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## The Student-to-Staff Shift: Exploring Pros and Cons in Vietnam

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### Abstract

*This study explores the practice of recruiting former tertiary students as official staff in higher education institutions within the context of Vietnam. Using a qualitative research design underpinned by the grounded theory approach, semi-structured and focus-group interviews were conducted with fifteen staff members from three different groups (five leaders, five supporting staff, and five academic staff). Thematic analysis revealed several benefits and challenges associated with this recruitment practice. Benefits included the promotion of institutional culture and continuity, nurturing future leadership, addressing local skill gaps, and reinforcing local identity and values. Challenges included the risk of groupthink, inbred intellectual culture, and diversity and inclusion issues. The study provides a nuanced understanding of this recruitment practice, offering practical implications for higher education institutions, policymakers, and researchers. The findings also shed light on potential directions for future research.*

**Keywords:** Higher education, pros and cons, student-turned-staff, Vietnam

### Introduction

The evolving dynamics of the education sector worldwide have necessitated a continuous examination of the recruitment strategies adopted by higher education institutions (Fadda et al., 2022). The specific and intricate needs of these institutions call for innovative approaches to workforce development. Within this context, the idea of recruiting former tertiary students as official staff in these institutions has gained prominence, especially in developing nations like Vietnam (Lam, 2009; Hayden, 2017). This approach is based on the premise that these former students, having been part of the academic community, could be better placed to understand the unique needs and challenges that these institutions face (Schlechty & Vance, 1983). However, while there are several arguments for the inclusion of former tertiary students in the official staff of higher education institutions, the concept also invites skepticism. Critics question the qualifications, experience, and suitability of these candidates for administrative roles traditionally filled by career

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educators or administrators with substantial experience. There is a pressing need, therefore, to systematically examine the benefits and potential drawbacks of such an approach, to offer higher education institutions practical guidelines and insights to inform their recruitment strategies. The present study significantly addressed this research gap. It aimed to provide an exhaustive evaluation of this recruitment strategy by understanding its influence on the institutions' operational efficacy, faculty satisfaction, student outcomes, and overall performance. This study also analyzed the potential challenges that might arise due to the induction of former students into the official staff, with a particular focus on the socio-cultural context of Vietnam. Through this comprehensive approach, the study aspired to contribute to the body of knowledge concerning recruitment practices in higher education, while offering pertinent recommendations for institutions considering this approach. It is with the hope that this research would foster informed decision-making among policy makers and university administrators, improving both the educational landscape and the future of higher education in Vietnam.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Conceptualization of "Student-turned-staff"***

The term "Student-turned-staff" generally refers to individuals who have completed their tertiary education or higher education, which includes undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral studies. They are alumni of higher education institutions who may have pursued various disciplines (Altbach & Knight, 2007). The literature often associates these individuals with potential roles in their alma maters, recognizing them as resources who can offer unique insights into the functioning and development of these institutions (Swider et al., 2017).

### ***Benefits of Recruiting Former Tertiary Students***

Several studies have identified potential benefits of recruiting former tertiary students in higher education institutions. First, these individuals, being products of the same institution, have a unique familiarity with the institution's systems, values, and culture, which may enhance operational efficiency (Lewis et al., 2015). Second, they tend to have a deep sense of loyalty and commitment towards their alma mater, thus contributing positively to the work environment (Chinyere & Harrison, 2016). Third, as former students, they can provide first-hand insights into the students' experiences, which could be invaluable in policy-making and administration (Lee, 2016).

### ***Drawbacks of Recruiting Former Tertiary Students***

Despite the potential benefits, several drawbacks have been identified in the literature. First, former students may lack the necessary professional experience, especially for senior roles, leading to concerns over their ability to carry out administrative tasks effectively (Collins, 2014). Second, they may carry pre-existing biases from their time as students, potentially affecting objective decision-making (Borraz-Mora et al., 2020). Lastly, concerns about inbreeding - the practice of hiring one's own graduates - have been raised, arguing that it might limit the diversity of ideas and practices

within the institution (Horta, 2022).

## **Methods**

### ***Research Design***

This research adopted a qualitative approach, underpinned by Grounded Theory. This design has been selected in order to gain a deep, contextual understanding of the phenomena under study (Aldiabat & Le Navenc, 2018). It allowed for the generation of theory through the systematic gathering and analysis of data, which was essential to address the nuanced aspects of the topic - recruiting former tertiary students as official staff in higher education institutions in Vietnam. Additionally, the research was primarily guided by two theoretical frameworks. Firstly, the Social Identity Theory (Hogg, 2016) aids in understanding the potential benefits of hiring former students. It postulates that individuals derive their self-image, in part, from the social groups to which they belong. As alumni, former students may exhibit strong commitment and loyalty to their institutions, thus potentially enhancing their performance and the working environment. The second theoretical lens applied was the Resource-Based View (RBV) (Collins, 2021). RBV can help explain why former students, with their unique knowledge and understanding of the institution, could be considered valuable and rare resources, potentially providing the institutions with a competitive advantage.

### ***Participants***

The participants for this study were selected from three distinct groups within higher education institutions in Vietnam: leaders, supporting staff, and academic staff. Each group was represented by five individuals, making a total of fifteen participants. This purposive sampling method had been chosen to ensure that a variety of perspectives were included, contributing to a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Particularly, the leaders group consists of those in decision-making positions such as deans, department heads, or university chancellors. Their insights would provide a strategic, high-level view of the recruitment practices and policies. Regarding supporting staff, this group is composed of former tertiary students who have been hired in non-academic roles in the institution. Their experiences would provide first-hand insights into the practical realities of being a former student turned staff member. Finally, the academic staff group consists of former students who have transitioned into academic roles within their alma mater. Their experiences would illuminate the unique challenges and opportunities presented in the academic sphere.

All participants were treated with respect and integrity in line with ethical research practices. The study's purpose, methods, and intended use of research findings were clearly communicated to all participants. They were assured of the voluntary nature of their participation, with the right to withdraw at any stage without any negative consequences. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, detailing the data collection, storage, and usage practices to maintain privacy

and confidentiality.

The recruitment of participants was carried out through email invitations sent to the chosen representatives of the three groups within several higher education institutions in Vietnam. The email included an overview of the study, its objectives, and the role of the participant. The potential participants would also be informed about the estimated time commitment and the interview process. Those who expressed interest would be contacted further to set up interview times and to discuss any queries they might have. By ensuring transparency, it was to encourage participation while also respecting the rights and privacy of all participants. The varied representation from leaders, supporting staff, and academic staff ensured a holistic understanding of the recruitment practices of former tertiary students in higher education institutions.

### ***Data Collection Instruments***

#### *Semi-Structured Interviews*

The primary data collection instrument was semi-structured interviews, allowing for a deep exploration of the participant's experiences and perspectives. The semi-structured format ensured that key areas were covered while leaving room for participants to share additional insights. Some questions for leaders included: "How do you view the practice of hiring former tertiary students as staff in this institution?" and "What are some key benefits and drawbacks you have noticed in this practice?" For supporting and academic staff, the questions included: "Can you share your experience of transitioning from a student to a staff member in this institution?" and "What challenges and opportunities have you encountered in your role?"

#### *Focus Group Interviews*

The second instrument was focus group interviews, which facilitated dynamic discussions, capturing a wide array of viewpoints. These interviews were first conducted with current supporting and academic staff who are former students of their current workplace to gain insights into their perceptions of the practice. Some focus group questions included: "What are your thoughts on former students working as staff in this institution?" and "How do you think their experiences as former students could impact their roles as staff members?" Subsequently, the discussions with the leader group were conducted to explore their shared ideas, under employers' lens, about the pros and cons of recruiting former tertiary students as official staff in the Vietnamese context. Some questions were asked as follows: "What do you think about the advantages and disadvantages when recruiting your own students?" and "What may be better or worse when recruiting a former student for an official position in your institution?"

A pilot study was conducted initially to test the interview and focus group protocols. This preliminary step aimed to ensure that the questions were clear, understandable, and able to elicit relevant responses. Reliability was ensured by having the same interviewer conduct all interviews, maintaining a consistent questioning style and interpretation of responses. Moreover, a detailed

interview protocol was followed for every interview. Validity was ensured through a process called triangulation, which involved comparing data from various sources (interviews and focus groups) and types of participants (leaders, supporting staff, and academic staff). This ensured a comprehensive understanding of the topic, strengthening the validity of the findings. Credibility was maintained through transparency in the research process and by providing participants with a summary of the findings to check the accuracy of the researchers' interpretations, a process known as member checking.

### ***Data Analysis***

This study employed thematic analysis as the primary method for data analysis. This is a qualitative analysis method that allows for the identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns or themes within the data. This method aligns with the explorative nature of the study, allowing for the emergence of a rich, detailed, and complex account of the data.

The thematic analysis in this study followed the six-step approach proposed by Terry and Hayfield (2021). Following the transcription of the semi-structured and focus group interviews, the researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts and listening to the audio recordings. This allowed the researchers to become familiar with the depth and breadth of the content. Then, the data were systematically coded, marking interesting and relevant features of the data that formed the basis for repeated patterns (themes). Both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) coding were used. After that, the codes were sorted into potential themes by collating all the relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes. This involved consideration of how the codes combined to form an overarching theme. The themes were then reviewed in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set. This involved checking if the themes told a compelling story about the data, and if the data within themes formed a coherent pattern. The themes were then refined, defined, and named. This involved a detailed analysis of each theme, determining the aspects of the data each theme captures, and the overall story of the analysis. Clear definitions and names for each theme were generated. The final step involved weaving together the analytic narrative and data extracts, and contextualizing the analysis in relation to existing literature and the research question. This rigorous thematic analysis process enabled the emergence of an in-depth, nuanced understanding of the research topic: the recruitment of former tertiary students as official staff in higher education institutions in Vietnam.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The data gathered from the fifteen participants resulted in the emergence of two key themes, including the "WHY?" (pros) and the "WHY NOT?" (cons), each capturing a different aspect of the phenomena under study.

#### ***The "WHY?"***

##### *Familiarity with Institutional Culture and Practices*

All of the leaders (n=5), four of the supporting staff (n=4 out of 5), and three academic staff (n=3 out of 5) indicated that one of the significant advantages of hiring former students was their deep familiarity with the institution's culture and practices. One leader noted, "Our former students understand the institution's ethos, how things work here, and that is an invaluable asset."

This finding aligns with the previous literature (Lewis et al., 2015), which suggested that familiarity with institutional values could enhance operational efficiency. In Vietnam, the influence of cultural and educational practices on institutional operations is profound (Quang & Vuong, 2002). The country's cultural emphasis on values such as harmony, respect for authority, and collective responsibility permeates into educational settings, shaping the institutional cultures of its higher education institutions (Phan & Locke, 2016). This cultural background may enhance the importance of familiarity with institutional culture in staff performance and effectiveness. Furthermore, Vietnamese higher education institutions often have unique administrative practices that have evolved from its socio-political context and educational philosophy (Phuc et al., 2021). These can include distinctive approaches to leadership and decision-making, student engagement, and community involvement. For former students who have navigated through these systems as learners, transitioning into staff roles may be smoother. Their deep familiarity with these practices can enable them to function more efficiently and effectively in their roles, contributing to operational efficiency. Moreover, the concept of 'face' - a sense of personal dignity or prestige in social contexts - holds significant sway in Vietnamese society (Kien, 2015). Alumni-turned-staff, already familiar with the institution's cultural nuances and social norms, can better navigate interactions and communication within the institution, preserving 'face' for themselves and others. This nuanced social navigation can foster a positive work environment and contribute to the overall institutional harmony. Finally, in the context of Vietnam's rapidly changing higher education landscape, with ongoing reforms and increasing international collaborations (Thao & Mai, 2020), having staff who are deeply familiar with the institution's identity can help maintain continuity and stability. These staff can serve as 'cultural anchors,' preserving the institution's core ethos while adapting to external changes.

### *Loyalty and Commitment*

Four leaders (n=4 out of 5), all supporting staff (n=5 out of 5), and two academic staff (n=2 out of 5) discussed the high level of loyalty and commitment that former students bring to their roles. A supporting staff member shared, "As a former student, I feel a strong sense of belonging and commitment to this institution, and I believe it shows in my work."

This is consistent with Chinyere and Harrison (2016), which suggests that the shared identity and experiences could enhance loyalty and commitment. It adds to the limited research on this topic in the Vietnamese context, suggesting that this recruitment strategy could have unique benefits in terms of staff loyalty and motivation. In Vietnamese society, the importance of loyalty and commitment, particularly towards one's alma mater, cannot be overstated (Pham & Lai, 2016). The

notion of loyalty, or ‘trung’, is deeply embedded in Vietnamese culture, reflecting in numerous aspects of life, including family, community, and institutional affiliations (Tho, 2016). This loyalty is often extended towards educational institutions, which are seen as an integral part of one’s personal and professional identity formation. The strong cultural emphasis on ‘trung’ provides a robust cultural context for the high levels of loyalty and commitment former students bring to their roles in Vietnamese higher education institutions. As alumni, these individuals share a common identity with the institution, have personal histories intertwined with it, and therefore, are more likely to exhibit higher levels of loyalty and commitment. This sense of loyalty can be even more pronounced given the emphasis on collective identity in Vietnamese culture. Vietnamese society places great importance on the concept of collective identity and the individual’s responsibility towards the group or community (Nguyen et al., 2021). Therefore, alumni working in their alma mater could feel a heightened sense of responsibility and commitment, as they are not just employees, but members of the institutional community with shared experiences and identities. Moreover, this loyalty and commitment may also reflect in the willingness to go beyond their basic job descriptions, work longer hours, or take on additional responsibilities - all of which can significantly contribute to the institutional operations and progress (Hogan et al., 2013).

#### *Ease of Training and Onboarding*

This theme emerged as a significant advantage of hiring former students, mentioned by four leaders (n=4 out of 5), all supporting staff (n=5 out of 5), and two academic staff (n=2 out of 5). They noted that the onboarding process was smoother for these individuals due to their existing knowledge about the institution. As one leader stated, “The onboarding process is quicker for former students. They know the system, understand the procedures, which makes them operational in a shorter time.” Similarly, a supporting staff member shared, “Since I was already familiar with the institution’s processes, I could dive into work much faster than other newcomers.”

This finding correlates with previous research indicating that prior familiarity with the organizational culture reduces the learning curve (Lewis et al., 2015), and seems particularly relevant in the Vietnamese context, where unique operational procedures may be in place. In Vietnam, a country known for its unique operational systems and administrative procedures due to its distinct socio-political history and culture (Chien & Thanh, 2022), the onboarding process for new staff members in higher education institutions can often be challenging. The bureaucracies in many Vietnamese institutions are deeply rooted in their historical, cultural, and political contexts (Nguyen & Tran, 2018), and understanding these nuanced systems can be a complex process for newcomers. However, when former students transition into staff roles, they already possess a deep understanding of these unique operational procedures, systems, and culture due to their past experiences as students. This understanding reduces the learning curve and allows them to adapt quickly to their new roles, thereby reducing the time and resources spent on the onboarding process. For instance, understanding the hierarchical decision-making processes, communication protocols, or administrative procedures common in many Vietnamese institutions is an innate part

of a former student's repertoire. This understanding allows them to navigate the institution's systems more effectively and be operationally ready in a shorter period. Moreover, in the context of Vietnam's higher education, where strong relationships and networking are critical for effective functioning (Meyer & Nguyen, 2005), former students-turned-staff come with an established network within the institution. This network can ease their integration into the staff community and improve their effectiveness in roles that require collaboration and coordination.

### ***Enhanced Communication and Collaboration***

Four leaders (n=4 out of 5), three supporting staff (n=3 out of 5), and three academic staff (n=3 out of 5) spoke of improved communication and collaboration resulting from shared experiences and common language with fellow alumni. An academic staff member shared, "Having studied here, I understand the 'language' and dynamics of this institution, which helps me communicate more effectively." A leader echoed this sentiment, saying, "Alumni share a bond, a common ground. This certainly fosters cooperation within the team."

This finding underscores the potential for enhanced team dynamics when former students are hired (Ellemers et al., 2004). The Vietnamese cultural paradigm is heavily centered on harmonious interpersonal relationships and group solidarity, encapsulated in the concept of 'đoàn kết', meaning unity or cohesion (Hallinger & Truong, 2016). This cultural attribute extends to the workspace and educational institutions, where the importance of maintaining harmony and promoting collaboration is highly valued. In this context, former students-turned-staff could significantly contribute to enhancing team dynamics due to their shared experiences and common language. Their shared history and knowledge of institutional culture and practices serve as a binding force, facilitating more effective communication and fostering mutual understanding within teams. The academic staff and leaders' quotes exemplify this shared 'language' and 'bond'. This 'language' is not only about linguistic communication but also encompasses the shared experiences, common terminologies, understanding of institutional norms, values, and implicit rules that govern behaviors and interactions within the institution. Furthermore, this shared understanding and bond can minimize conflicts, misunderstandings, or communication gaps that often occur in diverse teams, thereby fostering a more cooperative and harmonious work environment (Lee & Kim, 2020). Given that conflicts and misunderstandings can impact team productivity and work satisfaction, reducing such issues could contribute significantly to team efficiency and the overall institutional performance. Additionally, in a culture where group solidarity and unity are paramount, this enhanced cooperation can also contribute to a more positive working environment, reinforcing the sense of belonging and commitment among staff members, as discussed earlier.

### ***Nurturing Talent and Leadership***

This theme was prevalent among the responses of four leaders (n=4 out of 5), two supporting staff (n=2 out of 5), and four academic staff (n=4 out of 5). They emphasized that hiring former



students can help in nurturing talent and fostering future leaders who are already familiar with the institutional values and culture. One leader stated, “Our former students are potential leaders who have the capacity to shape the institution’s future.” An academic staff member shared, “Being a part of this institution again gave me a chance to give back and grow professionally in a place I am deeply connected to.”

This reflects the literature on leadership development and succession planning in higher education (Rothwell, 2010), highlighting the potential for former students to become future leaders. In the context of Vietnam, this strategy could help higher education institutions to cultivate leadership rooted in local values and experiences. Vietnam’s socio-cultural context places immense emphasis on leadership that is grounded in familiarity with local values, traditions, and experiences (Hallinger et al., 2017). This sentiment often translates into a preference for leadership that is organically nurtured within the institution, rather than brought in from the outside. In this context, recruiting former tertiary students as official staff presents a viable strategy to cultivate leadership that is deeply embedded in the institution’s culture and practices. Former students-turned-staff, due to their intimate understanding of the institution’s ethos, can potentially become future leaders who can carry forward the institution’s legacy while responding effectively to contemporary challenges. Their deep-rooted connection to the institution allows them to comprehend its core values, historical context, and unique dynamics, which are critical components of effective leadership. Furthermore, nurturing leadership from within allows for continuity of institutional culture and values, which is especially important in the Vietnamese context where respect for tradition and legacy is highly valued (Ren et al., 2021). These homegrown leaders, being products of the institution themselves, can perpetuate the cultural ethos and practices of the institution while bringing fresh perspectives and innovative strategies, thereby balancing tradition with modernity. The potential for professional growth within a familiar environment, as indicated by the academic staff member’s quote, also underlines the reciprocal benefits of this recruitment strategy. It provides alumni with opportunities for career progression within a context they are deeply connected to, thereby enhancing their job satisfaction and commitment.

#### *Maintaining Tradition and Continuity*

All leaders (n=5 out of 5), two supporting staff (n=2 out of 5), and three academic staff (n=3 out of 5) highlighted that hiring former students helps in maintaining tradition and continuity. A leader noted, “Former students are torchbearers of our institution’s traditions and ethos.” A supporting staff member added, “We are not just employees, but keepers of the institutional legacy.”

This perspective aligns with Schein (2010), suggesting that former students can act as cultural carriers, helping to maintain and transmit institutional traditions and values. This may be particularly relevant in Vietnam, where respect for tradition and continuity plays a significant role in society. In Vietnamese society, the cultural value of maintaining tradition and continuity is deeply rooted (Quang et al., 2022). Respect for tradition is an integral part of the Vietnamese ethos and

plays a significant role in societal institutions, including educational establishments (Nguyen, 2015). Vietnamese educational institutions often carry a rich legacy of historical events, academic traditions, and distinctive ethos that are cherished and upheld by its members. Hiring former students can serve as a strategic measure to ensure the maintenance and transmission of these institutional traditions and values, as they are intimately acquainted with the institutional legacy. As the leader's quote highlights, former students can act as "torchbearers" of institutional traditions, ensuring that the unique ethos and practices of the institution are preserved and passed onto successive generations. This sense of stewardship towards the institution, reflected in the supporting staff member's quote, goes beyond the typical employee's role. Former students-turned-staff perceive themselves as "keepers of the institutional legacy", which resonates with their deep-seated cultural value of respecting and preserving tradition. This heightened sense of responsibility can also enhance their commitment to their roles, contributing to the overall institutional performance. The concept of 'cultural carriers' can aptly describe the role of these alumni-turned-staff. By virtue of their personal history with the institution and their understanding of its culture, these individuals carry the institutional culture forward, reinforcing its values, norms, and practices. This continuity is particularly beneficial in the Vietnamese context, where respect for tradition and legacy is paramount (Quang et al., 2022).

### ***Addressing Local Skill Gap***

The idea of addressing local skill gaps through hiring former students was expressed by three leaders (n=3 out of 5), two supporting staff (n=2 out of 5), and two academic staff (n=2 out of 5). These participants noted that former students, having been trained in the local context, can better fill certain job roles that require specific local knowledge or skills. A leader commented, "Our alumni, being educated here, are more attuned to the local industry needs and are often a better fit for certain roles." A supporting staff member agreed, stating, "The training I received here made me well-equipped to tackle the specific challenges of my current job."

This observation aligns with the discussion on skill gaps in developing economies like Vietnam, where local higher education institutions play a vital role in shaping a skilled workforce that aligns with the country's economic and development goals (Thao & Mai, 2020). In the context of Vietnam, a rapidly developing country with unique socio-economic challenges (Trung & Van, 2020), higher education institutions play a pivotal role in shaping a skilled workforce that aligns with the country's specific development goals and industry needs (Tien et al., 2019). This task involves equipping students not only with globally relevant skills but also with a deep understanding of the local context, industry dynamics, and societal intricacies. In such a scenario, hiring former students can be an effective way to address local skill gaps. Alumni, having been trained in the local context, are likely to possess a nuanced understanding of the local industry needs, societal norms, and cultural nuances. This contextual understanding, coupled with the specific skillsets they acquired during their education, can make them particularly suitable for job roles that require specific local knowledge or skills. The leader's comment underscores this point, stating that former

students, being more “attuned to the local industry needs,” can be a better fit for certain roles. Similarly, the supporting staff member’s quote reveals how the training received at the institution prepared them well to tackle the “specific challenges” of their current job. This finding aligns with the discussion on addressing skill gaps in developing economies like Vietnam, where the local industry’s specific needs may differ significantly from global industry standards (Bodewig et al., 2014). Hence, local higher education institutions have a vital role in preparing a workforce that can effectively address these unique challenges.

### ***Reinforcing Local Identity and Values***

All leaders (n=5 out of 5), three supporting staff (n=3 out of 5), and two academic staff (n=2 out of 5) highlighted the role of former students in reinforcing local identity and values within the institution. A leader noted, “Hiring our own students helps in keeping our local identity and values intact. They carry the spirit of our institution and of our region.” An academic staff member shared, “Being an alumna and now a staff member, I believe I am in a position to uphold and pass on our local values to the next generation.”

The cultural context of Vietnam, characterized by a rich heritage and a strong sense of local identity, significantly influences all societal facets, including its education system (Van, 2020; Tran & Walter, 2010). Vietnamese higher education institutions often mirror this cultural ethos, fostering a unique local identity shaped by regional values, traditions, and experiences. In this regard, hiring former students as official staff can play a crucial role in reinforcing local identity and values within the institution. Alumni, having been shaped by the institution’s culture and the local context, are natural carriers of the institution’s spirit and the region’s distinct identity. As such, they are particularly positioned to uphold and transmit these local values within the institution. The leader’s quote encapsulates this idea, noting that former students help keep the institution’s “local identity and values intact”. They carry the “spirit” of the institution and the region, acting as a living link between the institution’s past and present, and a bridge to its future. This sentiment is echoed by the academic staff member’s quote, highlighting the unique position of alumni-turned-staff to uphold and pass on local values to the next generation. As individuals who have experienced the institution’s ethos as students and now contribute to it as staff, they embody the institution’s cultural continuity and play a pivotal role in its cultural preservation. This theme resonates with the literature on cultural continuity in organizations (Klein et al., 2013), emphasizing the role of insiders in preserving and transmitting organizational culture. In the context of Vietnam, with its strong sense of local identity and rich cultural heritage, this role takes on even more significance.

### ***Increased Community Engagement***

Four leaders (n=4 out of 5), all supporting staff (n=5 out of 5), and two academic staff (n=2 out of 5) identified enhanced community engagement as a benefit of hiring former students. They pointed out that these individuals often maintain strong ties with the local community, thereby enhancing the institution’s relationship with the local community. A supporting staff member

observed, “Being a local, I have strong connections with the community. I believe this helps our institution in strengthening its community outreach.”

In the Vietnamese context, community relationships and networking form a critical aspect of both social and professional interactions (Do et al., 2023). Such connections are particularly significant for higher education institutions, which often play central roles in their local communities, contributing to social, cultural, and economic development. In this regard, the hiring of former students can significantly enhance the community engagement of these institutions. As individuals who often maintain strong ties with their local community, these alumni-turned-staff can help to strengthen the institution’s relationships and engagement with the community. This is exemplified in the quotes provided by the participants. A supporting staff member, a local to the area, attests to having “strong connections with the community”, which they believe aids in bolstering the institution’s community outreach. Their experiences and insights, as both alumni of the institution and members of the community, serve as valuable assets in fostering robust connections between the institution and its surrounding community. This finding mirrors the growing emphasis on community engagement in higher education (Watson, 2007), as institutions worldwide increasingly recognize their roles as active contributors to their communities. Such engagement can take various forms, from community service and public scholarship to partnerships with local organizations and involvement in local governance. In Vietnam, the practice of networking significantly amplifies the potential impact of this community engagement (Do et al., 2023). The strong community ties of alumni-turned-staff can facilitate deeper, more meaningful engagements with the community, aligning the institution’s goals with the community’s needs and contributing to mutual growth and development.

### ***Promotion of Homegrown Research***

Three leaders (n=3 out of 5), two supporting staff (n=2 out of 5), and four academic staff (n=4 out of 5) suggested that recruiting former students can bolster homegrown research initiatives. A leader stated, “Our former students, now researchers, are more likely to work on topics that are locally relevant and beneficial to our community.” Similarly, an academic staff member noted, “Being an alumnus, I find myself drawn to research issues pertinent to our context, contributing to the local body of knowledge.”

The Vietnamese higher education context presents a unique intersection of global knowledge practices and local cultural and societal norms (Lam, 2004). In this backdrop, the potential of former tertiary students to contribute significantly to homegrown research initiatives is noteworthy. The research ecosystem in Vietnam, like in many developing countries, is influenced by a demand for locally relevant knowledge that can address national development challenges (Nguyen et al., 2016). As such, higher education institutions are increasingly recognized as key actors in generating this knowledge. This study’s participants noted that recruiting former students bolsters homegrown research initiatives. The participants’ observations resonate with literature emphasizing the role of

higher education institutions in producing locally relevant knowledge (Goddard & Vallance, 2013). Particularly in Vietnam, the intimate understanding of local contexts, cultural nuances, and societal structures that former students possess can significantly enrich the research output. As homegrown researchers, these individuals are in a unique position to investigate issues inherent to their own context, formulating research questions that are intrinsically connected to their experiences and surroundings. The nuanced insights they bring can enhance the relevance and applicability of their research findings, thereby strengthening their potential impact on local development.

### ***Support for Rural and Less Developed Regions***

Two leaders (n=2 out of 5), one supporting staff (n=1 out of 5), and three academic staff (n=3 out of 5) suggested that hiring alumni could be a strategy to support rural and less developed regions. An academic staff member remarked, “Alumni are often more willing to return and work in less developed regions, which is crucial for the development of these areas.”

Addressing regional disparities remains a significant challenge for Vietnam, a nation marked by stark contrasts between its urban and rural areas (Anh et al., 2012). The development of less developed regions, particularly rural areas, is a critical national priority. Higher education institutions can play a pivotal role in these efforts, given their capacity to foster human capital and drive knowledge-led development. In this context, the potential of hiring alumni as a strategy to support rural and less developed regions is particularly noteworthy. As suggested by the participants, former students, particularly those originating from these regions, are often more willing to return and contribute to their home locales. This willingness to work in less developed regions is crucial for driving their development. The participants’ comments also underscore the potential role of former tertiary students as change agents in their home regions, applying their education and skills to contribute to local development. This concept aligns with Hamano’s (2013) observations on the role of education in addressing regional disparities in Vietnam. By returning to their home regions, these alumni can aid in transferring knowledge and skills, fostering innovation, and catalyzing development initiatives. They can help to bridge the urban-rural gap, ensuring that the benefits of higher education extend beyond metropolitan areas. Furthermore, in the Vietnamese context, where familial and regional ties often remain strong, the desire to contribute to one’s home region can be a powerful motivator (Shohet, 2021). This cultural trait can further enhance the impact of hiring former students in driving development in less developed regions.

### ***Cultural Fit and Employee Well-being***

All leaders (n=5 out of 5), three supporting staff (n=3 out of 5), and two academic staff (n=2 out of 5) agreed that former students often exhibit a high degree of cultural fit, contributing to employee well-being and job satisfaction. A leader shared, “Our alumni staff seem to adapt easily to the work environment, reporting higher job satisfaction.” A supporting staff member added, “As an alumnus, the transition was smoother for me. I feel comfortable and valued here, which positively affects my work.”

Cultural fit is a well-established concept in organizational behavior literature, with numerous studies demonstrating its impact on various employee outcomes, including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions (e.g., Ramsahye, 2022; Searle & Al-Sharif, 2018). At its core, cultural fit refers to the congruence between an individual's beliefs, values, and behavior, and those of the organization. In this study, it was found that, according to the participants, former students often exhibit a high degree of cultural fit within the higher education institution they join as staff. This cultural fit contributes significantly to employee well-being and job satisfaction. In the context of Vietnam, this finding is particularly significant. Vietnamese society places high value on cultural familiarity, communal harmony, and a sense of belonging (Tai, 2001; Tran et al., 2017; Phan & Locke, 2016). These cultural attributes, deeply embedded in the Vietnamese psyche, can significantly influence individual attitudes and behaviors, including work-related outcomes. Hence, for former students, the inherent familiarity with the institution's culture and the sense of continuity from their student life to their professional roles can engender a strong sense of cultural fit. This observation aligns with the study by Kristof-Brown et al. (2005), which posits that a high degree of congruence between an individual's and an organization's characteristics can lead to higher job satisfaction and lower turnover intentions. Thus, recruiting former students could be a viable strategy for higher education institutions in Vietnam aiming to foster a content and committed workforce.

### ***Enhanced Alumni Relations and Fundraising***

Three leaders (n=3 out of 5), four supporting staff (n=4 out of 5), and one academic staff (n=1 out of 5) posited that hiring former students could bolster alumni relations and enhance fundraising efforts. One leader noted, "Former students, now staff, often maintain strong connections with their peers, facilitating alumni outreach and fundraising." An academic staff member similarly stated, "As an alumnus, I am more invested in strengthening our alumni network and participating in fundraising initiatives."

The role of alumni as significant stakeholders in higher education institutions is well recognized, with their potential contributions extending from mentoring current students to making financial donations. With a robust alumni network, institutions can not only foster a sense of continuity and belonging but also tap into a valuable resource for fundraising and institutional development (Ashline, 2017). In the current study, the potential role of former students in strengthening alumni relations and enhancing fundraising efforts was emphasized by the participants. According to them, former students, having become staff, maintain strong connections with their peers, thereby facilitating outreach to the alumni community and participating more actively in fundraising initiatives. The potential of former students to serve as a bridge between the institution and its alumni network could hold particular significance in the context of Vietnam. As higher education institutions in Vietnam grapple with limited public funding (Mai et al., 2022), they are increasingly seeking to mobilize resources from various sources, including alumni donations. Hence, hiring former students could provide a unique opportunity to strengthen alumni relations and enhance

fundraising efforts.

### ***Support for Entrepreneurship and Innovation***

Four leaders (n=4 out of 5), two supporting staff (n=2 out of 5), and three academic staff (n=3 out of 5) suggested that hiring former students can contribute to fostering a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation. A leader shared, “Our alumni, having experienced our entrepreneurial curriculum, are well-positioned to infuse this culture into our operations.” An academic staff member concurred, stating, “Being a graduate of this institution, I carry its spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship into my role, encouraging the same in my students.”

The potential role of higher education institutions in fostering a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation is increasingly being recognized, with alumni often seen as vital actors in this process. In this study, the idea of former students playing a significant role in nurturing an entrepreneurial and innovative culture within their institutions emerged as a notable theme. The participants of this current study suggested that former students, having been exposed to the institution’s entrepreneurial curriculum and innovation-driven environment, are well-positioned to bring these elements into their professional roles within the same institution. This observation aligns with the growing literature on the role of higher education institutions in fostering entrepreneurship and innovation (Guerrero et al., 2016). It also holds particular relevance in the context of Vietnam, a country striving to transition towards an innovation-led economy (Cameron et al., 2020). As Vietnam continues to embrace economic reform and innovation, higher education institutions have a critical role to play in instilling an entrepreneurial mindset and innovative thinking among students and staff. Therefore, hiring alumni who have already internalized these values could be a promising strategy to cultivate such a culture within these institutions.

### ***Linkages with Local Industries***

Three leaders (n=3 out of 5), one supporting staff (n=1 out of 5), and two academic staff (n=2 out of 5) highlighted that former students often have strong linkages with local industries, facilitating industry-academia collaboration. A leader commented, “Our alumni, being part of the local industry network, often facilitate collaborations and partnerships that are beneficial for our institution.” A supporting staff member echoed, “Having worked in the local industry, I was able to bring in industry projects and partnerships.”

The idea of former students acting as facilitators of industry-academia collaboration emerged from the responses of the participants. They observed that these individuals, often being part of local industry networks, can significantly contribute to fostering partnerships and collaborations between the institution and industry. This suggests that the former students, with their industry connections and firsthand experience, can serve as valuable bridges between academia and industry, facilitating collaboration, knowledge exchange, and mutual growth (Durante et al., 2015). Their role could be particularly significant in driving research collaborations, industry-oriented curriculum development, and creating opportunities for internships or projects for current students. Such

collaboration aligns with a broader trend in higher education policy worldwide towards more significant industry-academia engagement to boost economic competitiveness and innovation (Malhotra et al., 2023). This theme also resonates strongly with the context of Vietnam, where fostering robust linkages between higher education institutions and industry is identified as a national priority (Tien et al., 2019). The government has been encouraging universities to engage with the industry to improve the relevance of education and research to the country's development needs.

### ***The “WHY NOT?”***

#### ***Potential Bias and Favoritism***

A challenge noted by three leaders (n=3 out of 5), two supporting staff (n=2 out of 5), and four academic staff (n=4 out of 5) was the perception of bias or favoritism associated with hiring former students. One academic staff member mentioned, “There can be a perception that we were hired because of our connections rather than our qualifications.” A leader also expressed concern saying, “We need to be careful about the potential for favoritism, which can negatively affect the staff morale.”

The perception of bias or favoritism in hiring former students lies in the possibility that these individuals might be perceived as receiving undue advantages due to their previous relationship with the institution, potentially leading to dissatisfaction and discord among other staff members. This concern aligns with existing research on ‘in-group’ favoritism (Weeks et al., 2017), which warns that members of a group may favor others who belong to the same group, leading to potential bias and unfair treatment. This can negatively impact the overall work environment, affecting team dynamics and employee morale. The issue of favoritism assumes even greater relevance in the Vietnamese context, where personal relationships, or “quan hệ”, often play a critical role in social and business interactions (Meyer et al., 2006). Such practices may lead to nepotism and cronyism, undermining the fairness and transparency of the hiring process. It is essential for institutions to maintain stringent hiring standards and ensure that merit and qualifications remain the primary criteria for employment decisions.

#### ***Potential for Groupthink***

On the downside, two leaders (n=2 out of 5), one supporting staff (n=1 out of 5), and four academic staff (n=4 out of 5) expressed concerns about the potential for groupthink if an institution primarily hires its former students. An academic staff member stated, “A predominance of former students could limit fresh ideas and lead to conformity of thought.” Similarly, a leader shared, “We need a mix of people and perspectives to avoid the trap of groupthink.”

The potential for groupthink, which is a tendency for groups to seek consensus rather than consider a range of perspectives, was identified as a downside of hiring former students by the participants. This potential downside arises from the concern that if an institution predominantly hires its former



students, it could limit the diversity of ideas and experiences within the staff body, leading to a homogeneous way of thinking and potentially stifling innovation and progress. This concern aligns with research on group dynamics and decision making by Janis (2020), who coined the term “groupthink” and highlighted its risks in decision-making processes. Groupthink can lead to poor decisions as it discourages dissent and stifles creativity and innovation. In the Vietnamese context, where education is traditionally seen as a critical avenue for social mobility and national development (London, 2011), the issue of groupthink becomes especially important. The development of the higher education sector in Vietnam is crucial for the country’s continued economic growth and social progress. Ensuring diversity of thought and encouraging innovative ideas is pivotal for cultivating a vibrant, dynamic higher education sector that can effectively meet the changing needs of society and the economy.

### ***Risk of Inbred Intellectual Culture***

A potential challenge, raised by two leaders (n=2 out of 5), one supporting staff (n=1 out of 5), and three academic staff (n=3 out of 5), was the risk of developing an inbred intellectual culture. An academic staff member pointed out, “If we only hire our own form students, there is a risk of creating an insular academic culture that discourages new perspectives and innovative thinking.”

Intellectual inbreeding is a term used in academia to describe a situation where an institution primarily hires its own graduates as faculty members. The potential risk of such a practice is the development of an insular academic culture that lacks diversity of perspectives, leading to a potential stifling of innovative thinking. The participant’s sentiment is reflected in research in higher education, notably by Horta (2022), that has raised concerns about the risks of intellectual inbreeding and its potential negative impact on academic productivity and innovation. In the context of Vietnam, this issue becomes particularly significant given the country’s ambitions to build a robust, innovative higher education sector (Bodewig et al., 2014). Vietnam has been making concerted efforts to improve the quality of its higher education institutions, with a focus on fostering creativity, innovation, and high-quality research (Nguyen & McDonald, 2019). Intellectual inbreeding could potentially undermine these efforts by limiting the diversity of academic perspectives and impeding the introduction of novel ideas and approaches.

### ***Diversity and Inclusion Challenges***

A potential downside identified by four leaders (n=4 out of 5), three supporting staff (n=3 out of 5), and two academic staff (n=2 out of 5) was the challenge of ensuring diversity and inclusion when a significant proportion of staff are former students. One leader warned, “If we are predominantly hiring our own students, it might become challenging to ensure diversity in our staff composition.” Another leader added, “It is crucial to balance our recruitment to ensure diverse perspectives and maintain an inclusive environment.”

Diversity and inclusion in higher education staff can significantly contribute to the richness of educational experiences, fostering an environment of creativity, innovation, and mutual

understanding. However, if an institution predominantly hires its former students, it could potentially compromise the diversity of the staff composition, which might, in turn, affect the diversity of perspectives within the institution. The participants also highlighted the importance of balancing recruitment to maintain an inclusive environment and to encourage diverse perspectives. This concern ties in with the broader discourse on diversity and inclusion in higher education (Horta, 2022). In a diverse educational environment, students can learn from others who have different experiences, beliefs, and perspectives, thereby enhancing their capacity to work and interact with people from different cultural and social backgrounds. In the context of Vietnam, this concern holds significant weight given the country's ethnic and cultural diversity (Choi, 2016). Vietnam is home to 54 different ethnic groups, each with its own language, lifestyle, and cultural heritage (Sundkvist & Nguyen, 2020). In order to promote mutual understanding and respect among these diverse groups, it is important for higher education institutions to reflect this diversity in their faculty composition. Moreover, as Vietnam seeks to internationalize its higher education sector (Ryu & Nguyen, 2021), ensuring a diverse and inclusive staff composition can play a critical role in preparing students to thrive in an increasingly globalized world.

## **Conclusion**

This study has provided a nuanced exploration of the practice of recruiting former tertiary students as official staff in higher education institutions within the context of Vietnam. The findings reveal a comprehensive view with both benefits and challenges that should be considered by institutional leaders and policymakers. The benefits of recruiting former tertiary students are manifold. They include the enhancement of institutional culture and continuity, nurturing future leadership, addressing local skill gaps, and reinforcing local identity and values. The unique perspectives drawn from this study further highlight the potential for this practice to advance homegrown research, support development in rural and less developed regions, foster a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation, and facilitate linkages with local industries. Moreover, hiring alumni as staff can boost alumni relations and aid fundraising efforts, an aspect that is becoming increasingly significant for higher education institutions in Vietnam.

However, potential challenges were also identified. These include the risk of groupthink, inbred intellectual culture, potential biases and favoritism, and issues with diversity and inclusion. It is essential for institutions to maintain a balanced staff profile that brings in diverse perspectives and fosters an inclusive environment. A homogeneous staff composition can lead to intellectual inbreeding and groupthink, hindering innovation and critical thinking. This study thus concludes that while hiring former tertiary students as staff can bring numerous advantages to higher education institutions, it is not without potential pitfalls.

## ***Implications***

This study holds several important implications for higher education institutions and policymakers. For higher education institutions, the benefits and challenges identified in this study provide a

practical guide for higher education institutions considering the recruitment of their own graduates. Institutions can leverage these insights to create effective recruitment strategies that capitalize on the benefits of hiring former students while mitigating potential pitfalls. For instance, institutions might consider policies that promote a balanced composition of former students and external hires to benefit from a diverse set of perspectives. Strategies could also be developed to enhance alumni engagement and fundraising efforts by leveraging alumni who have been hired as staff.

For policymakers, the findings underscore the potential of this recruitment practice to contribute to local economic development, cultural continuity, community engagement, and the enhancement of homegrown research. Policymakers might consider providing incentives for higher education institutions that successfully utilize this practice to address national and regional priorities. However, they should also be aware of potential risks associated with this practice, such as the possibility of intellectual inbreeding or diversity and inclusion issues, and develop guidelines to prevent such occurrences.

### ***Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research***

Despite its valuable insights, this study has some limitations that provide opportunities for further research. First, it focused on higher education institutions in Vietnam, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research could replicate this study in different geographical and institutional contexts to compare and contrast the results. Second, the study used a qualitative design with a limited number of participants, which may not capture all perspectives within the higher education sector. Future studies could employ a mixed-methods approach or a broader participant base to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Third, this study explored the phenomenon from the perspectives of the staff members. Future research could incorporate the views of other stakeholders, such as students, alumni, or employers, to gain a more holistic view. Additionally, the study did not delve into the long-term impacts of this recruitment practice on institutional performance and quality of education, which could be a promising direction for future research. Finally, it is imperative to reiterate that this investigation revealed a higher propensity for such practices within public institutions as opposed to their private counterparts. Given the pecuniary orientations of private universities, there may exist divergent recruitment strategies aimed at maximizing economic returns. As such, it is incumbent upon researchers to validate the proposed conjecture and undertake a more thorough discourse concerning the congruencies and divergences in the policies implemented in the private and public sectors. Such an approach will indeed contribute to a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the landscape.

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