

# Accelerating social sciences reach a fork in the road

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Vietnam's Higher Education Reform Agenda 2006-2020 made the promotion of research a critical priority for the country. This emphasis was underlined again in a later master plan, the Science and Technology Development Strategy 2011-2020.

The promotion of research means putting research at the centre of university activity. This is of particular importance given the fact that most universities in Vietnam are teaching institutions having inherited the former Soviet model of higher education and research under which research in Vietnam has traditionally belonged in specialised research institutes and academies.

The promotion of research also means encouragement for researchers to publish in international indexed databases such as ISI Clarivate WOS or Scopus.

What is the status quo of research in Vietnam? Is there any room for further development? We can get part of the answer – within the field of social sciences – from reading a newly published De Gruyter book, [\*The Vietnamese Social Sciences at a Fork in the Road\*](#), co-edited by Dr Quan-Hoang Vuong and Dr Trung Tran.

Its main findings include the fact that:

- Despite the number of publications by Vietnamese authors being modest, as shown in the ISI Clarivate WOS-Scopus databases, it has been rising slowly but steadily. In 2008, 136 Vietnamese social science scholars published in 88 international publications. The respective figures in 2018 are 923 and 391. The respective figures for hard sciences are 1,059 (in 2008) and 5,694 (in 2018), according to the ISI Clarivate WOS (SCIE).
- Among the top institutions for research output, Vietnam National University Hanoi leads the league tables, followed by the National Economics University Hanoi and Hanoi Medical University. However, the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, the most prominent research-intensive institution in the social sciences in the country, only ranks sixth. The top seven institutions contributed 29% of the published articles in 2008-18.

- Looking at the different fields, economics contributes the highest number of studies: 620 articles or 22.70% of the total. This is followed by education (338, 12.38%), healthcare (313, 11.46%) and business (308, 11.28%).
- Leading authors – who may lead research groups, write solo publications and publish in highly ranked journals – play an important role in research publications. The top 10 ‘most eminent researchers’ contributed 24.8% of all Scopus-indexed journal articles between 2008 and 2018.
- Co-authoring with international social scientists is prevalent. However, the number of articles wholly written by Vietnamese authors has increased gradually between 2008 and 2018.

### **Top-down reform**

The year 2008 marked the first milestone for the promotion of research in Vietnam: the National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED), inspired by the US’s National Science Foundation, was launched.

The critical difference between NAFOSTED and other research-funding mechanisms is that NAFOSTED refers to international publishing as the *sine qua non* for research grant outputs. In addition, the profile of the principal investigator and key investigators in a research project, as recorded in ISI Clarivate WOS and Scopus, is essential when it comes to receiving a grant.

The grants provided by NAFOSTED have resulted in a significant surge in research outputs in both STEM and Social Sciences-Humanities. By the end of 2018, about 4,000 international publications had been published with funding from NAFOSTED. This figure is equal to 20% of the international publications in Vietnam between 2008 and 2018.

The year 2017 was another milestone in the importance of international publishing for academics in Vietnam. Specifically, the new regulation on PhD education or Circular 08/2017/TT-BGDĐT required a PhD candidate to have at least one publication indexed in ISI Clarivate WOS or Scopus prior to the final defence of their thesis.

A similar condition applies to a PhD candidate’s supervisor: to be eligible to be a supervisor, a lecturer must also have at least one publication indexed in ISI Clarivate WOS or Scopus.

The new regulation might be considered the first ever publish-or-perish policy in Vietnam. Its immediate effect has been a sudden surge in the total number of authors who have published an ISI Clarivate or Scopus-indexed paper. By the end of 2018, there was a total of 923 authors, an 81.6% increase on the figure in 2016 before the new regulation was issued.

### **Bottom-up initiatives**

The increase in research output in social sciences in Vietnam over the

past decade may be partly due to bottom-up initiatives undertaken by the universities. Currently, the most frequent policy adopted by many universities is a monetary reward for international publication. On average, a university pays faculty who have published an international article about US\$1,000 to US\$2,000. In some special cases, the bonus might even be around US\$10,000 for an article published in a high-impact factor journal.

### **Towards the future: quality and ethics**

Vietnam has borne fruit in international research outputs over the past decade. It is the result of both top-down endeavours and bottom-up responses. Furthermore, the constant striving for better continues to raise standards. Currently, the academic sector in Vietnam mostly uses metrics such as the Impact Factor, the Q Factor or the H-index as proxies for research quality.

However, it is apparent that these measures are not adequate for the sustainable development of research. In the future, the country needs to develop mechanisms that support and stimulate quality research publications through transparent data collection and analysis as well as replicable research findings, for example:

- Open access can facilitate replication and triangulation of research; and can help save researchers time, effort and the cost of repeating research due to a lack of access to similar datasets and study projects.
- Open science can bring more responsibility and transparency and reduce abuse and misconduct.
- Better science communication can enhance the awareness of the general public when it comes to academic knowledge and scientific evidence.

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