

The Science of Returning Home:  
A case study of Vietnamese scientists returning from  
PhD studies abroad

Eren Zink

Dept. of Cultural Anthropology, Uppsala University, Sweden  
International Foundation for Science, Stockholm, Sweden

# Ý kiến nhà khoa học

## Phát triển kinh tế vườn, thích ứng biến đổi khí hậu

SẢN XUẤT NÔNG NGHIỆP ĐANG GẶP NHIỀU KHÓ KHĂN DO HIỆU ỨNG NHÀ KÍNH LÀM TĂNG NHIỆT ĐỘ TRÁI ĐẤT, BĂNG TÁN CHẢY, MỨC NƯỚC BIẾN ĐỘNG CAO, LƯỢNG MƯA LỚN, GIÓ BÃO MẠNH, TRIỀU CƯỜNG, SÓNG LỚN VỚI CƯỜNG ĐỘ NGÀY CÀNG MẠNH VÀ TẦN SỐ NGÀY CÀNG NGẮN, DIỄN TRÌNH CỦA BIẾN ĐỔI KHÍ HẬU (BĐKH) LẠI RẤT PHỨC TẠP TRONG XU THẾ CHUNG VỀ MỨC ĐỘ KHÁC NGHIỆT NGÀY MỘT GIA TĂNG, NHƯ HẾT ĐÀM HẾT HẠT HẠN, UN VU HẢ

# Ý kiến nhà khoa học

## Nghiên cứu khoa học theo nhu cầu xã hội

NGHIÊN CỨU KHOA HỌC (NCKH) THEO NHU CẦU XÃ HỘI ĐỐI VỚI TẤT CẢ CÁC QUỐC GIA, NHẤT LÀ ĐỐI VỚI CÁC QUỐC GIA ĐANG PHÁT TRIỂN. ĐÂY LÀ VẤN ĐỀ ĐANG ĐƯỢC CÁC NHÀ QUẢN LÝ, NHÀ KHOA HỌC NƯỚC TA QUAN TÂM VỚI MONG MUỐN GẮN KẾT NCKH VỚI NHU CẦU KINH TẾ - XÃ HỘI.

**BỐN YẾU TỐ QUAN HỆ CHẶT CHẼ GIỮA NCKH VÀ NHU CẦU XÃ HỘI**

**GIẢI PHÁP TĂNG CƯỜNG GẮN KẾT GIỮA NCKH VÀ NHU CẦU KINH TẾ - XÃ HỘI**

nghe sinh học, hóa học, cơ khí, động hóa và công nghệ thông tin. Bên cạnh các chương trình K và CN với hệ thống các đề tài hình thành theo cơ chế trình b

Nguyễn Đăng Vang, deputy chairman of the National Assembly's Science and Technology Committee, spoke with *Kinh Tế Đô Thị* (Urban Economy) about science and technology research development

## Consistency is key for matching funds with competent scientists

Has inconsistent State spending on research projects discouraged many scientists from doing research? on Finance and the Law on Auditing. Auditing is necessary, but we should propose some regulations that provide department at each research institute which takes care of these procedures so that scientists can concentrate on helping improve production. The Government has issued relevant documents to help farmers register their

One of 2,000 researchers globally contributing to the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize-winning report on global warming, Dr Nguyễn Hữu Ninh warns **Trần Quỳnh Hoa** that the clock is ticking if the world is to avert the devastating effects of climate change.

## Climate change requires concerted response

While conducting research at the University of Szeged in Hungary and at the Biological Research Centre of the inner SANCTUM environment. Inner Sanctum: It is forecast that Việt Nam will be severely affected by climate

## Cold homecoming for highly-skilled graduates

Nguyễn Trung Hiếu returned to Vietnam after six year studying in Britain, thinking that his education would aid the country's development. But Hiếu believes his knowledge is not being fully utilized and feels under-valued. His story is unfortunately far from extraordinary, as thousands of Vietnamese returning from studying abroad are discovering.



## Vietnamese academics must learn to think outside the box

What is the main aim? Tuesday June 24, 2008

## VN, US promote educational ties

HÀ NỘI — Việt Nam has become one of the 20 countries sending the highest number of students to the United States, with 30 per cent more students enrolled in US universities and colleges. Nhân highlighted an ongoing co-operation project

## Kiến nghị lập Quỹ Khuyến khích tài năng khoa học trẻ

Kiến nghị này được nhiều nhà khoa học (KH) đầu ngành gửi đến Bộ KHCN và Quỹ Phát triển KHCN Quốc gia trong khuôn khổ lấy ý kiến về cơ chế hoạt động của quy định tài trợ nghiên cứu cơ bản (NCCB). Theo PGS Phạm Ngọc Châu, nên có quỹ này để khuyến khích, vun đắp tài năng KH trẻ, đảm bảo nguồn nhân lực KH kế cận. Ngày 8/6, đại diện Bộ KHCN cho biết: Cùng với đề xuất này, đội ngũ nhà KH kiến nghị từ nay trở đi NCCB phải đáp ứng và tuân thủ quy chuẩn quốc tế thì mới được công nhận. Trao đổi với Báo KH&ĐS, TS Lê Đình Tiến, thủ trưởng Bộ KH&CN cho hay: Nếu có được Quỹ này sẽ rất thuận lợi cho các nhà khoa học trẻ. Tuy nhiên không thể tách riêng khỏi Quỹ phát triển KHCN Quốc gia vì như thế sẽ có quá nhiều quỹ. BN

Programme in Vietnam Dr Tran Xuan... news about the scheme which is now in... tenth year.

research report... professor claim... completed in... le year.

## Research Questions

- What are some key challenges encountered by young scientists that return to Vietnam after they complete a PhD training in a foreign country?
- What are the social, cultural or economic explanations for these challenges?
- How do young scientists respond to the challenges that they encounter?
- Why is understanding these challenges important for successful integration and development in Vietnam?



# Content of Paper

- Introduction
- Methods and background to study
- Scientific cultures: anthropological and sociological approaches to the study of science
- A history of higher education and international exchange
- Case study of scientists that returned home
  - Dr. Dzung
  - Dr. Mai
  - Dr. Phuong
  - Dr. Huong
- Conclusions



## Cases – Dr. Dzung

Dr. Dzung is 34 years old, married, and has a son. In 2007 he had just returned from Europe to his biology department at a regional university far from both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Dzung comes from a family of scientists, however he has not specialized in the same field as his father, and he belongs to a university where he does not have strong kinship networks.

### Challenges:

- Earning a living from doing science as he was trained
- Accessing research funds from national or international sources

### Options:

- Moving abroad
- An international project



## Cases – Dr. Mai

Dr. Mai returned to Viet Nam two years ago after completing her PhD in agricultural sciences abroad. Now she is working at a regional university. She is not yet 40 years old, and lives with her husband and child. She is publishing scientific articles nationally and internationally, and involved in development projects.

For her, research results are essential for achieving improvements in development and natural resource use. She says, “if you do not have the knowledge, how can you argue and make change?”

### Strategies:

- Strong kinship and political network
- Providing scientific services to senior university staff
- International research funds
- Contributions to curriculum for next generation of scientists



## Cases - Dr. Phuong

“I am a failure” she says.

Science, in her view, allows one to go beyond giving aid to alleviate a problem in one place in the short term, It permits one to achieve a level of understanding that can help to solve the problem in the longer term and for a larger group of people. Her scientific research, however, has not been able to achieve this. She explains:

*You do research, but who listens to you, and what good does it do? It is kind of bitter... Nobody listens to the results of your research, and nobody cares. Even the knowledge that one learns while away, I think very little of my own experience from abroad has been applied [in Viet Nam].*

I ask her to explain why, and she replies:

*I would say the whole system is not ready to change. We came back [from studies abroad] with the set mind for change, and the system is not ready for change. So maybe we just got disappointed. Some of us are more optimistic. Many times people say ‘just go along and wait for the right time to make a change,’ but I'm not so convinced.*



## Cases - Dr. Huong

Dr. Huong is in her early 30s, she has two children, and has recently returned to her research institution after doing a PhD abroad in the field of Biology. She sees little hope of using her research skills that she learned abroad in her home country.

### Challenges:

- Low salaries create a disincentive for doing scientific research
- Colleagues must chase consultancy projects, resulting in a working environment that discourages teamwork
- Different generations in her institution have different perceptions of what constitutes scientific work, but it is difficult to discuss this openly.

Nevertheless, Huong is committed to staying in Viet Nam:

*If we do not come back, Viet Nam cannot change. If we come back, face to face, then we can do something. One person cannot do anything, but if my generation cannot change, then the next one may be better. If we do not come back, then the next generation cannot be better.*



## Trends

- 1) The persons interviewed generally profess a strong commitment to the idea that science should lead to development, and express a wish to be an active contributor to this process.
- 2) Different generational cultures of doing science result in different understandings of how science should be practiced in Vietnamese institutions and universities.
- 3) Hierarchies within institutions and universities based upon respect for age and kinship at times discourage open exchanges of ideas, and limit access of young persons to the tools and funds for doing science.
- 4) The economics of science, including both salaries and grants, are dominated by an informal economy that reduces incentives for doing research.
- 5) Together, factors 2, 3, and 4 lead to a work environment that discourages teamwork in science.



## Conclusions

The Government of Viet Nam has a number of ambitious plans to use science capacity to achieve new levels of economic development and poverty elimination. At this conference, and in the newspapers, this is a recurring message.

However, the findings of this study suggest that simply investing additional national and international funding in science will not necessarily lead to the achievement of the intended goals.

To benefit from the talent of a new generation of scientists will require a careful consideration of the current structure of the scientific community in Viet Nam, its culture, and its economy. Ideally this would result in the development of a national action plan that encourages the development of creative scientific work environments.



# Thank you for your attention!

Eren.Zink@antro.uu.se

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