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Vietnamese Early Career Academics' Identity Work:

Balancing Tensions between East and West

Abstract

Through a narrative analysis of 33 interviews with Vietnamese early career academics, we explore whether a Confucianist/collectivist academic context in Vietnam has a key influence on academics' identity work, within the embrace of encroaching managerialist practices. We show how these academics from 11 universities negotiated identity alignment and identity tensions between such cultural orientation and managerialism. On the one hand, a Confucianist ethic underpinning higher education in Vietnam is likely to encourage academics to engage in managerialist practices, as it promotes harmony and loyalty to their respective university and its global, 'excellence' goals. On the other hand, a culture underpinning of collegiality can create tension with the individualist nature of managerialist practices. Our recommendations for universities in a similar context are to adapt the more individualistic performative approaches developed from the West by crafting their own collegiate, soft managerialist hybrid practices.

Keywords: identity, identity work, culture, collectivism, individualism, collegiality, Confucianism.

Introduction

This qualitative study explores early-career academics' identity work. It focuses on a relatively collectivist national culture of Vietnam, within universities enacting an increasing managerialist agenda, based upon more individualistic, regular target setting, performance management and accountability practices from the West (McCarthy and Dragouni 2020; Shepherd 2017). The managerialist agenda has been driven by pressures of globalisation and internationalisation of HE, creating the lure of rising up global league tables and journal rankings (Hill, Hell, and Van Cauter 2019; Soliman, Anchor, and Taylor 2019).

Early-career academics (ECAs) have attracted interest from scholars for a while. Still, very little attention has been paid comparably on academics' contradictions with regards to their identity work (Bristow, Robinson, and Ratle 2017), particularly in the era of inclusion and exclusion (Bosanquet et al. 2017). Indeed, early-career stage is a window duration for ECAs to construct themselves in the community. They are sometimes seen as powerless victims of the system (Laudel and Gläser 2008), who are more likely to comply to set themselves up as academics (Bristow, Robinson, and Ratle 2017). The definitions of ECA vary among institutions and researchers around the world (Hemmings 2012), mainly regarding the number of years since first employed as academics (Acker and Webber 2017) or PhD completion (Bosanquet et al. 2017). Importantly, this paper uses the term ECAs instead of 'young' academics (Archer 2008) to emphasis our focus on academics' narratives of their career stages and community engagement rather than their 'age'. Following the consensus in the recent literature of ECAs, this paper adopts the definition of ECAs as those who have obtained a PhD and/or have taught and researched in academia (Beck and Young 2005; Kolsaker 2008; McAlpine, Amundsen, and Turner 2014) under full-time contracts (Bristow, Robinson, and Ratle 2019) for up to 7 years (Sutherland 2017).

The focus on the extent of cultural alignment with managerialist practices in Vietnam is particularly pertinent. Many critiques of managerialism in Western institutions has highlighted tensions between the pressures of this form of identity regulation and academics' identity (Boussebaa and Brown 2017). Identity regulation is known as a form of organisational control to discipline and shape employees' identities (Bardon, Brown, and Pez   2017), which has become an approach to study managerialism in academia (Boussebaa and Brown 2017).

This paper aims to understand whether a specific Southeast Asian national cultural context reduces or increases identity tensions with encroaching managerialist practices. Moreover, it endeavours to understand how Vietnamese academics' reflexively shape, maintain and transform their sense of self (Alvesson and Willmott 2002) (i.e. their identity work) to be able to manage these tensions. The paper, thereby, responds to Brown's (2015) call for further research to expand our understanding of identity work regarding contexts, processes and temporality. We focus on exploring ways to make sense of the social basis of identity and identity work from a developing country context, in response to managerialism (Kalfa, Wilkinson and Gollan 2017).

By focusing on Vietnam, it follows research by Huang, Pang and Yu (2018), who explore identity work in China, in the context of increasing managerialist practices. By focusing on more collectivist cultures, like Vietnam, we thereby move away from assuming 'instrumental individualism' of academics, which has dominated identity literature (Knights and Clarke 2017). Academics have been widely studied as subjects of the western individualist system (Gardner and Willey, 2018), in coping with organisational norms and professional values such as elitism and excellence (Alvesson and Spicer 2016). Similarly, most of the recent studies on academic identity have explored academics' identity work as individual projects (e.g. Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). Moreover, this atomisation of academic working life promotes increasing competition within the academics' own department, university and broader scholar

community (Kalfa et al., 2017). In contrast, following Tran et al. (2017), we specifically explore the more collectivist orientation of Vietnamese ECAs, which promotes a more cooperative influence on the identity formation process. Most crucially, we draw out the other particular aspects of the complexity and hybridity of Vietnamese culture which impact on identity formation.

Research Context

The growing market-driven, managerially controlled system of Vietnamese HE is the culmination of more than 30 years of the reform discourse of Doi Moi (Renovation). It represents a considerable drift away from the past government-led, ‘central planning’, ‘monopoly state-ownership’ approach, which was heavily influenced by the former Soviet academic system. In particular, Vietnam’s Higher Education Reform Agenda, HERA, initiated in 2006, was a turning point in the country’s higher education governance. The reform proposes that Vietnam’s higher education ‘shall attain the advanced regional standards, approach the world’s advanced level, have high competitiveness and suit the socialist-oriented market mechanism’ (HERA, 2005). In 2012, Vietnam’s Higher Education Law, the country’s first law on HE, was adopted which gave universities increased financial autonomy. Such reform has resulted in various changes in public service, including an increasing ‘diversity’ in ownership (Doan 2016). Moreover, by opening the door for private investors, including international players into the sector, Vietnam HE has accepted the emergence of a quasi-competitive market in which students become consumers, and the competition amongst universities and academics for external funding increases. In addition, global professional requirements and assessments have gradually been imposed upon Vietnamese academics who historically worked on standards regulated by the state’s educational laws, with respect to the quality and quantity of their professional work. By joining multiple educational organisations such as ASEAN

University Network and the Asia Pacific Quality Network, Vietnamese universities have been increasingly marketed in terms of teaching, research, staff mobility and quality assurance.

Methodologically, we develop a narrative analysis of 33 interviews with Vietnamese ECAs. We explore how those academics negotiate any identity tensions to construct their work identity. In order to fully explore the impending tensions around academic working life, within such a normatively prescribed cultural context, ECAs within this research were all exposed to and embedded within a more managerialist, individualistic cultural context (such as the UK, Australia, America) relatively early in their career to study or work overseas and then returned to Vietnam to work in HE. Such mobility represents recognition from Vietnamese universities that they need to increase the quality and professional qualifications of their academics (Pham and Fry 2011). We argue that such academic career changes seem to particularly prepare ECAs to reflexively relate to the complexity of identity construction in their working lives. More specifically, it is argued that these academics could be much more reflexive in their identity work to negotiate the tension between the temporal regularity of national cultural rhythms and the encroaching managerialist agenda in Vietnam. It thereby follows Stensaker, Välimaa and Sarrico (2012) who highlight that cultures existing at a university level could oppose reforms, such as managerialism, where they are seen to promote undesired changes.

Conceptual framing

Identity is defined as context-sensitive and an evolving mix of constructions that includes an individual's multiple and shifting reflexive self-narratives (Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas 2008). The significance of context reminds us of the communitarian perspective, where academic identity is grounded in defining communities, which act as the source of key values, language and meaning to understand the world. This research thereby follows the recent work of Huang et al. (2018) and Henkel (2005), who all highlighted the effects of the new managerial

reforms on academics within a communitarian theoretical perspective. Whilst Huang et al. (2018) pointed out that the academic discipline and the HE community itself are the most powerful sources of academic identity, we want to explore here whether national culture plays a moderating role within Vietnamese ECAs identity. Similarly, Freidson (2001) highlighted that in addition to being subject to the normative power of the academic profession, academic organisations are also inevitably affected by bureaucratic and market forces. More specifically, this paper follows Le (2016), whose research on the formation of academic identity by academics in Vietnam, found wide-ranging evidence of the significant role of Vietnamese national culture.

The correlation between culture and identity is emphasised widely by both sociologists and organisation scholars. As noted by Alvesson et al. (2008, 11), cultural factors and identity formation are intertwined: ‘...there is nothing natural or self-evident about a concern with who we are; preoccupation with identity is a cultural, historical formation. Far from coincidental, the surge of identity scholarship is part of this formation, which makes the surge appear logical and necessary’. It is believed that the processes of individuals’ identity construction have a strong cultural and contextual background (Brown 2015). From the perspective of social identity theory and theoretical basis of identification, individuals perceive oneness and a sense of belonging to some human aggregate (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley 2008). Individuals identify themselves with their group, or broadly speaking with their nation. They tend to insert national values and beliefs into their self-definition. Individuals’ identities within their larger cultural and historical membership of their community are constituted on the basis of cultural raw material, including language, symbols, values, sets of meanings, and norms of behaviours. They assemble their self-narratives from cultural resources, memories or desires to transform their sense of self (Alvesson et al., 2008). An individual as a member of society tends to be influenced by knowledge, morals, customs and

habits deriving from the culture of the society. From this point of view, culture is seen as a whole comprising of antecedents to processes of identity formation. It influences the processes by which individuals choose to insert meanings available into their self-identity.

Identity work might differ in different national cultures (Brown 2015). As the literature appears to be Western-dominant, it is critical to study other contexts, such as the Southeast Asian cultural context of Vietnam, due to its potential to present distinctive morphologies of identity work and identity construction. Vietnam's HE system is, in many respects, the product of a complex mix of educational heritages, from French, American and Soviet influence, which has been shaped and transformed over nearly a hundred years. Vietnam is considered as a high-context culture, relying on implicit interrelational contexts, where individuals are moulded in cultural features around a Confucian ethic and high collectivism (Hofstede 2001). Similarly, Doan (2005) divided the present system of moral education in Vietnam into two types: 'traditional morality' and 'socialist morality'. He asserted that traditional morality includes mainly of Confucian values and beliefs that have been transmitted by families, schools and society for many centuries. Socialist morality, including values and norms shaped by the ruling Communist Party, is enacted through a national curriculum, the media, and politically directed 'social activities' (London 2011). Both forms of 'moral education' receive a continuing and explicit focus from policymakers in Vietnam (Truong, 2013).

The Confucian ethic stresses the importance of top-down, centralised assimilations of 'correct behaviour', infused with harmony, loyalty and obedience. Confucianism conceives of the individual not as a detached entity, but as part and parcel of his/her human relationship with others (Yao 2000). Confucianism asserts that fulfilling one's role in these social relationships is essential to building harmony and stability within society. The Confucian ethic has historically shaped structures, processes, educational content and inter-personal relations within the Vietnamese education system (Hallinger, Walker, and Trung 2015). Loyalty within

Confucianism invokes a strong sense of pride in working for an academic institution, underpinned by a well-developed sense of social prestige (Tran et al. 2017).

The collectivist orientation is enacted through being part of a close-knit social system, with a preference toward collective benefits rather than individual goals. Members of a collectivist community are seen as collective selves while individuals in individualist culture are autonomous selves. Individuals prefer to have a close relationship and trust in group cohesion (Yuki 2003). Being a member of a community is a protected and supported role in exchange for loyalty to the community. Within an organisational context, this loyalty characteristic of collectivism aligns with the importance of Confucian harmony to achieve such commitment to both fellow colleagues and their university (Tran et al., 2017). People are more obedient or sensitive to the demands and needs of each other and their organisations, avoiding opinions that may interfere with harmony. They are less insistent on pursuing personal goals that might jeopardise their relationships with other people or the organisation (Bochner 1994).

It is pertinent to note the overarching acceptance of a high power distance underpinning the Confucian and the collectivist cultural feature in Vietnam (Hofstede 2011). It highlights the extent to which individuals accept significant differences in power and the way people show admiration for status and rank. Such an orientation increases acceptance of top-down communication and control by managers. Vietnam's contemporary political system continues to be characterised by this inherited tight central control of social and cultural institutions, along with being a strong influence on academic life. Bureaucracy characterised as a hierarchical authority and the presence of rules and the legitimacy of power (Huang and Pang 2016), has an important influence on academic affairs within Vietnamese universities. The system remains highly state centralised by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), and the Communist Party Committee (Tran et al. 2017). This bureaucratic orientation has Confucian undertones reflecting the need for order and stability (Goldin 2011). Within

Confucian societies, this is achieved in part through the clear establishment and reinforcement of hierarchical roles in all social relations. Academic institutions are still expected to conform to rigid staffing and salary policies that have little to do with the aspirations of universities. Furthermore, research funding mechanisms are driven mainly by bureaucratic, political considerations, rather than by considerations related to research productivity.

Finally, amidst these cultural influences, values emerging from globalisation (for example, personal freedom, individualism) have begun to influence attitudes and behaviours amongst Vietnamese academics (Hallinger and Truong 2014). Gaining inspiration from Le's (2016) research, with a managerialist push in universities, underpinned by global marketisation standards and ranking league tables, our research question becomes: In the context of competing national cultural pressures, to what extent do Vietnamese ECAs support or contest a managerialist emphasis on aspects such as individual merit, transparency, accountability and productivity?

Methodology

A narrative methodology is used to explore the impact of culture on ECAs' identity. Narrative methodology in organisational research refers to the use of narratives (stories) into research, by which the meaning of organisational experience is explored (Rhodes and Brown 2005). Narrative methodology is widely used in social sciences, particularly in studies of identity work in academia (Bristow, Robinson, and Ratle 2017) and academics' identity construction (Ylijoki & Ursin 2013). According to Brown and Rhodes (2005, 176), studies of identity can derive the best value from the narrative by considering "the many possible identities that organisational members can adopt and the ways in which particular identities strive for dominance".

After achieving the consensus on the criteria of ECAs (i.e. those who have obtained a PhD and/or have been to teach and research in academia under full-time contracts for up to 7 years), the second author conducted interviews with ECAs whose profiles met the attributes of

the above criteria. This included 33 ECA participants who work in 11 universities in the North, South and Middle of central Vietnam. These academics have all returned to Vietnam from their fellowship or study abroad in research or teaching, or further education such as Master or PhD programmes, especially from the countries such as UK, US, New Zealand, Australia.

A semi-structured interview was used as the key instrument to collect the data for this study. Narrative research data not only emerges from giving prepared questions and acquiring answers but also arises from interactions between researchers and informants (Netta 2018). The question protocol became more enriching after each interview until no new major enquiry emerged, which also significantly signposted the saturation of the data (Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora 2016). Recorded interviews having an average length of 100 minutes were transcribed verbatim.

To develop reflexivity within the answers to the research question, participants were asked about their career development as educators or overseas PhD students; experiences of their professional work in Vietnam and in the country where they were pursuing their fellowship and study, and how such experiences had elicited change and justification within themselves in their organisational contexts.

We used NVivo software to code and analysed data. To avoid the loss of meaning occurring within the translation process (Boussebaa and Brown 2017), we coded in Vietnamese, and translated quotes into English. The narrative methodology integrates a past, present and future self in the data analysis (McAlpine 2016), which can expand our understanding of how academics have been affected by cultural aspects and their own narratives in the past; what they are trying to do (to fix their current self); and who and how they want to become. To 'keep the story intact for interpretive purposes' (Fitzmaurice, 2013, 616), we kept the information collected from individual interviews inseparable from their stories. To effectively employ thematic narrative analysis, we followed the work of McAlpine

(2016) regarding the steps of data analysis. This method has been used widely by scholars whose interests focus on academic identities in this journal (Fitzmaurice 2013, Feather 2016, Bosanquet et al. 2017). Correspondingly, we first looked at individual cases, followed by their professional stories. In the second stage of data analysis, we focused ‘on the content of narratives to elicit the common themes that emerged from the interviews’ (Fitzmaurice 2013, 616). After accounting for the differences and sameness in patterns among individuals’ stories (McAlpine 2016), the themes which emerged were around the significant effects of culture on their professional experiences. The details of how themes were developed are presented below.

Narratives from the interviews were arranged in different orders by coherently relating data and concepts (Thornborrow and Brown 2009). From the raw data, we openly coded all the transcripts individually. In this stage, first-order themes were discovered from various statements across participants’ stories of their experiences to define, affirm, and develop their personal identity (e.g. ‘my academic work is about’; ‘my responsibility is’), and how they related themselves to other actors, organisations and contexts (e.g. ‘being a member of a university is about following the university’ regulation’; ‘I will also support their (colleagues’) career development’).

As the analysis of the transcripts is inductive with the adoption of an iterative procedure (Giorgi and Palmisano 2017), we went back-and-forth between data, theory and literature, focusing on identifying the diverse aspects of identity work. This process involves instances where interviewees mention their processes of identity confirmation (e.g., ‘I am like the cell of one body’ [university]). There were instances in which they professed that their actions related to identity construction (e.g., ‘the core of academics is to share their knowledge’).

In developing the second-order themes, we collapsed and refined the first-order themes into broader categories. Three broad themes were identified, which will be elaborated upon in the next section:

- i) Confucianism as cultural support for managerialist identity regulation;
- ii) External collectivism as cultural support for managerialist identity regulation;
- iii) Collegiality as a cultural constraint against managerialist identity regulation.

To verify for validity, member checking is suggested as one of the more efficient tools used to check the faithfulness and adequate reflection of the participants' narratives (Madill & Sullivan, 2018). However, it is pertinent to note that as the data was collected in accordance with ethical practices, where all the personal information of interviewees was kept anonymously, the transcripts were not sent back to the interviewees because the contact/personal details had been deleted. This was to protect the interviewees from any harm, due to sharing their career experiences with us; especially, as they are ECAs (the most vulnerable group of academics). It is recognised though that anonymity reduces the visibility of data trustworthiness (McAlpine, 2016). We did, however, conduct cross-checking regarding coding and translation, within our small group of authors and another small group of academics, chosen for their expert knowledge in the area. Regarding data coding, one author coded the data, and the other authors checked if the interpretation was consistent with the stories' meanings. This reflective process benefits the researchers by enabling them to gain insight into their own blind spot (Madill and Sullivan 2018); in particular, this process can ensure 'a corroborated and coherent analysis' (Boussebaa and Brown 2017, 14).

Analysis of Emergent Findings

Confucianism as cultural support for managerialist identity regulation

The implicit role of a Confucianism ethic as a facilitator for identity regulation in universities is a dominant theme among the participants of the current study. It has also been found in similar contexts (e.g., Chan, Lee, and Yang 2017; Lee, Wan, and Sirat 2017). The interviewees expressed a high level of identification (individuals' perception of a sense of belonging to their organisations) and a positive bond and loyalty with their universities. For ECAs, identification

with their universities became the normative identity work, where all of the regulations applied within their universities are seen as highly acceptable. These academics took pride in identifying as members of their organisations, and conducted identity work in alignment with the universities' requirements. One ECA identified herself as 'a cell of one body' in terms of her integration and harmony with the organisation, and she defined her role as 'a person, a researcher, an expert; and I contribute to maintaining a good image of my university' (N2).

Another ECA felt a compulsion to follow her university's norms as it was accepted that personal career development aligned with such loyalty:

'I am an academic of an organisation, so I have to follow its norms if I want to develop within this system. The norms will be like this forever, so I have to be compliant with them.' (N16)

Moreover, as those ECAs hold a strong identification with their universities, they viewed their identity work as an activity that not only fulfils personal development but also contributes to their respective organisation's development as well, defined by emerging managerialist agendas:

'I won't place my freedom above my organisation's (collective benefits)' (N22).

'I think it [studying abroad] was suited to what I needed and wanted, and what my university wanted to do in terms of developing more overseas-educated academics to develop its brand' (N9).

This means due to their loyalty to their respective university, the pervasive Confucian ethic of loyalty, pride and harmony has created a supportive mechanism for Vietnamese university management's push for global excellence and competitive advantage. Of course, this allegiance of a top-down form of organising reflects the acceptance of a high power distance with Vietnamese culture.

In the stories shared by ECAs, top-down managerialist practices underpinning this push for global competitiveness have been applied mainly around ‘*research and teaching time*’. In other words, academics have to fulfil the assigned workload they need to carry regarding research and teaching activities. In addition, they are assessed in terms of ‘*research points*’, which means they need to publish on journals indexed by Scopus or equivalent. Whilst this practice is, to some extent and in some universities, flexible because ‘academics can increase their teaching hours and reduce their research hours’ (N16) or vice versa, the significant change here is that all measures aim to maximise academic performance. This performative change is seen positively by the ECAs in terms of organisational and individual effectiveness:

‘I think changes in management are innovative - they are great jumps, which will cultivate further renovative changes’ (N5)

‘...those actions (managerial practices) are essential because they (universities) need these so that academics take their work more seriously.’ (N15)

External collectivism as cultural support for managerialist identity regulation

The acceptance of such individual performative measures with the aim of developing an institutional competitiveness globally was further underpinned by the collectivist ethic, applied externally, as academics were increasingly motivated by connecting with other individuals beyond their immediate university and country. In collectivist cultures, such as in Vietnam, individuals appreciate this wider connection within significant relationships (Yuki 2003). In addition to collegial relationships internally, ECAs here recognised the emerging importance of building external relational networks (King and Bond 1985), to build such global excellence. An ECA said she found it difficult to develop internally without her wider network. She reflected on her working relationships within the university and the significance of such broader relationships:

‘I always feel I am fighting alone. There is no one working in my field, so I feel very lonely...I want to have at least another person who can challenge me so I can have an opportunity to reflect if I need to change anything...’ (N12).

Other ECAs highlighted the importance of building and sustaining a healthy external network for professional development:

‘Social skills are essential to maintain good relationships with colleagues, professors or organisations. In research, I can see a very important role in networking’ (N6).

‘In my opinion, to have a sustainable career, you have to know how to work in groups...’ (N2)

Furthermore, these networks are not only where academics construct their identities, but also where academics confirm their identity distinctiveness:

‘When people know my networks, they can understand the distinctiveness of my identity, who I am. Hence, I think they will have a different view of me in comparison with others.’ (N21)

Moreover, this wider collective spirit is highlighted through the motivation and responsibility academics feel towards fostering a significant impact on wider society, rather than only engaging identity work for their personal purposes:

‘Our research only has an impact when we share it, so that everyone can use it. What is the point if you do your research just for yourself?’ (N11)

‘If you are a good academic but your work is only disseminated within your university, you cannot inspire many others.’ (N19)

Collegiality as a cultural constraint against managerialist identity regulation

Other ECA identity narratives point towards a high collectivist ethic which represents a tension with the more individualistic aspects of managerialist practices. One of the manifestations of collectivism is the importance of maintaining the intragroup relationship - the relationship between members of an organisation or working unit (Yuki 2003). Therefore, academics identified not only with their university as an institution, but with their academic colleagues as well. This finding is also reflected in Burnes, Wend and By (2013) research, who point out universities comprise groups of scholars from different disciplines and departments whose primary allegiance may be to their own peer groups, subject area and careers, rather than to the university as a whole. Collegiality legitimises different views and priorities and ensures that it is taken into account when making decisions (Hardy 1991). ECAs in this study showed a clear indication that they embraced collegiality and collective care for their colleagues as a means to develop their identity:

‘I always share what I have learned with my colleagues. It is a way to deepen my learning’ (N19).

‘Without support from colleagues and managers, and a good working environment, I would have given up. I would have left everything behind. In a positive and supportive working environment, I have the motivation to turn challenges into opportunities’ (N2).

However, some ECAs were concerned that they were focusing too much on the collective good and felt aggrieved that they had to sacrifice their own interest. In that respect, the collectivist culture is seen as a constraint for academics’ identity work because academics’ identity work still retains its individual nature (Alvesson and Spicer 2016). Hence, despite the supportive impact of the Confucian ethic on the practice of managerialist identity regulation, ECAs highlighted that they experienced conflict between the impact of a collectivist mindset and the increasing individualist managerial controls, around the nature of emerging academic work. Strong allegiance to intragroup loyalty, or collegiality was identified as an underlying tension

with the more individualistic managerialist identity regulation, such as around research performance. ECAs in this study stated that they sometimes felt compelled to put research work aside in order to carry out other responsibilities, such as administration work.

For example:

‘I am an academic, but I had to do administration work. My academic work is important, but we had nobody to do administration, so I had to do it... administration was the shared task. But because nobody did it, I had to do it’ (N16).

The above ‘shared task’ comment highlights that ECAs seem to view administration work as a responsibility to maintain collegial relationships, rather than as a task imposed by management.

A similar comment shows the significance of maintaining such relationships:

‘Life is impossible with personal self only; we have to be aware of what we are doing to make the people around us pleased...’(N33).

In addition, the collegiate orientation seems to drive ECAs to engage with activities that prevent them from forming distinctive personal identities and more towards shared identities.

One of them expressed it in a Vietnamese proverb:

‘There are no fish if the river’s water is too pure. We have no friend if we are too good.’
(N6)

The same person highlights the pervasiveness of collegiality:

‘Although there is no target, I still force [myself] to do some things, to be similar to others...’(N6).

This collegiate orientation can even become a threat of identity construction if ECAs do not try to get along with colleagues:

‘Social relationships at work can impact badly on what you do...For example, if people don’t like you, or if you do not get along with the head of the department, they won’t support you...’(N23)

“There is some sort of working environment which makes you not only unhappy, but also want to leave it. You feel so disappointed with colleagues’ (N9)

“I wanted to separate myself from that university to develop my capacity, and to understand myself better because when I was there, I was not myself’ (N30).

In the face of managerial pressures, there was evidence to suggest that ECAs started to develop ‘time-out’ tactics to offset those cultural constraints. Moreover, they reflected upon their time out within a western university and how they crafted time and space to pursue their individual research interests:

‘I used to work very hard without thinking about anything else. Since I started my study here (abroad), I have taken time for myself and my research, and I feel so good. In the past, I could not say no to my colleagues. I did not want to spoil the collegiality, so I agreed to cover their tasks.’(N6).

‘I just followed organisational rules and quietly created a different routine for myself. If I had not put my head down, who would have let me pursue my PhD study overseas?’ (N10).

Discussion

Our research has explored the identity alignment and tensions of Vietnamese ECAs in their response to managerialist practices within a Confucianist and collectivist culture. The narratives of those ECAs show that the collectivist/Confucianist cultural orientations in Vietnamese HE have an interdependent relationship with managerialism, which represents a cultural-ideological mode of control (Alvesson and Willmott 2002). This concurs with Tran et al. (2017) who also identified alignment and tensions within Vietnamese HE, by focusing on senior leaders within two universities. By focusing on ECAs from 11 universities across Vietnam, our research offers an insight into the lived experience of such identity tensions from the perspective of more precarious workers.

This study advances the extant literature of identity work regarding the effects of managerialism in a different context of South East Asia. In the context of Vietnam, it highlights the complexity of cultural forces which both supports and threatens the emergent managerialist practices. The Confucianist ethic appears to support managerialism through its organisational focus on harmony and loyalty. The collectivist ethic was found to both support and acted against managerialism. From an external collectivist perspective, ECAs in this context seem to have become more globally and societally orientated; thereby tending to support the global ambitions of managerialism. Our findings are aligned with the extant literature regarding ECAs' desire to contribute to society and hope 'to be good' (Fitzmaurice 2013). In contrast, the internal collectivist ethic around building collegiality in the context of Vietnam acts against the individualistic goals of managerialism. Reale and Primeri (2014) focus on the persistence of collegiality, despite legislative reforms and a willingness to overcome or reduce it. However, regardless of how much ECAs would prefer effective collegial relationships, collegiality in academia has still been hard to realise (Bristow, Robinson, and Ratle 2019). Consequently, there is a resultant frustration around these identity tensions, which we speculate will ultimately impact on ECAs' identity work. Therefore, we argue that Vietnamese universities would do well to craft their own form of managerialist practices, which reward behaviour on a more collegiate, collectivist rather than on a competitive basis. By doing this, universities can capitalise upon the embedded collegiality between academics, emerging from the collectivist culture, whilst maintaining the Confucianist predisposition towards achieving harmony between personal and organisational goals. This finding reminds of the argument made by Burnes, Wend and By (2013), who recognise that the nature and effectiveness of collegiality rely on the willingness of academics to act collegially. Similarly, Marini and Reale (2015) showed that collegiality could thrive, even when universities are 'managerially

led'. Managerialism and collegialism can coexist within a university (Weert, 2001) to fit the needs of 21st-century universities (Burnes, Wend and By, 2013).

Following the above lines of argument, we suggest a distinctive path to study academic life and academia. The dominant literature of 'instrumental individualism' has brought a gloomy and, to some extent, negative feeling for 21st century academia where managerialist actions are not avoidable. In other words, the more intensely the literature is directed to the debate around instrumental individualism of academics' identity work the lonelier and individualist academic work would appear. Alternatively, it is suggested to look for more examples like the Vietnamese context, where academics' identity work is not necessarily always around individual/personal projects. Even managerialism can work more effectively when it can motivate and encourage collegiality. This distinctive focus on research about academics' identity work can offer more lessons for an individualist context, in order to blunt managerialist pressures in academic life, whilst sharpening collegialism for more effective academic governance.

We follow Mignot-Gérard (2010), who suggests that managerialism can be successfully enacted by rectors or presidents who are able to give substance to the culture – in this case of Confucianism and collegiality. Could a form of 'soft' managerialism – a managerialism offering leeway for individual freedom - combined with a collective recognition for Vietnamese scholars be compatible with collegiality (Deem and Brehony 2005) and provide a different path dependency? Managerialism must accommodate and guarantee room for some forms of collegialism, particularly to govern academic concerns, such as research and teaching to be effective (Marini and Reale, 2015).

In terms of how such a soft managerialist hybrid could be enacted, we argue that the Vietnamese HE system could develop flexible performance-related practices, which measure and reward academics for not only their individual performance, but their collective

performance as well, to align with collegial norms. This flexibility would also reflect the relatively less excessive competitive demands caused by managerialism than in Western academia such as in the UK setting (Clarke and Knights 2015). This finding also concurs with Tran et al. (2017: 1902), who argue the following, ‘creative borrowing and flexible indigenisation or adaptation to suit local contexts are crucial to the success of education reform.’ This follows Chan et al.(2017), who muse over a new Asian form of hybridisation of higher education, which could selectively borrow from the West, but draws upon its own traditions.

The findings in our research support previous studies which argue that ECAs’ performance and work efficacy are undermined by factors such as the lack of support in the workplace and a supportive network (Hemmings 2012). Last but not least, our research highlights the methodological significance of choosing foreign-trained ECAs as sources of cultural reflexivity, drawing on a wider knowledge of managerialist discourse.

Conclusion: Future Research Challenges & Limitations

In summary, a significant finding from our research shows that Vietnamese ECAs view managerialist practices in a more ambivalent fashion. Whilst recognising collegiate tensions, the Confucian and external collectivist orientation appears to further a positive view of managerialism as not only advancing academic careers, but reforming institutions around an innovative future.

Like many other studies, this one cannot avoid some limitations that we should acknowledge to support your interpretations better. This research is drawn from a modest sample of Vietnamese ECAs between 2017 and 2019. We suggest that future research could focus on a wider set of academics, not just ECAs, such as managers and senior academics. Such samples might reveal different levels of identity work due to the difference in generations in a special context like Vietnam. A further impetus for research around ways in which

collegiality in different contexts may mitigate potential negative impacts of managerialism on academic working lives.

We conclude by calling for more longitudinal, qualitative research around the way in which managerialism is implemented and how it affects academic identity work within Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries. Will Vietnamese universities adapt their practices to manage the collegiate tensions which are identified within this research and follow the Vietnamese proverb, which reflects its collectivist norm? *‘Just like swallows that typically fly in flocks to signal the beginning of spring, one swallow is not enough to indicate spring’s arrival’*.

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