

Manchester Geographical Society



Funding Report

Aspirations, Hopes, and Experiences of Precarity: Vietnamese Students in the UK

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Introduction

International students (IS) constitute a substantial segment of global migrants, and their tuition fees play a crucial role in sustaining the operations of higher education institutions in the UK with a focus on “internationalisation”. Positioned as the second-top global destination, the UK accommodates more than 500,000 non-EU students (UniversitiesUK, 2022). However, the UK has many paradoxical policies; on the one hand, they rely on IS fees to boost income, while on the other hand, they have increasingly stringent visa restrictions on IS. IS are often assumed to be privileged subjects in social discourses, with portrayals such as being a “cash cow” due to fee category classifications, generating “surplus profit” to “fund research losses” (UK Government’s briefing on the financial impact of COVID-19). In academic debates, international students are typically depicted as strategically making calculated decisions to accumulate “capital”. Stereotyping IS as a collective group can overlook the diversification of backgrounds such as class, gender, ethnicity and race. Vietnam has a huge international student market, ranking 9th with over 80,000 students abroad (UIS, 2020). Specifically, by April 2020, 14,000 Vietnamese students were studying in the UK (Ministry of Education and Training – MOET). This significant presence makes research about Vietnamese IS compelling.

My research aims and questions are to explore the aspirations, hopes and lived experiences of Vietnamese IS to the UK and how they exercise their agency to navigate different power dynamics. A study on Vietnamese IS has the scope to contribute to key theoretical debates across the geography and other social sciences around the internationalisation, global politics, and economics of higher education and the lived experiences of immigration politics for international students.

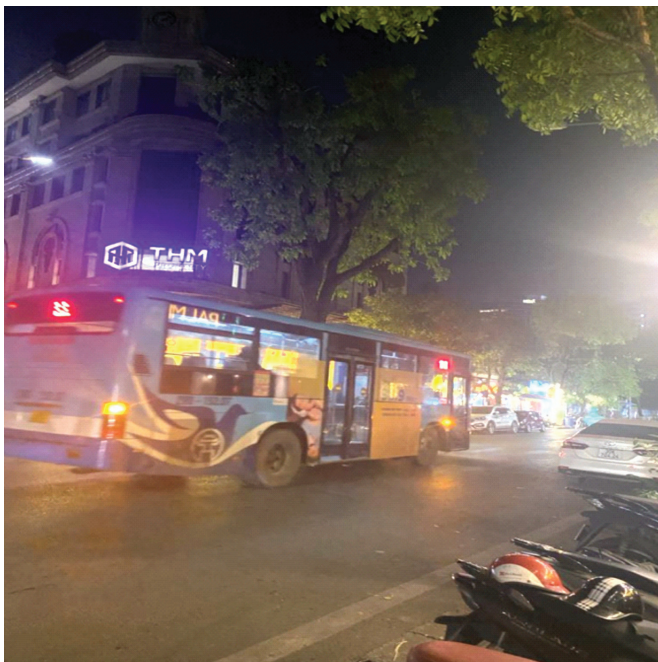


Figure 1: Fieldwork in July 2024 in Hanoi, Vietnam

Methodology

The project employs a qualitative research methodology, encompassing a multi-sited ethnographic approach conducted across various research sites in the UK and Vietnam. Multi-sited ethnography offers a deep exploration of the lived experiences, perspectives, and practices of research participants, while situating these with a broader understanding of the social, economic, and political dynamics (Marcus, 1995). My study conducts 60 semi-structured interviews, including 50 with Vietnamese international students and 10 with educational agents and different participant observations. Fieldwork for the project was partly supported by the Manchester Geographical Society Research Fund.

Findings and Discussions

My findings demonstrate that transnational mobility is closely linked to students' agency in navigating various constraints and is deeply entangled with their enduring social positions, such as gender and class. For many students, international education transcends the pursuit of academic or social mobility; it challenges the view of students, often seen as privileged and merely strategic actors in search of Western credentials and capital (Yang, 2018). Instead, students often see studying abroad as a way to address uncertainties and disrupt entrenched social hierarchies in their country of origin. Their aspirations for international mobility represent an emotional negotiation to navigate their class and gender identities in Vietnam.

Secondly, my research reveals that many Vietnamese students experience multifaceted forms of precarity that permeate various aspects of their lives, manifesting in border and visa controls, housing insecurity, labour market experiences, and financial difficulties (Mulvey *et al.*, 2024; Wilson *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, the study emphasizes that precarity is not just an external condition, but is embodied and emotionally experienced (Cairns *et al.*, 2021; Gilmartin *et al.*, 2023). Finally, the findings demonstrate that, rather than resisting outright, Vietnamese international students actively negotiate and exhibit resilience in navigating these precarious circumstances. My study challenges the stereotype of international students as privileged and contributes to a nuanced understanding of the embodied and emotional experiences of precarity, highlighting how these experiences are unequally shaped by the intersecting facets of students' social positioning.

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