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University Expectations and Preparations at the Upper-Secondary School Level:
A Case Study at the Experimental High School of Hanoi and Hanoi University

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ABSTRACT

The Vietnamese education system has shifted drastically in recent history. From the influence of the French colonial period, to Ho Chi Minh's literacy campaigns, to recent changes in the higher education system, Vietnam's development has largely impacted students and educators. Even as the education system begins to modernize, many of the original Confucian values still dominate the field. With this dynamic in mind, this project aims to discover students' expectations and preparations for university. By conducting a case study at the Experimental High School of Hanoi, I was able to hold class discussions about university plans with nearly 400 students and conduct interviews with eight students and one teacher. This enabled me to learn the type of work the students and the school value when researching, preparing, studying, and applying to university, but also the student's thoughts, feelings, and expectations for university. Additionally, two focus groups with current university students allowed me to obtain both a retrospective and prospective point of view on the university process.

From these data, I was able to examine how factors such as parental influence, stress over choosing a future job, and immense focus on the university entrance examination drive students' university process. Students, especially students who plan on studying abroad, must put ample time and effort into attending university. Overall, they aim to gain strong academic growth in areas about which they are passionate, applicable job skills that will make them strong candidates after graduation, and also important life skills.

Key Words: Secondary education, Higher education, University preparation, Vietnam

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INTRODUCTION

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Vietnam is in the midst of rapid and ever-changing economic development, which has huge impacts on many aspects of the country. After Doi Moi, there were ample education reforms in attempts to regain control of a previously French-dominated education system (World Bank, 2011). Currently, Vietnam has a high literacy rate of 90% and spends nearly 15% of the GDP on education (World Bank, 2011). However, Vietnam's education system is still heavily influenced by Confucian values which results in a very hierarchical system of learning with a lot of memorization and fact regurgitation (McCornac, 2012). Efforts lately are shifting towards improving higher education with governmental organizations like the Ministry of Education and Training and the implementation of the Higher Education Reform Act, which hopes to hold universities to a higher standard by 2020 (McCornac, 2012). Despite large strides and attempts to modernize and improve Vietnamese education, students, educators, and experts believe that there is still room for improvement.

As education continues to shift, students are becoming all the more motivated to better their future through university. Both the United States and Vietnam place a high value on education, particularly higher education, yet they two systems are radically different. Many Vietnamese students aim to attend university, some with the ultimate goal of attending university overseas to receive a Western style of education. Vietnamese daily life and culture are permeated by Western influences and are developing quicker than the education system, which results in an interesting dynamic as students evaluate their future education plans. I find this dynamic very intriguing, and wanted to study the secondary and tertiary education systems from the points of view of students to learn how deeply rooted cultural values and modern higher education goals influence the way they view and prepare for their future goals.

With this interest in mind, my research will focus on students' preparations and expectations of their university education. By doing a case study at the Experimental High School of Hanoi, I tried to gain an understanding of the process students undertake in preparing for university. In the limited time frame, I was hoping to discover not only the type of work they put in when researching, preparing, studying, and applying to university, but also their thoughts, feelings, and expectations for university. Since I am only researching the Hanoi Experimental School, whose unique and more modern educational goals differ from those of many other schools, I must acknowledge that my research is not generalizable across all secondary schools. However, I gained valuable insight into the university process and education system as a whole from my time spent there. Additionally, by supplementing this research with focus groups with current students at Hanoi University, I was able to get the prospective and retrospective viewpoints on the university process.

Based on my initial research and interests, I developed the following three research questions to guide my project and help me explore the different personal and academic factors that influence the university process:

1. How do students prepare for their university plans?

2. What kinds of tools does the Experimental School of Hanoi provide in helping prepare students for for their university plans?

3. What are the students' expectations for university?

LOCATION

I conducted my research at Trường THCS Thực Nghiệm, which is the Experimental High School of Hanoi. The primary school was created in 1978 by the National Research Institute of Education Sciences under principal and researcher Ho Ngoc Dai to create an educational

environment that shifted the focus to the needs of the student rather than the teacher (Duong Van Thanh, 4/28/16). This shift from the teacher to the student was unheard of in Vietnam at the time, and the school endured a lot of critical judgment for their modern mission (Duong Van Thanh, 4/28/16). Today, the school prides itself on its alternative mode of teaching and education where students are taught to express themselves, learn new languages with a focus on speaking, and grow in a comfortable educational environment that fosters personal growth (Tong Quynh Hoa, 4/18/16). In 1998, with the backing from the National Research Institute of Sciences and demonstrated success in the primary school, the Experimental School of Hanoi was able to open up the secondary school, which is where I conducted my research. The high school currently has 706 students and 37 teachers, and operates six days per week (Trường THCS Thực Nghiệm). The students today have the opportunity to join different extracurricular activities and clubs through the school and still act as the key agents in their learning (Trường THCS Thực Nghiệm). The school operates as a public school and still receives support from the National Research Institute of Education Sciences (Duong Van Thanh, 4/28).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although there is no existing literature on university preparation in Vietnam, this literature review will briefly discuss the history of Vietnamese education, the current state of education, and future goals for education. Providing a background on Vietnam's education system will provide context for the student's experiences and interview results. It will also include a brief discussion on university preparation and expectations in neighboring Southeast Asian countries to allow for further analysis of Vietnam's unique perspective.

HISTORY OF EDUCATION

Vietnamese education has always been driven by traditional Confucian values, but has undergone many changes since French colonization of Vietnam during the early twentieth century. At this time, the French education system was focused on specific training to benefit their colonial efforts (World Bank, 2011). There were not enough schools for the number of students, and 95% of the population was illiterate (World Bank, 2011). The system remained this way until 1945 when Vietnam regained independence from France, and Ho Chi Minh began a movement to end illiteracy in Vietnam (World Bank, 2011). From this time through the early 1970s, Vietnam began to repair their education system, build more schools, and adopt an educational approach with Russian influences. Schools began to focus on teaching more traditional subjects, and the schools that the French created for their children opened up to Vietnamese students (World Bank, 2011).

American efforts to the Vietnamese education system started occurring in the South in the early 1950s when they began to try and implement changes (World Bank, 2011). Through the 1960s, the United States focused on improving Vietnamese school curriculums and deemphasizing the importance of standardized test by funding training for Vietnamese educators to come to the United States to learn new teaching methods (World Bank, 2011). Americans had the goal of modernizing education through promoting methods of learning other than rote memorization; however, it was difficult for these changes to fully come to fruition because the hierarchical and memorization style of learning is so deeply rooted in Vietnamese culture and values (World Bank, 2011).

In the early 1980s, the government issued further education reforms focusing on primary education. They wanted to improve "the provision of care and education for the younger

generation from early childhood to adulthood with the aim of laying the initial foundations for all-round development" (World Bank, 2011, p. 8). After a decade of working to improve primary education, the efforts shifted to secondary education, which resulted in a large increase in high school graduates (McCornac, 2012). Now efforts are shifting to improve higher education.

CURRENT STATE OF EDUCATION

Currently participation rates of education are on the rise, and the number of students from 1996 to 2005 increased by 3 million students to a total of 23 million students (World Bank, 2011). As of 2005, there are 2,224 upper secondary schools in Vietnam (World Bank, 2011). In addition to an increase in number of students, there has been an increase in resources in the past decade with a new, updated curriculum and textbooks for schools (World Bank, 2011). There is also a clear increase in the number of students in higher education with enrollment increasing by an average of 6.4% per year from 1998-2004 (World Bank, 2011). Despite these numbers, the number of university professors has stayed the same, and universities are at full capacity (Clark, 2014). In 2012, there were 1.3 million students applying to university and 500,000 applying to college for less than 600,000 spots (Clark, 2014). Studying abroad has also become common for Vietnamese students, and many choose to study in countries like Australia (26,015 Vietnamese students in 2013) and the United States (16,098 students in 2013) (Clark, 2014). Overall, there has been a large increase in the number of students in Vietnam due to many of the educational reforms that have been enacted in the past half-century.

Many of the current reforms to Vietnamese education are trying to change the traditional way of Vietnamese teaching and learning and influencing the system to become more Western. Cooperative Learning (CL) is a Western style of education that focuses on building relationships in the classroom and working collectively to learn (Nguyen, 2009). This is particularly relevant

to the Experimental High School of Hanoi, which takes a CL approach as it works to foster a student-centered environment of critical thinkers. However, some argue that CL will not work in a Vietnamese school setting because elements such as "shared leadership and face-to-face interaction may conflict with a number of values that Asian children are taught to respect and nurture" (Nguyen, 2009, p. 858). The current system is having a hard time shifting over to the Western style of education because of different cultural aspects such as a large power distance and emphasis on hierarchies, so adjusting to these differences would require changes in cultural beliefs and the education system at large. A study done by Nguyen et al. (2009) found that Vietnamese students preferred the traditional style of teaching with strict hierarchy and leadership to a more cooperative group-learning setting. Although many reforms have been made, in general, the Vietnamese classroom environment and style of learning remains fairly unchanged.

Additionally, teachers have little incentive to make changes to the system because they lack proper resources and rewards. There is a lack of qualified educators in Vietnam, and therefore teachers are responsible for classes that are far too large and have to take on more responsibility for little reward at all levels of education (Hayden, 2010). Besides being in large classes, teachers do not receive enough up-to-date training and lack many classroom resources to teach effectively (World Bank, 2011). Although education reforms are heading in the right direction with improving curriculums and participatory rates, there are not as many efforts to improving the conditions and resources for Vietnamese teachers and professors to keep up with the changes and numbers of students.

Because of this, many students turn to tutoring and private classes to boost their educational experience and make them competitive candidates when they graduate from high

school. Students attend these classes or private tutors in both rural and urban areas, and they see tangible improvements on their academics (Dang, 2007). In an education system that is driven by test scores, these classes are necessary to solidifying further education. However, these classes do cost extra tuition, which means that lower socioeconomic families cannot afford this privilege. Carr-Hill (2011), found that the wealthiest 20% of households spend 7 times the amount on this supplementary education compared to low-income families. Currently, extra classes and tutors are crucial to success in the education system, yet these resources are not available to everyone.

Once at university, students are having a hard time developing pre-professional skills that make them competitive candidates for jobs when they enter the workplace. Currently, despite an increase in university enrollment, students are having difficulty finding jobs after university because they don't have the right skill set (Tran, 2013). Many employers and students themselves recognized that the "soft skills of university students were weak and far from expectations, and that they were not 'work ready' after graduation" (Tran, 2013, p. 641). Although Vietnamese high schools have been criticized for teaching and promoting a type of education that is not applicable to the professional world because of the intense focus on memorization and lack of independent thinking, many universities use these methods and recent graduates are facing the repercussions as they cannot find jobs. Although some efforts are being made to shift the style of teaching and type of skills taught at the university level, Tran (2013) argues that there must be a systemic change fueled by both teachers and students.

EDUCATION GOALS

Vietnam's education reform is no where near finished, and the Vietnamese government still has many goals that they want to achieve. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET)

is the key figure for education reform and change, and is responsible for controlling aspects of education such as tuition prices, enrollment numbers, and curricula (McCornac, 2012). They are a key player in the field of education, and are a driver of the current changes and goals. Currently, the majority of education efforts are focused on improving the higher education system, since the initial education reforms targeted primary and secondary schools.

The Ministry of Education and Training established the Higher Education Reform Act (HERA) in 2006 to create goals and standards of a new Vietnamese higher education system (McCornac, 2012). HERA is working to better the education system through higher university attendance and graduation rates, generating more research opportunities, teaching more work-applicable skills, improving conditions for teachers, and overall increasing the quality of the current system (McCornac, 2012). HERA recognizes where there are lags in the current higher education system, and has laid out the foundation for righting the faults in the system. Additionally, HERA is working towards eliminating the corruption in the current system through the promotion of four main values: "integrity, participation, accountability, and transparency" (McCornac, 2012, p. 268). Students can change the path of their educational career through money and bribery, and HERA is working to equalize opportunities by encouraging a new system built on honesty and hard work.

Finally, Vietnam is working hard to establish itself the global picture of higher education. Vietnam currently has the goal of having at least one Vietnamese university ranked in the top 200 worldwide universities, and establish four international universities (McCornac, 2012). These efforts for new international universities are being funded by the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (McCornac, 2012). As Vietnam continues to develop, its education system is trying to match the quality of education in developed countries.

UNIVERSITY PREPARATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRIES

There are many different factors that can affect whether or not students enroll in university. Wu and Bai (2014) studied a group of Taiwanese students during ninth grade and their first year of university to identify how different influences affected their university process. Their largest finding was that parents play a very large role in the outcome of their students' academic aspirations. Many of the students incorporated their parents' expectations into their university goals, which drove the kinds of decisions they made about applying and attending university. However, once the students matriculated and began their studies, their parents' influence on their academic decisions decreased significantly. Teachers had lesser influence on the students, however, their influence was much more positive and had a lasting effect on students throughout their university experience. Finally, peer influence had very little impact on students' university goals, but was important for sharing information and research on different schools (Wu and Bai, 2014).

Wu and Bai's (2014) final finding was that actual university attainment was much more likely if the students starting thinking about their academic aspirations early on. Students that had started thinking about their university goals from a young age were much more likely to achieve their university goals later on. Overall, this study demonstrated the important influence of key figures in a students' life and students' early personal ambitions on university outcomes.

Another study (Nikitina and Furuoka, 2012) explored Malaysian students' learning expectations. Recently, Malaysia has started making higher education widely available and accessible, however, students are graduating with a high rate of unemployment because they lack

important soft skills. The Malaysian government is working to fix the students' needs and incorporate more soft skills into their university education. This study observed the different educational goals of Malaysian students and categorized their education goals under life experiences and skills, typical university academics related to their major, and soft skills. Under life experiences, students were hoping to gain new lifestyles, new experiences, new friends and relationships, a new community, independence, perseverance and patience (Nikitina and Furuoka, 2012, p. 219). These skills were important to students as they incorporated skills related to growing up and living independently for the first time, which is a large part of the university experience. In terms of building soft skills, the students were hoping to learn job-applicable skills like communication and teamwork, but felt like these skills were missing from their university education. The study also found that students were expecting a much more holistic university education that would encompass more than just their area of study. Despite these expectations, the majority of students felt that their department and professors were useful tools in aiding students' academic and professional goals. Even though students were hoping for more professional skills, they still felt as if their university experiences were an important time for learning (Nikitina and Furuoka, 2012).

METHODOLOGY

SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

I conducted the majority of my research at the Experimental High School of Hanoi, located at 50 Liễu Giai, Ba Đình District, Hanoi. I made nine visits total to the school, spending five periods with twelfth-grade classes, one period with an eleventh grade class, and four periods with tenth grade classes. Ms. Tong Quynh Hoa, the head English teacher at the school, was responsible for creating my schedule and acted as my main supporter at the school. I only

attended English language classes, eight of which were taught by Ms. Hoa and two of which were taught by Ms. Hien, another English teacher. Although I would have liked to have spend more time with the eleventh-graders and twelfth-graders, they were preparing for their exams while I was there and I could not take up much of their class time. Each class had between forty and fifty students, so I was exposed to about four-hundred students total. All of my research was done in the classrooms at the high school, and I was recognized as a familiar face at the school.

My supplemental research with the students at Hanoi University consisted of two focus groups, an hour long each, which were conducted in two different coffee shops. The students that I worked with volunteered to be a part of the research, and I had previously-established friendships with them before the focus groups.

METHODOLIGIES

I undertook a non-traditional approach to the data collection given my unique circumstances. Although I was expecting to be able to hold small focus groups with students, the majority of the data was collected in the style of a class discussion, or question and answer session. For all of the twelfth and tenth grade classes, I stood in front of the classroom with a microphone and held a discussion about university preparations and expectations. I would often have students raise their hands to yes/no questions to gauge their responses, and would call on students when asking open-ended questions, or to explain why they answered a question yes or no. Ms. Hoa was present during these, and would sometimes clarify a question in Vietnamese to the students.

I also had the opportunity to interview some students one-on-one, in between classes or if they had free time. I chose students by random sampling, as I would ask random students in the class if they would be willing to answer some questions one-on-one. However, many of the

students were hesitant to answer, so the process was self-selecting. Since I was in the classroom there were many other students around, although none of them paid attention to our conversations. Ms. Hoa was not present during these.

For the eleventh grade class, I used a different methodology. I initially started out with a class discussion, but the students were very quiet and did not want to answer my questions, so I gave them the option of writing out answers. I wrote the following seven questions up on the board:

1. What job do you want? Why?

2. Do you feel ready for university?

3. How are you preparing for university?

4. Who do you talk to about university? Friends? Parents? Teachers?

5. What do you talk about?

6. Are you nervous? Why/Why not??

7. Do you feel pressure from parents/teachers?

This ended up being very successful, and I had 37 out of 43 students turn in answers. Additionally, I was able to get a lot of honest and candid data from the students even though I only spent one period with them. I also had opportunities to observe the English classes if there was extra time after I did my discussion.

DATA COLLECTION

Overall, I held six class discussions: two with twelfth graders and four with tenth graders. Each lasted about thirty minutes, and I used a question guide for the discussions and to make sure all of the necessary topics were covered (See Appendix). All of the discussions were conducted in English as part of their class to practice speaking. This was my main method of

collecting data, and these discussions with the eleventh grade survey make up the bulk of my data. During the discussion, I would briefly jot down notes, and would take more thorough notes after the discussion.

I was also able to conduct eight interviews at the school. I interviewed three female senior students (one of these students I interviewed twice), two male senior students, a female sophomore student, and Ms. Hoa, the head English teacher. Since I had to conduct these interviews during breaks, they lasted between fifteen and twenty minutes and took place in the classroom. I used the same question guides from the class discussions for all of the interviews (See Appendix), but was not able to complete all of the questions because of the time constraint. All of the interviews were conducted in English and in the classroom. I took notes during the interviews, and then did more thorough analysis afterwards. After every visit to the school, I wrote an entry about what I did, whom I was with, what data I found, and synthesized the information.

I also held two focus groups with current students at Hanoi University to obtain a retrospective point of view on the university process. The first focus group was two female students and one male student, and the second focus group was with two female students. All of the students were in their third year at Hanoi University and majoring in International Studies. I created a question guide, but used it sparingly (See Appendix). I took many notes during the interview, and then afterward recorded all of the information I gathered in a more succinct way.

LIMITATIONS AND BIASES

I encountered some limitations while conducting my research. First, the class discussion format was not I what I was anticipating, and many of the students were shy to share their points of view or opinions. Because it was a group of forty to fifty students, it might have been

intimidating for the students to share honest thoughts and vulnerabilities related to university in front of their peers. Some of the students felt comfortable speaking in front of the whole class, but it was hard to gauge the thoughts and opinions of all the students.

When I was able to get time with students for one-on-one interviews, the location for the interview was both noisy and not private. Since I conducted the interviews in the classroom, their peers and teachers were sometimes present, which could have altered their answers. Students would often turn to their peers after I asked them a question and would briefly discuss it in Vietnamese before answering, which also could have influenced their answers. It was not the ideal environment to conduct the interviews, and the students' responses might have affected by their surroundings and peers. Additionally, there was not adequate time to conduct the interviews. Since I had to conduct the interviews during the students' breaks and free time, my time was limited, and I was not able to get through all the questions in my interview guide. Because the students had major exams coming up, I was not able to speak to them for a longer period during class time. Although I was still able get a lot of information from these interviews, it was not enough time to establish a strong rapport and complete all the questions I intended to ask.

Additionally, due to the students' schedules and the schedule Ms. Hoa created for me, I was not able to spend enough time with the eleventh-graders, and instead spent more time with the tenth graders than I was expecting. Although I was able to learn valuable information from them, they were only just beginning to think about university and it would have been helpful to spend as much time with the eleventh-graders as I did with the twelfth-graders.

Additionally, my data and interpretations might be skewed by my own experiences and point of view as a student enrolled in the Western higher education system. I came into this

project not only with my own university experiences and preparations, but also with a lot of knowledge and information on how the American higher education system functions. This perspective and background could affect my interpretations of their experiences. I acknowledge these biases and did my best to not let them affect my research, but my perspective could have permeated my findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From my six class discussions, eight interviews, one survey, and two focus groups, with perspectives from high school students, university students, and one high school teacher, I will present and discuss the data in the following themes: job paths, parental influence, teacher influence, university preparations, university expectations and study abroad.

JOB PATHS

From my twelfth grade class discussions on April 11 and April 13, more than half of the students knew what jobs they wanted to have, and many of them emphasized the importance of knowing their career paths before starting university so they can pick the right major. For the students who did not know what job path they want to take, it was a major area of stress. One student even said "if you don't know what job you want you're screwed" (Class Discussion, 4/13/16). One of the senior male students that I interviewed wanted to be a graphic designer because he was deeply passionate about the arts and technology and loves designing logos and graphics for friends, work, and fun (12th Grade Male Participant, 4/18/16). He has spent so much time researching and thinking about this career path, that he has already decided what graduate program he wants to pursue in four years. However, another student that I interviewed in the senior class does not know what she wants to do but will probably study banking because her

mom works in banking and assured her that it is a steady career with a reliable salary (12th Grade

Female Participant 2, 4/11/16).

From the 37 written responses from the eleventh grade students, ten students wanted do

creative jobs (such as graphic designer or filmmaker), five did not know, four business jobs,

three chefs, three event management, two technology jobs, two teachers, one tour guide, one

translator, one physicist, one counselor, one journalist, one barber, and two students with no

response. Many of these students cited genuine interest and passion for the area of study, and

only a few mentioned salary as motivation for the job (11th Grade Survey, 4/13/16).

Despite the majority of students at the school feeling confident about their future job

paths, the university students from my focus groups did not know what job they wanted to have

when applying to university, and figured out what to study within the last year. All of the

university students were International Studies majors, and chose this major because they thought

it could be helpful for whatever future job they would decide to have. One of the students said

that she was able to learn a better understanding of her strengths and weaknesses once she got to

university, and was able to make a more informed decision about pursuing marketing as a career

(Focus Group, 4/17/16; 4/26/16).

The majority of the tenth graders did not know what career path they want to take, and

are more worried about beginning their preparations for university rather than future jobs like

their older peers (Class Discussion 4/18/16; 4/19/16; 4/21/16; 4/22/16).

Overall, the students highly emphasized the importance of figuring out a career path

before starting university. They viewed university as a stepping stone to the future, and as a

bridge that connects them to adulthood and a job rather than its own important experience. The

students who knew what job they wanted to have were more focused on improving their soft

skills related to their jobs, whereas the students who did not know what job they wanted felt immense pressure to make up their mind. None of the undecided students thought about picking a flexible major at university, like international studies, that would give them more time to decide, but instead just felt more unprepared than their peers. The university students, looking back at their high school experiences, realized how job-related stress was unnecessary. When many of the students know what jobs they want to have and are vocal about their passions and achieving this job, it puts pressure on their undecided peers that they need to decide on a job as soon as possible.

PARENTAL INFLUENCE

About half of the students felt immense pressure from their parents when making decisions about university. In the twelfth grade class, many students chose their future job paths based on their parents' advice, and heavily weighed what their parents had to say. One student did not know what he wanted to study in university, and his parents told him to not bother going and to work in a bakery or factory instead (Class Discussion, 4/11/16). He felt immensely conflicted about whether to listen to his parents or to still go to university. However, not all students feel burdened by their parents' insisting advice. A female twelfth grader that I interviewed told me how she is undecided about a future job, and so her parents chose her university and area of study for her. She was relieved that her parents were able to help her, and appreciated their input and advice (12th Grade Female Participant, 4/18/16). For the eleventh graders, thirteen students felt parental pressure, nineteen students felt supported, and five students did not answer. The students who did not feel supported cited different factors like letting their parents down or parents pushing them to make decisions about their future (11th Grade Survey, 4/13/16). The tenth graders have just begun to have conversations with their

parents about university, and did not have much to say about their parents' role in the university process so far (Class Discussion 4/18/16; 4/19/16; 4/21/16; 4/22/16).

However, many of the students acknowledged that even though talking to their parents about university was another source of stress, they emphasized that their parents provide a lot of support for them and their decisions (Class Discussion, 4/13/16). A senior male student found inspiration from his dad, and decided to study engineering so he could work with his father after he graduates (12th Grade Male Participant, 4/25/16). He was excited to learn what his father does, and felt support and excitement from his parents for deciding on engineering. Additionally, none of the university students felt any pressure from their parents when they were in high school, and felt like that helped take away some of stress of deciding on a university and transitioning to university (Focus Group, 4/17/16; 4/26/16).

The parents also have the opportunity to communicate with the teachers at the school, and one student mentioned how while the parents had a meeting with their teachers, none of the students knew what they discussed. Parents can discuss strengths and weaknesses with the teachers, and can evaluate the students' plans without the student being present (12th Grade Female Participant 2, 4/11/16). The students felt ambivalent about these discussions, and it was unclear whether or not these private conversations bothered them.

Parental behavior has a huge influence on the students' university perception and decisions. For parents who put pressure on their children, it made the university process more stressful and the students felt as if their parents were playing a large role in their decisions and behaviors. Whether it was through suggesting different job paths, pressure to study, or pressure to make decisions, it changed the way the students' viewed their university process, which follows Wu and Bai's (2014) findings of parental influence as a driving factor in students'

university decisions. Instead of an independent decision that the student made for themselves as they begin to establish themselves as independent adults, it was a decision that they made with their parents. However, some students felt pressured to impress their parents by making the right decisions and receiving high marks. This parental pressure was initiated by the students, and in some ways brought upon themselves. For the students that did not feel pressure from their parents, their decisions were much more independent, and they did not have the extra parent-related stress which helped them view their university process with a more positive attitude. Overall, the students felt supported by their parents whether it was through parental investment in helping them achieve university education or by having the freedom and support to make their own decisions.

TEACHER INFLUENCE

Teachers do not play a significant role in the students' university process, but they can be a helpful tool if students seek them out. During class time, teachers might talk about university broadly, but they do not receive a lot of university support, help, or guidance in their classes (Class Discussion, 4/11/16). However, if students approach their teachers with university questions they can be a valuable resource. Only the twelfth graders mentioned seeking out teachers to discuss university; none of the eleventh or tenth graders have considered this resource yet. One student who was unsure of her career path had a helpful conversation with Ms. Hoa, her English teacher, who told her "not to be nervous and that everything works out" (12th Grade Female Participant, 4/18/16). Ms. Hoa said that sometimes students in her classes will approach her with questions about future jobs and whether or not these jobs play to the student's strengths. She feels that many of the students "study very very hard…they know the way to study in the future and know the way to get [a] position in university, [but] some of them ignore it because

they don't want to study anymore" (Tong Quynh Hoa, 4/18/16). She was very aware of the students' capabilities, and can provide them a wealth of thoughtful insight about their university plans and expectations. Because of this, some parents will come to her and ask for Ms. Hoa's insight into their child's academic performance and goals in order to help guide their child's university process more effectively (Tong Quynh Hoa, 4/18/16).

None of the tenth or eleventh grade students have talked to their teachers at all about university, but one student felt as if teachers put him under too much academic pressure and stress (11th Grade Survey, 4/12/16). However, at the beginning of twelfth grade the students have Orientation Day, which is day when students and their parents can go to the school and talk to their teachers about strengths, weaknesses, and potential jobs, and also talk to visiting universities about different programs (12th Grade Male Participant, 4/18/16; Tong Quynh Hoa, 4/18/16). It normally happens around the first week of April, and gives students the opportunity to speak to their teachers outside of class about university, and to learn about different jobs and universities (Tong Quynh Hoa, 4/18/16). In one of the focus groups with the university students, they all remembered Orientation Day, but none of them attended because they thought it would not be helpful (Focus Group, 4/17/16).

Teachers can be a very valuable resource to students if the students decide to reach out because they have a lot of insight to offer students about skills and strengths in the classroom, however, the majority of students underestimate their helpfulness. This finding makes sense given what Wu and Bai (2014) found with teachers having a smaller but more lasting impact on students' university ambitions. Because teachers have more knowledge about students' academic performances in the classroom, they can offer more informed advice than the parents about university decisions. Currently, the benefits of the teachers' perspectives are underused and if

more opportunities were available during school for students to talk with their teachers about their plans, or even as part of class, students could be more prepared for their university aspirations.

Even though the teachers' influence on university is minimal at school, Orientation Day at the Experimental High School of Hanoi sounds like a successful program where students, teachers, and parents can learn more about their strengths, weaknesses, and potential universities. Having this kind of program available to students is an important tool that can help aid them into making better decisions about future jobs and universities. Since none of the university students had any success with Orientation Day, it most likely depends on the school and teachers' efforts in helping their students.

UNIVERSTIY PREPARATIONS

The most prominent way students prepared for university is preparing for the entrance exam. The entrance exam is a large test that the students take July 1, and it is the main determinant of what schools they are able to get into. Each student chooses one of the exams to take based on what they think they want to study, and each exam is comprised of three subjects of ten points each, creating a total score out of thirty points (Focus Group, 4/26/16). This score, along with their high school transcripts, determines whether or not they get into university.

The weight of the entrance exam weighed heavily on the twelfth grade students. The majority of the students have tutors, and take practice tests of the exam to prepare (Class Discussion 4/11/16; 4/13/16). The students did not start studying for the entrance exam until the beginning of their senior year, and study about two to three hours a day outside of class just for the exam and not their school studies. Additionally, many of the students will stop paying attention in classes that they are not taking the exam in, and will use that time to work

independently (Focus Group, 4/17/16). Despite the exam's importance, one of the students believed that "the exam is silly, and the way they do it [in Vietnam] isn't right. It's a waste of time and not fair. There should be no test…and a different way decide if they should be in our not" (12th Grade Male Participant, 4/18/16).

The students have also spent time researching different universities and programs that fit their interests. One of the students that I interviewed chose Hanoi University for both his major and for the "extraordinary teaching method with more student-teacher communication [and] more open-mindedness" (12th Male Participant, 4/18/16). This teaching method is similar to the teaching methods of the Hanoi Experimental High School, but none of the other students mentioned teaching methods and learning styles as a factor they were considering and instead the focus was just on academic programs.

The juniors have not started preparing for the entrance exam, but have started looking into programs, researching different universities, and determining future career paths (11th Grade Survey, 4/13/16). They acknowledged that they would not start preparing for the entrance exam until their senior year, and are focusing on learning more about schools, programs, and jobs. None of the tenth graders have started preparing for university except for the students who want to study abroad. These students have started researching overseas programs, tuitions, and necessary tests like the SATs (Class Discussion 4/21/16; 4/22/16; 10th Grade Female Participant, 4/19/16).

One of the senior students felt that the school does a great job preparing students for university because "they focus students on what they need for university, the entrance test, and are really supportive of decisions" (12th Male Participant, 4/18/16).

Although students spend time researching different universities and programs, the entrance exam dominates their university preparations, and even interrupts their regular studies. Even though some of the students recognize that the university process and entrance exam is not necessarily the best way to determine one's worthiness of university admission, they still intensely prepare and study, and accept this system as it is. The majority of students are so focused on the numbers that they need to get into university, that they maybe lose sight of learning for the sake of learning. Instead, their lives during the final year of high school are dominated by studying for this exam. The research that they do on schools is mainly focused on academic fit and finding the right program, rather than looking at the university experience holistically and taking into account important factors such as learning styles, social fit, and preparing for independence. However, this makes sense in the context of the Vietnamese education system, which puts more value on being able to memorize facts and therefore perform well on a test, rather than a holistically looking at education as a growing process both personally and academically.

UNIVERSITY EXPECTATIONS

The students said that they are looking forward to their time at university with both apprehension and excitement. The twelfth grade students were the most excited about university, but still maintained a lot of nerves. They were strongly looking forward to the opportunity for new experiences, new places, new friends, independence, and the ability to study something that they are passionate about (Class Discussion 4/11/16; 12th Grade Female Participant, 4/18/16). When I asked one student whether she was excited for university, she answered "half yes half no, excited to grow up, not excited to say goodbye to friends, family, and teachers" (12th Grade

Female Participant, 4/18/16). Another senior student said that he was equally excited for both social and academic reasons (12th Grade Male Participant, 4/18/16).

However, the younger students were more worried than excited. From the eleventh grade survey, the students cited the source of their nerves as not feeling ready, fear of failure, not thinking they are smart enough, letting down parents, and overestimating the importance of university for determining the trajectory of life (11th Grade Survey, 4/13/16). The tenth grade students were more worried about academics, and even finances and affording university. Less than half of the eleventh graders mentioned being excited for independence and academics, and the few tenth graders who were excited were also the students who knew what jobs they wanted to have after university (11th Grade Survey, 4/12/16; Class Discussion 4/21/16; 4/22/16). Although some of the younger students viewed their future university endeavors with positivity, the overwhelming feeling was nervousness.

The university students discussed how they were expecting their lives to be "happier, freer, and easier but it's not" (Focus Group, 4/17/16). All of the students were excited to start university, and felt bittersweet about leaving high school and home. However, the transition was hard for all of them because it was not fully what they were expecting and it was a large shift from what they were used to with academics (Focus Group 4/17/16; 4/26/16). They briefly mentioned how they were nervous for new classes, but emphasized their excitement.

Unsurprisingly, students had mixed emotions about what to expect out of university. In preparing for university all of their focus is on academics, yet many of their worries are social. However, this is in line with the research done by Nikitina and Furuoka (2012) because they found that students were equally anticipating the life skills, like independence and building relationships, as part of the university learning experience. The students tended to get more

excited and think about the social and personal growth opportunities the older they got, whereas this is not on the radar of the younger students quite yet. The majority of the students looked at the opportunity for personal growth with excitement, yet the case of the university students demonstrates that this aspect of university might be more difficult than expected. By the end of high school, the students might feel anxious and ready to leave that chapter of their life, and not consider the comfort in their high school routine. This would explain why many of the younger students were not feeling excited about university yet. The majority of the younger students feel nervous, and much of that can be attributed to not knowing their area of study and job paths yet. The students who were younger but knew what jobs they wanted seemed less anxious than the students who did not know what they wanted to study. The Wu and Bai (2014) study would suggest these younger students who have started planning for university will be more successful in their university goals.

STUDY ABROAD

Many students have the goal of studying abroad, yet the process is difficult and requires a lot of time, research, and resources. One student that I interviewed plans on studying abroad in Holland studying hotel management, and has been planning on studying abroad for all of high school (12th Grade Female Participant, 4/11/16). Her mother has worked at the World Bank with many people from all over the world and so has "a really open view about abroad life" (12th Grade Female Participant, 4/25/16). Her mother has encouraged this student and her siblings to study abroad, and her two older siblings are currently studying in the United States. She started studying for the English language exam and SATs her sophomore year because she had the goal of studying in the US. However, the tuition for the US was too high and she lied to her parents that she had changed her mind to study in Holland so she does not have to be a financial burden

to her parents. She chose to study abroad so that she can receive a higher standard of higher education, and so that she can support her future family and never be burdened by lack of money (12th Grade Female Participant, 4/25/16).

Another student was planning on studying abroad in Germany at a vocational school for mechanical engineering. He only decided to study abroad at the beginning of his senior year after talking to his cousins who are studying abroad in Germany (12th Grade Male Participant, 4/25/16). He decided to study at a vocational school so that he can balance both learning and applicable skills. When he initially decided to study abroad, only his mother supported him and his father discouraged him from studying abroad because he would be leaving his family, and his father worried about him getting lonely from being so far away from home. However, both of his parents fully support him, and he plans on returning to Vietnam after he finishes school to work at his father's business (12th Grade Male Participant, 4/25/16).

Even many of the sophomores have started planning and thinking about studying abroad by researching different programs, tuitions, and necessary tests, and a few of them have started studying for tests like the SATs (Class Discussion, 4/22/16). Two of the students mentioned their goal of attending an Ivy League university, and were eager to get my advice on how to get in. A 10th grade student that I interviewed decided that she either wants to go to Stanford, Harvard, or Yale, and has already started studying for the SATs with a tutor (10th Grade Female Participant, 4/19/16). She mentioned another school in Hanoi, the Amsterdam School for the Gifted, the often sends students to Ivy League schools and seemed frustrated that her school has not sent any students to Ivies (10th Grade Female Participant, 4/19/16). When I asked one of the older students if many students plan on going to Ivy League schools, she laughed and said no, and implied that these lofty goals were not attainable (12th Grade Female Participant, 4/25/16).

Although many students have the goal of studying abroad in tenth grade, only a few of the seniors that I talked to are actually studying abroad. The process that it takes to study abroad is not only time consuming, but expensive and difficult to manage with all of the other aspects of school. One student mentioned how students have to be "self-starting and self-motivating to follow through with the process (Class Discussion, 4/13/16). Additionally, the older students get, the more realistic they are about their educational goals. Although schools like Harvard are tempting and exciting, by the time students reach their senior year they are much more realistic about what they can accomplish. Study abroad seems like a very self-selecting process because of the immense focus, planning, and drive it takes to get all of the necessary aspects of it prepared. None of the students talked about what they were expecting from studying abroad, which leads me to believe that they are so focused on what it takes to get there that they do not necessarily plan for adjusting to a different style of teaching and learning and to a new country and environment. Choosing to study overseas is a consuming task that requires a lot of determination, and most students have not enough thought about the kinds of challenges they will face once they get abroad.

CONCLUSION

Overall, my case study at the Experimental High School of Hanoi revealed how complicated and layered the university process is for students. Students are under an immense amount of stress from the school, family, and themselves as they prepare academically and emotionally for the next step in their education careers. I was expecting to see students being burdened by the traditional Vietnamese education system, but the Experimental High School of Hanoi does a superb job of building relationships with the students. Although there are clear influences of the traditional system at the school, the school fosters a strong sense of community

and positive educational growth. However, the school can only help and prepare students so much for their university aspirations, and students are feeling the heavy weight and pressure of university both in and out of the classroom.

The students spend ample time studying in order to prepare for university. Although students do some research on universities, programs, and jobs, these decisions are often discussed and influenced by parents. The main way for students to prepare independently is through intense focus on the entrance exam, instead of focusing on their academics in school. University thoughts dominate their lives in and outside of school, and it detracts from the students' education in school. Although the school provides some tools for students in the university process, like Orientation Day, there are not many opportunities for students to talk to teachers about university unless they seek it out themselves. All of these conversations are about academics however, and students do not seem to have any resources or opportunities to discuss or think about the non-academic aspects of university. The current university students really struggled with the non-academic aspects of university, and the high school students are more excited for this aspect and may not be anticipating the negative sides of living independently in a new environment. However, the students' excitement about starting a new chapter of their lives is tangible as they look forward to studying their passions, learning how to live independently, and begin to shape their lives as adults.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although there was no existing research on this topic in Vietnam, the literature helped to explain how the current Vietnamese education system came to be and explain its functions and goals. Even at an experimental school, especially with the importance of the entrance exam, the traditional Confucian values were apparent. Looking at university goals, expectations, and

influences in other Southeast Asian countries shed light on some of the trends at the Experimental High School, like the immense parental influence, and the expectation of learning important life skills. Future research could be conducted at multiple schools to get a more well-rounded sense of the education system, and could follow students throughout high school and university to fully understand the trends, expectations, and realities for the students on their higher education journey.

Additionally, a few of the students revealed their skepticism and criticism about the Vietnamese education system, and further research could be conducted on how these negative opinions affect their education experiences. Even though a few of them believed that the system needs change, they still were preparing with the same intensity as the other students.

Finally, it would be interesting to do more research on Vietnamese students studying abroad and how they transition and cope with a completely new country and education system. The students who were planning on studying abroad were so focused on the logistical steps in getting abroad that none of them mentioned how they were preparing for a completely different education system and culture shock. Further research could be done on study abroad students' transition and success in a foreign school. Overall, looking at the different ways students experience the university process from start to finish will provide more insight into the Vietnamese educational system as a whole.

APPENDIX

12th Grade Discussion/Interview Guide

1. What job do you want to have after university?
2. Why do you want to have this job?
3. How do you plan on becoming this job?
4. Are you planning on going to university?
5. Do you feel ready for university?
6. Are you nervous about university? Why/why not?
7. Are you excited about university? Why/why not?
8. How did you decide on which university to go to?
9. How are you preparing for your entrance exams?
10. Describe a typical day at school:
11. How do you prepare for university in school?
12. Do you talk to teachers about your university or job plans?
13. If you do talk to your teachers, what do you talk about?
14. Do you talk to your parents about university and job plans?
15. How have your parents been involved with your university and job plans?
16. How do your parents feel about your university and job plans?
17. Do you feel prepared for your university and job plans?
18. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

10th Grade Discussion/Interview Guide

1. What job do you want to have after university?
2. Why do you want to have this job?
3. How do you plan on becoming this job?
4. Are you planning on going to university?
5. Are you nervous about university? Why?
6. Are you excited about university? Why?
7. How are you preparing for university?
8. Have you started thinking about the exams?
9. Describe a typical day at school:
10. Do you talk to teachers about your university or job plans?
11. If you do talk to your teachers, what do you talk about?
12. Do you talk to your parents about university and job plans?
13. How have your parents been involved with your university and job plans?
14. How do your parents feel about your university and job plans?
15. Do you feel prepared for your university and job plans?
16. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Focus Group Guide
1. What job are you planning on having after university?
2. Why did you choose this job?
3. When did you decide on this career path?

4. How did you choose your university?
5. How do you feel about your university?
6. What was high school like for you?
7. What did your typical day in high school look like?
8. What did you do to prepare for university?
9. How did your high school prepare you for university?
10. How did you feel about university before going?
11. Were you nervous? Excited?
12. Did you feel prepared?
13. In what ways did you feel prepared and in what ways did you feel unprepared?
14. Did you have tutoring outside of class?
15. If so, what did you do?
16. How did you feel when you first started university?
17. What role did your parents play in deciding your university?
18. What role did your parents play in deciding on a job path?
19. What kind of relationship did you have with your parents during high school?
20. When you talked about university, what were your conversations like?
21. Did your school talk about university? If so what did they say?
22. What were your expectations about university?
23. Were your expectations true? Which were and which weren't?
24. Describe your typical university class?
25. How does it compare to high school classes?

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CLASS DISCUSSIONS
1. 12th Grade Class (April 11, 2016)
2. 12th Grade Class (April 13, 2016)
3. 10th Grade Class (April 18, 2016)
4. 10th Grade Class (April 19, 2016)
5. 10th Grade Class (April 21, 2016)
6. 10th Grade Class (April 22, 2016)

SURVEY
1. 11th Grade Class (April 13, 2016)

INTERVIEWS
1. Duong Van Thanh (email, April 28, 2016)
2. Anon. 12th Grade Female Participant (April 11, 2016; April 25, 2016)
3. Anon. 12th Grade Female Participant 2 (April 11, 2016)
4. Anon. 12th Grade Male Participant (April 18, 2016)
5. Anon. 12th Grade Female Participant (April 18, 2016)
6. Anon. 10th Grade Female Participant (April 19, 2016)
7. Anon. 12th Grade Male Participant (April 25, 2016)
8. Tong Quynh Hoa (April 18, 2016)

FOCUS GROUPS
1. University Students (April 17, 2016)
2. University Students (April 26, 2016)