The Growth of Service-Learning in Vietnamese Higher Education

Catalysts, Characteristics, and Challenges

Dung Nguyen
Victoria University of Wellington

Andrea Milligan
Victoria University of Wellington

Kathryn Sutherland
Victoria University of Wellington

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Abstract

Service-learning has appeared in Vietnamese higher education in recent decades and is among a range of pedagogical approaches that have been imported from the West. This article discusses features of service-learning in Vietnamese universities that have emerged from the distinctive ideologies of the socialist-communist country, the influence of traditional values and religious beliefs, and the conditions of a postcolonial society and modern global economy. The interpretive multisite case study discussed in this article investigated local service-learning courses in four public universities in the Middle and South of Viet Nam. Four catalysts for the growth of service-learning in Viet Nam were identified: employability, responsibility to the community, enhancing young people's moral values, and teachers as bottom-up initiators of service-learning initiatives. The lessons from this study hold potential to inform future policies, institutional organization, as well as pedagogies and strategies to improve and sustain service-learning practices in Vietnamese higher education and similar contexts.

Keywords: *service-learning, Vietnamese higher education, postcolonialism*

El crecimiento del aprendizaje-servicio en la educación superior vietnamita

Catalizadores, características y desafíos

Dung Nguyen, Andrea Milligan, and Kathryn Sutherland

Resumen

El aprendizaje-servicio existe en la educación superior vietnamita desde las últimas décadas y se encuentra entre una variedad de enfoques pedagógicos importados de Occidente. Este artículo analiza las características del aprendizaje-servicio en las universidades vietnamitas que han surgido de las ideologías socialistas-comunistas de este país, la influencia de los valores tradicionales y las creencias religiosas, y las condiciones de una sociedad poscolonial y una economía global moderna. Este artículo es un estudio de caso interpretativo en múltiples sitios que investigó cursos de aprendizaje-servicio en cuatro universidades públicas del centro y sur de Vietnam. Se identificaron cuatro catalizadores para el crecimiento del aprendizaje-servicio en Vietnam: empleabilidad, responsabilidad con la comunidad, mejorar los valores morales de los jóvenes y docentes como creadores de abajo hacia arriba de iniciativas de aprendizaje-servicio. Las lecciones de este estudio tienen potencial para informar futuras políticas, organización institucional, así como pedagogías y estrategias para mejorar y sostener las prácticas de aprendizaje-servicio en la educación superior vietnamita y contextos similares.

Palabras clave*: aprendizaje-servicio, educación superior vietnamita, poscolonialismo*

Internationally, service-learning has been viewed as a means for higher education institutions to develop a sharper focus on civic engagement and social responsibility, in addition to the two long-standing missions of teaching and research. As the "third mission" of contemporary universities (Annette, 2010; Zomer & Benneworth, 2011), an expectation for greater civic engagement is highlighted by the now ubiquitous use of the term "engaged" universities (Benneworth, 2013; Hollander & Saltmarsh, 2000). Service-learning in Western traditions is expected to provide experiential opportunities for students to participate in democratic life beyond campus and integrate academic, disciplinary content with civic engagement concepts and practice (Annette, 2005; Saltmarsh, 2005).

Although service-learning has often involved experiential and credit-bearing academic characteristics in Western contexts (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995), service-learning in Asian universities is generally defined as "intentionally structured activities that engage students in social services to solve problems encountered by community members" (Nishimura & Yokote, 2020, p. 187). Many service-learning activities are noncourse based, short term, and/or related to a graduation requirement and are not credit bearing. Along with certain accomplishments, Asian service-learning practices have been criticized for emulating Western ideologies and lacking a focus on the moral underpinnings of Asian education systems. Scholars such as Kusujiarti (2011) and Nishimura and Yokote (2020) have argued that there is a need for critical insights about the political orientation, structural challenges, and social justice outcomes of service-learning programs and have noted insufficient attention to various spiritual traditions.

Few academic studies have reflected on how service-learning has been distinctively contextualized in Vietnamese higher education. Information about service-learning courses in Vietnamese universities can readily be found in public media, such as online magazines, social media, and university websites. However, academic publications are scarce. We found only one coauthored book chapter (Halimi et al., 2014) about an international service-learning partnership with Portland State University in Oregon and two other papers (Phung, 2007; Phung & Mol, 2004) about community engagement in the field of environmental studies. Other research publications have been posted on personal blogs and service-learning websites (Nguyễn et al., 2012), as a conference presentation (Nguyen, 2016), and in an institutional journal (Le, 2017).

Our study aimed to address this research gap and to add a Vietnamese perspective to the international scholarship on service-learning in international and regional literature. Research attention to a Vietnamese perspective is important for at least two reasons. First, it adds to a growing conversation about pedagogical practices and organizational development needed for service-learning, within Viet Nam and among international scholars. Second, the findings may hold particular cogency for other Asian and Confucian contexts as universities grapple with the problems of international policy borrowing and the need for situated, nuanced approaches to service-learning programs.

Service-Learning in Vietnamese Higher Education

Vietnamese higher education is now in its fourth decade of reform. After Viet Nam gained independence in 1975, the 1986 *Đổi Mới* economic reforms and subsequent 2006–2020 "acceleration stage" loosened state control over the economy (according to the Viet Nam's Five-year Socio-economic Plans: 2006–2010, 2011–2015, 2016–2020). Universities in Viet Nam experienced greater popularization, privatization, and commercialization (Nguyen, 2009). Higher education is now open to more students from the middle and lower classes and has expanded through international funders and business-university partnerships (Dang, 2009; Vu & Nguyen, 2018). As part of the widespread economic reforms, the Higher Education Reform Agendas (HERA 2006–2020 [Resolution 14/2005/NQ-CP] and HERA 2021–2025 [Resolution 29-NQ/TW/2013]) have aimed to support greater institutional autonomy and to achieve higher quality in teaching, learning, and research to produce a workforce and knowledge for economic development.

The duty to create socialist citizens capable of serving the economy and society has been a long-standing expectation of higher education in Viet Nam (Law 08/2012/QH13 and Law 34/2018/QH14). Compulsory socialist political education courses include Marxist-Leninist Philosophy,

Marxist Political Economics, Scientific Socialism, Ho Chi Minh Thought, and History of the Vietnamese Communist Party (Phong & Thu, 2020). In addition, Communist Youth Union divisions in every university organize volunteering programs, among which have been the noteworthy Green Summer Campaigns, launched in 1993 and continuing today, in which students are mobilized to engage with communities during their summer holidays. However, critics have identified these efforts as one-sided and fragmented, with too much emphasis on communist political education, superficial community volunteering programs, and an inadequate approach to moral education (Doan, 2005; Nguyễn, 2015; S.H., 2014). Furthermore, graduates have been perceived as lacking practical experience and the soft skills needed to contribute to economic development and global integration (Tran, 2013; Truong et al., 2018). In response to these critiques, university teachers across a range of disciplines have integrated service-learning into their courses, in the expectation that this might bring practical, moral, and social aspects together with disciplinary content.

As a comparatively more recent phenomenon than within Western and other Asian contexts, service-learning has emerged in Vietnamese higher education in the past two decades, mostly embedded in coursework, but sometimes under voluntary programs broadly related to academic study. Through initiatives that appeared from at least 2007, service-learning has gained more interest, and a wide range of training programs, workshops, and conferences have involved an increasing number of universities countrywide. This article focuses on the service-learning practices of four such universities to sketch out common and specific catalysts, characteristics, and challenges. But first, we outline our theoretical frameworks and research methods.

Theoretical Frameworks

Our study incorporates two theoretical orientations: a broadly interpretivist research paradigm and *Asia as Method* (Chen, 2010) as an additional theoretical outlook. These lenses allowed attention to the socially constructed nature of knowledge and the interplay between Western and Asian knowledges. They were cogent for our overall purpose of understanding how participants thought about and experienced service-learning, especially in the Vietnamese postcolonial context.

Service-learning courses in Viet Nam normally involve multiple actors and contexts. The realities of these courses are various and shaped by people from different social, political, hierarchical, economic, ethnic, and gender perspectives. Interpretivism allowed us to recognize that there "is not a single understanding of the 'right' way of viewing a particular situation. Instead, it is an understanding of multiple perspectives on the topic" (Willis, 2007, p. 113). Thick description captured participants' different thoughts, emotions, interactions, and nonverbal communications and paid attention to their motivations and intentions, perceptions of events and details, and the meaningfulness of situations.

Kuan-Hsing Chen's (2010) *Asia as Method* outlook provided another interpretive layer for this rich qualitative data. Chen (2010) argued that undoing the effects of colonization and imperialism in Asian societies rests on "multiply[ing] frames of reference" (p. 223) to include Asian histories, cultures, and intellectual contributions, as well as recognizing the impact of the West. His concept of *geocolonial historical materialism* encourages consideration of phenomena within their social, historical, and spatial contexts. A geocolonial historical materialist view of service-learning practices in Viet Nam highlighted the influence of Western conceptions of civic engagement and the traditional beliefs, colonial history, and socialist ideologies of Viet Nam. It also called our attention to the importance of moral values in Vietnamese culture and how this perception drove our participants' actions. Chen's concept of *critical syncretism* encourages shifting the object of identification toward the self, in contrast to colonized subjectivities that have been passive and taken the colonizer as the object of identification. It helped us understand how practitioners were looking to existing Western frameworks, acknowledging them as a part of the formation of Vietnamese service-learning, and building on them with a critical and reflexive consciousness. Concomitantly, through *inter-referencing*, Chen proposed that we should look beyond one's country borders. This lens helped us to consider institutional strengths and weaknesses and how

practitioners made use of existing resources to develop service-learning initiatives in other Asian countries and contexts.

Investigating service-learning in Vietnamese higher education through Chen's frame of reference allowed us to be aware of the highly contextual interpretations held by our participants and supported our interest in understanding service-learning phenomena in relation to embedded cultural beliefs and values. As an effect of surges of foreign domination, pro- and anti-Western discourses have always coexisted in the minds of Vietnamese people. This has manifested as admiration for, and being mesmerized by, the foreign world and, at the same time, negative feelings such as fear, isolation, and even opposition to the West (Inrasara, 2006; Nguyễn, 2000). In the context of higher education, for example, a colonial psychology exists in the practices of policy borrowing and research publication. Vietnamese higher education is heavily influenced by external systems, especially China and the West, in terms of organizing structures and policies, curriculum content, intellectual influences, teaching methodology, and quality assurance, for example (Le, 2014; Nguyen & Hamid, 2015; Tran & Marginson, 2018; Tran et al., 2017, 2020). Studies have identified a range of reasons for weak research capacity (Pho & Tran, 2016; Ta & Zyngier, 2018), but underneath individual and institutional difficulties lies a lack of confidence in building an independent research system and foregrounding a distinctive voice. Our study aims to give voice to the practitioners of service-learning in Viet Nam as the foundation for further research.

Research Methods

This study addressed three research questions:

1. Why has service-learning emerged?
2. How is it conceptualized?
3. What are the challenges for service-learning in Vietnamese universities?

We used a multisite case study (Merriam, 1998) to investigate the implementation of service-learning courses at four Vietnamese universities. Although service-learning courses can be cross-faculty or interdisciplinary, courses within individual faculty contexts were the focus of this research. A multisite case study enabled us to describe service-learning practices in a range of university faculties and to uncover common rationales, constraints, and opportunities behind those practices in the Vietnamese context. The study was approved by the Human Ethics Committee of our university before data collection.

We used purposive sampling to select four sites that offered credit-bearing service-learning courses. The four courses, or cases, represent different university types (national, regional, and provincial) and a variety of disciplines. Case One was a Social Work course in Evergreen University, a member of National University. Students' service-learning projects in this course included working with hospital patients, orphanages, and a rehabilitation center. Case Two was a pedagogical course offered by the Mathematics and Computer Sciences faculty at Olympia University, which is also a member of the National University. This faculty had implemented service-learning in 2012, but some service-learning activities in the wider university had reportedly dated back to 2007. This university has a teacher education center for service-learning among other innovative teaching approaches, and was the only case where civic engagement was stated as a core value on the main page of the university website. Case Three was a Business English internship course at Regina University, which is a public university under provincial management. Service-learning at Regina appeared to emerge in 2015, as teachers in several faculties began to initiate experiential learning practices. The Dean of Foreign Languages Faculty was highly influenced by a teacher who had studied in the United Kingdom and South Africa, where service-learning had been popular. Case Four was a course at Universal University. This university began service-learning projects in 2015 but, at the time of data collection, the Oriental Cultures course was the only example of a service-learning course, with

students providing service to communities in the creative arts sector. The approach taken in this course was inspired by practices that the service-learning teacher had researched and discovered at Olympia University.

The selected cases are presented in Table 1, with pseudonyms and broad categorizations[1] of discipline, faculty, and community organizations to protect participants' identities. Significantly, this is the first study to include the voices of a wide range of stakeholders involved in service-learning practice in Vietnamese universities, including administrators ($n = 6$), teachers ($n = 6$),[2] students ($n = 20$), community partners ($n = 4$) and youth union leaders ($n = 4$). Student participants were interviewed in focus groups, whereas other types of participants were interviewed individually.

Table 1.

The Selected Sites, Participants, and Numbers of Interviews.

	Evergreen University	Olympia University	Regina University	Universal University
University governance	National	National	Provincial	Regional
Faculty	Sociology	Mathematics	Foreign Languages	Oriental Studies
Case/service-learning course	Social Work	Mathematics Pedagogy	Business English Internship	Oriental Cultures
Top administrator interviewed	Vice-rector	Vice-rector	X	X
Faculty/middle administrator interviewed	Dean	Dean and manager of Centre for Teaching Innovations	Dean	Vice-dean and teacher
Service-learning teachers interviewed	1 teacher	2 teachers	2 teachers	
Student focus group	6 students	4 students	5 students	5 students
Community partner/representative interviewed	Head of Social Work Office at Hospital	Principal of School for Children with Disabilities	Youth union secretary and organizer of Class for Migrant Children	Manager of Creative Arts Organization
Youth union leader interviewed	Deputy secretary	Deputy secretary	Deputy secretary	Secretary
Number of interviews and participants	7 interviews 10 participants	8 interviews 11 participants	6 interviews 10 participants	4 interviews 8 participants
TOTAL	4 sites, 39 participants, 25 interviews			

Our study used multiple sources of evidence including individual and group semi-structured interviews, course-related documentation, and archival records. The data were analyzed with a reflexive thematic analysis approach guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) methods. The analysis was conducted at a latent rather than a semantic level because the researchers examined "the *underlying* ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations—and ideologies—that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). We used both inductive and deductive approaches to coding.

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[1] We have been particularly careful not to share details about the service-learning courses that would reveal participants' identities.
[2] One administrator also reported on their role as a teacher.

An initial inductive-coding phase allowed space for possible themes to arise from the data, whereas the subsequent deductive phase enabled a more comprehensive exploration of the data using codes generated from the inductive phase. We identified key themes that we have labeled "catalysts," and we outline these in the findings below.

Findings

The analysis identified four catalysts for the emergence and growth of service-learning in Vietnamese universities: (a) as an instrument for employability outcomes associated with higher education reform, (b) to enhance a mutual relationship between community and university, and (c) as a response to the perceived moral decline in young people. Last, (d) Vietnamese service-learning has been distinguished by bottom-up initiation from faculty level in response to limited institutional support, with teachers and faculty administrators working as catalysts for change. The characteristics of these catalysts weave international philosophies of civic engagement with ideologies that are particular to the Vietnamese context.

Catalyst 1: Employability

As economic growth is a key focus for developing countries, one of the main drivers for Vietnamese service-learning has been the expectation that higher education will produce a more effective workforce. Our study showed that service-learning is perceived as providing greater opportunities than non-service-learning courses for authentic learning experiences, soft skills awareness and training, and practical assessment structures that aim at better employability for graduates. Employability appears to be the main driver for the appearance of service-learning in Viet Nam, in contrast to Western countries where the primary focus appears to have been on building democratic capacity for undergraduates (Annette, 2005; Saltmarsh, 2005) with employability as a more secondary goal.

Our first group of findings indicated that service-learning emerged predominantly in response to the pressure of Vietnamese higher education reform, especially the requirement to produce a more competent and ethical workforce. The teachers in our study responded to these reforms by adding experiential learning opportunities that incorporate community service into academic curricula. The development of soft skills through service-learning was a key theme, mentioned in three-quarters of the interviews. Participants identified a wide range of skills, of which the most frequently mentioned were self-management, problem-solving, teamwork, initiative taking, interpersonal communication, responsibility, leadership, risk management, and cultural awareness (ranked from the highest to lowest frequencies). Vo (teaching assistant, Olympia) emphasized the ways in which students developed intellectual independence and self-management:

> In other courses, we just listened to lectures … but for this course, we had to read and prepare the lesson before class … by doing this we were able to discuss when the teacher gave the lecture. In the past, we wanted to discuss but nothing was in our minds. It was hard at first … but then we recognized that this would avoid the inertia in students' learning.

Some participants indicated that traditional courses had not provided sufficient opportunities to develop such skills. By contrast, service-learning was perceived as leading to enhanced student employability. For example, teachers reported that, with improved soft skills, most of their service-learning graduates became employed in the communities that they used to serve, public and private organizations such as social shelters (Ms. Hoai, teacher, Evergreen), and educational centers and institutions (Dr. Thai, dean, Regina).

Another theme in the participants' responses was that authentic service-learning projects provided the context for these soft skills to be practiced. Twenty-three of the 25 interviews, including all those with student participants, identified that the practical aspects of service-learning courses linked the classroom content to the students' experiences and intended professional lives. Whereas non-service-learning courses had included lectures, group presentations, and classroom discussions, all the service-learning

courses included a combination of lectures (half the courses involving community members as guest lecturers), field trips to investigate problems, discussions with the community to plan solutions, and consultations with teachers and community members at every stage of the process or when problems arose. For instance, Nhien (student, Universal) found it interesting that their service-learning project required them to think of strategies to preserve Vietnamese creative arts, although their course was about oriental cultures:

> We found it was extremely interesting to learn about the art and artists, communication skills, and how to disseminate what we learned to high school students. The most unexpected result of all was that we were saving an endangered traditional creative art in a course about oriental cultures.

Another dimension of authenticity that was emphasized was that service-learning required the combined knowledge of various disciplines. Participants in 70% of the interviews identified interdisciplinarity as a key benefit of service-learning experiences. These experiences required students to skillfully weave knowledge and practice from various fields into their service, thus enhancing students' adaptability in their future workplaces.

Catalyst 2: Responsibility to the Community

A second motivation for Vietnamese service-learning, in the eyes of the participants, was that it has been a means to address the critique that higher education has neglected its social responsibilities to community (Huyền, 2018). Participants in all four service-learning cases felt that universities could help strengthen communities through knowledge/technology transfer and community service, especially when this involved credit-based and disciplinary courses with structured reflection. Participants also noted valuable opportunities for learning *from* community knowledge, such as experts in Vietnamese folk cultures and creative arts. It was felt that these mutual relationships helped transform universities into equal and responsible partners who academically engaged with communities' problems. Conversely, the relationships helped sustain and disseminate traditional community insights, especially endangered cultural traditions, paving the way for social development.

The second group of findings suggested that service-learning has revived the social responsibility of Vietnamese higher education toward community. For example, besides knowledge and skills for employment, Ms. Nha (teacher, Olympia) shared that "my biggest motivation was to raise [my students'] sense of responsibility to and social awareness of their communities, bridging the gap between university and community." This theme arose in 20 of 25 interviews. Youth Union leaders also noted that, more recently, volunteering and community engagement programs had started to integrate more disciplinary content. Yet, with service-learning practice, the contribution had become more significant in that students were aware of the diverse community needs, and community expertise was treasured and transferred to students' learning. All types of participants (teachers, deans, community agents and students) agreed that service-learning courses engendered a greater awareness of community issues and the need for students to address these issues from their academic perspectives.

Communities were more than mere recipients of charity and volunteering efforts. The interview analysis identified that the service-learning projects had developed trust within the communities, and as a result, that communities were seeking further support from the universities. For example, reflecting a feeling that was evident among community agents in most cases, Mr. Thanh (community agent, Universal) disclosed that he was extremely enthusiastic about sharing his knowledge, although he was hesitant to give advice about service-learning projects, possibly due to the social respect for learned people. His first thought had been:

> How would a person in my role dare to talk? … I was not trained academically, and experience was the only thing I had. In front of me was a big audience including a vice-rector, eight PhD teachers, two associate professors, and 350 students. My shirt got soaked with sweat even before I started talking. But after my talk and our performance, the vice-rector came and requested us to come at least once a year because he himself hadn't learnt about this art, let alone his students.

One exception was in the case of Olympia University, where the principal of the school for children with disabilities indicated that they had occasionally proposed their needs to the service-learning team for them to consider. This confidence may have been the result of a long-term partnership with the service-learning team. In general, the widening trust and scope for making a difference appeared to spur those involved in service-learning to continue supporting the communities. Consequently, the students came to understand that their learning was actually part of life around them.

Catalyst 3: Enhancing Students' Moral Values

A third group of findings related to how the ideological underpinnings of Vietnamese service-learning held potential to alleviate perceived concerns about declining moral qualities among graduates (Lê, 2012, 2017; Nguyễn, 2015; S.H., 2014). As Vietnamese universities are held accountable for the ethics of citizens and the future workforce, they promote ideologies that resonate with Vietnamese traditions. Participants' responses across all cases indicated that service-learning is deeply embedded in and driven by the principles of benevolence, harmony, and causality law—principles rooted in traditional Vietnamese beliefs that have been treasured, maintained, and handed down over generations. The principles reflect the popular and important Vietnamese conception of *Học để thành nhân trước khi thành danh* (learning to be before learning to know) and serve to develop "learning to be" as one of the UNESCO's four principles of 21st century's education to produce intellectual, moral, cultural, and physical citizens (Delors, 1996).

The teachers in our study noted that working with communities brought growth in students' awareness of and respect for diversity as well as their perceptions of benevolence. Many students from our study pointed out that they became aware that the world around them is not homogeneous—including, for example, people from queer communities, with disabilities, from criminal backgrounds, and living in poverty—and that traditionally intangible values were being endangered. Students needed to continuously engage in self-reflection, show empathy, avoid discrimination, and approach these communities with not only knowledge and responsibility but also benevolence and conscience—that is, develop their social and emotional capabilities. The teachers reported that students' emotional maturity appeared to accentuate the character-building effects of service-learning, addressing the perceived concern relating to the perception of a deterioration in the moral values of Vietnamese youth. Also significantly, service-learning could potentially become good preparation for global citizenship, for which the respect for diversity has always been a prerequisite.

In at least 75% of the interviews, participants connected service-learning practices with the concept of benevolence, an inherent virtue within Vietnamese culture (Nguyen, 2012). *Lòng nhân từ* (or *lòng nhân ái/sự tử tế*) in Sino-Vietnamese can be translated as "benevolence" or "kindness" in English. Being a considerate human being is associated with two qualities: *nhân* (human) and *tâm* (heart). Learning to be a good person is the aim of self-cultivation and self-improvement, a value that is present in most of the principal religions in Vietnamese culture, especially Buddhism and Christianity. Although the concept of benevolence is not unique to Viet Nam, its distinctiveness in Vietnamese culture draws from a confluence of traditional and three religions' (Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist) beliefs about leading a balanced life. Benevolence in the Vietnamese context involves the virtue of *tâm* (kindness, conscience), the practice of achieving harmony (as a Vietnamese habit of caring for the heart rather than the head), and causality law (the expectation that from good seeds sown today, people have the right to hope for abundant crops in the future).

There was a broad consensus in participants' narratives that engaging with communities flowed from their *tâm*, to the extent that it "can be considered the prerequisite for doing service-learning" (Ms. Hoai, teacher, Evergreen). It was perceived that doing service-learning requires a person, particularly a teacher, to have a lot of *tâm* because their work involves love, sacrifice, tolerance, and even bravery, qualities that cannot be solely quantitatively measured. This may explain why *tâm* was surprisingly invoked 49 times by participants, the highest frequency for any construct, and was widespread in 15 of the interviews. The idea that *tâm* was a prerequisite for doing service-learning was mentioned by most teachers,

administrators, and student participants and cited by community agents as a widely agreed-upon characteristic for practicing a good job in daily life.

The concept of harmony was also perceived as having been widely practiced throughout the service-learning projects. As a living principle of Vietnamese people, harmony can be achieved by balancing oneself and one's relationships with other people and nature, observing moderation, and avoiding extremes. Although there were constraints due to policy changes or reductions in resourcing for service-learning, the practitioners treated each other with considerable care and understanding. For example, in the case of Universal University, there was clear respect for hierarchy, face-saving, and indirectness among teachers, students, and community people. When there were conflicts, the practitioners tended to work more from *tình* (sentiments) rather than *lý* (reasons) and kept mutual care and understanding at the core of their service-learning practice. For example, Ms. Yen (teacher, Universal) shared that:

> There were some misunderstandings between community people and me, and/or students, but I always tried to explain with patience in the hope that they would figure it out some day. When there was a conflict, I told my students to try to compromise and find solutions, not to blame the community people.

Despite various challenges or complaints expressed in the interviews, we also noticed pride, peace of mind, and a strong belief that good seeds would produce good fruits. As part of an agricultural heritage and Buddhist beliefs about charity, Vietnamese people put much confidence in causality law in many aspects of their life (Hoang, 2017). One striking finding across the cases was that this belief often led teachers to prioritize disadvantaged communities for their service-learning courses: for example, a school for children with disabilities, an orphanage, a rehabilitation center, or an organization working to preserve an endangered cultural art form. Additionally, many participants believed that the causality law could resolve even their hardest problems. In the words of Dr. Thai (dean, Regina):

> I started service-learning from the expectation to raise students' awareness about kindness, conscience, and benevolence. And I believe that was why the project touched others' hearts, so we didn't have to do any advertising for the program … I found that the teachers understood the meaning of service-learning so they didn't mention much about how they would be paid. The good cause has itself helped solve many problems.

In another example, and in more difficult circumstances, Ms. Nha (teacher, Olympia) similarly invoked the causality law: "When someone anonymously complained about my service-learning initiation, I was shocked at first, but then I tried to prove that my good cause would justify my action."

Catalyst 4: Teachers and Faculty Administrators as Bottom-Up Initiators

The fourth group of findings indicated that although service-learning appears to be a Western-imported conception, the idea of integrating it into a course syllabus has mostly been initiated from the bottom up by teachers or faculty administrators. This theme came through in 19 interviews, mostly from teacher and (vice) dean participants.

As a common problem in Vietnamese higher education, service-learning teachers experience tightened obligations, pressures, and limitations in their professional roles. Although educational reform is supposed to give teachers more autonomy, inadequate facilities and institutional support have often hindered change (Le, 2014; Tran, 2019). Teachers in this study were concerned about, for example, the lack of time dedicated to practice in practical courses, their teaching being focused on mass production with little room for creativity, teaching content lacking practical dimensions, and a mismatch between disciplinary and practical demands. Most noticeably, in all of the cases, there was limited institutional policy or support for the implementation of service-learning into the current curriculum. Despite all the challenges, these teachers-initiated service-learning without waiting for top-down institutional policy changes.

To ensure the success of their service-learning courses, the teachers had to take on multidimensional roles. As they were among a minority of teachers doing their courses differently, they had to start everything from scratch, and were left to problem-solve largely on their own. From the teachers' responses, we identified at least 15 roles that a teacher might need to perform before, during, and after a service-learning course.[3] Remarkably, initiating service-learning with the least institutional support, Ms. Yen (teacher, Universal) appeared to play the most roles (12) across the cases. When asked if there was anyone who could take on her service-learning work, she laughed quietly and said, "No," later adding, "I suffered too much pressure from all directions: from the top down [managers], from the same level [colleagues], and even from the bottom up [students]."

From the participants' responses, it appears that much of the work of community partnerships is shouldered by teachers, whereas university structures and systems remain largely unchanged. This raises a question about the mechanisms required to integrate service-learning and the actions needed by various players to ensure positive reciprocal relationships and outcomes for all involved.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that service-learning in Viet Nam is not merely borrowed from the West, at least in its primary motivation. The growth of service-learning—a response to issues of employability, community responsibility, and young people's moral values and driven by teachers as bottom-up initiators—has instead been shaped and supported by Vietnamese ideologies. This section discusses how these ideologies were practiced with hybrid approaches and strategies blended from Western and local traditions and identifies two challenges for Vietnamese service-learning in the onward journey: to develop its distinctive features and to gain institutional support for its sustainability.

East-meets-West Approaches to Service-Learning Practice

It was apparent that while practitioners looked outward to existing Western frameworks and acknowledged them as informing Vietnamese service-learning, they built on Western frameworks with a critical and reflexive consciousness. Using Chen's (2010) outlook, in this section, we discuss the East-meets-West phenomenon in which outer drivers and influences and local motivations and conditions have resulted in a distinctly Vietnamese approach to service-learning.

Our study shows that the practical and experiential aspects that service-learning has added to the contemporary curriculum derive not only from Western concepts and practices such as experiential learning and learner autonomy but are also deeply underpinned by Confucian and Vietnamese educational philosophies and pedagogies. Tran (2013, 2015) has argued that traditional teaching methodologies and passive learning styles that produced workers to follow orders, listen, and obey are no longer appropriate in an increasingly integrated labor market that requires employees to develop creativity and take initiative. Our study suggests that experiential learning is more well-developed in Vietnamese pedagogy than previously thought and has been shaped through Confucian teachings and sayings/proverbs about learning in Vietnamese traditional teaching (Trinh & Kolb, 2011). This may explain why most of the teacher participants in our study seemed to treat experiential learning as an inherent part or outgrowth of traditional pedagogy, although some mentioned that they got the name from a Western source.

Largely through faculty-level efforts, and as means to enhance academic autonomy amid top-down policy change, teachers and administrators in this study had worked to strengthen and re-chart partnerships between communities and universities to promote the reciprocal interests of both parties, especially through East-meets-West strategies. The integration of service-learning into the curriculum is different from other existing forms of Vietnamese civic engagement, such as volunteering or charity,

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[3] Although none of the teachers fulfilled all these roles, the duties encompassed teacher, coordinator, mentor, syllabus designer and adapter, project funder, assessor, fund raiser or finder, service-learning initiator, quality assurer, administrator, project accountant, service-learning researcher, service-learning self-trainer, student skill-trainer, and student recruiter.

because like Western traditions, it is credit bearing and allows students to make more structured commitments to the community. Although volunteering campaigns were reported to involve some academic content for the sake of diversity, service-learning took relevant academic knowledge and skills as the requirement and foundation to address the community's problems.

Alongside the disciplinary knowledge that students brought to their service-learning projects, they also treasured their involvement in the community and the reciprocity of their learning. The findings affirmed previous research (Tran et al., 2020) that found students could have control over and enjoy their learning in an active and autonomous learning environment. The service-learning students not only listened to lectures but also explored knowledge by presenting conceptions, discussing problems, proposing solutions, and defending their perspectives, which demonstrated a shift in focus from passive to active learning. Our participants noted that students benefited deeply from the practical experience, as well as from broadening their awareness of communities' needs and learning from community members' knowledge. Similarly, community members learned from students, and in these reciprocal processes and engagements, we can see Chen's (2010) notion of critical syncretism in action. Where prior volunteering activities from students had cast the communities as "others," the service-learning projects described in our research showed evidence of mutual support and reciprocal learning. With previous volunteering approaches, communities were largely perceived as the beneficiaries of and places for charity, which was criticized as "giving a fish rather than a fishing rod" (Ms. Hoai, teacher, Evergreen), that is, creating a dependent rather than a stronger community. In the disciplinary-based service-learning projects, communities instead shared their own insights, knowledge, and experience and became students' and universities' partners who could participate in knowledge-sharing processes to strengthen both parties.

Almost 70% of the participants also told us that the service-learning courses had enabled them to learn much more than they had imagined possible. This corresponds with Chan et al.'s (2019) study in which a compulsory service-learning course had a strong impact on learning despite students' initial lack of interest. Our findings have affirmed the desire of other Vietnamese scholars (Nguyen, 2010; Pham, 2015; Tran, 2009) who have argued that there is an urgent need to take this civic engagement mission into greater consideration because of its potential to improve teaching and learning quality; to empower teachers, students, and communities; to renegotiate university-community power relations with a view to sustainable partnerships; and, most importantly, to revive traditional values.

Service-learning has proved to be a potentially powerful instrument for addressing the perceived decline in students' moral qualities. The participants suggested that their service-learning projects had built qualities such as social responsibility, a commitment to social justice, and respect for Vietnamese beliefs and values, thereby addressing the concern of some scholars (Doan, 2005) that the current curriculum lacks moral education and is overly focused on political courses and volunteering programs. By integrating moral traditions, the service-learning programs in this study had emphasized the importance of learning to "be" alongside learning to "know," as represented in Vietnamese traditions and Confucian heritage cultures (Ma & Tandon, 2014) and in international education ideologies (Delors, 1996). This also signifies that Vietnamese service-learning has been developed with an intention to revive traditional values, distinguishing it from Western expectations of service-learning that have primarily focused on enhancing democracy.

Challenges Ahead

The findings of this study suggest two challenges ahead for service-learning practitioners in Vietnamese higher education: (a) developing distinct approaches to service-learning, and (b) garnering institutional support to sustain service-learning initiatives.

Furthering a Distinctive Vietnamese Approach. First and foremost, an *Asia as Method* (Chen, 2010) lens reminds us to foreground and celebrate the distinct characteristics of Vietnamese service-learning while not uncritically adopting or totally rejecting Western influences. Practitioners could continue to acknowledge Western frameworks as part of the formation of Vietnamese service-learning, and build on them, analytically and reflexively. To practice critical syncretism and inter-referencing is to

consider models similar to the Vietnamese context from Asian, socialist, and/or developing countries to address problems and to establish powerful alliances across different structures, concerns, and priorities, paving the way for critical work and meaningful knowledge production.

The use of student-centered pedagogies within courses in our study (such as student presentations and discussions, students' deciding project content, and formative peer assessment) is consistent with the teaching practices of many foreign-trained lecturers in Viet Nam (Tran et al., 2020) and indicates that Vietnamese learners can adapt to active learning environments (Tran, 2012). Nevertheless, it seems that face-saving and hierarchical cultural traits held back service-learning's progress. There remained in our cases some exploitation of students' time, paternalistic concerns for student safety, and misunderstandings about teachers' plans. Therefore, it is crucial that future practitioners thoughtfully and flexibly combine traditional and Western pedagogies, pairing student-centered strategies with teachers' lectures, choice of communities, and assessment, as well as comprehensively communicating with each other so that outdated values do not obstruct the sustainability of new pedagogies for service-learning.

To continue to re-chart the relationship between university and community, the responsibilities of and benefits for both parties need further clarification. We found that some communities misunderstood the purposes and practices of the service-learning courses or that the community roles were not highly respected, and this undermined the potential and agency for the communities. The long-standing and ongoing university-community relationship from the Olympia University case showed that strong mutual trust and confidence can actively contribute to the sustainability of service-learning practice.

There also needs to be clearer connections between service-learning and the teaching of moral values. Along with course content, it is necessary to design specific outcomes, activities, and reflective questions on students' awareness of values such as benevolence, harmony, or causality law. Incorporating course content into justice-learning or civic engagement education has been raised as one of the challenges of Western service-learning (Butin, 2006) and the lack of local moral underpinnings as one of the concerns of Asian service-learning (Nishimura & Yokote, 2020). Highlighting the distinctive Vietnamese traditional ethics in the curriculum and engaging in practical activities that raise students' metacognitive awareness of their beliefs can turn these values from assumptions into concrete and transferable lessons.

Garnering Institutional Support. Discipline-based service-learning practices do not require top-down support to be *initiated* but will require this support to become embedded within the university system. In contrast to the existing volunteering programs and civic political education components that have long existed within institutions and are well-supported from the top down with resourcing, funding, and a firm place within the curriculum, service-learning has yet to be cemented as a solid component within universities. In most of our cases, the teachers initiated the courses with very little institutional support. Yet, they persevered and developed courses that were acknowledged not only by many teachers within the same and other universities but also by their faculty and institutional administrators.

The bottom-up nature may also hinder the future maintenance of the courses. As Bennett et al. (2016) have shown from the Australian context, many such service-learning initiatives started with a lack of institutional support. However, a bottom-up model is likely feasible only in the initial stages because there seemed to be some exhaustion by the end of their projects. Similarly, our participants were concerned about future funding, training resources, and the lack of successors to carry on their course/s, among other issues relating to course sustainability. Although most participants were aware that their institutions' limited budgets did not allow them to be funded for small-scale application of a new teaching approach, they did imply some hope for future institutional measures. It seems that in the Vietnamese context, service-learning will certainly require top-down supportive structures and policies to work most effectively and sustainably.

Conclusion

This article has provided insight into the catalysts, characteristics, and challenges of service-learning practice in Vietnamese higher education. This research makes two important contributions to the understanding of service-learning in Vietnamese higher education. First and foremost, it provides a more

comprehensive picture of service-learning in Viet Nam than is currently available in the research literature and contributes to international scholarship about this practice in non-Western settings. Second, this study shows that service-learning can be practiced from bottom-up initiatives and developed on the basis of an institution's existing resources before embedding it further institutionally.

Inevitably, the study carries limitations, including its sample, which comprised a limited number of universities, disciplines, and service-learning projects. A wider range of cases, including those from the North and across more disciplines, would enhance the applicability of the findings and speak to a wider audience. Second, our interpretivist approach and Chen's (2010) *Asia as method* framework are arguably subjective. Therefore, if other scholars are interested in this line of research, they could consider including a greater range of cases as well as conducting the study at different times so as to engender greater confidence in this interpretive research.

This study will hopefully provide valuable information to universities in Viet Nam and beyond, where civic engagement, especially service-learning, is projected to become part of the institutional mission. Understanding the catalysts and challenges for the implementation of service-learning helps us to work out how to support efforts to advance and sustain service-learning in the future.

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About the Authors

Dung Nguyen is postgraduate research student adviser for the Faculty of Postgraduate Research at Te Herenga Waka, Victoria University of Wellington (email: dung.nguyen@vuw.ac.nz)

Andrea Milligan is senior lecturer for the School of Education at Te Herenga Waka, Victoria University of Wellington.

Kathryn Sutherland is associate professor in the Centre for Academic Development at Te Herenga Waka, Victoria University of Wellington.