



## **An innovative model bringing international doctoral training opportunities to ASEAN students.**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose** – The aim of this paper is to describe a new model of cross-institutional doctoral training being developed between Aston University and the VNUK Institute of Research and Executive Education (VNUK) at Da Nang University.

**Design/ Methodology/ Approach** - Aston University and VNUK are delivering a Higher Education Partnership (HEP) project, co- funded by the British Council Vietnam, researching doctoral training models and governance. The project has focused on identifying and sharing best practice in university governance and quality assurance procedures between the UK and Vietnam. During the research phase of this project the rules and procedures governing doctoral training in the UK and in Vietnam were compared and discussed with various stakeholders, both institutional and national. This process led to the development of new proposals for transnational co-operation in doctoral training, with the potential to increase the options for high quality doctoral training in Vietnam and the wider ASEAN region. Initial findings from the HEP project are shared as a basis for discussion of the need for and benefits of the proposed transnational doctoral training “hub”.

**Findings** – A cost-efficient model of high quality, transnational doctoral training leading to the award of a UK PhD is proposed. The doctoral training “hub” model suggested aims to ensure that sufficient capacity to provide multidisciplinary research training exists, and to generate sustainable research networks for the future.

**Research limitations** – The proposal is based on a small scale, mixed quantitative and qualitative study of participants in doctoral training in Vietnam, and discussions with similar stakeholders in the UK. Proposals made are for preliminary discussion and require development and approval by institutions and national agencies before implementation.

**Originality/ Values** – This presentation (and the proposal for a new, partnership driven model of transnational doctoral training herein) has relevance for the education ministries in ASEAN countries who provide scholarships for doctoral training, as well as for universities and students in Vietnam and the UK.

**Keywords** – transnational, doctoral training centre, doctoral training hub, Higher education, Innovation.

## **1. Introduction**

Research everywhere is dependent upon funding, and this includes the need for funding of the training of future researchers to doctoral level. In Vietnam, the Vietnam International Education Department (VIED) which is part of the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) provides lecturers in Vietnam with opportunities to undertake research training abroad through its Project 911. In addition, there has been bilateral co-operation between the funding organisations in the UK and Vietnam with the launch of 911-Newton PhD Scholarships in 2015, administered by the British Council Vietnam. Project 911 has the objective to upskill existing lecturers to doctoral level, and for the duration of the scheme (2010 to 2020) aims to send up to 1,500 persons per year abroad for training (MOET website) to institutions with a signed agreement with MOET.

Doctoral training programmes in the UK are often of a shorter duration than those of other international destinations for 911 scholars; however, MOET data showed that out of 1,300 students funded in one year, only 80 came to the UK for study. One factor in this could be the comparative cost of studying in the UK. This paper proposes one way in which this potential barrier to UK doctoral training could be overcome.

### **1.1 Transnational education (TNE)**

Transnational education (TNE) was defined by HEGlobal as “education delivered in a country other than the country in which the awarding institution is based”. Some definitions of TNE include the assumption that students will be able to study for awards without leaving their own country, whereas the proposition made in this paper has a looser definition, whereby students can be awarded a UK degree after undertaking a significant proportion of their research in their home country.

Transnational education programmes awarded by UK higher education institutions cover the whole range of possible awards; undergraduate, postgraduate masters and doctorates. Indeed, the UK has led the world in TNE for over 20 years (McNamara and Knight 2015). Overall, the proportion of UK awards made through TNE is weighted in favour of undergraduate awards, with 47% of programmes overall and 66% of TNE students enrolled on undergraduate programmes in the latest survey from 2014/15 (HEGlobal 2016) In the same survey, 44% of programmes and 28% of student enrolments were postgraduate taught. The balance of TNE programmes at UG or PG level does vary with subject area, however, with postgraduate programmes being in the majority for subjects such as medicine, other science subjects and education, whereas UG TNE programmes are more common in the fields of Arts and humanities, maths and computing.

In all fields of study, there are relatively small numbers of postgraduate *research* programmes-which would include doctoral programmes. The field of Medicine and related subjects had 8% of TNE programmes at postgraduate research level, and similar figures were found for engineering (7%) and Arts & Humanities (6%). Education had 13% of its UK TNE programmes delivered at PG research level whereas Business and management (which represents the field with by far the greatest total number of UK TNE programmes) had very few (<1%). HESA records show that there were a total of 4,965 students enrolled on UK TNE research doctorates in 2014/15, out of a total of 665,995 students enrolled on UK TNE awards (British Council, 2016).

The proposals here come from the partnership between VNUK at the University of Danang, and Aston University in the UK.

**UK TNE partners.**

Two countries in the ASEAN regions are consistently amongst the top three countries that are recipients of UK TNE programmes: Malaysia and Singapore. Students in recipient countries can study for UK awards in many ways, from distance learning, to blended learning supported by local tutors or UK “flying faculty”, to fully franchised programmes taught by the host partner organisation (HEGlobal 2016). Such models of UK TNE are being developed with other countries in the ASEAN region such as Vietnam, but the proposal here will focus on a model of postgraduate research TNE that involves study in both the UK and the host country.

## **1.2 Models of Doctoral training**

### **Doctoral training in the UK**

The training of PhD students in the UK is intimately linked to the way research is funded in the UK and Europe. Initially, the higher education sector in the UK was funded primarily by the state and research funding came from two main sources. Firstly, funding for research infrastructure at Universities came from the University Grants Council (which was abolished in 1989) and secondly, funding for training and projects came from the UK Research Councils. This system ensured that peer reviewed research of the highest quality was supported, as well as providing well-maintained facilities. (Lunt et al, 2014).

Moves to ensure accountability for the use of UK public funds, along with pressures on public funding in general, have led to many changes in the funding of research since these early days. Introduction of quality-related funds to institutions from the Funding Councils based on the outcome of the “Research Assessment Exercise” (RAE) in the 1980’s replaced the block grants from the University Grants Council. The four main Research Councils created in 1965 joined together in 2000 as Research Councils UK (RCUK), which today continues to award PhD studentships every year. However, the individual Research Councils are moving from the award of stand-alone studentships towards supporting research through themed Centres for Doctoral Training (DTCs) or through Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs).

### **UK Doctoral Training Centres:**

Doctoral training centres (DTCs), as recognised and supported by the UK Research Councils, are institutions (or groups of institutions,) which provide the expertise and facilities to train researchers in specific themed, interdisciplinary areas. Students are funded at these DTCs for a period of 4 years, during which they will receive training in technical and transferrable skills as well as the research element of a UK PhD award thereby increasing their employability. This can be compared to the more “traditional” expectation that a UK PhD will be completed within 3 years.

One benefit of a DTC to doctoral students is that they are not be trained in isolation, and therefore can start to build their research networks for the future. Also, because of the integrated nature of the training received the students develop a range of personal and professional skills in addition to their research development, which prepare them for their future careers. Most importantly the research capacity provided at a doctoral training centre also allows a multi-disciplinary approach to research priority areas, thus providing the best use of funding resources.

### **Aston Universities’ support for doctoral training.**

Aston University is a partner the Midlands Graduate School Doctoral Training Partnership, a doctoral training network funded by the ESRC. Aston also supports the training of its entire postgraduate student population through the Aston Graduate School, thus ensuring that students have the opportunity to access a variety of training opportunities as well as undertaking the research component of a UK PhD award.

The proposals for a transnational doctoral training “hub” discussed later are based around the support already provided by the Aston Graduate School, and the quality procedures for UK doctoral training already in place at Aston. They also reflect the multidisciplinary nature of the research undertaken at Aston, and the experiences of co-operative research between Aston academics and researchers at VNUK and other institutions in Vietnam.

## **2. Preliminary findings from the HEP Project**

### **2. 1. Methodological considerations.**

A small-scale survey was undertaken in Vietnam to inform the discussions during the project phase at Aston. The survey was given to participants at meetings held at VNUK, allowing some limited opportunity for discussion. 143 PhD students were invited to the meeting, 37 attended and responses were obtained from 36. A further meeting was held for supervisors: 60 were invited, 55 attended and all completed the survey. Although the survey was predominantly quantitative in design, the responses allowed several themes to be identified for exploration at Aston.

## 2.2 Survey Results

The themes identified from the survey were:

<b>Main theme</b>	<b>Sub themes</b>
<b>Funding</b>	<b>Scholarship vs self funding</b> <b>Variety of funding needs</b> <b>Challenge of lack of funding</b> <b>Expectations of students</b>
<b>Dissertation topic</b>	<b>Level of project outcomes</b> <b>Vietnamese focus/ international relevance</b> <b>Industrial/ societal focus needed</b>
<b>Advisor/ supervision</b>	<b>Experience</b> <b>Relationship and responsibilities of joint supervisors</b> <b>Challenges of part time doctoral students</b>
<b>Challenges with international recognition</b>	<b>Language</b> <b>Relevance/ focus of projects</b> <b>Journals published in.</b>
<b>Doctoral standards</b>	<b>Expectations of doctoral awards</b> <b>Comparisons between sectors</b> <b>Variability in training and opportunities</b>
<b>Procedures</b>	<b>Bureaucracy</b> <b>Candidate selection</b> <b>Publication expectations</b> <b>Defence and assessment</b> <b>Duration</b>

## 2.3 Issues highlighted during workshops at Aston.

A series of workshops with Aston academics with experience of PhD supervision, Graduate School support staff and experts from Aston Registry were held to discuss the

themes identified in 2.2. In addition, a session was held to explore the role of a UK National Standards Agency in the UK. Representatives of the UK Quality Assurance Agency with experience in transnational education attended to consider aspects of the UK Quality Code applicable to doctoral training (QAA).

#### **2.4 Main issues identified: Doctoral training in Vietnam and the UK.**

At present the regulations and procedures governing the award of a PhD in Vietnam and the UK are similar in purpose and structure, but very different in duration and detail. Both systems have periods of training, of interim assessment before progression, of research and of final assessment and award. However, the duration of the training and qualifying phase and the total time taken to complete doctoral studies in the UK is much shorter than in Vietnam, with the expectation that a student will complete their work and submit their thesis for examination within 3 years. The qualities expected of a doctoral candidate are similar in both countries systems, but the way in which the students are assessed during training and for award differ markedly. These differences present barriers to the “co-tutelle” model of joint doctoral training that might lead to a dual PhD award where the student receives a doctoral qualification from both the UK and the Vietnamese institution.

The proposals here come from the partnership between VNUK at the University of Danang and Aston University, and the joint Higher Education Partnership project they are completing.

### **3. Proposed model**

The model we propose can be considered as a form of transnational education at doctoral level, where a UK PhD award can be made to student who have undertaken their research project partly in the UK, and partly in Vietnam. The proposal is not for single isolated projects however, but for the formation of a doctoral training “hub” similar in purpose to the DTC model preferred by the UK funding councils. This “hub” will be based at a UK centre with sustainable and appropriate research links in Vietnam, so that scholarship providers could fund groups of students on multi-disciplinary projects addressing projects of relevance to national and international priority research areas.

Students would apply for a project at the UK institution and be registered for a PhD. The doctoral training taught courses and initial phases of the research would be undertaken at the UK institution, and the student would remain in the UK until successful completion of their qualifying report (usually 1 year). The student would then return to their Vietnamese institution to undertake the main body of their research project under the supervision of the associate supervisor at the Vietnamese research institution, with continued primary supervisory support from the UK. The student will return to the UK to write up their thesis and for examination according to the UK requirements for a PhD award (submission of thesis and viva voce examination with an external examiner) at the end of the three-year period.

The advantages of this proposal for transnational doctoral training are:

- A UK doctoral award available to more Vietnamese students
- Reduced overall costs (fees and living costs) as around 50% of the research will be undertaken at the partnering Vietnamese research institution or university.
- Deepening collaborative research activity between Vietnam and the UK, addressing projects of value to Vietnam and elsewhere.
- Increased number of joint publications in international journals for the Vietnam and UK research supervisors,
- Maximising value gained for those funding scholarships for doctoral training.

The importance of funding projects through a doctoral training hub are:

- Ability to address research priority areas in a multidisciplinary manner
- Students do not develop their skills in isolation,
- Scale of projects addressed by research hubs or centres can be greater than that in isolated projects
- Students engaged in a busy research environment will develop networks for the future.

This proposal has been discussed by representatives of UK university governance procedures and doctoral training, and key features for success were identified. These include:



- Synergistic or complementary research interests of the UK principle supervisor and the Vietnamese associate supervisor.
- A history of joint research activity between the UK and Vietnamese partners.
- Understanding of both supervisors and institutions as to the requirements of a UK doctoral award, and of the standards and outcomes expected for the award of a PhD.
- Infrastructure and academic support at both institutions appropriate for the needs of the project.
- Studentships, or other funding, which provide adequate resources to support the student and the project.
- Identification of research projects that not only address the research priorities of Vietnam, but where possible are of wider interest with the potential of leading to international publications.

This proposal for transnational research training was developed by VNUK at the University of Danang and Aston University, and builds on the existing relationships in teaching and research between the two institutions. Indeed, many of the indicators for success already exist in this partnership (including understanding of UK governance procedures, and existing research collaborations), making the Aston/ VNUK partnership an ideal location for the development of such a transnational doctoral training “hub”. As another presentation at this conference shows, there are many risks involved with transnational educational initiatives especially between countries of differing regulatory cultures and language (Phung et al 2016), so the VNUK/Aston history of successful co-operation will help mitigate these risks. Finally, the importance of attracting high quality Vietnamese scholarship students (with sufficient funds for their research projects) to the initiative is key to its success.

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