

Social and Cultural Capital Across Borders:

Exploring the Backgrounds and Aspirations of Vietnamese Students in Germany

CHRISTINE MORITZ

This article investigates how Vietnamese students explain their choice to study in Germany, by drawing on data from eight semi-structured interviews. The students' accounts revealed that they all possessed specific, pre-existing social and cultural capital related to Germany. In terms of outcomes, all students focused on gaining a form of transnational institutionalized cultural capital, as they view a German bachelor's or master's degree primarily as a vehicle for further transnational mobility and personal and career development, rather than necessarily seeking to remain in Germany or return to Vietnam after their studies. This article also highlights how existing links between East Germany and Vietnam which developed prior to the 1990s continue to influence student mobilities by shaping the specific forms of embodied cultural capital, institutionalized cultural capital and social capital available to students. These insights add to the body of literature which seeks to extend Bourdieu's theoretical concepts to the transnational activities of East Asian and other globally mobile elites. (Marginson, 2008; Norén-Nilsson, Savirini & Uhlin, 2023).

Keywords: Vietnam, Germany, Higher education, International student mobility, Transnational education

Editor's note: All Non-English characters in this article have been transliterated into English characters due to formatting issues.

The Vietnamese government has a stated policy of encouraging out-migration for the purposes of work and education, but destinations are chosen 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 (see for example Wolf & Lowman, 1990; Schwenkel, 2017). 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 from Vietnam have received less attention, perhaps because they are expected to reside in the destination country only temporarily.

This investigation seeks to shed light on the reasons for Vietnamese students' choice to study in Germany, considering their educational histories and backgrounds. In doing so, it contributes to existing literature about how the growing number of internationally mobile East Asian students makes the decisions regarding their 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. 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.

The first part of this article outlines key concepts from this theoretical framework and provides contextualizing information on the current state of research on Vietnamese and German higher education as well as international student mobility. The second part of this article details the research process and results.

Theoretical Background

This article utilises Bourdieu's theory of *elite reproduction*, with reference to the concepts of *social, cultural, and economic capital*, to analyse how Vietnamese students leverage and accumulate different forms of capital in their pursuit of higher education in Germany. Situated within social conflict theories of education (Chernoff, 2013), Bourdieu's approach views education as a key mechanism through which social inequalities are reproduced under the guise of meritocracy (Bourdieu, 1986). 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). While Bourdieu described four primary forms of capital – economic, cultural, social and symbolic – it is the three first that are central in this analysis.

Economic capital refers to financial resources and assets, and their equivalents. Cultural capital takes two forms: *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); and *Institutionalized cultural capital* refers to one specific way in which cultural capital can be given a more permanent value through legitimation by the state, for instance through university diplomas that give academic credentials. Social capital is the network of connections possessed by an actor, which can potentially be 'called in' and converted to other forms of capital. (Bourdieu, 1986)

Although Bourdieu's theories originated in the France of his day, recent scholarship has extended his work to transnational settings (Amelina et al., 2012; Koh & Kenway, 2016; Marginson, 2008). This paper seeks to build on this work by taking a 'multiscalar' approach (Koh & Kenway, 2016) which takes into account the accumulation of social status through education on a variety of geographic 'levels', which the recipient may subsequently interact with in distinct ways.

Higher Education in Vietnam: History and Current Challenges

To contextualise the findings in this paper, the next section gives a brief overview of the development of Vietnamese higher education, as well as the growth of the foreign student population in Germany.

The mismatch between the type of higher educational content which is perceived to be 'prestigious', and actual workforce needs, has been observed by researchers to be particularly acute in Vietnam (St George, 2014), due to the fact that Vietnamese higher education developed out of a system of competitive state examinations, designed to prepare young men for civil service. Under this system, ascent into the bureaucracy was, in theory, wholly dependent on merit. Eventually, the highest of these 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). This historical background contributed to the idealization of

theoretical, research-oriented university qualifications as the best preparation for elite careers.

Modern higher education policy in Vietnam reflects a structural-functionalist attitude towards higher education (Collins, 1971) in which an increase in absolute numbers of students is seen as a key to economic and social development, and the development of private and foreign higher education options are actively encouraged. To promote these goals, the Vietnamese government has published a number of laws and guidelines on higher education development over the last few decades. For instance, in parallel to the publication of the updated Education Law of 2005, the Vietnamese government also published its Resolution no. 14/2005/NQ-CP, otherwise known as the Higher Education Reform Agenda or HERA in English (Parajuli et al., 2020; Pham 2018), which aimed to open up Higher Education in Vietnam 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 for every 10,000 people by 2010 and 2020 respectively' (Thị Vĩnh Phúc, 2005) for the purpose of 'satisfying the requirements of national industrialization and modernization, international economic integration and people's learning demands' (ibid.). These laws and policies have contributed to a massive increase in overall higher education enrolment in the country, including in privately owned institutions; from 2000 to 2010, total enrolment more than doubled from 0.9 million to 2.3 million students (Parajuli et al., 2020).

International Students in German Higher Education

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. In fact, in a previous survey carried out by Study in Germany (2025) international students quoted affordability as the most important consideration in their choice of study destination, 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.

Research Process

In summary, this research seeks to investigate how a particular group of international students chooses and navigates a non-marketised higher education system in Europe, and to what extent the different forms of capital and existing social and historical ties may be significant in such an environment. Specifically, the central question of investigation is how Vietnamese students in Germany explain the reasons for their choice to study there.

The article contributes with insights on what existing forms of capital this group leverages in order to study in Germany, and any similarities in the typical backgrounds, goals and attitudes amongst this group of students. In addition, the research seeks to understand what forms of capital (social, economic or cultural) the interviewees anticipated to gain from studying in Germany. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted during the spring term of 2025, with each lasting around 45 minutes.

To gather background information about the history and current processes behind Vietnamese students coming to Germany to study, I interviewed two university lecturers, 'Linda' and 'Chi' who differ from the other interviewees in that they were not students at the time of the interview, and they had not completed a degree in Germany during the past 10 years. Linda is a German citizen born in the DDR who married a Vietnamese man and lived in Vietnam for several decades, before returning to Germany. Due to her various professional roles (detailed in the interview below), her experiences and insights provided valuable background information

on how multifaceted historical and institutional ties between the German and Vietnamese governments and higher education systems developed, and how they continue to impact student decision making to this day.

Chi both lectures at a German university and works with a private agency recruiting Vietnamese students and assisting them in their journey to study in Germany. In interviewing her, I chiefly sought to understand the role of private education agents in contemporary student journeys, and to what extent this might influence individual students' choices and motivations. As it turns out, however, the majority of Vietnamese students studying in Germany do not use such agents. Chi herself estimated that the number of students taking this route to be perhaps 10%, with most support ceasing once the student has graduated from their 'Studienkolleg' the agency initially arranged for them and moved on to their main university. Indeed, none of the students I ultimately interviewed had used an agency.

In arranging the student interviews, my main selection criteria were designed to take a purposive sampling approach (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.

Findings

1. *Evolution of Vietnamese Student Mobility to Germany in Recent History*

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.

Figure 1 Research participants

Interview Number (in order of date conducted)	Pseudonyms	Sex	Role/ Interview Focus	Interview Location	Main Interview Language	D e g r e e s 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.	Binh	F	Student	Zoom	English	Bachelor in Business Informatics
6.	Ngoc	F	Student	Zoom	English	MBA
7.	An	F	Student	Zoom	English	Bachelor in Business Psychology
8.	Tran	F	Student	Zoom	English	Bachelor in Business Administration

At the time, all arriving Vietnamese students had to study there, typically for one year. The Vietnamese government decided which subjects students should study, and stipends were sponsored by the DDR 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. As Linda (2025-03-06) explicates, “the assumption of the Vietnamese (government)...in the 1970s and 1980s was that they really needed (qualified) people in every field”.

This suggests that, even at that time, the Vietnamese government took the *technical-functional view* (Collins, 1971) that encouraging as many students as feasible to acquire university level education would be instrumental in overall social development.

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 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 a foundation college in Germany. 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.

In this way, significant *cultural and institutional capital* has been built up in northern Vietnam in relation to Germany and German educational connections. 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 Binh, whose family home is in Hai Phong, three hours away, 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 research 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.

These findings therefore give insights into how current educational links between Vietnam and Germany are a continuation of the links that were built up between the DDR and Vietnam, and how these affect students' individual choices in the present day. The existing *social capital* and relationships built up between them historically are kept, even once political reality has radically shifted.

2. Existing Forms of Capital which Students Leverage 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. Bourdieu (1986) points out that additional time spent on education represents a common elite reproduction strategy by ensuring the conversion of existing *economic capital* into future *embodied cultural capital* and *institutionalized cultural capital*. Except for Ngoc, who improved her English and prepared for the IELTS exam while still working, all did this with financial support from their family. No one 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 decisive reason for choosing Germany for their studies.

Personal Links

All the student interviewees mentioned 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. 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 had already emigrated to Germany are a key facilitating factor in the decision-making process.

3. Forms of Capital Which Students Seek to Acquire

Perception of Educational Quality and Subject Choice

Many of the interviewees mentioned educational quality as a key reason for choosing to study abroad. 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 An (2025-04-23) said: 'In my bubble...people always talk about studying abroad.'

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 mentioned Germany's reputation specifically for technical subjects. Ngoc stated outright that "I would like to come to Germany because I think the education here is very good", citing more opportunities for discussion, supportive lecturers who were willing to explain content to the students, as well as the opportunity to develop "critical think-

ing" 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 to study technical subjects or business (which is consistent with the subject choices of the students interviewed – see figure 1). 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

Most of the interviewees did not have a strong opinion on whether they wanted to stay in Germany permanently, stating 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.

"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", (Binh, interview 2025-04-15).

It seems, therefore, that the interviewees do not view remaining in Germany as a necessary precondition to immediately acquire 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, while others believe that the *institutionalized cultural capital* gained from their degrees will be sufficient to work in a country of their choice. This suggests once again that students seek to accumulate forms of *cultural capital* which are explicitly transnational in nature, and which can be con-

verted into additional *economic capital* in future. In other words, the participants view the German qualification and skilled work experience as a form of *transnational institutionalised cultural capital* with exchange value (Bourdieu, 1996) across multiple national *fields*, rather than being tied exclusively to the German labour market.

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. This research 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 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.

This research 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 cultural capital which they expect to translate fluidly across geographical spaces. 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.

Christine Moritz holds a MSc in Asian Studies from Lund University.

Email: moritzchristine475@gmail.com

References

- Andres, Lesley (2022), 'Chapter 12: 'Theories of the Sociology of Higher Education Access and Participation''. In: James Côté and Sarah Pickard (eds), *Routledge Handbook of the Sociology of Higher Education*. London: Routledge
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1986). 'The Forms of Capital'. pp. 241-258 in: John Richardson (ed), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1996). *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (2007). *Sketch for a Self-analysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre & Wacquant, Loic (1992). *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Bryman, Alan. (2016). *Social Research Methods*. 5th Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Chernoff, Carolyn (2013). 'Conflict Theory in Education' in James Ainsworth (ed.), *Sociology of Education*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publication
- Collins, Randall. (1971). 'Functional and Conflict Theories of Educational Stratification'. *American Sociological Review*, 36, 1002-1019
- Deutsche Vertretung in Vietnam (2025). *Akademische Prüfstelle – Merkblatt für das Deutschland-Verfahren* [Academic Document Validation Center: Information about the procedure in Germany]. Available at: <https://vietnam.diplo.de/vn-de/willkommen/aktuelles/1602272-1602272> [Accessed: 5 May 2025].
- Kelmendi, Blerina (2024). 'Higher Education in Germany: Key Trends & Statistics 2025'. *Study in Germany*. Available at: <https://www.studying-in-germany.org/higher-education-in-germany-key-trends-statistics/> [Accessed: 5 May 2025].
- London, Jonathan (2011), 'Chapter 1: Education in Vietnam: Historical Roots, Recent Trends'. In: John London (ed). *Education in Vietnam*. Singapore: ISEAS
- Moore, Robert (2008). 'Capital' In: Grenfell, Michael (ed). *Pierre Bourdieu : key concepts*. Durham U.K.: Acumen.
- Ho, Vu Khue Ngoc (2011), 'Chapter 9: 'Market-Led Globalization and Higher Education: The Case of Da Nang University''. In: John London (ed). *Education in Vietnam*. Singapore: ISEAS
- Kenway, Jane, & Fahey, Johanna (2014). 'Staying ahead of the game: the globalising practices of elite schools'. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 12(2), 177–195.
- Koh, Aaron, & Kenway, Jane (2016). *Elite schools: Multiple geographies of privilege* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Marginson, Simon. (2008) 'Global field and global imagining: Bourdieu and worldwide higher education'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29(3), 303–315.
- Norén-Nilsson, Astrid, Savirani, Amalinda, & Uhlin, Anders (eds). *Civil Society Elites: Field*

- Studies from Cambodia and Indonesia*. Copenhagen: NIAS
- Ong, Aihwa (1999). *'Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality'*. North Carolina: Duke University Press.
- Pham, Thi Tuyet Anh. (2018). Competitive strategies of Vietnamese higher educational institutions. *International Higher Education*, 93, 19–21.
- RMIT (2022). 'Our History'. Available at: <https://www.rmit.edu.vn/about-us/who-we-are/our-history>. [Accessed: 5 May 2025].
- Schwenkel, Christina. (2017). 'Vietnamese in Central Europe: An Unintended Diaspora'. *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 12(1), p.1.
- St George, Elizabeth (2014), 'Chapter 6: Change and Continuity in the History of Vietnamese Higher Education'. In: Cynthia Joseph and Julie Matthews (eds). *'Equity, Opportunity and Education in Postcolonial South East Asia'*. London: Routledge
- Study In Germany (2025). 'Germany International Student Statistics 2025'. Available at: <https://www.studying-in-germany.org/germany-international-student-statistics/> [Accessed: 5 May 2025].
- Thur Vien Phap Luat (2005). *'Government Resolution on Substantial and Comprehensive Renewal of Vietnam's Tertiary Education in the 2006-2020 Period'*. Available at: <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/EN/Giao-duc/Resolution-No-14-2005-NQ-CP-of-November-02-2005-on-substantial-and-comprehensive-renewal-of-vietnam-s-tertiary-education-in-the-2006-2020-period/93413/tieng-anh.aspx> [Accessed: 5 May 2025].
- Vietnam News (2023), 15 June. *'RMIT University Backs Vietnam with New AU-250m Strategic Investment Fund'*. Available at: <https://vietnamnews.vn/brandinfo/1546700/rmit-university-backs-vietnam-with-new-au-250m-strategic-investment-fund.html>. [Accessed: 5 May 2025].
- Wolf, Daniel & Lowman, Shep (1990). 'Towards a New Understanding of the Vietnamese Boat People'. *SAIS Review*, vol.10, No.2, pp.101-119
- Woods, Shelton (2002), *'Vietnam: A Global Studies Handbook'*. California: ABC-CLIO