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## **The Sense-Making of Home Among Vietnamese Returning Graduates**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*While many Vietnamese students are reported to study abroad, the experiences of home-making among Vietnamese returning students are paid scant attention to in current research on Vietnamese international student mobility. Following a Heideggerian perspective on building and dwelling at home, this study explores the sense-making of home through conversations with 13 Vietnamese returning graduates. The analysis of the empirical material shows that home which is constructed and experienced by the returning graduates' use of intersecting materials is socially shared. It is an embodiment of returning migrants' engagement in the world with familiarity and discomfort created by their friction with the interrelated materialistic and discursive aspects of life. Their returns involve incomplete life happenings with diverse emotions and experiences of belonging. The findings of this study add nuance to the extant understanding of home as belonging and challenge the common conceptualization of home as a private space.*

**Keywords:** home-dwelling, Heidegger, international students, sense-making of home, Vietnamese returning students, return migration, skilled migration

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This study is situated within the outflow of approximately 100,000 Vietnamese students to 48 countries and territories, while the number of returning students is not published publicly (Nguyen, 2022) and amidst the Vietnamese government's claim of a supposed brain drain caused by those who do not return (Gribble, 2008; Nguyen, 2014). Stories about very successful and well-known returning expatriates seem to be flooded in the media (see Nguyen, 2013). Stories about other students' home sense-making are less heard. This study voices the

experiences of home-making among Vietnamese returning graduates who have lived and worked in Vietnam for some years after their returns.

Home matters to them and to us. Home means more than just a house we live in or a place where we share with others. We are never placeless. We are always in a place, making sense of it. Then the issue of being in a place like home raises some questions that the author expects to answer in this paper: How do Vietnamese returning students make a place home? How is home important to these returning graduates, who have already been back to their home countries? How does home matter to them and the people around them?

This study fits into the diverse body of research on Vietnamese international student mobility. Current studies on the negotiations of transnational mobilities among Vietnamese students have focused on the impacts of the Vietnamese government's human capacity-building policies that encourage students to study abroad and attract them to return for contributions to national development (e.g., Nguyen, 2013 & 2015; Trang, 2022). Another stream analyzes existing statistical information on popular study destinations and investigates the drivers of students' decisions to choose to study in these countries (e.g., Nam & Cheng-Hai, 2021; Nguyen, 2021; Pham, 2018; Pham, 2019). Several researchers look into Vietnamese students' motives for studying abroad and returning (e.g., Nghia, 2019; Nguyen, 2022; Phan, 2023) and the factors that influence their decisions to return (e.g., Tran et al., 2022a). Some studies examine Vietnamese returning students' experiences of adjustment to the home society, their strategies, and agency to confront challenges and opt for possibilities for work and life advancement (e.g., Le & LaCost, 2017; Tran et al., 2022a), and others focus on exploring the reasons for and the effects of brain drain on Vietnam's development (e.g., Gribble, 2008; Ho et al., 2018; Nguyen, 2015 & 2022). A piece that is still missing in this research mosaic is returning graduates' sense-making of home.

The author takes on board a Heideggerian perspective on the notion of home relating to the ways we experience being in space. Primarily, this perspective examines how we *build* a place for *dwelling*. A place has already been built in some manners, but our location in the place gives it specific meanings through our embeddedness in our dwelling. As such, a home is constructed by our engagement in the space with others in different life domains. It embodies the meaning of how we make sense of the place where we live.

This article adds nuance to the existing body of transnationalism research on routes and roots among skilled migrants (e.g., Cheng & Xu, 2025; Lu, 2022; Paile & Fatoki, 2017). It argues for migrants' transnational relationships and practices that make them stand their two feet in two societies as well as the push and pull forces that determine international students' intentions to return or not to return (e.g., Gribble, 2008; Nghia, 2019; Nguyen, 2015). The author of this paper argues that moving home is a process, rather than an end-point that is finished at the time when students have returned from their international education journeys. This process involves returning graduates' uses of intersecting materials for building the way they return home with embodied experiences and emotions in dwelling and the way they share it with others. Their returns release an effect on the

negotiations between their routes and roots in the home society which can be new for them.

This argument is unpacked in the following sections. A literature review of international student returns outlines major research foci on this issue before the author discusses the theoretical framework on home. These two sections are followed by the research method and results, the discussion of the findings, the conclusion, and the limitations.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies on the sense-making of home among returning graduates are quite rare, but research on skilled migrants' sense-homemaking in the body of research on transnationalism has been lavish (e.g., Conradson & McKay, 2007; Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014; Singh et al. 2012, to name but a few). For instance, skilled migrants are often reported to use transnational relationships to settle their relocation for immigration. These strategies are affected by the intra-national regimes of mobility, and socio-economic, cultural, and political conditions in host and home societies, causing certain precariousness in migrants' sense-making of belonging (Singh et al. 2012). Some skilled returning migrants may find their home society strange and unfamiliar when they face difficulties in seeking employment, feelings of guilt in fulfilling family responsibilities, and conflicts in cultural and traditional norms (Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014). The current body of research on transnationalism evinces that migrants' feeling of belonging to a place is a social-personal space.

Most extant studies on Vietnamese returning graduates have focused on their return intentions and experiences of return. For example, by exploring Vietnamese students' intentions to return home, Nghia (2019) found that a majority of them (78.1%) would choose to return to develop their home country and fulfill familial duties. A smaller percentage (14.6%) wanted to return to Vietnam to work due to their familiarity with the work culture in this country, and 7.3% expected to maintain and use their existing social relationships for their social and professional lives. Tuan and Cong (2022) found that Vietnamese students returning home from Japan are able to acquire recognized degrees that allow them to secure well-paid jobs in Vietnam. Le and LaCost (2017) noticed that Vietnamese student returnees find it difficult to readjust to Vietnamese society because of reverse culture shock despite the fact that they have spent most of their lives living in this country. Others choose to return because of familial and relationship bonds while some experience personal upheavals in their social relationships caused by their absence from maintaining them for their overseas studies.

Tran et al. (2022a) examined the contextual factors that influence Vietnamese students' decisions to return home from Australia after graduation. These factors include their failure in obtaining permanent residency and precariousness of employment in Australia created by the tightening skilled immigration policies, the rising pandemic Covid-19, and general employment trends while they anticipate greater employment and business opportunities at

home. Some are even cautious about the competitive job opportunities available in their home country because of their unfamiliarity with the cultural, organizational, and professional practices that are held in Vietnam. Not all returning graduates' degrees can be "good" (p. 51).

By moving to the broader body of research on international students' returns, the author remarks that employment prospects are often cited as a strong driver for graduates not to return home while others choose to return home because of family and social relationships and/or government schemes for talent attraction. Alberts and Hazen (2005) found that professional opportunities in the US as the host society lure students to stay on while personal and societal forces enable them to decide to return home. Similarly, Velciu and Grecu (2017) argued that it is difficult for some Romanian students to make a decision to remain in the host country or return to Romania after graduation when they must calculate the costs and benefits as well as opportunities and constraints posed by family and social relationships at home and employment and higher study advancement in the foreign countries. Yu (2016) contended that some Chinese students' intentions to remain in the US or return to China after graduation are sometimes ambivalent. They may "walk on both feet" (p. 209) when considering sudden lucrative job offers and familial bonds in China and worries about their lives fitting in the US society and competitive employment opportunities in the US. Their decisions are made under a rational calculation of costs and benefits with regard to multiple factors in the home and host societies.

Kratz and Netz (2016) pointed out that monetary motives can be one of the major decisions for international students to return as they are more likely to be employed by multinational corporations. Family bonds and difficulty in seeking employment in host societies are said to push international students to return (Cheung & Xu, 2015). Paile and Fatoki (2017) affirmed that relationships between returning students and their families and friends enhance their decisions to return upon graduation. Likewise, Lu (2022) discovered that convenience for re-connecting with friends and families in China plus work opportunities that are strengthened by their academic abilities are seen as the driving factors for Chinese international students' return. Bahna (2017) found that the more parents want their child to return, the likelihood of return increases, and the higher the educational level the father has, the less likely his child returns to the home country.

Governments' diasporic strategies are also found to influence international students' decisions and intentions to return home. Strategies to attract expatriates through attractive incentives and priorities, retain domestic students, and engage them to work in their home country have been deployed in China, India, and Vietnam (Gribble, 2008, Nguyen, 2022). The Chinese government has used celebratory rituals to lure skilled expatriates to return (Biao, 2011). The Vietnamese government has attempted to retain domestic students by extending their higher education capacity and has encouraged excellent students to study abroad by providing them with scholarships. The latter group is required to return home after they finish their study programs (Nguyen, 2014). Diasporic populations are believed to facilitate expatriates' contributions to national

development which include remittances, technological transfer, business cooperation, and extensions of professional relationships (Gribble, 2008).

These studies allow the researcher to pay close heed to some points for exploration in this study. They include economic influences posed by employment offers in the home society, family bonds and relationships, broader socio-economic regulations, political conditions that either impede or accelerate their returns, returning graduates' expectations to contribute to development, conveniences, difficulties in their re-adjustment to the home society, and personal circumstances. These issues are explored through a Heideggerian perspective on home.

## THE HEIDEGGERIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE MAKING OF A HOME

Heidegger (192) stated that we are always located in a place, but our being in the place involves both our physical or imagined presence and the meanings we give to the place. We  *dwell*  in that place. But our location does not completely define our anchor to that place because we can continuously  *build*  another place for  *dwelling* .

Building is for us to dwell. Building is a means, and dwelling is an end (Heidegger, 1971). However, some forms of building are not for dwelling. For example, a truck driver can feel comfortable and familiar with his truck although he does not reside in it. Heidegger (1971) traced the verb "build" back to its origin in German. The German word "bauen" (building) originally contains "buan" which means "dwell" (p. 2). In fact, when we build a place for us to dwell, we already dwell in our building. For example, when students are crafting their international education sojourns, they already dwell in the places of study program applications, visa applications, the imagination of the country where they will reside, and their negotiations with their relationships with their friends and family. In some sense, they are "cultivating" (Heidegger, 1971, p. 2) their building for their future dwelling in that foreign country while they are dwelling in the home society.

Home is a place where we reside in  *a social context*  and where we are  *with others*  and feel  *comfortable, familiar,*  or "remain at peace" (Heidegger, 1971, p. 3). It indicates our  *movement towards it*  by either coming from it or going toward it. Being at home includes more than just staying at home. While staying at home signifies a sense of physical presence, being at home encompasses certain  *meanings of being in a place* . It can mean our emotional connection to a place with others, feelings of ease and comfort when doing things in a place with familiarity, intimacy, privacy, and a place for us to be in.

Coming home implies either  *a physical*  or  *emotional movement*  towards either a place where we can feel comfortable with a social context or an ambiance where we do things with our familiarity. We build the place to dwell in. Building, in this sense, does not necessarily mean building a shelter architecturally or technically, but it means we construct a locale so that we can be in with our comfort and familiarity and feel at home. By dwelling in a place, we make sense of the space by giving it the meanings of our being and everyday activities. We

are not simply contained in space (Heidegger, 1962). We embody the places we are in.

The discussion on building and dwelling in a place enables the researcher to withdraw the interrelations in the home-making process as follows: A new home is built from an existing one in which social contexts and our interactions with others matter to us. Dwelling does not mean solely residing, but it signifies our direction toward a home where we feel safe, secure, comfortable, and peaceful. Building a home can involve struggles, uncertainty, discomfort, and precariousness in building for dwelling. Our activities during our journeys to the direction we target embody the meanings of the places we are going to, have been to, or aim to reach. Home can be plural, multilayered, and shared.

### **SAMPLING TECHNIQUE AND PARTICIPANTS**

This study was conducted in April 2023 with the ethical clearance approval of the institution where the author was working, which was effective from March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023 to December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

A snowball sampling technique was used for participant recruitment. This sampling technique allowed the researcher to approach the people whom he knew and who met the criteria of completing a degree program overseas and had returned to Vietnam for at least a year. These key initial people introduced him to others meeting the selection criteria. The researcher tried to balance the number of male and female and married and unmarried participants, but most of the potential participants were married as they were mature. Culturally speaking, the initial participants introduced the researcher to other people of the same gender. He also tried to obtain a balanced cohort of previously sponsored and privately funded graduates of different levels of education and disciplines. However, this number was humble, and this issue could have posed a sampling bias. To reduce this bias, the researcher selected participants of different ages and disciplines to avoid choosing “extreme cases” (Collier & Mahoney, 1996, p. 56) and involved them in conversations with intimacy.

The targeted number had been 20, but after conversing with 13 participants, the researcher realized that the themes that emerged seemed to be repeated among the participants, and the information provided was saturated. When themes and information are repeated, a saturation point is reached, and researchers may decide to terminate the data collection and begin to analyze the data (Saunders et al., 2018). The 13 participants lived in eight provinces and cities in Vietnam.

After the researcher introduced the study and confirmed the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, the conversations were begun and recorded. Some were conducted face-to-face at the participants’ chosen places while others were conducted online as they lived far from the researcher’s location. Each conversation was entirely conducted in Vietnamese upon the participants’ request and took place in Vietnam.

The conversations focused on the study inquiries that explored the participants’ home sense-making processes. They included the initiation of their overseas studies, decisions to return, experiences of returning home, meanings of

their home-making, and future aspirations. The author used information questions, yes/no questions, and even affirmative statements to encourage the participants to express their opinions, feelings, and attitudes. The empirical material was analyzed in accordance with the themes identified in the last paragraph of the literature review and theoretically framed around the Heideggerian concepts of building, dwelling, and home sense-making. Selected quotes were translated into English for use in this paper. The participants' names were anonymized with pseudonyms for confidentiality reasons.

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Information

No	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Country of Study	Degree and Field of Study	Scholarship Holder	Year of Graduation	Current Job
1	Anh Phuong	Female	26	The UK	Master of TESOL	No	2020	English lecturer
2	Thanh Linh	Male	36	The Netherlands	Master of Biotechnology	Yes	2012	Officer in an agricultural department
3	Truong Van	Male	32	Japan	Ph.D. in Environmental Technology	Yes	2013	Officer in a provincial natural resources and environment department
4	Duc Ngo	Male	37	Sweden and Malaysia	Master and Ph.D. in Geographical and Environmental Sciences	Yes for the Master. No for the PhD	2012, 2023	Lecturer
5	Khanh Anh	Female	40	Singapore and Australia	Master of Arts	Yes for the study program in Australia, no for the one in Singapore	2007, 2012	Project leader, lecturer
6	Van Nhan	Male	30	Sweden	Master of Biotechnology	Yes	2012	Lab technician and officer at a provincial



7	Minh Khanh	Male	32	Australia	Master of TESOL	No	2019	department of science and technology Lecturer and manager at a foreign language center
8	Danh Minh	Male	32	China	Master of Chinese Teaching to Speakers of Other Languages and Ph.D. in Chinese Literature	No at the beginning and yes later	2018	Lecturer
9	Dai Phuong	Female	33	The UK	Master of Economics and Finance	Yes	2013	Financial analyst at a state bank
10	Cao Bien	Male	43	The UK	Master of Construction Project Management	Yes	2013	Project manager at a state company
11	Phuong Thao	Female	31	Taiwan	Master of Finance and Banking	No	2013	Internal audit offer at a state bank
12	Kim Ngoc	Female	35	Sweden	Master of Transportation Technology	Yes	2012	Specialist in a provincial transportation department
13	Quang Tien	Male	37	Taiwan	Master of Business Administration	No	2013	Deputy head of a private company

## RESULTS

### **Intersecting materials for building a home anew**

Building a home normally requires the preparation and use of materials for construction. Likewise, the participants' experiences show that they used some materials that were already available in the home society and materials that they acquired by themselves to construct the new home in the home society. Anh Phuong's return was dictated by her parents, who wanted her to come back after her graduation as she was the only child in the family. She got ready to go home with her master's degree in TESOL, knowledge obtained from her international education journey, her family, and her marriage proposal in Vietnam. Danh Minh had always wanted to improve his Chinese language and dreamed about studying it in China. His parents sold their farming land and borrowed loans from a bank to invest in his Chinese language studies at first and master's program later. "Investment must be returned" to his parents' "sacrifice and unconditional love" for him forged Danh Minh's determination when he was talking about his return.

The making of the home upon their return was co-constructed by their parents, spouses, and the government. For example, Anh Phuong acknowledged that her return had already been planned even before she began going to the UK for her studies. Her parents wanted her to come back to fulfill her familial duties as the only child. She understood that the Vietnamese government has been internationalizing the country in many aspects for global integration by making English one of the compulsory subjects taught at the tertiary level, and this strategy would pose an advantage for her to look for an English teaching job. The government scholarship holders expressed optimism about obtaining work that would be relevant to what they had studied. For example, as a Vietnamese government scholarship holder, Van Truong was required to go home to serve the country for at least six years. He was pretty certain about his future work at a natural resource and environment department under the auspices of his uncle who was a high-ranking state officer. Thanh Linh said that even if the scholarship program had not required him to return, he would still have chosen to return due to his homesickness and boredom living in the Netherlands. Dai Phuong, Duc Ngo, Van Truong, Phuong Thao, Kim Ngoc, Cao Bien (scholarship holders), and Quang Tien and Khanh Anh (privately funded students) aspired to contribute their social and academic knowledge gained during their studies to their home country. These participants expected to cultivate a new home in the home society by using their knowledge, skills, transnationally professional relationships, and family relationships to settle in the home society.

The feeling of belonging to their hometown as the birthplace full of memories, connections to their beloved people, and romantic relationships enabled them to return. Van Nhan, Duc Ngo, Van Truong, Cao Bien, Minh Khanh, and Thanh Linh felt that their returns were planned before they were about to graduate from abroad. Minh Khanh thought that a return to his parents' financial investment in his studies should be his decision to return home with them. Filial piety was found common among the participants, and it was experienced as "an

obligation that Vietnamese people culturally follow” (Duc Ngo). Dai Phuong and Anh Phuong’s returns were also actualized by the development of their romantic relationships that they had established transnationally when they were studying overseas. The feeling of being “back to the place to which [they] belong” (Van Nhan) was shared with the people that they loved and wanted to reunite with.

Their new home in their home society was constructed both in line with their initial design and drifted away under the influences of the social contexts, changes in relationships, and their own circumstances. For example, most of the scholarship holders stated that the requirements for work assignments seemed to be an advantage for graduates like them because job competition was often “very high” (Cao Bien) in Vietnam. Being given a job in advance, working for a state organization that could earn them social respect, and being close to their families seemed to accord with their expectations upon their returns. However, “waiting on a bench for jobs” for some months gradually “ruined” (Duc Ngo) their dreams to use their professional knowledge to contribute to the organizations they were about to work in. Some decided to get married “to feel balanced” (Cao Bien) between the pressure posed by the job-waiting time and their personal lives.

### **Familiarity and discomfort during dwelling in return**

Many of the participants found it “comfortable and happy” (Van Truong) to work in their hometowns and lived with their families. Their familiarity with home during their return was initiated and contributed by several factors. First, the availability of work that was arranged by the local governments for the scholarship holders and chances for work created by their internationally recognized degrees enabled them to experience a “smooth” (Van Nhan) transition back to their home society. Second, this “smooth transition” was experienced in relation to their social and family relationships. For example, Duc Ngo, Van Truong, and Van Nhan associated their hometowns with their relationships with the people they loved and knew well. Third, all of them praised the supportive collegiality they received at work that turned “organizational culture shock” into “something new” (Dai Phuong) that they could learn from.

However, discomfort and struggles were found popular among some participants. Limited space for innovation and use of knowledge and skills caused by perceived bureaucratic mechanisms, disappointment with prolonged work appointments, and social prejudices appeared to be the struggles that these participants went through. Van Truong found it hard to be “encapsulated in the tight home with limited capacity for creativity” when he was struggling to fit in the work environment “with many cumbersome work procedures”. Similarly, Thanh Linh encountered limited space for him to “think out of the box” at work at home because of the bureaucracy that he was supposed to go through. Duc Ngo felt “down in the dumps” (repeated twice in the conversation) when he was assigned to work in an international relations office at a university instead of working in a provincial department of natural resources and environment department as promised by the local government. Although Phuong Thao was appointed as an internal audit officer for a state bank after eight months of waiting,

she was often asked to write meeting minutes for her department. This menial job did not meet her expectation to contribute “something significant to [her] homeland.” What is more, social norms posed a challenge. For instance, Khanh Anh felt “uncomfortable” with social prejudices and norms toward what girls and women were supposed to do and follow. Her hair dying was once criticized by her neighbors and relatives. She felt that her “home in the homeland was strange.”

These participants used some practical strategies to confront the challenges to feel at home during their returns. By taking advantage of being a state officer, Duc Ngo applied for permission to switch his job to a public university and then went to Malaysia for his doctoral studies. Dai Phuong, Kim Ngoc, Thanh Linh, Phuong Anh, and Van Nhan said that the time they had spent studying abroad made them less competitive than graduates from Vietnamese universities who could start their jobs earlier. Their response was to use the other aspects of their knowledge obtained overseas to thrive at work. Duc Ngo used his English competencies to fulfill his job as an international relations officer. Kim Ngoc, Phuong Thao, Cao Bien, and Van Truong utilized their social relationships to do other extra jobs for income and for community development. Van Truong asked one of his acquaintances to refer him to “Bread for the World”, a German non-governmental organization, to fund some community development projects in his hometown. Duc Ngo taught English private classes in his neighborhood, and Kim Ngoc worked as a part-time English-Vietnamese translator. At the time of this research writing, they were mostly settled in their hometowns, feeling satisfied with their current lives. Although a few of them traveled abroad for entertainment, business activities, education, and conferences, most resided “peacefully” (Danh Minh) in their homelands without relocating to another place.

### **The embodiment of home-dwelling**

The participants embodied the places where they returned with several meanings. 11 out of the 13 participants felt connected to the places as an “umbilical cord” with expectations to contribute their knowledge to national development. Van Truong wanted to connect international non-governmental organizations to his hometown for development. Thanh Linh expected to bring the hands-on knowledge he had obtained from his international education by organizing instructional conversations in collaboration with state agencies to disseminate agricultural production practices in the Netherlands to local farmers in his hometown.

Khanh Anh and Minh Khanh (both were single at the time of their return and at the time of this research writing) did not want to return home, though they had to do so. After the international education journeys to Singapore and Australia, Khanh Anh went to work in the US and met her boyfriend. However, since she was unsuccessful in renewing her tourist visa, she had to return to Vietnam. She continuously failed to re-apply for a visa to the US and ended up breaking up with her lover. Feeling disappointed and sad, she spent her time looking for a job to “forget” the failure and successfully applied for a faculty position at a university. Minh Khanh, likewise, returned home after splitting up with his crush in Australia.

On the first evening of his return, he was so brokenhearted that he fainted and was taken to a hospital near the airport. These two people's home was physically the houses where they lived with their family members in Vietnam, but they always dreamt of going again. Coming home just opened up preparation for another departure.

The idea of coming home as a departure that was not necessarily a geographical relation was also experienced by some of the other participants who believed that their returns marked a transition in their professional and personal lives. Anh Phuong said that coming home and getting closer to the people she loved was a "shelter for happiness". For Quang Tien, Phuong Thao, and Dai Phuong, their return opened "another door" (Quang Tien) to their new professional lives. The other participants expressed that their "home" was "quite new" (Thanh Linh) when they noticed that they seemed to be connected back to their memories that they had nearly forgotten, the people that they loved and respected, the buildings, food, houses, trees that they had rarely paid attention to before they studied abroad (Duc Ngo, Anh Phuong, Khanh Anh, Thanh Linh), and even "the smell of the countryside where [he] grew up" (Duc Ngo). In this sense, their home was embodied through their histories, memories, surroundings, and artifacts. They actually dwelled at home through their homecoming.

## DISCUSSION

The results presented above are now analyzed against the theoretical framing of a home which allows the researcher to point out some main findings.

The first finding is related to returning graduates' use of materials for return and relocation. The participants' returns are normally drafted and initiated by both push and pull factors as identified in Nghia's (2019) study which includes their expectations to contribute to the homeland development and fulfill familial responsibilities. Many of the returning students in this study experienced the importance of fulfilling filial piety as "dutiful children" (Yeoh et al., 2013, p. 441). The ways returning graduates make sense of their homes are initiated and influenced by societal and personal factors as indicated in some previous studies on Vietnamese student return migration and return intentions (e.g., Nghia, 2019; Tran et al., 2022a) and on international student return mobilities (e.g., Velciu & Grecu, 2017; Yu, 2016). Family bonds are found to be important material for their return. This issue has been referred to in previous studies such as Cheng and Xu (2015), Lu (2022), Paile and Fatoki (2017), and Nghia (2019) although money incentives in terms of salaries are not the same as the findings by Kratz and Netz (2016) or Tuan and Cong (2022).

While Tuan and Cong (2022) affirmed that Vietnamese returning graduates can acquire well-paid jobs with their educational qualifications, the findings of this study seem to be in stark contrast when a majority of the participants did not receive better salaries than the ones they had used to have before their studies, especially for those who were scholarship holders and had to be waiting to be assigned work by the local authorities. Albeit differences in the cost-sharing contributions, domestic students at Vietnamese universities are willing to pay for

their higher education in terms of extra courses and skills for employability (Le et al., 2022). A similar scenario happens to international returning Vietnamese students. In fact, anecdotal evidence from media outlets in Vietnam has repeatedly raised concerns about returning graduates' humble salaries and their low likelihood of getting employed (e.g., *VTC News*, 2021; *VnExpress*, 2022). International students may even look for assistance from migration agents (some are reported as providing unethical exploitation) that provide advice and paperwork support to lengthen their stay in host countries for work and migration (Tran et al., 2022b). This means that extra skills outside the curriculum and work experience are needed.

Despite favoring their English or foreign language proficiency, employers in Vietnam give more priority to job applicants' actual working experiences, adaptability, understanding of organizational culture, and soft skills. Knowledge obtained from Western universities is not enough. Extra skill sets that accord with the working environment are essential as well. Xu et al. (2023) argue that Western epistemology and doctrines which are being decolonized at Western universities can be recolonized when Asian students negotiate their bargaining power with Western universities in their choice of study destinations in Asia. The findings of this study further point out that Western epistemology and knowledge, Asian values, and local knowledge are not sufficient to prepare international graduates for employment. Probably, they need globally accepted employability values and skills too. Re-globalizing the current curriculum in higher education can be a research area that needs empirical investigation.

For governments, human capital manifests a rational calculation between the costs of financing students' overseas studies and the benefits of counting the number of degrees. For returning students, their international education degrees (one of the materials for building their returns) for their individual goods become socially shared commodities that are consumed as public goods for national development. Securing employment in the home society is a benefit for those on the state sponsorship programs, but the cost they pay is to face (perceived) bureaucracy that can be compensated by the extension of their social lives and opting for community development activities. The (perceived) bureaucracy and the authority's late response to their work appointment make them feel that not all degrees are "good" (Tran et al., 2022a, p. 51). It is difficult to evaluate if their returns can mitigate the effects of a supposed brain drain in Vietnam within the scope of the investigation of this study, but it is certain that the experience of home-making is both socially and personally constructed by their use of intersecting materials.

Second, while previous studies (e.g., Conradson & McKay, 2007; Robertson & Runganaikaloo, 2014; Singh et al. 2012) have pointed out that home is the social-personal space, this study adds that home is always socially shared. International student migration is often uneven and dynamic under the influences of the changing broader socio-political contexts and their relationships with others. Home is a "multilayered, ongoing process" (Wiles, 2008, p. 116). It can be a physical home that accommodates returning students to secure their well-being. It can, at the same time, be referred to and experienced as an embodiment

of their social relationships, social and familial responsibilities, symbolic representations of their educational qualifications, struggles in their professional and personal lives, and institutional norms and protocols.

Third, home is an embodiment of returning graduates' emotions created by their engagement in the physical and discursive aspects of their lives. As Lefort (2022) pointed out, the sense-making of a home is negotiated between their belonging to a "relative double relation" (p. 145) and the presence of their dwelling. Returning graduates constantly move when positioning themselves in a place called home, and such a negotiation is made sense through the way they relate themselves to others and the meaning of their life trajectory. Home is not primarily defined by identity anymore. It is contributed by the diasporic population's relations with whom they imagine becoming, the socioeconomic and political conditions that play out, and how they would re-imagine what they aspire to do in such circumstances. During the sense-making process of navigating home, returning graduates tend to invest in "emotional labor" (Wang, 2016, p. 130) to familiarize themselves with cultural and institutional norms while trying to solve uncertainty and discomfort during their relocation to the professional and cultural environment at home. This kind of labor is an expression of their affective responses to places that they call home. The feeling at home is plural, layered, embodied with histories, and shared. It involves familiarity with places where returning students can feel secure physically and emotionally. They build, dwell, belong to, and move towards a place to belong to and struggle to belong to. Through their dwelling at home, highly skilled returning graduates may negotiate their subjectivity in belonging with others, thus making their belonging intersubjective and incomplete. By building their return as home, returning graduates both cultivate their preparation and gather the joining of the spaces in which they are located into an experiential space.

## CONCLUSION

This study enquired about the sense-making of home among Vietnamese returning students in the context of the Vietnamese government's attempts to increase the quality of the highly skilled workforce by encouraging students to study abroad and luring them to come back for national development. By using a Heideggerian perspective on home, the author argued that international students' returns are initiated by their preparation of necessary materials, cultivation of conditions that are readily available, and gathering of spaces into an experiential place. As such, their returns are not experienced alone, but they rather share the constructions of their returns with others. Home is always socially shared. The process of building and dwelling at home encompasses returning graduates' use of various materials in intersecting domains. They perceive that Vietnamese society could offer them opportunities gained by their educational credentials. They can use their knowledge and skills, the availability of accommodation and family support, the use of social and professional relationships for job applications, the feeling of belonging to the place, nationalism, and romance for home-making. They build home, cultivate it, and dwell at home. Coming home

signifies another departure in their professional and personal lives. This departure is full of emotional labor.

### LIMITATIONS

Due to the purposive sampling technique, the humble number of the participants chosen in this study does not represent the general population of Vietnamese returning graduates. Quantitative studies that use large-scale surveys and semi-structured interviews with more participants coming from diverse degrees and fields of study and backgrounds can overcome this limitation. In addition, home-making is an ongoing process (Alberts & Hazen, 2005; Wang, 2016; Yeoh et al., 2013). Because the data collection for this study took place in a month and captured the participants' retrospective and current moments in their lives, the data set does not entirely show the complexities and changing nature of home over a long period of time. A longitudinal study on these participants in some years is recommended for future research.

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