

Social and Cultural Capital Across Borders:

Exploring the Backgrounds and Aspirations of Vietnamese Students in Germany

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how Vietnamese students in Germany explain the reasons for their choice to study there. It draws on Bourdieu's field theory, and analyses data from eight semi-structured interviews. It quickly became apparent that all the students interviewed had specific, pre-existing social and cultural capital related to Germany. In terms of outcomes, all are focussed on gaining a highly internationalized form of institutionalized cultural capital, as they view a German bachelor's or master's degree primarily as a vehicle for further international mobility and personal and career development, rather than necessarily seeking to remain in Germany or return to Vietnam after their studies. Through interviews related to the development of higher educational exchange between Germany and Vietnam, the study also highlights how existing social and institutional links between East Germany and Vietnam which developed prior to the 1990s continue to influence these processes by shaping the specific forms of embodied cultural capital, institutionalized cultural capital and social capital available to students. These insights add to the recent body of literature which seeks to extend Bourdieu's concepts to the transnational activities of East Asian and other globally mobile elites (Marginson, 2007; Norén-Nilsson et. al., 2023).

Key Words

Vietnam; Germany; Higher education; Social capital; Cultural capital; International student mobility

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Note on Languages and Scripts

The work for this thesis involved the use of three main languages: English, German and Vietnamese. The reasons for this are described in further detail in the methodology section. Both German and modern Vietnamese use variations on the roman alphabet which contain letters and/or symbols not found in English.

For ease of reading, place names are generally quoted in English. Where I indicate that an interview was conducted in German, any English translations of direct quotes are my own. German language words and names which include German characters not found in English have been reproduced using the German alphabet, including special characters. Where Vietnamese names or other words are quoted directly, for instance as part of the reference list, I have endeavoured to spell these correctly and have used Vietnamese script. When referencing, however, I have in all cases followed the stylistic lead of the original source on

whether to include non-English characters in the titles or authors' names, regardless of the name's linguistic origin. Any inaccuracies or errors in these areas are of course my own.

1. Introduction

Background

The Vietnamese government has a stated policy of encouraging out-migration for the purposes of work and education, but choices of destination are made by individuals and the reasons for these individual choices are under-researched. Considerable attention has been paid to certain Vietnamese migrant communities in various countries, with the Vietnamese community in Germany being a prominent example. However, these studies have typically focused on labour migrants who arrived during significant historical periods, for instance during a period of cultural exchange between communist countries and the former Deutsche Demokratische Republik [*German Democratic Republic*], otherwise known as East Germany (for convenience, and to distinguish it from the contemporary German state, this is hereafter referred to as the DDR). Students, perhaps because they are expected to reside in the destination country only temporarily, often receive less attention.

At the same time, there is anecdotal evidence that the backgrounds and reasons for studying abroad, for Vietnamese students in German speaking countries, may be distinct from those of students travelling to other countries, including in the anglosphere. Most Vietnamese who study at university in Europe have been studying the relevant language for several years. This raises the question of how decisions on destination countries are made, given the differences in the availability and nature of intensive language provision for children. Investigating this issues will not only contribute to existing literature about how the growing number of internationally mobile East Asian students makes the decisions regarding their specific study choices (Kenway & Fahey, 2014), but also sheds greater light on the social backgrounds and attitudes of university-educated Vietnamese citizens who either plan to live abroad for a time or have already done so, who now constitute an important subgroup of Vietnamese society in their own right.

Research Problem

This thesis aims to bridge gaps in current research by focussing both on the profiles of individual students coming to Germany to study, and the perceived advantages they wish to gain from their studies in Germany which lead them to select it as a destination country. To do this, I employ the theoretical concepts introduced by Bourdieu, with a particular emphasis on *social, economic and cultural capital*, to shed light on the complex reasons for people's actions as they navigate *social fields*.

This thesis therefore addresses the following research questions:

Main Question:

How do Vietnamese students in Germany explain the reasons for their choice to study there?

Sub question 1:

What existing forms of capital does this group leverage in order to study in Germany, and how does this mediate any similarities in the typical backgrounds, goals and attitudes amongst this group of students?

Sub question 2:

What forms of capital (social, economic or cultural) do they anticipate gaining from studying in Germany?

Academic Contribution

This study contributes to ongoing discussions on how elites leverage social, cultural and economic capital through education. In doing so, it builds on Bourdieu's studies of the acquisition of capital through education and elite reproduction (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu 1996) and adds to the growing body of literature which seeks to extend his ideas to an

increasingly globalised modern world, overcoming the ‘methodological nationalism’ of his original studies (Amelina et al., 2012, in Kenway, 2016). In focussing on Vietnamese students, who are not typically the focus of research as an immigrant group in their own right, it also contributes to the literature on modern Vietnamese education, analysing the Vietnamese context in the light of broader debates related to the massification of higher education and international student mobility.

Outline of the Thesis

Following this introduction, chapter 2 discusses current debates within the sociology of higher education, as well as assessing key literature on contemporary issues within the German and Vietnamese education systems. Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical framework which underpins the analysis, while chapter 4 details the methodological tools used in analysing the results, including ethical considerations. Chapter 5 details the research findings and analyses the results obtained, followed by a conclusion in chapter 6.

2. Literature Review

Introduction

There has been a growing scholarly literature on Western higher education since the 1980s, focusing in particular on issues of access and globalisation. The first part of this literature review analyses some current debates in the sociology of higher education. This literature review then discusses the distinctive features of the German higher education system, as well some of the literature on recent developments in Vietnamese higher education, to better contextualise possible reasons for Vietnamese students choosing to study abroad. The final part discusses the research gap this thesis seeks to address.

Educational Choices and Mobility: Sociological Perspectives

The study of higher education emerged as a distinct sociological sub-field in the 1960s (Andres, 2022), during a period which saw an explosion in student numbers throughout the anglosphere and worldwide. The following section analyses some of the key debates on international student mobility.

Functionalist sociological theories view society as being composed of interconnected components which each work together for the benefit of the whole (Andres, 2022). Building on this tradition, the *technical-function theory* of educational stratification rests on the assumption that, as technology develops, society will inevitably continue to require increasing numbers of people with higher levels of general skills, as well as specialized technical skills (Collins, 1971). Consequently, the number of years which students spend in school will continue to increase as technology continues to evolve, since the actual effects of education align with its *manifest* (purported) *functions* of both developing students' abilities and enabling social mobility (Côté and Pickard, 2022). Although Collins (ibid) developed his theories based on the domestic US education system and employer demands of his time, this viewpoint has continued to affect key policies in higher education through the late 20th and early 21st centuries, and the continual expansion of global higher education is still seen by organisations such as the OECD as vital for allowing young people to maximise their contributions in a modern, technological society (Andres, 2022).

One of the practical consequences of these assumptions has been the meteoric expansion of higher education. Trow (1973) predicted this move from ‘elite’ to ‘mass’ and finally to ‘universal’ higher education – in which over 50% of students would eventually participate in the higher education system – as inevitable for all advanced societies, with the potential to decrease income inequality in the long run. His prophecy was fulfilled, at least in the anglosphere – by 2019, just over half of students in the US and the UK had completed some form of higher education program (OECD 2020 in Fallis, 2022). Later in this section, I will argue that this is the perspective which also underlies current Vietnamese government policy on higher education.

Social conflict perspectives on higher education view society in terms of competing interest groups and their struggle for power. Theorists in this tradition posit that education is not necessarily meritocratic, and that its primary function is to create unequal outcomes which reinforce existing patterns of social stratification. This occurs both through socialising students into specific patterns of behaviour which typically align with their class or community of origin, and by classifying students by ability in a way which tends to reproduce, reinforce, and justify existing structures (Chernoff, 2013). In other words, instead of its surface-level aims, social conflict theory about higher education institutions focuses on their *latent* (‘hidden’) *functions* in propping up the interests of certain elite groups (Côté and Pickard, 2022).

Bourdieu’s work on elite reproduction falls under the ‘social conflict’ umbrella and provides a compelling explanation of education’s function in society. His seminal work *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power* (Bourdieu, 1996) developed his theory of the various forms of capital an individual may possess (Bourdieu, 1986) to argue that education is a key means by which social determinism disguises itself in order to perpetuate the status quo. In particular, he argued that members of the national elite employ different *reproduction strategies* to maintain their *cultural, social and economic capital*, and that these have *exchange value*, in that they can be converted more or less ‘expensively’ into other forms of capital. Furthermore, using data from the France of his day, he argued that different schools reflected these differing ‘mixes’ of capital, reproducing a range of different social *fields* which their graduates occupied. By consciously using attendance at specific types of

educational institutions as *social investment strategies*, families could ensure that their *cultural capital* was maintained across generations.

Although Bourdieu's analysis was specific to a particular set of institutions in a specific time and place, his theories have been widely used to explain educational choices and elite reproduction in other contexts. Nonetheless, more recent authors in the field of education have pointed out that Bourdieu's work shows a 'methodological nationalism' (Amelina et al., 2012, in Kenway, 2016) which may no longer be appropriate to the activities of modern, more globalised elites. Kenway and Fahey (2014) note that elite secondary schools in English speaking countries are increasingly internationalising as they try to attract students across borders. Ong (1999) further notes that, as East Asian elites move across borders, they face unique challenges in converting their existing *economic capital* into the *cultural capital* of their host countries.

In parallel to the massification of domestic western higher education, there has been a significant growth in students crossing borders to study. To take just one striking figure, the OECD (2020) states that the number of international students in OECD countries doubled from around 2 million in 2009 to 4 million in 2018. On a policy level, the almost uncritical acceptance of this growth signifies both a functionalist and *neoliberal* attitude towards higher education as a free market of options. According to this perspective, allowing students to freely select between a multitude of higher education courses, which may better fit their educational needs and preferred price points than what is available back home (Ford & McMullin, 2022) is likely to contribute to the economic development of both the sending and receiving countries. This has led to the *equity-standards debate* in higher education, which puts under scrutiny the idea that there can be both intense competition amongst educational institutions and continually increasing overall numbers of students, without this creating any 'losers' or decreasing the rigour of existing educational courses. (Côté and Pickard, 2022). Below, I will discuss to what extent these issues are also relevant in the context of German universities.

Other researchers use *push-pull factor theory* to analyse deficits (*push factors*) students perceive in their home country, and possible advantages (*pull factors*) to going abroad. For instance, Gutema et al. (2023) identify some possible push factors as being perceptions of low educational quality or limited future employment opportunities in the home country.

Mazzarol and Souter (2002) also identify family connections to the destination country as a possible pull factor in their study. However, this framework can fail to capture the nuances of individual decision making. It can therefore be useful to combine this idea with Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* – long-lasting attitudes and practices on the part of particular students and their communities – to understand the attitudes and habits which drive specific educational decisions (Eusafsai, 2024).

Vietnamese Students in Germany

The next section aims to contextualise the situation of Vietnamese students in Germany, with a review of the relevant literature. This is followed by a section assessing the current state of the domestic higher education system in Vietnam, in order to suggest some possible push factors which may lead to students going abroad. Finally, there is a brief discussion of existing literature on Vietnamese populations in Germany, which is important for understanding the areas which have thus far been under-researched.

Higher education in Germany

Like many other countries, Germany has seen a meteoric growth in its international student population; numbers rose from 394,665 to 469,485 in the 6 years from 2018-2024 alone (Kelmendi, 2024). Unlike many other countries in Europe and elsewhere, however, German public universities still charge no additional fees for international students. Instead, all students pay the same 'semester fees', which range from around 100-300 euros. The one exception is the recently introduced 'Higher Education Innovation Act' of 2022, which allows universities in the state of Bavaria to charge students from outside the European union additional fees if they wish (Bayern Recht, 2025). Even this policy, however, has had mixed effects (Upton, 2022); for instance, TU Munich, one of the first universities to take advantage of the policy, has already been forced to drop the fees from 3000 to 1500 euros per semester following a decline in international student recruitment (Stacey, 2023). In fact, a previous survey carried out by Study in Germany (2025) quoted affordability as the most common reason international students gave for choosing Germany for their studies, at 35.3% of those surveyed. Instead, the major barrier to entry remains the fact that most bachelor's degrees at public universities are taught through the German language.

History and Context

Modern Vietnamese higher education developed out of a system of competitive state examinations, designed to prepare boys for the civil service. Therefore, ascent into the bureaucracy was, in theory, wholly dependent on merit. In practice, however, opportunities to prepare for these examinations were dictated by the financial situation of individual families. In some cases, the local community would also select which boys should have the opportunity to study, creating a complex interplay between local social status and educational opportunities (London, 2011).

Eventually, the highest of these court qualifications, Tiến sĩ, became conflated in the Vietnamese understanding with the Soviet ‘doctor of science’ title, and thereafter with the PhD in its current form (St George, 2014, p.97). In keeping with this, the mismatch between the type of higher educational content and institution which is perceived to be ‘prestigious’, and actual workforce needs, has been observed by many researchers to be particularly acute in Vietnam. While some vocational training schools do exist for secondary and tertiary level students, these are not considered to be prestigious (Woods, 2002) and do not lead to higher education qualifications. Vocational training schools are therefore not a viable option for students wishing to learn technical skills in order to enter highly paid professions.

With regards to degree-awarding institutions, only lower-tier universities generally make an attempt to focus on professional or technical training, and in these cases the results are often mixed. Hồ (2011) points out that, even where explicitly supported by the government, such experiments tend to be relatively isolated efforts on the part of individual institutions. For instance, Hồng (2011) details one such attempt. Under the auspices of the Vietnam–Netherlands project on Professionally Oriented Higher Education (PROFED), beginning in 2005, the Hưng Yên University of Technical Teacher Education worked with local companies in the Red-river Delta to create a competency-based framework for students enrolled in the electrical engineering and IT majors. At the request of the companies

involved, subjects such as ‘Job Orientation’ and ‘Communication Skills’ were added, and the proportion of practical training in the degree programs was increased.

This institution has a long history of providing junior-college level vocational training, from its foundation as the Hung Yên Industrial Vocational School in 1966. It might therefore be perceived as a promising environment for this type of trial. However, there were significant issues with project implementation. A key challenge was the competencies of the lecturers themselves, who were hired based on previous academic qualifications and achievements, rather than industry experience. Another issue was a systemic lack of funds for additional practical training in the field of electrical engineering, resulting partly from the extremely rapid expansion of university enrolment in recent years.

The very structure and purpose of this program shows another key contradiction inherent in the Vietnamese public higher education as it currently stands. The experiment was authorised by MOET, the Ministry of Education and Training, as part of its sweeping higher education reform act of 2005 (Resolution 14/2005/NQ-CP). Among the stated aims of this act is to give institutions greater autonomy, as well as to split higher education into two streams, research oriented and professionally oriented, taking much greater account of the needs of industry (Hồng, 2011). However, MOET currently keeps a tight hold of the university curriculum; this program was viewed as ‘experimental’ precisely *because* it allowed the institution to temporarily depart from these rigid prescriptions. In other words, since other institutions do not have the same permission to modify the curriculum, they cannot currently consider similar attempts at reform. In practice, therefore, modernisation efforts in public higher education are still in their infancy.

All of this suggest several possible factors which might conspire to push Vietnamese students to study abroad. Students looking to specialise in technical or other university subjects with immediate applicability to the workplace face a dilemma. If they remain in Vietnam, there is likely to be a clash in their desire to gain *institutionalized cultural capital* through completing a degree at a prestigious public university and the need to gain *embodied cultural capital* in the form of foreign language and other workplace skills. Anecdotally, the author has heard that it is a widespread part of the *habitus* of the upper middle class in Vietnam to send their high school graduates to the highest ranked public university course they can manage to get into, with little regard for the student’s own interests, and even the location of the institution

in question. One possibility is that, in studying abroad, students may be able to sidestep such expectations.

The Development of Foreign Language Higher Education

Modern Vietnamese public education, at all levels from kindergarten to tertiary level, is a highly homogenized system which is centralized in the hands of the state (London, 2011). It is also taught entirely through the medium of standard Vietnamese, with some rare exceptions at primary level for ethnic minorities (Truong, 2011). This is largely due to historical factors. French language education during the colonial period was limited to a handful of secondary-level institutions in larger urban areas, which aimed to provide clerks for colonial offices (St George, 2011); by design, this system only impacted a small subset of the population. As a result, modern public education, including higher education, was effectively rolled out ‘from scratch’ by the new communist state, beginning in the 1970s, with one aim of this endeavour being nation building and encouraging the use of a common language throughout the country (St George, 2011).

In 1986, the Vietnamese government announced the ‘đổi mới’ reforms at its 6th National congress, paving the way for its successful transition to a market economy. Nonetheless, for-profit higher education institutions were effectively banned in Vietnam until 2000, when the government gave special permission to Australian university RMIT to open its doors in the country, as part of an Australian ‘strategic investment fund’ for Vietnam (RMIT, 2022; Vietnam News, 2023). A few years later, the Higher Education Reform Act of 2005 came into force.

In addition to the efforts at reform of the public university system, another aim of the act is to open Higher Education in Vietnam up to for-profit institutions and foreign investment, in order to massively expand both the overall quantity and quality of provision: ‘To expand the training scale, attaining the rate of 200 students and 450 students (*sic*) for every 10,000 people...’ (Thư Viện Pháp Luật, 2005) for the purpose of ‘satisfying the requirements of national industrialization and modernization, international economic integration and people’s learning demands’ (ibid.). Since then, there has been a massive increase in overall enrolment in the country, including in privately owned institutions. According to the World Bank

Group, from 2000 to 2010, total enrolment more than doubled from 0.9 million to 2.3 million students (Parajuli et al., 2020). This suggests a strong tendency towards *structural functionalist* view of education on the part of the Vietnamese government. since the underlying assumption seems to be that this wholesale expansion will necessarily lead to further productivity gains and economic development.

Tran, Ly and Mai (2024) sought to explore students and staff perceptions of private foreign language provision through qualitative research. They found that students felt that the value of English medium education was high, suggesting that the students might be hoping to gain *embodied cultural capital* in the form of language skills, which would aid in their future employability. However, the interviewees also raised similar concerns to those expressed by the participants in the Hưng Yên trial; that the Vietnamese subject specialists, while competent in their own fields, were ill-prepared to deliver the new material through the medium of English, as they lacked the relevant language and pedagogical skills. In other words, if the quality of such teaching is considered inadequate by students, this further suggests that the ability to study through the medium of English or another foreign language may be a significant pull factor for students travelling internationally.

Existing Research on Vietnamese Student Communities in Germany

One particularly early and significant instance of Vietnamese migration to Europe occurred in the then communist East Germany (GDR/DDR). In 1980, a bilateral agreement was signed between the DDR and Vietnam, and around 70,000 labour migrants moved to East Germany and worked there under labour contracts (Schwenkel, 2017), initially living in accommodations which largely segregated them from the rest of German society (Bösch & Phi, 2021). After the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, many of these Vietnamese lost their employment and consequently their legal status. Many of those who did not leave immediately, however, eventually made Germany their permanent home (Nguyen S., 2023). By contrast, while West Germany also saw significant labour migration flows prior to reunification, these generally stemmed from countries closer to home in Southern and Eastern Europe (Kreienbrink et. al, 2012). Instead, those Vietnamese migrants who did come to West Germany arrived as part of a wider push by western countries to resettle ‘anti-communist’

migrants during the Vietnamese ‘Boat People Crisis’ as part of an ‘Orderly Departure Program’ involving 65 western countries, including West Germany (Wolf & Lowman, 1990).

Nowadays, there is an emerging body of literature written by the children of these two groups of migrants, the self-identified ‘1.5- generation’ or ‘2nd generation’ who grew up in Germany. This work offers a positionality from within today’s Vietnamese community in Germany and has helped to shed light on some of the specific experiences of this group. For instance, Nguyen T. (2023), a recent master’s student at Humboldt University, compared members of this generation in Berlin and Paris, exploring and contrasting issues around identity, bilingualism and belonging. Another, separate thesis (Nguyen A., 2024) emphasizes the auto-ethnographic element, which allows the writer, as a self-described member of the ‘1.75 generation’ to link the research to her own life by interviewing fellow students of Vietnamese descent about their perceptions of ‘mother tongue’ and how it relates to their identities. Whilst some of the interviewees for these studies are students, however, their focus is on a specific community which does not include Vietnamese students who grew up in Vietnam and made the decision to move to Germany for higher education.

Finding the Gap and Research Positioning

The literature based on Bourdieu’s theoretical framework is well-established and continues to develop. This work adds to recent attempts to overcome issues of ‘methodological nationalism’ (Amelina et al., 2012, in Kenway, 2016) in his work by recognising the transnational nature of modern elites and their search for *cultural capital* through education. In doing so, it builds on and contributes to existing literature on the sociology of higher education, focussing on the German context, where student fees are not a primary driver of internationalisation or student recruitment and where English is not typically used in undergraduate teaching. By showing how Vietnamese students, an understudied population, navigate these issues, this has a potential to contribute to the literature on higher education through this theoretical lens.

At the same time, literature on migrant communities typically does not study international student populations in their own right. Perhaps this is due to the assumption that, since they do not necessarily intend to remain in a country, their presence does not create a longer-term

social impact. However, I argue that the transitory nature of these populations does not necessarily minimize the significance of their presence. Investigating their attitudes, motivations and expectations has the potential to provide valuable sociological insights into issues related to the massification and globalisation of higher education.

3. Theoretical Framework

Overview of Theoretical Framework

The objective of this thesis is to analyse the attitudes, backgrounds and personal goals of Vietnamese students studying in Germany, and how the forms of capital available to them, and those which they hope to acquire through studying abroad, influence their choice to study in Germany. In order to do this, I utilise theoretical concepts introduced by Pierre Bourdieu as part of his *field theory*. Bourdieu's work is significant in that it seeks to overcome the *structure-agency conflict* in the social sciences. His theoretical concepts shed light on how material conditions can simultaneously affect an actor's social position, while also reinforcing certain types of personal experiences, which thereby continually reproduce themselves.

Key Concepts

Forms of Capital

Bourdieu's theories of *capital* describe social mechanisms for the 'distribution of material resources and means of appropriation of socially scarce goods and values' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.7). In the sense that this presupposes that the amount of available resources is finite, this concept is sometimes viewed as an extension of Marxist social thought, though this has been contested (Paolucci, 2022).

Bourdieu defines *social capital* as the network of connections possessed by an actor, which can potentially be 'called in' and converted to other forms of capital. Such networks may be more or less formally institutionalized, eg. through the existence of a club, clan etc. However, social capital is not static or permanent; instead, such networks require a constant exchange to strengthen ties and create a sense of mutual obligation. The strength of a network depends both on the quantity and strength of an actors' contacts, and the additional capital - social, economic and cultural - which each of these contacts can leverage. Therefore, although social capital is never directly interchangeable with the other forms of capital, it is influenced by them and cannot be divorced from them (Bourdieu, 1986).

Bourdieu defines *cultural capital* as the collection of non-financial signals and ‘assets’ which assist the holder in maintaining and improving their social standing and thereby navigating, and succeeding in the culture in question (Bourdieu, 1986; Moore 2008). It may be divided into three main types: *objectified cultural capital*, *institutionalized cultural capital*, and *embodied cultural capital* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.119).

Objectified cultural capital refers to cultural capital represented by the material objects people possess. These choices are a signal to others, but their precise significance and value is also highly dependent on a person’s existing *habitus*, which causes them to imbue particular objects with specific social meanings (Moore, 2008). In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu analyses this process in detail, detailing how the purpose of competition for luxury goods is to signal exclusivity. In the case of fashion, for instance, he argues that the moment clothing mass production started, and it became more available, the ‘beautiful’ people began to signal exclusivity through turning to ‘authentic’ and ‘genuine’ lifestyle options such as real army surplus and safari jackets in order to re-distinguish themselves from the masses (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 230).

The concept of objectified cultural capital is included here for the sake of completeness, as part of the analytical framework used. However, due to the nature of the findings of this thesis, objectified cultural capital is not mentioned in the analysis section itself (see section 5).

Embodied cultural capital is Bourdieu’s explanation for how the external, social world is transposed into an individual’s internal self or ‘second nature’ (Moore, 2008, p.110). It is acquired through various means, including education, and is closely connected to the concept of *habitus* (Moore, 2008). Embodied cultural capital may be viewed as material wealth converted and integrated into a person’s *habitus*; parents can ‘transmit’ it to their children, for example, by funding their education beyond the time when they might otherwise have broken it off. Examples of embodied cultural capital acquired through education or other means might be a particular type of accent, a detailed knowledge in a scientific field, or artistic and musical tastes. For instance, a scientist is, in a sense, the embodiment of his field, and in addition to holding the appropriate initial qualifications, must regularly interact with the related knowledge and practices in order to remain so (Bourdieu, 2007).

However, it is also important to note that instantaneous transmission of embodied cultural capital is not possible and that, conversely, it is possible to acquire it without any deliberate effort. Thus, while its acquisition often presupposes access to material and financial resources, its relationship with these is more complicated than merely a direct exchange. Precisely due to this relative obscurity in its mechanisms of transmission, Bourdieu argues that this is the form of capital which is most likely to have symbolic value in society. He also argues that the greater the barriers a society places to the direct transmission of economic capital, the more likely it is that actors will seek to find ways to transmit embodied cultural capital in its place (Bourdieu, 1986).

Institutionalized cultural capital refers to one specific way in which cultural capital can be given a more permanent value through legitimation by the state. While embodied cultural capital on its own has the same biological limits as its bearer (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248), institutionalizing it, for example through an educational qualification, means that the cultural capital ‘now has a relative autonomy vis-à-vis its bearer’. In this way, it creates a kind of ‘performative magic’ to ‘impose recognition’ (ibid).

Economic capital refers to financial resources, and possessions which can easily be converted into financial resources, such as property. Unlike Marx’s theories, Bourdieu’s does not focus on the processes by which economic capital is accumulated. Rather, Bourdieu was interested in *conversion* – the choices and processes by which people seek to convert the economic capital at their disposal into other kinds of social advantages, and vice-versa.

Bourdieu’s view is that economic capital is the form of capital which underlies the acquisition of all others. This is because, to acquire the other forms of capital described above, economic capital must always be expended – either directly, or through expending its direct equivalents, time and effort. For example, choosing an appropriate and carefully thought-out gift, as well as the performance of the care with which it is given, is likely to increase the giver’s social capital with the recipient. Another example is the acquisition of certain habits or knowledge, which can only be achieved either through schooling, or focussed attention at elsewhere (which presupposes the availability of time and attention, and therefore by extension economic resources). The resulting cultural or social capital may then in turn eventually result in a higher income – ie, in a re-conversion of the investment into economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Habitus

According to Bourdieu, the conscious perceptions of social actors are an essential component of social reality (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In contrast to theories such as rational choice theory, Bourdieu argues that learned social structures are a key part in how individuals exercise their individual agency. *Habitus* is a set of dispositions or attitudes acquired from early life and surroundings; people then make choices based on this framework, taking into account the social capital they have at their disposal and their current location within the social field. It is worth noting that Bourdieu emphasises family and early experiences as the dominant force in the formation of *habitus*, with educational experiences as secondary. A person will generally continue to act on the ‘facts’ which are assumed to be ‘inherently true’ by members of their original social circle (Bourdieu refers to such ‘facts’ as *doxa*). While later social influences can also play a role, the former heavily influence how these later influences are interpreted, and whether a person is able to adapt successfully to a new set of *doxa* (Maton, 2008).

Habitus is, of course, not directly observable. In order to identify aspects of an actor’s *habitus*, we must instead search for patterns of repeated attitudes and actions (Burke, 2015), and operationalize these for the purposes of research. For instance, Bodovski (2015) in her study of the relationship of parental *habitus* to adolescents’ school achievement, split her study into educational expectations, adolescents’ self-concept, and locus of control. For instance, statements such as ‘I feel good about my myself’ were coded as positive on the self-concept scale, while ‘at times I think I am no good at all’ was reverse coded (Bodovski, 2015, p.45). In this way, it is possible to investigate how differences in such attitudes vary depending on the social backgrounds of those involved, ie, to suggest how these aspects of *habitus* vary based on the participants’ original place in the social *field*.

Field

The concept of the social *field* is the third key to understanding Bourdieu’s conception of a social world and social practices which mutually reinforce each other through actors’ engagement therein. It refers to the existing social ‘playing field’, in which actors work to

accumulate different forms of *capital*, according to their current place within it, but also taking into account their existing habits, tastes and values. Bourdieu thus viewed *field* and *habitus* as a mutually reinforcing ‘dialectic’ (Thomson, 2008, p.75), with the evolution of both the actor and the social arena being shaped by their interactions with one another. In this conceptualization, therefore, neither *habitus* nor *field* can be described as causal, in contrast to simpler conceptions of social actors behaving with *rational self-interest* in a pre-existing social environment (Thomas, 2008). Instead, actions in the social field simultaneously work to preserve elements of the existing social structure, as well as continually transforming it (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Criticisms and Possible Limitations

Bourdieu perceives social capital as a private good which is acquired, in the Marxist fashion, through a zero-sum struggle with other actors. This contrasts with other conceptions of social capital as a multiplicative public good which results in social trust and the potential for participation which benefits all members of a society (Putnam 1993; 2000). From Putnam’s standpoint, while social networks are still used by actors to the benefit of all participants in the network, these benefits are not necessarily exclusionary (Putnam, 1993).

Bourdieu’s stance on this issue is clearly illustrated in *Distinction* (1984), when he gives his view on the quality-standards debate in education: ‘*In a period of ‘diploma inflation’ the disparity between the aspirations that the educational system produces and the opportunities it really offers... this affects all members of a school generation, but to a varying extent depending on the rarity of their qualifications and their social origins... (this is) one of the paradoxes of what is called ‘the democratization of schooling’*’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p.139). From his viewpoint, the primary *latent function* of education is to transmit cultural capital between generations (Bourdieu, 1986), which must necessarily be diluted through greater participation.

As already mentioned, Bourdieu sought to use his concept of *habitus* to resolve the *structure-agency issue* (Maton, 2008). However, Bourdieu’s view of the durability of *habitus* has been criticised as simply providing a slightly more nuanced, but still deterministic, view of the reasons for social actions (Burke, 2015). Although Bourdieu claims that *habitus* is not to be

understood as a mechanical cause and effect mechanism, Jenkins (1982) argues that there is little practical difference between the conceptualisation of habitus as Bourdieu described it, and simple determinism. In utilising this framework, it will therefore be important to examine the various aspects of an individual's habitus carefully, to avoid falling into an oversimplified deterministic interpretation of their experiences.

4. Methodology

Methodological Approach

I have chosen to use a qualitative approach to my data collection for this study. Qualitative methods may be broadly defined as relying on in-depth analysis and interpretation of observational data situated within ‘naturalistic’ social settings, in order to gain insights about social phenomena through the meanings people assign to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). The primary sources of data in this type of research consist of words, actions and direct experiences (Anderson *et al.*, 2006).

In my thesis, I investigate how Vietnamese university students in Germany explain the reasons for their higher education choices, how they believe that making this specific choice - compared with alternatives such as studying in Vietnam or in the anglosphere - will benefit them in the future, and whether any commonalities can be found within this group with regards to their backgrounds and aspirations. The use of a qualitative methodology is well suited to a topic such as this, where there is a significant lack of previous research into this specific area and population (Bryman, 2016). As detailed in the literature review, Vietnamese students are not typically the focus of research, either by governments or social scientists, as they are not viewed as a separate immigrant group requiring special attention. Rather, most existing research on Vietnamese communities in eastern Germany tends to focus on those whose members are now in the ‘2nd generation’.

The theoretical framework chosen deals with power relations and their reproduction, taking a *social constructivist* rather than *positivist* ontological standpoint. The emphasis is on research participants’ own ideas of reality, which are generated through their own mental processes and lived experiences, and how these simultaneously interact with and help shape the world around them (Shannon-Baker, 2022). Proponents of social constructivist and critical theories, such as feminist and postcolonial theories have emphasised the need for a qualitative methodological approach in order to avoid the reproduction of extractive forms of knowledge creation in the search for ‘objective’ knowledge, which they argue reproduce and entrench existing power structures in the academy and privilege the standpoints of dominant groups over the embodied, relational and localised experiences of marginalised actors (Collins, 1990; Smith, 2005). Epistemologically, Bourdieu emphasizes the importance of a reflexive

approach to knowledge production, situating findings in the context of the social structures of their specific place and time (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). His theories are therefore well suited to investigation by qualitative methods (Bryman, 2016).

Data Collection

The method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. This is a method of interviewing which provides an outline of questions in order to guide the discussion, but then allows the interviewer flexibility to follow up through additional questions, in order to seek additional information as appropriate. Doing this can allow a researcher to avoid ‘pigeon-holing’ people’s experiences into rigid, pre-defined categories, enabling additional themes to emerge as the interviewee has more freedom to guide the conversation (Bryman, 2016, p. 471).

Each interview lasted around 45 minutes, with the guiding interview questions designed to reflect some of the key issues identified in the literature review and theoretical framework for investigation (see appendix 1). For instance, the question ‘Why did you decide to come to Germany to study?’ seeks to illuminate the forms of *capital* which interviewees seek to gain, while also potentially shedding light on how the idea of going to Germany links with the own *embodied dispositions* and those of their social network, ie. to aspects of *habitus* and *social capital*.

Sampling Process

In order to gather background information about the history and current processes behind German students coming to Vietnam to study, I interviewed two participants, ‘Linda’ and ‘Chi’ (see appendix 2) who differ from the other interviewees in that they had not completed a degree in Germany during the past 10 years. Linda is a German citizen who was born in the DDR, but subsequently married a Vietnamese man and lived in Vietnam for several decades, before returning to Germany. After meeting her in Germany, I asked whether she might be able to put me in touch with current Vietnamese students in the country. However, during our subsequent conversations and interactions, it became clear that her personal experiences were

also relevant to my research, and she agreed to do an interview with me, as well as putting me in touch with Chi, who also works as a lecturer at a university and in addition, works part-time with an agency bringing Vietnamese students to German universities. My connections with her and Chi were therefore a clear example of *convenience sampling* (Bryman, 2016), in which research participants are chosen based on the fact that they are easy for the researcher to make contact with, often due to existing personal connections.

The focus of my interviews with Linda and Chi was on their work with previous or current Vietnamese students in Germany, as well as related policy and organisational activities. I believe that this information provides valuable background perspectives which helped to inform the direction of my other 6 interviews and contextualize my findings.

In arranging the student interviews, my goal was to use *purposive sampling* (Bryman, 2016), meaning that the individuals were selected based on certain criteria – namely that they should self-identify as Vietnamese, have completed their schooling in Vietnam, and then have come to Germany with the intention of studying for a university degree. Initially, both Linda and Chi attempted to help me find student participants for my interviews, but this was unsuccessful. Indeed, locating participants was initially much more challenging than I had expected, regardless of which channel I tried to use. Eventually, my flatmate Hoa put me in touch with Son and Ân, and Ân put me in touch with her older sister Trân, who she is in close contact with but who is studying in a different city, about a week later. This is an example of *snowball sampling*, in which initial contacts and interviews lead the researcher to locate other suitable participants (Merkens, 2004). I found Ngọc – the only interviewee to have come to Germany to do a master's degree, as well as the only one who had studied English and not German in order to be admitted - by reaching out to potential participants via a language exchange app. Bình agreed to participate after I sent out a similar message on the social media group for a students' hall of residence where I had stayed.

Data Analysis- Using Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is an umbrella term for an approach to qualitative content analysis which is widely used across the social sciences. Essentially, it is a method of pattern identification, in which qualitative data is coded for underlying patterns (themes) which can then be analysed to provide new insights into the social world. In addition to interviews, thematic analysis is

also suitable for analysing other types of textual data, making it a flexible method which enables researchers to draw on a variety of data sources. The process of identifying themes in these texts is applied iteratively, with researchers' own theoretical knowledge, familiarity with the context, and research approach inevitably playing a part in how they identify and subsequently code patterns in the data (Fugard & Potts, 2019).

Coding Process and Analysis

All of my interviewees allowed me to create sound recordings of our conversations, meaning I had the luxury of being able to listen again to the audio after all the interviews were completed. Nonetheless, I chose not to transcribe the interviews in full, but rather to take detailed notes in the first stage of the analysis. Although transcription can obviously be a useful tool for yielding comprehensive results and making ensuring no information is missed, Loubere (2017) points out that it can also have negative consequences, as it may cause the researcher to miss opportunities for reflexive thinking in the early stages of the data analysis process. Bryman (2016) also suggests that 'coding as soon as possible' and continuing this process iteratively through multiple stages of analysis is likely to sharpen the qualitative researcher's understanding of the data (p.576).

Transcribing my notes using the computer program Obsidian allowed me to begin noticing repeated patterns and creating hyperlinks to cross-references key emerging themes early on. Initially, ten 'prototype themes' (Hayfield & Terry, 2021, p.53) emerged. For instance, I initially identified 'language lessons and tests prior to arriving', and 'school links' as separate themes, but merged these as it became clear that these two areas were substantially interconnected for many of the participants.

Reflections and Ethical Issues

Positionality

Positionality refers to the personal characteristics of the researcher, and how these interact with the issue to be investigated. It locates the researcher in relation to the topic, the research participants and the wider context (Holmes, 2020, p.2). This is important in order gain an

awareness of the potential underlying power dynamics at play and how these could influence the outcomes of the research or the process of data collection (Crawford et. al., 2017).

Some authors have argued that using a qualitative methodological approach in itself helps to avoid the reproduction of extractive forms of knowledge engendered in the search for ‘objective’ knowledge, which they argue reproduces and entrenches existing power structures in the academy and privileges the standpoints of dominant groups over the embodied, relational and localised experiences of marginalised actors (Collins, 1990; Smith, 2005). As outlined above, the semi-structured interview process further allows interviewees ample room to guide and shape the conversation and to add additional information of their choosing.

In a sense, I was both an insider and outsider to the community I was studying. I am a researcher from a university in the global north, who had studied courses in Germany for 6 months immediately prior to the beginning of the data collection process. I was therefore dealing with participants with a similar academic background. On the other hand, I am also an outsider to the Vietnamese community in Germany. In addition, I am also someone who is an English native speaker and speaks German at C1 level, while I only speak B1-level Vietnamese. As a result, all interviews were conducted in either English or German. Out of necessity, therefore, I was imposing the obligation to do the interviews in a western language with which I was likely to feel more secure than most of my interviewees. This raises the issue of linguistic alienation and linguistic violence, which risk perpetuating patterns of domination over knowledge production (Gay, 1998).

In order to try and mitigate these issues and give the interviewees the opportunity to express themselves as freely as possible, I gave them the option to do the interview in either English or German. I also made clear that I was not a native German speaker, but that I could understand both languages, as well as some Vietnamese, and the interviewees were free to mix English, German and Vietnamese as they wished. Many of the interviewees chose to do the interview largely in English, since this was their stronger language of the two, in spite of the fact that all except Ngọc had also obtained German certificates at at least B2 level. Nonetheless, those who knew me better and were aware of my background, such as Hoa, expressed that they were excited to talk to me but also nervous, highlighting the fact that I was a ‘native speaker’ or ‘English teacher’. However, my experiences of studying at Hanoi National University in Vietnam and obtaining a B1 certificate, which turned out to parallel

some of the experiences my participants had had while learning German, helped me to put interviewees at ease and gain more detailed answers.

Ethical Considerations

Before embarking on this research, I considered whether the topic of the research might prove to be politically contentious or pose any risks to the participants (Crawford et. al., 2017). However, as mentioned in the literature review, Vietnamese government policy shows a fairly uncritical, blanket support for out-migration for work and study abroad. Similar to its targets of increasing the quantity of students in higher education, the government also has explicit targets to increase the number of Vietnamese going abroad in order to build capacity within the country and create economic opportunities for individuals, with the government at times actively engaging in diplomatic efforts to facilitate both better treatment for Vietnamese citizens abroad and an increase in their absolute numbers (see for instance MOLISA 2023; MOLISA 2024, Guarascio & Nguyen, 2024) . Due to this explicit government support, therefore, this topic was unlikely to be unduly sensitive for participants or put them at risk of harm.

In line with guidance from the Swedish Research Council (Görman, 2024), informed consent was obtained from all participants prior the interviews taking place, with the author communicating the broad aims of the research in a ‘jargon-free’ manner in their chosen interview language and making clear that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time (Ragin and Amoroso, 2011, p.89). Furthermore, participants were also informed ahead of time that the results would be anonymised, with identifying information limited to the student’s approximate age, sex, university, and field of study. Participants were also advised that this research would be published on the university’s website, which is normal procedure in Sweden, and that they would therefore be able to freely access the results should they have an interest in doing so.

My interviews with Linda and Chi raised additional ethical considerations, since in these cases some of the specific details of their individual career paths and personal lives were relevant to the research content. I therefore took additional care to have frank discussions with each about these issues, both at the beginning and the end of their interviews, in order to

confirm that they still consented to my using their data. During Linda's interview in particular, it became clear that she was volunteering significant amounts of personal information which was likely to make her fairly easy to identify. We therefore discussed again whether she felt any aspect of the topic could be contentious in the modern Vietnamese political context, which she did not. She also confirmed that, although I would do my best to anonymise her, she was happy for me to use all the information she chose to give in her answers, even if it made her identifiable to readers. Since she has personal experience of conducting research in a university environment, I feel confident that this constitutes fully informed consent about how her information is used in this study, but I have still endeavoured to anonymise her details as far as possible.

5. Findings and Analysis

Most of the relevant background information about the interviewees is given in the table in appendix 2. However, for confidentiality reasons, I have de-linked some other details about their personal experiences from the individual interviewees, which I believe is nonetheless relevant to the findings. This information is detailed briefly below.

As mentioned earlier, there were 8 interviewees in total. All of the students interviewed were in their early or mid-twenties, apart from Ngọc, who was in her mid-thirties.

In the courses of my interviews with the two lecturers, Linda and Chi, I learned that all students coming from Vietnam to study in Germany are obliged to attend one or two semesters at a well-established system of university preparatory colleges in Germany (these are called '*Studienkolleg*' in German – in this thesis they are hereafter referred to as 'college' or 'foundation college'), the vast majority of which are public and tuition-free, and which focus on teaching foreign students for whom German is a second language. All of the students interviewed, apart from Ngọc, described spending one or two semesters there prior to starting their bachelor's degree in Germany. Furthermore, all said that they had studied in a different city for foundation college than for their degree.

It is notable that the initial choice of destination seems to be made in quite a different way to the subsequent choice of university. For instance, Ân and Trân attended the same foundation

college, even though they subsequently selected different destination cities and subjects of study. Other participants described choosing cities closest to their relatives who were already living in Germany. Yet others said that their choice of foundation college was heavily influenced by their teachers or peers. In other words, this choice appears to be closely linked to the existing *social capital* available to the students, which they understandably lean on much more heavily when they first arrive in Germany. Chi also described how her agency assists the small proportion of students who do not feel that they have enough existing social connections to navigate the process on their own, and who would like comprehensive assistance with the process during the first year or so. While these students also have the final say over their destination and study choices, Chi states that the agency typically funnels them to a select few colleges in cities where the agency has significant contacts with host families and other resources for arriving students, namely FH Kiel, Bochum, and Darmstadt.

Evolution of Vietnamese Student Mobility to Germany in Recent History

As mentioned previously, the first interview conducted was with Linda, a university lecturer who was heavily involved with the system bringing foreign students to Germany during the DDR.

Linda began working at the Herder Institute at the Karl Marx University (now the University of Leipzig), which was the foundation college responsible for students coming to study in the DDR from the rest of the world, in the 1970s and 1980s. At the time, all arriving Vietnamese students had to study there, typically for one year. She felt that the students at the time were of a very high academic standard, as the Vietnamese government would send the students with the highest scores in the university entrance examination to study in the Soviet Union, and those with only slightly lower scores to study in the DDR. The Vietnamese government decided which subjects students should study, and stipends were sponsored by the East German government. The students studied a very broad range of fields, including German Language and Linguistics, Archival Sciences, Natural Sciences and Law to name just a few:

‘Because the assumption of the Vietnamese (government)...in the 1970s and 1980s was that they really needed (qualified) people in every field’.

This suggests that, at that time, the Vietnamese government took the *technical-functional* view (Collins, 1971) that encouraging as many students as they feasibly could to acquire university level education would be instrumental in overall social development. This may also provide a historical explanation as to why the Vietnamese government's current laws, policies and reforms continue to rely heavily on such assumptions (see literature review)

At the time, Linda believes that most of the students had also attended language oriented secondary schools, and already spent a year learning German in Vietnam, probably at the Hanoi National University.

After the fall of the DDR, things changed significantly:

‘Then the DDR collapsed, at that was...difficult...because there were no more government scholarships...it was also unclear, whether those who were already here would continue to be supported’. She cited one specific case she knew of when a friend of hers was unable to finish her studies because of this.

After the reunification of Germany, any Vietnamese person with sufficient *economic capital* could come and study in Germany. However, these new students had more trouble once they arrived in Germany, both because they were weaker academically, and because they did not receive stipends (ie. they had less de-facto access to economic capital once they arrived), leading to many of them having to work part time in restaurants or elsewhere.

Some years later, Linda was working at the German Embassy in Hanoi, where she was responsible for '*Die Akademische Prüfstelle*' (the government agency responsible for validating foreign academic qualifications for German immigration and employment purposes (Deutsche Vertretung in Vietnam, 2025)). There, she realised the access conditions had worsened in the intervening years, because students applying also needed a school leaving certificate, university entrance exam, and an additional two semesters of study at undergraduate level in Vietnam, before they could even enter the foundation college. Only those who already had a bachelor's degree in Vietnam could directly enter university to study as second bachelor's degree in Germany. As a result, far fewer students applied to study in Germany during this period.

This experience also further confirmed Linda's impression that the academic standards of the students had gone down, because those students who were 'really good' were able to get a scholarship elsewhere (eg. in the Anglosphere), and these are only available for master's level in Germany. This was also the impression at the German Embassy in Hanoi, where she was then working. However, there was a recognition at the German Embassy of the soft power benefits of Vietnamese students studying in Vietnam, as they were aware that many of the people then at the top of government departments were graduates from the DDR, who had a continuing interest in good relations with Germany due to their previous experiences there. To try and make Germany a more attractive destination once again, Linda and her colleagues at the embassy eventually succeeded in scrapping the two-semester study requirement.

From the information outlined above, we can see how significant *cultural and institutional capital* has built up in northern Vietnam in relation to Germany and German educational connections specifically. Strikingly, in a sign that these links continue to influence mobility up until the present day, all of the students interviewed grew up in Hanoi, apart from Bình, whose family home is three hours away in Hai Phong but who was nonetheless raised with the expectation that she would attend Hanoi National University if she did not go abroad. Although the students interviewed for this thesis were certainly not selected as a representative sample of the entire Vietnamese student population in Germany, this is nonetheless very notable, given that the author made no attempt to select students from a particular geographic origin within Vietnam.

It is especially noteworthy that none of the students originated from Ho Chi Minh City, even though it has now overtaken Hanoi in population size and total GDP (National Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2025), and students there have the same legal rights to travel and study abroad as their northern counterparts. In addition, there are a number of prestigious language and social science-oriented universities in Ho Chi Minh City, which carry the same legal status as 'national level' universities as those in Hanoi; a notable example is the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, which is part of the Ho Chi Minh City National University system in much the same way as the Hanoi University of Languages and International Studies is part of the Hanoi National University system (Vietnam News, 2020; Nhân Dân 2023). Nonetheless, it seems that the legacy of the educational links forged between the DDR and the early reunified Vietnam, particularly the institutional links represented by the Hanoi National University and the Goethe Institute in Hanoi, continue to be significant even today.

These findings therefore give insights into how existing structures, *social fields* and *social capital*, have evolved into current educational links between Vietnam and Germany, and how these affect students' choices in the present day. It also shows how countries and individuals continue to exploit existing *social capital* and links built up between them historically, bending them to their purposes to maintain the relationship even once political situation has radically shifted.

Section 1: Existing Forms of Capital Students Leverage in Order to Study in Germany

Existing Economic Capital

All the students interviewed make use of *economic capital* or its equivalent, in the sense that they were all able to focus exclusively on studying German or English prior to going to Germany, typically for 6 or 9 months; as mentioned in the theoretical framework, Bourdieu argues that this additional focussed attention on non-income-generating activities, such as prolonged education, constitutes the use of economic capital in an indirect form (Bourdieu, 1986). Except for Ngọc, who improved her English and prepared for the IELTS exam while still working, all did this with financial support from their family; none mentioned working part time or receiving financial aid prior to leaving Vietnam. However, overall, the students interviewed seem to have leveraged greater levels of *social* and *cultural* than *economic capital*. Several mentioned now working to support themselves, and nearly all explicitly emphasized low/no tuition as a deciding reason for choosing Germany. This is further reinforced by the fact that all of the students seem to have spoken English at a markedly higher level than German on graduating high school, meaning that the path to studying in an English-speaking country would presumably have been much shorter in terms of additional investment into language learning.

Links to Germany Prior to Arriving

Personal Links

Many of the interviewees stated that the decision to study in Germany was initiated through family links, and that the seeds for the decision were planted at a young age. Son's father had spent a year working in a factory in the DDR. All the other interviewees had either an aunt or older sister already living in Germany and were strongly encouraged to go and study abroad by their parents, who viewed Germany as the natural choice, given their personal links to the country. Ngọc, the only interviewee without existing family ties to Germany, came on the advice of a friend and colleague, who had graduated from the same MBA in Leipzig before returning to Vietnam.

Son stated:

'For me it was pretty straightforward, because my dad pretty much oriented me to study in Germany'.

He added that the decision was confirmed when 'as I child, I showed my interest in cars and technical stuff', citing Germany's strong reputation in these areas as almost self-evident.

This strongly suggests that existing *social capital* in the form of these contacts, as well as the *embodied cultural capital* perceived to have been gained by those who have experienced living in Germany and then returned, are a key facilitating factor in the decision-making process.

At the same time, it is interesting to note that many of the interviewees also took pains to emphasize that they were happy and excited by the idea of coming to Germany and viewed it as a personal choice in which they invested considerable autonomous effort, in spite of their families' influence and encouragement. In Hoa's case, her father's sister had lived in Germany for over 30 years, but she stated that she 'Hardly talked to her' when she was young, even though her aunt would visit Vietnam around once a year. Instead, Hoa said that it the idea to study in Germany was her own, and that her parents 'let her decide her own future', even though they would have preferred her to stay in Vietnam for her bachelor's degree and only go abroad for her master's. Son, Bình, Ân and Trân, on the other hand, were all strongly encouraged by their families to go abroad for their bachelor's, although Bình was initially reluctant to do so, warming up to the idea only when she went through a difficult personal time after being accepted to university in Hanoi.

Ân said:

'I don't think there is any pressure from them (my family), it is also my own interest to go to Germany...in my family it is really normalized'.

This suggests the idea of studying abroad as a rite of passage, into which the individual wishes to be perceived as voluntarily investing considerable amounts of indirect *economic capital* in the form of time, effort and educational expenditure, but also intangible qualities such as 'grit', 'talent' and 'self-motivation'. In my view, this is a clear example of individuals seeking to leverage the opaqueness of the mechanisms of transmission inherent in the acquisition of *embodied cultural capital*. As detailed in theoretical framework section (above), it is precisely this opacity in the mechanisms of transmission which makes this such a coveted form of capital, with which individuals can seek to differentiate themselves from the masses and create a sense of distinction from others (Bourdieu, 1984)

Educational Links

Although they planned to study in Germany from a young age, the interviewees all attended public middle schools, or occasionally private middle schools, which do not specifically focus on languages or preparation to study abroad. Also, none described taking German lessons as children, though some visited relatives in Germany when they were small, as stated above.

By contrast, nearly all seem to have chosen their high school and geared all their educational activities during their high school years to their ambition to study in Germany. Hoa chose German as her second language in High School. Son and Trân both chose to apply to the highly competitive Foreign Language Specialized School in Hanoi, which is affiliated directly with the Vietnam National University of Languages and International Studies. Son, who chose to take the entrance exam in English, described his experience in some detail:

'My dream of studying in Germany started really early, so I went to a specific school which taught classes in German...it was kind of hard to get into that school... I had to take extra

English courses for that.... you could take the entrance exam in German or English...if you do the entry exam in English, you can choose...whatever language you want. But if you do it in German, you can only go into the German class.'

He further stated that the school had links to DAAD and the ZfA (Zentralstelle für das Auslandsschulwesen) agency, which is the German organisation responsible for schools which have accreditation agreements with the German government (Bundesamt für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten, 2025). His entire class took the B2 certificate together before graduating.

Tran, who attended the same school, described how, for students in the German language stream, applying to university in Germany was a given and something which was done collectively:

'If an application phase opened up for us to apply, it will be announced by our teachers, and we will do it together.'

'I went here to study with a whole group of friends...really close friends...it actually influenced my decision...for (which university to choose)...and of course you want to choose a university where your friends also study.'

'...you can see it also in the way teachers...give grades; also in the way we apply for university in Vietnam...most of us, we will not really focus on study for the...national exams for university, we will focus on how we can have a good notes (grades) in high school so our...profile will be good to apply (to a University in their chosen country abroad).'

It is worth emphasizing that the interviewees uniformly framed attending these institutions as a stepping stone to their existing ambition of studying in Germany, *not* as the cause of their decision. In this sense, their experiences clearly depart from the historical process described by Linda, where the institutional recognition of the students' talent was a deciding factor in the government's decision to send them abroad. It also contrasts substantially with Bourdieu's findings in 'the State Nobility' (1996), which emphasizes the key role of certain schools in elite reproduction. In that analysis, the position of an individual within the *social field* and the types of *capital* at his disposal were largely a pre-determined result of the

institution attended, with only limited transverse or downward alterations in the nature of individuals' subsequent professional and personal destinations.

This point is illustrated vividly in the example of Trân and her sister Ân. During their interviews, they both chose to emphasize that Ân, due to being younger than Trân and attending a different high school, had a significantly different educational experience. Ân went to a school which she describes as follows: 'It's just a normal high school, but they have a partnership (with the DAAD)'. Although she says that the school did 'not do a good job' of teaching German and she only had a few language lessons per week, she 'really loved' German and spent a lot of time outside of school studying it, as well as attending extra classes at the Goethe Institute in Hanoi. In other words, while they emphasized the significance of these issues for Ân on a personal level, neither seemed to view these differing experiences as salient factors in influencing or altering Ân's ambition to study in Germany.

In summary then, these students utilise the existing educational links between Vietnam and Germany, chiefly to aid them in the purpose of acquiring the *embodied cultural capital* represented by a detailed knowledge of the German language and educational system. They also leverage the *social capital* represented by teachers with an insider knowledge of German university applications and opportunities to take German language exams during sessions which are not open to the public. Such German language qualifications, as well as high school qualifications and report cards geared towards studying in Germany, also constitute a form of *institutionalized cultural capital* which helped them to facilitate the application process. However, as detailed above, none of the students considered attending a specialized high school as essential to their university application process, and in Bình and Hoa's cases, they used the alternative route of obtaining their German language certificates at the Goethe Institute in Hanoi and attending public German language classes there and at Hanoi National University after finishing high school.

Existing Vietnamese Community in Germany

Many of the interviewees cited the large existing Vietnamese community in Berlin, or in Germany in general, as a key advantage of studying there. This once again emphasizes the

key role that shared existing *social and cultural capital* plays in instigating and facilitating students' plans to study in Germany.

Bình stated:

'Here in Germany, the Vietnamese community is very, very big...if people like to socialize, it will not be difficult for them to live in Germany'. She mentions a Facebook group for tips and advice, for example 'if there are 'sales season' in supermarket they also post in Facebook, and there are so many Vietnamese restaurants here'. She also mentions that she initially found her accommodation through community links, and that she is grateful that she was able to find a room easily in this way, as affordable student accommodation is well known to be scarce in Berlin.

Hoa described feeling isolated in the small town of Marburg, and said that moving to Berlin for her bachelor's degree was her top priority for this reason. She currently works 25 hours a week in a restaurant on top of her studies, which is feasible due to the fact that the Vietnamese owner is 'very easy-going' with her and allows her to swap shifts whenever she wishes. Ngọc also appreciates the presence of a strong Vietnamese community in Leipzig, which she says helped her overcome some of the initial cultural challenges associated with moving abroad.

Ân was the only interviewee with a slightly more critical view of the Vietnamese community in Germany, feeling that many in the older generation have viewpoints on Germany and Vietnam which are no longer realistic. For instance, she believes that many older members of the community are unaware that the Vietnamese government now strongly supports out-migration and global mobility, rather than viewing those going abroad as 'traitors'. She describes an incident when she was working in a Vietnamese restaurant, and her older co-workers expressed shock that she was considering returning to Vietnam after her studies, as they thought the Vietnamese government would 'catch her'. She also feels that Vietnamese restaurant owners tend to exploit those Vietnamese students who, unlike her, are obliged to work to support themselves, stating that many of these students find it difficult to get a different part-time job when they initially arrive due to language and cultural barriers.

Section 2: Forms of Capital Which Students Seek to Acquire

Perception of Educational Quality and Subject Choice

Many of the interviewees mentioned perceptions of better educational quality as being a key consideration in deciding where to study. Almost all the interviewees said the idea that studying abroad is better than studying in Vietnam is generally accepted within their social circles back home, and never really questioned. As Ân said: 'In my bubble...people always talk about studying abroad.' Although this research does not focus in detail on the participants' social backgrounds and contacts in Vietnam, for both practical and confidentiality reasons, this suggests that this assumption is a key part of the *doxa* – the common set of 'facts' – which is taken for granted within these students' social class(es) of origin (Deer, 2008).

On the other hand, when mentioning their reasons for choosing Germany specifically, the answers given were much more concrete. Apart from the affordability issue, which was mentioned by every single interviewee, many also cited Germany's reputation for educational quality in their specific subject area. Son, as cited above, mentioned Germany's reputation specifically for technical subjects. Ngọc stated outright that 'I would like to come to Germany because I think the education here is very good', citing more opportunities for discussion and supportive lecturers who were willing to explain content to the students on her MBA, as well as the opportunity to develop 'critical thinking' skills, which she perceives to be lacking in the Vietnamese educational system. Chi also suggested that most of the students who come to study in Germany nowadays do so in order to study technical subjects or business (which is consistent with the subject choices of the students interviewed – see appendix 2). This suggests the desire to gain *institutionalized cultural capital* in the form of educational credentials, as well as technical and professional skills, which are a form of *embodied cultural capital* (Moore, 2008).

Career and Future Plans

Perhaps surprisingly, most of the interviewees did not have a strong opinion on whether they wanted to stay in Germany after graduating. Most stated that the decision hinges on whether they find a job which suits them and allows them to fulfil their other personal and professional aims. Many felt, however, that it was important to continue working in Germany for some time after graduating, as this would be looked on more favourably if they tried to get a professional job in Vietnam in the future:

Bình stated:

‘In my opinion, when I already spend 4 years to study here in Germany, I think I should find a job here and work here for a period of time. I think if I just go back to Vietnam, it will be hard to find a job’.

Son also plans to stay in Germany for at least 5 years initially, saying that having studied and worked in Germany, 'A lot more paths open to me, I have more choices so to say.' However, he also mentioned that he was open to working in other western countries, particularly English-speaking countries, or other countries in Asia such as Korea if he had the opportunity.

Ân was also unsure of her precise plans:

'When I graduate, I think I'm going to stay. I'm not really sure if I'm going to go into another country outside of Germany...but I think I will stay in Germany or somewhere in Europe'.

It seems, therefore, that the interviewees do not view remaining in Germany as a necessary precondition for amassing additional *economic capital* once they have finished their degrees. Instead, some view spending a few more years in Germany as a way of further enhancing the *embodied cultural capital* they can claim from their individual experiences, as discussed earlier, while others believe that the *institutionalized cultural capital* gained from their degrees will be sufficient to work in a country of their choice.

For some of the interviewees, personal and lifestyle factors also play a significant role in the decision. Hoa stated that she had initially planned to stay in Germany, but now has a boyfriend who is going to start a master's degree in Germany next fall. As a result, she now

only plans to stay for as long as he does, and work for ‘one or two years’ before returning home. She also states that she wishes to return to be close to her parents, since her younger brother is now also planning to go abroad and study.

Ngọc, who has now been working professionally in Leipzig for some time, also emphasized the lifestyle and personal development related aspect:

'Before, I was kind of traditional woman when I live in Vietnam...Now, I become more modern in my thinking. I can say that now my thinking changed to become more independent'.

Tran also stated that she now wishes to stay in Germany as she has a German girlfriend and feels that ‘as a queer person’, it will be much easier for her to ‘have a family’ than in Vietnam’.

Analysis

All of the students interviewed described how the idea of studying in Germany was instigated through the *embodied cultural capital* represented by close contact with those who had left Vietnam to work in Germany, either temporarily or permanently. They also stated that they chose Germany in part due to the lower immediate investment of *economic capital* required. Instead, these students tend to leverage existing *social capital* in the form of close personal contacts, and to a lesser extent, community links in particular geographic locations, which may be mediated through social media or professional agencies, in order to facilitate their initial arrival in Germany. They also make use of indirect forms of *economic capital* in terms of the unpaid time and effort which they invest in learning German both prior to and after arriving, on top of the time already invested in the formal schooling which would be required for entry into university in Vietnam.

In terms of the forms of capital gained, all the students agreed that they would acquire *embodied cultural capital* in the form of technical and/or critical thinking skills, as well as *institutionalized cultural capital* in the form of degree qualifications. Many mentioned that

they expected these degrees to open doors to employment opportunities worldwide, rather than only in Germany.

The perception of higher education quality is a clear pull factor for students seeking a university education abroad (Gutema et. al, 2023), and this was also identified by the interviewees in this study, particularly in terms of technical skills and employability. However, we can also see that the students interviewed here do not necessarily expect future employment opportunities to be tied to the host country. Rather, as described above, they expect the *institutional social capital* acquired in Germany to have a global validity which will allow them greater opportunities for international mobility in future. This also aligns with perceptions of the ‘impractical’ nature of contemporary Vietnamese higher education, even at the top-tier institutions these students might otherwise have attended, as outlined in the literature review. As in Mazzarol and Souter’s (2002) research, family links to the destination country also seem to play a significant role.

This thesis takes a *social conflict perspective* to higher education, since it is based on Bourdieu’s theoretical framework. The nature of the students’ answers during their interviews align with this perspective, in that they suggest that they too perceive going to Germany as a way to differentiate themselves from others in the competition for scarce employment opportunities, rather than simply as adding additional competencies which will make them more effective in jobs which are already likely to obtain. For instance, as mentioned earlier, Binh was unsure if the *embodied social capital* she gained through studying in Germany would be sufficient to differentiate her from other candidates if she returned home immediately afterwards. Even though Son is clearly very passionate about his field and spoke enthusiastically about his current student job at a start-up, which he said complements his studies, his answers about the future focussed on the fact that studying in Germany would give him the right qualifications to work abroad, either in Germany or elsewhere. Studying in Germany may therefore constitute a further way for these students to differentiate themselves in the era of the *higher education massification* (Trow, 1973) and *diploma inflation* (Bourdieu, 1984), which as detailed in the literature review are also relevant issues within the Vietnamese domestic context.

This study also gives support to the idea that studying abroad in general, as well as the choice of Germany in particular, is heavily tied to the *habitus* of the students’ social groups back

home (Eusafsai, 2024), where studying outside of Vietnam is highly normalized. The value the students place on the existing migrant community, which to a greater or lesser extent provided them with additional assistance with, and motivation to, go to Germany, suggests links between the processes described by Ong (1999), in which Asian students seek to convert their existing *economic capital* into *embodied cultural capital* through education abroad, and the social and cultural links provided by existing communities which emerged for other historical reasons. We can therefore see how these existing migrant communities, which have been described by previous researchers (See for example Schwenkel, 2017; Bösch & Phi, 2021) can also impact current student mobilities.

6. Conclusion

The experiences of international students worldwide are a significant current issue in the sociology of higher education, while the rapid expansion of Vietnamese higher education is a salient topic within Vietnamese society. Vietnamese students who attend institutions in Germany represent a small but significant sub-population with particular features related to current conditions in the German education system, as well as the history of educational exchange between Vietnam and East Germany.

This thesis analyses these students' experiences through the lens of Bourdieu's *social field theory*, examining in particular the *forms of capital* which both enable them to choose Germany as a study destination, as well as their anticipation of future capital to be gained. In doing this, it also examines students' views of the relative advantages and disadvantages of other possible choices open to them, including studying in the anglosphere and remaining in Vietnam.

This thesis has shown how students who choose to study in Germany leverage existing *social capital* and *embodied cultural capital*, for instance through relatives living in Germany, as well as existing community and educational links. They are less likely to leverage large amounts of *economic capital*, in terms of course fees or high upfront agency fees, though they all invest considerable amounts indirectly in terms of additional time and effort spent on language education prior to arriving in Germany. The findings in this thesis also highlight the importance of existing educational and institutional links, the foundation of which were laid between the DDR and northern Vietnam prior to 1990 and continue to influence patterns of educational exchange between Germany and Vietnam today.

Due to the qualitative data collection methods used in this thesis and the limited sample size, it is important to note that the sample used and results obtained are not representative of the Vietnamese student community in Germany. The choice to use only qualitative data is suitable when investigating a subject such as this, where previous research into a particular population or issue is limited (Bryman, 2016). However, this choice also meant that I was unable to meaningfully investigate emergent patterns related to the number of students coming from the same geographical region in Vietnam, which might have been possible in a

larger scale quantitative or mixed-methods study. I believe that this constitutes a possible additional avenue for future investigation.

Nonetheless, this work adds to the growing literature within Bourdieu's framework which seeks to transcend the 'methodological nationalism' of his original studies on educational advantage (Amelina et al., 2012, in Kenway, 2016), and analyse the specific mix of cultural, social and economic capital leveraged by East Asian students as they navigate challenges and opportunities in international education to acquire various forms of capital in the destination country. These processes and challenges may be markedly different to those faced by students attending elite schools or universities in their home country (Ong, 1999; Kenway and Fahey, 2014). Analysing these processes can help us to enrich our understanding of how the use and acquisition of various forms of social, cultural and economic capital play out across borders.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Guiding Questions for Student Interviews

- 1) What are you currently studying? Where? How long have you been there? Which language(s) do you use at university at the moment?
- 2) What/where did you study at primary/secondary school?
- 3) Why did you decide to come to Germany to study? When did you make the decision? (Who helped you decide?)
- 4) Did you consider going to any other country to study? If so, which one? Why did you settle on Germany?"
- 5) Why did you decide to study in Germany rather than remaining in Vietnam?"
- 6) Before coming to Germany, did you learn English/German in Vietnam? Where/when/how?
- 7) Before arriving, did you have any family or friends living in Germany?
- 8) Can you tell me a bit about your experiences in Germany up until now?
- 9) What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of studying in Germany for you? How do you think it will help you in the future?
- 10) Do you plan to stay in Germany after graduation? Why/why not?
- 11) Are you currently working? What type of job do you plan to do after graduating?

Appendix 2: Interview List

Interview Number (in order of date conducted)	Pseudonym	Sex	Role/ Interview Focus	Interview Location	Main Interview Language	Degrees Studied in Germany
1.	Linda	F	Lecturer	Face-to-Face	German	N/A
2.	Chi	F	Lecturer	Zoom	German	(Old Style Integrated) Master's in Sinology and German Linguistics
3.	Hoa	F	Student	Face-to-Face	English	Master of business communications Bachelor of Business Communications
4.	Son	M	Student	Zoom	English	Bachelor of Electrical Engineering
5.	Bình	F	Student	Zoom	English	Bachelor in Business Informatics
6.	Ngọc	F	Student	Zoom	English	MBA
7.	Ân	F	Student	Zoom	English	Bachelor in Business Psychology
8.	Trân	F	Student	Zoom	English	Bachelor in Business Administration