

# Research Capacities in Vietnam's Post-Colonial Higher Education – The Cases of Three Public Universities in Ho Chi Minh City

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Despite several efforts to overcome the disadvantages of the academic environment in Vietnam's post-colonial higher education system, the academic staff still lack adequate competencies to conduct high quality research (Dao, Pham, and Nguyen 2012; Nguyen 2013; Nguyen 2011). This study seeks explanations for this issue and solutions to develop university lecturers' research capacity in the context of Vietnam's academic environment. The research highlights the constraints that influence researcher capacity at three levels – individual, institutional and national. To fulfil the research aims, this study addresses and tackles three questions: What should be the forces driving the mechanism of research capacity-building at national, institutional and individual levels? How do they interact with each other across levels? And what do university lecturers do to cumulate or moderate these factors to improve their own academic competence?

The theory of cumulative (dis)advantages offers a lens to investigate the mechanism of enhancing and building research capacities across three levels (Merton 1968; Merton 1988; Oleksiyenko and Sá 2010). Four countervailing forces (i.e. innovative norms, commitment to meritocracy, organizational instrumentality, and interests in global science) have been identified and examined as factors constituting to enhance the development of academic capacities (Liljia 2012; Mahbuba and Rousseau 2011; Merton 1988; Zuckerman 1977). To test if these forces really enhance the faculty academic strengths, this study conducts detailed analysis of the countervailing processes across the three levels within the interpretivist paradigm. Data was collected at three flagship public mono-disciplinary universities. A mono-disciplinary university teaches only subjects in a defined field. The three universities teach in three distinct fields (i.e. social, natural and medical sciences) in Ho Chi Minh City. My research includes direct observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation.

The first finding is the “toxic” academic environment embracing the tensions between the

“standard Western” academic practices and the indigenous norms. The strong influence of the “tainted and unwritten” norms, namely “save face,” pursuit of social status and fame, and individual or group interests, as components of the “toxic” academic environment, clashed hard with the “standard Western” academic practices (Yang 2014). This tension leads to the three prominent attitudes among the academic staff – the “fear of change”, “favour of standard and clean research practices”, and “ignorance”. The second finding is the synergies and asymmetries within and across the three levels, which seems to be contradictory to the literature review. While there are the synergies of commitment, interests and norms, striking asymmetries of organizational instrumentality exists, reflecting the “sloppy” translations of policies and practices among three levels. Overcoming these trajectories, lecturers are very active to cumulate advantages for developing their research capacities at individual level, which is considered as the final finding of this study – the cumulative countervailing forces. These would act as vital factors to enforce a better understanding and thorough translation of policies and coherent practices across the three levels, and a significant breakthrough in the chain of disadvantages in Vietnam's post-colonial academic environment.

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