CONTEXTUALISING SERVICE LEARNING

FOR

VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION

By

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents for their love and trust in me,

to my husband for understanding me,

and to my children for their wonderful company.

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ABSTRACT

The term ‘service learning’ has appeared on the horizon of Vietnamese higher education in the past few decades and is one among a wide range of pedagogical approaches that have been imported from the West. ‘Looking outward’ (Nguyen & Tran, 2017), especially to the West, is a legacy of long-lasting foreign domination that has shaped political and social changes in Viet Nam. Despite its Western roots, the service learning approach also appears to have accommodated Vietnamese ideological influences associated with creating a more capable workforce, fulfilling socialist responsibilities, and cultivating Confucian moral values. This form of experiential learning is expected to respond to the dreams of the nation by producing young graduates who possess the expertise and ethics to meet Ho Chi Minh’s socialist ideology ‘*Vừa hồng, vừa chuyên’* (Both socialist-minded and professionally competent), who are better prepared for a modernised and globalised workforce. Driven by these ideologies, service learning has become increasingly popular in Vietnamese universities. Yet, despite the widespread adoption of the approach, the contextualisation of service learning is underexplored in academic research. This study aims to address the research gap by investigating the inception, challenges and opportunities, and implications for the growth and expansion of service learning in Vietnamese context.

This multisite case study, which involved participants from four universities in Viet Nam, employed an interpretivist paradigm and Kuan-Hsing Chen’s (2010) *Asia as Method* as theoretical orientations. An interpretivist lens enabled an exploration of the subjective experiences of those who have been involved in service learning projects and the meanings they construct. Meanwhile, *Asia as Method* highlighted the specificity of the local context and offered a more radical edge to an interpretivist lens, particularly in terms of proposing changes to service learning in Vietnamese higher education. A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) of interview, document, and observation data revealed three distinguishing features of service learning in Vietnamese higher education: the importance of communities as a means for educational change, the challenges associated with navigating power relationships, and the significance of benevolence as moral value.

My findings suggested important implications for policy development and service learning practices in Vietnamese higher education. In order to bridge the gap in literature on service learning in a socialist, communist, and Southeast Asian developing country, a

framework for institutionalising service learning in Viet Nam is proposed, together with a set of tactics to support practitioners to sustain their service learning initiatives. I envisage that the framework will serve as a reference point for service learning initiatives in universities in the wider Asian region, particularly those with a Confucian heritage, ex-colonised territories, and developing countries.

Keywords: service learning, Vietnamese higher education, *Asia as Method*

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Gap and Research Questions

Vietnamese higher education is now in a fourth decade of reform. After Viet Nam gained independence in 1975, the 1986 *Đổi Mới* economic reforms and subsequent 2006-2020 'acceleration stage' loosened state control over the economy. Universities in Viet Nam experienced greater popularisation, privatisation, and commercialisation. Higher education is now open to more students from the middle and lower classes and has expanded through international funders and business-university partnerships. As part of the widespread economic reforms, the Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA, 2006-2020) (Resolution 14/2005/NQ-CP, 2005) has aimed to support greater institutional autonomy and to achieve higher quality in teaching and learning and research in order to produce a workforce and knowledge for economic development. It was unclear that HERA has influenced how higher education changed its recognition of civic engagement responsibilities towards community because even before 2006 universities had emphasised civic engagement through socialist political education courses, volunteering, and community engagement campaigns in curricular and extra-curricular programmes. However, some legislative changes and disciplinary practices that have appeared since HERA seem to suggest that civic engagement has become an increasingly important mission for Vietnamese higher education, in addition to teaching and learning and research.

The duty to create socialist citizens, who possess the capacities and moral standards to serve the economy and society, has been a longstanding expectation of higher education in Viet Nam (Law 08/2012/QH13, 2012; Law 34/2018/QH14, 2018). However, the practicalisation of this duty has been criticised as one-sided and fragmented with too much emphasis on political courses and superficial volunteering community engagement programmes (Doan, 2005; T. K. Nguyễn, 2015; S.H., 2014). Furthermore, graduate students have been perceived as lacking practical experience and the soft skills needed to contribute to economic development and global integration (World Bank, 2008). In response to these critiques, university teachers across a range of disciplines have integrated service learning[1] into their courses, in the expectation that this could bring practical, moral, and social aspects

[1] The definition of 'service learning' will be discussed in Chapter 3

together with disciplinary content. Through initiatives that at least date back to 2007, service learning has gained more interest, and a wide range of training programmes, workshops, and conferences have involved an increasing number of universities across the country.

While service learning has been defined in different ways, it can connect academic course content to service in a community organisation. Students' reflections on their experiences can, in turn, enable them to gain deeper understanding of the course content. Information about service learning in Vietnamese higher education can readily be found in public media such as online magazines, social media, and university websites. However, it has been under-researched in Vietnamese higher education, which creates a barrier to understanding and disseminating effective pedagogical practices and organisational development. This study aims to contribute to addressing this research gap, with a particular focus on Vietnamese higher education's social responsibility, and also aims to add a Vietnamese perspective to the scholarship on service learning. It explores the following three questions:

1. Why has service learning emerged, and how is it conceptualised and practised, in Vietnamese universities?
2. What are the constraints to, and what are the opportunities for, service learning in Vietnamese higher education?
3. How could service learning be further contextualised for Vietnamese higher education?

1.2 Research Motivation

I am a lecturer in the Faculty of English Linguistics and Literature at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (HCMUSSH), which is a member of Ho Chi Minh - Viet Nam National University (HCM-VNU). As an English linguistics and teacher education lecturer, I teach courses about curriculum and pedagogical approaches. My own English learning background and teaching has meant that I have become familiar with Western pedagogies, especially in language teaching. I am particularly interested in enhancing learner autonomy in foreign language education, which I believe holds potential for Vietnamese students whose learning style has been strongly influenced by Confucian heritage culture. Along with teaching, I have also held managerial positions, with responsibilities including designing practicum experiences and internship field trips as part of the Faculty's curriculum.

There have been three critical moments in my career that led me to a research focus on service learning in Vietnamese higher education. In 2010, I learnt about 'Espérance ACTI' (Aiuto e Cooperazione tra Ticino ed Indocina), a Swiss non-governmental organisation that works to provide aid to Indochinese countries, from friends. They were Vietnamese members of the organisation and had raised funds to assist regional development in Viet Nam. I was moved that an organisation far away in Europe would care so much about the difficulties of people in developing countries like Viet Nam. Since then, I have been burning with the desire to do something for my country, especially for people who have struggled with hardship in their lives.

Another incident that struck my heart was in 2013 when I led the internship students of the Translation and Interpreting discipline to communities in the North, where they practised as tour guide interpreters. This internship was part of the curricular requirements for the English bachelor programme. One of the places we visited was an ancient village where 18^{th}-19^{th} century traditions such as architecture, crafts, and farming techniques were still preserved by villagers. My students were, like me, moved by the pristine beauty of the village. However, we observed a vulnerable community: young people had left the village for employment in big cities, children struggled to walk several kilometres and swim across a river full of swift currents to get to school, and elderly people were working manually on their farms which yielded poor crops. We asked ourselves what role we were playing in the community: Visitors? Intellectuals? Donors? Any of these roles suggested that we were just outsiders: not a part of the community. This experience left me intrigued about what my students and I could do to alleviate the disadvantages of community members, and what role universities can play to strengthen communities.

The idea for this study also stemmed from an opportunity to attend an orientation workshop on service learning in 2014, sponsored by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung fund (German) and presented by the Center for Educational Excellence at the University of Sciences. Although the term 'service learning' seemed strange to me, the idea of practical and experiential learning was closely related to the practicum and internship part of my role. Moreover, the course-based nature of service learning made me realise its potential to fulfill my desire to make a difference through my professional work. As I searched for information about the application of the approach in Vietnamese higher education programmes, I was surprised to find that service learning had been adopted long ago by faculties of several

universities and non-profit organisations. This sparked my interest in finding out about their experiences, particularly in different disciplines, so that I could replicate their practices in my teaching.

1.3 Study Scope and Terms

This study investigates service learning in four selected universities in Viet Nam. The participating institutions represent a range of national, regional, and provincial universities and disciplines that have integrated service learning as a part or a whole course syllabus. While the study focuses on undergraduate courses, international literature related to service learning in colleges and postgraduate courses has also been considered.

The terms 'Asia' and 'Viet Nam' can be understood differently; therefore, it is useful to introduce their complexities for the purposes of this thesis. As a large and diverse continent, Asia can be a problematic term to define because of its complex geographical, demographic, cultural, religious, historical, and political intersections. Even in a cartographic definition, the meaning of Asia is made through "force of habit" (Vukovich, 2013, p. 587). From a post-colonial perspective, Vukovich (2013) has contended that 'Asia' is ambiguous. In Western-based Asian studies, Asia has been defined by colonial and imperialist history, which placed the continent in a dialectic binary with European and American colonisers and featured it as a negative space or as having exotic differences from the West. While Southeast Asia has been considered the most colonised area of the world, there have been very few academic analyses of Southern Asian post-coloniality. Chua (2008) has pointed out that this was due first, to language barriers, as most of the knowledge of post-coloniality is written in non-European languages and cannot be communicated to the Western world where most of the colonisers originated; second, to ongoing political instabilities in these countries that distracted attention from the consequences of colonisation for cultures and societies; and third, to rapid economic development that has limited the time for a critical examination of the past to recover voices and sentiments suppressed through colonial periods.

In this thesis, I use the term 'Viet Nam' with a decolonising intent. In Vietnamese, the country's name is written as two words, but in English as one word with two syllables (Vietnam). Vietnamese is a mono-syllabic language while English is a multi-syllabic language, which may be why English users tend to convert Vietnamese (and other languages') mono-syllabic words into multi-syllabic words. *Việt Nam* was officially used in

the early 19th century under the *Nguyễn* Dynasty, but its origin has been dated back to the 14th century. *Việt* is an anthropological term to indicate the original tribe/race of Vietnamese people, and *Nam* carries the geographic sense to denote the independent area to the south of China (Q. H. Phạm, 2013). *Việt Nam* has been changed several times under Chinese domination but Vietnamese people have always insisted on using this name to represent their independence (Trần, 1920). While the term 'Vietnam' is an accepted spelling in English, in this study – following other academic texts such as Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2020) – I preserve the name of the country as two words (while omitting tone signals and the circumflex e, for ease of reading). This is not to oppose the use of 'Vietnam,' but to suggest a different perspective that relieves the feeling of Western influence. It signals the post-colonial inflection in this study that gives consideration to the voices, experiences of resistance, and post-war conditions of Viet Nam, as well as the effects of more recent economic colonisation and globalisation.

Much of the argument presented in this thesis also centres on the concept of an 'East-West' dichotomy. The contrast between East and West appears to be associated with the Christian belief that when a human being died, the soul migrated west to follow the sunset and, like the sun, to rise again. In this conception, the West is a better place to be reborn, while the East is viewed as impure and dark (McNeill, 1997). The book *Orientalism: Western concepts of the Orient* (Said, 1978) has further established the concept of the 'East-West dichotomy' as the binary relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. This questioned the structures of power, knowledge, hegemony, culture, and imperialism that were embedded in the colonial discourse of the Orient as the other (Burney, 2012). Nowadays, the concept refers to a perceived contrast between Eastern and Western worlds, especially in cultural and religious rather than geographical terms, and its boundaries vary according to who is using the terms and their purposes. This study uses the concept of 'East-West' to highlight matters of culture and colonialism as they have influenced service learning in Vietnamese higher education.

1.4 Research Context

1.4.1 Political Domination and its Effects on Vietnamese Higher Education

This and the following section sketch the higher education context in which service learning has emerged in Viet Nam. In response to the economy's rapid development during the 30-year period of *Đổi Mới* (1986-2006), Vietnamese universities have gone through enormous changes in organisation, range, and quality. While there are many distinctly Vietnamese characteristics of the higher education system, the changes have been strongly influenced by a legacy of colonisation and a desire for Western recognition in an increasingly globalised world.

Viet Nam has experienced many surges of domination in its history, which explains why Vietnamese higher education has been strongly influenced by Chinese Confucianism, French colonialism, and Soviet and United States powers (Nguyen, 2012; Pham & Fry, 2004). Under the domination of China for more than 1000 years (111BC-938AD) that some authors have referred to as an early form of colonisation (Burr, 2014; Shackford, 2000), Vietnamese education endured a strong influence of Confucianism although there existed some modified values. Confucianism was considered the foundation for the official education system and folk teachings in families, villages, and communities in medieval times (Ly, 2015). In terms of formal education, teachers, scholars, students, and mentors were supposed to strictly embody Confucian virtues. *Văn Miếu Quốc Tử Giám* (the Royal College established at the Temple of Literature), founded in 1076, was the first higher education institution established to educate bureaucratic scholars or mandarins who worked for the state (Dang, 2009; Nguyen, 2012) and is recorded as the oldest higher education institution in Southeast Asia (Pham & Fry, 2004).

Like other Asian countries holding Confucian values, Viet Nam has always appreciated education and intellectuals. Under Vietnamese feudalism, teachers (or masters) were ranked second to the king (Nguyen et al., 2006). Teachers were considered unique sources of knowledge and thus their teachings were to obey, not to question (Truong et al., 2017). In contrast to most other Confucian societies where nepotism was popular, under Vietnamese feudalism, any student who passed the highest in doctoral-equivalent examinations could become a civil official in royal bureaucracy, despite their family backgrounds (Dang, 2009). As another trait of Confucianism, education at all formal levels

and in the family has emphasised the importance of knowing how to behave towards others and living in harmony with community and nature (Burr, 2014). For example, Sino-Vietnamese proverbs with Confucian values are taught to very young children and the banner '*Tiên học lễ, hậu học văn'* (Learning manners first, learning the letters later) has been posted in most primary classrooms throughout Viet Nam over the years. In folk and family education, young people are also taught that a plan can only be successful when it is in harmony with the will of God, the land, and the people, as in the proverb *'Thiên thời, địa lợi, nhân hòa'* (T. A. Tran, 2013).

Confucianism has arguably had negative influences on Vietnamese society. For example, the system that promoted scholars to state mandarins was thought to affect the national economy and society because it produced people who were good at letters and literature rather than administration (Ly, 2015). Some of the negative legacies of Confucianism influencing contemporary Vietnamese higher education have been "the lack of curriculum covering practical or technological skills, its looking down on manual work" (Pham & Fry, 2004, p. 201), and the overfocus on tests and examination (Nguyen et al., 2015; Pham & Bui, 2019; T. T. Tran, 2013a, 2013b; T. T. T. Tran, 2019). The hierarchy between teachers and students, and seniors and juniors, together with face-saving practices, has restrained the critical contributions of the lower-powered towards higher-powered people, affecting the development of higher education (Tran, Tran, Nguyen, & Ngo, 2020). As a result of passive learning, students have been considered intelligent but not self-confident, or creative (Truong et al., 2017). Yet, while a Confucian learning style has been widely perceived as rote-memorisation, Tan (2015) has argued that the concept of *si* (thinking or mindfulness) involves an active inquiry into issues and inferential thinking. In contrast to 'rote-memorisation,' *si* emphasises "the need for us to take ownership of our own learning, engage in higher order thinking, and reflectively apply the lessons learnt in our lives" (p. 428). Confucius highlighted the importance of experience through "three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest" (Trinh & Kolb, 2011, p. 3). Many Confucian sayings reflect the importance of practical experience in the learning process, for example, '*Học là học để mà hành. Vừa hành vừa học mới thành người khôn'* (Learning is to practise. Learning and practising will make one become wisdom) or '*Học phải đi đôi với hành'* (Study goes as a pair with practice).

The second phase of domination was French colonisation. In 1858, aiming to find resources for economic development, France began its plan to overthrow Confucian-Vietnamese feudalism and started Western colonialism in Viet Nam (1858-1945). The most significant heritage left by the French colonisation of the country was the language. The Romanised writing system known as *Quốc Ngữ* (National Language) had a profound influence on education, society, and politics. Despite its initial rejection by Vietnamese people, this script was found to be easier than *Hán* and *Nôm* Chinese scripts for nationalists to propagandise anticolonial ideologies (Pham & Fry, 2004). The introduction of *Quốc Ngữ* in the education system also promoted Western liberal ideas and the notion of a free state. The Romanisation of Vietnamese, therefore, "fitted its design of mass literacy and democratization" (Bianco, 2001, p. 3). The University of Indochina – the former Viet Nam National Universities in Ha Noi (VNU), established in 1906 by French colonists – used French as the delivery language, popularised Western scientific knowledge and methodologies, and prepared graduates for local administration and professional departments.

The period of French colonial rule also marked the start of a 'looking outward' preoccupation among Vietnamese people. The idea was to look at national liberation movement models overseas for better revolutionaries to rise against French colonial rule. For example, Phan Boi Chau, inspired by the Meiji Reform in Japan, initiated what became *Phong trào Đông Du* (Eastward Movement) that called for Vietnamese youth to separate from the national education system and to learn from overseas countries, especially Japan, to mobilise and reclaim national liberation. Responding to the call, the young Ho Chi Minh (who later became the founder of the Vietnamese Communist Party and leader of the Vietnamese revolutionary movement), decided to start his study abroad. He became a significant example of somebody who learned not only from Asian models but also from other countries in Europe, America, and Africa (Duiker, 2000) to enrich his experiences and nurture his nationalist enthusiasm to fight against French colonial rule (Pham & Fry, 2004). This preparation contributed to leadership that made the historical victory of the August 1945 Revolution possible and reclaimed control from French colonists. This idea of looking outward is reprised in current 'policy borrowing' practice in Vietnamese higher education, discussed in detail in the next section.

When the French returned shortly after the August 1945 Revolution, higher education was abandoned until the 1955 Geneva Treaty put the system under a Soviet model run by the

communist Democratic Republic of Viet Nam in the North and a United States model led by the US-backed Republic of Viet Nam in the South. Contemporary higher education became a mix of the Soviet "disciplinary curriculum that emphasised applied science and specialized knowledge" in the North, and the United States-influenced "integration of theoretical and practical knowledge in credit-based curriculum" in the South (Nguyen, 2012, pp. 128–129). The Soviet model, according to Dang (2009), "separated teaching activities from research activities and left the governance of institutions to particular line ministries" (p. 9). In the 1950s-60s, although China and North Viet Nam followed the Soviet model, China switched to the system of cultural authenticity and creativity under Mao Tse-Tung's determination that later paved the way for the Chinese Cultural Revolution. North Viet Nam, on the other hand, retained the Soviet model mainly because its historical and political conditions required specialists to serve construction in the North.

Across these different periods of political domination, there have been strong connections between universities and social movements in resisting dominating powers. Despite the lack of academic studies on this topic, historical works and contemporary media have provided evidence that internship and volunteering programmes that existed in Northern universities, especially in teacher education and healthcare, became indispensable partners in revolutions against Western domination (Hanoi National University of Education, 2011; K. T. Nguyễn, 2015; Nguyễn, 2017; Trần, 2015). These studies have also pointed out the close relationship between Vietnamese universities and communities, and have suggested that civic engagement on the part of higher education institutions has played a key role in the country's liberation and independence in 1975.

1.4.2 1986-2006 *Đổi Mới* and Socialist-Oriented Market Economy

Along with the influence of political powers, Vietnamese higher education has more recently been affected by the market-based economy and the influence of neoliberalism. After the withdrawal of dominant powers, Viet Nam made significant changes to its higher education system, first through *Đổi Mới* (1986-2006) and then the HERA (2006-2020). These two milestones are introduced in this section, and returned to in Chapter 2, because they fundamentally frame conceptions of civic engagement and service learning in Vietnamese higher education.

When the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was about to dissolve in the late 1980s, Viet Nam faced a dilemma about whether to follow or to abandon socialism. The Vietnamese government did not want it to become a capitalist market economy like most other former communist countries but preferred an economy in which the Communist party could retain its power (Dang, 2009; Nguyen, 2012). With the *Đổi Mới* economic reforms, the Vietnamese government's initial aim was to loosen the state-controlled economy with "no intention of privatization or any move towards a market economy" (Ngo, 2018, p. 17). It was not until the late 1990s, and recognising the benefits of a freer economy and the stable authority of the Communist Party, that the government instated a socialist-oriented market economy. This decision defined a shift from central management and state subsidies to an economy that remained under the administration of the socialist state but functioned in accordance with market principles and encouraged the private sector and economic competition (Ngo, 2018).

Đổi Mới has had far-reaching effects on Vietnamese society and especially higher education which has been transformed significantly (George, 2010; Hayden & Lam, 2010; Nguyen, 2012; T. T. Tran, 2013a; Tran, Tran, Nguyen, & Ngo, 2020). Higher education has become increasingly popular and is no longer confined to the elites. From 1992-1993 to 2006-2007, the number of universities increased dramatically from nine to 139 universities (Hayden & Lam, 2010) and reached 237 in 2019-2020[2]. In 1986, less than 2% of the population were enrolled in tertiary education; this increased to over 28% in 2019, according to data from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics. Another effect of *Đổi Mới* has been increasing privatisation and differentiation in institutional organisation. Non-public institutions have become part of the higher education system, including private, semi-public, vocational, and business training institutions, and those founded by individuals and organisations (Hayden & Dao, 2010; Nguyen, 2012). Public higher education institutions have been permitted to collect tuition fees (Hayden & Lam, 2010) and student loans and equity-based scholarships have been introduced (Dang, 2009). Partnerships with businesses and industries, and commercialisation of research and services, have become some of the strategies through which higher education institutions have diversified their income sources (Nguyen, 2009).

Among the changes stimulated by *Đổi Mới*, two larger-in-scale, multidisciplinary, research-oriented, national universities were created by merging universities and research

[2] From the MoET University Statistical Data in 2019-2020

institutes in Ha Noi (in 1993) and Ho Chi Minh city (in 1995). Prior to that, the universities specialised in different disciplines and existed independently with their own management systems. The establishment of the VNUs was considered a big step towards institutional autonomy and cost reduction. Hayden and Lam (2010) describe the two universities as operating:

> under charters given directly to them by the government. These universities enjoy special privileges, including that the prime minister appoints their presidents. The two universities are different also in that they have more academic and financial autonomy than any of the other public-sector institutions. They can, for example, make a great many more budgetary decisions without reference to a ministry. They can also, if they choose, depart from the national curriculum frameworks approved by the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) – though, in practice, it seems that they generally conform to these frameworks. (p. 20)

This multi-disciplinary university model, unlike the Soviet tradition of university specialising in only one discipline, has also been considered a facilitator for research collaboration and idea sharing among many Vietnamese universities at present (Tran, Tran, Nguyen, & Ngo, 2020).

The establishment of these universities was a dynamic example of how Vietnamese higher education was influenced by the country's economic change, especially in terms of funding mechanisms. The decision aligned with *Đổi Mới* policies to decentralise state management (Bui, 2014), prepare local human capital for globalisation (Dang, 2009; Ngo et al., 2006), and privatise education in agreement with international donors such as the World Bank (Dang, 2009). In an economy that depends heavily on international lending, structural adjustment policies in education have ensured the stability of foreign capital (Le, 2014) and have shifted away from Soviet centralised planning to accommodate Western decentralisation and privatisation. An example of structural adjustments was the inclusion of private universities and colleges with considerable financial autonomy over tuition fees, charging for other services and products, and budget and spending management (Le, 2014; Le & Hayden, 2017).

Viet Nam's economic change has been linked to neo-liberalism by many commentators (Edquist, 2006; Le, 2016; Marginson, 2013). Gainsborough (2010), for example, argues that although *Đổi Mới* commenced at the later stage of neo-liberalism, it possessed nearly all the traits of this global neo-liberal trend: the market becomes the

determiner of the way goods and services are distributed, while the state facilitates and maintains economic and political stability and provides public infrastructure. However, Painter (2005) argues that a different version of neo-liberalism has prevailed in Viet Nam. Noting the prominence of state-owned enterprises and public investment in infrastructure and industry development, Painter contends that "Vietnam's development strategies, including marketisation, are strongly influenced by models other than neo-liberalism, and follow a trajectory of their own" (p. 262). Masina (2012) explains that Viet Nam did not adhere to a Western liberal model of governance but appeared instead to look to the success stories of other Asian industrializers (such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore) where the state continued to exert its control over key fields of the economy.

Although liberalisation has promised to transform the Vietnamese higher education system as part of a more modernised, industrialised, and knowledge-based nation, there has been growing concern about some of its effects. One example is the various motivations of donors. Major national funds and loans from the World Bank and Asian Development Bank have played a significant role in expanding the scale and scope of higher education (Le, 2014). The World Bank (2020), for example, has maintained that Vietnamese universities have the potential to seek additional, non-state resources and should make fund-raising a major priority, and that there should be tax reductions for firms and individuals who donate to tertiary education. However, the lending conditions of financial institutions have exerted considerable influence over the direction of higher education (Dang, 2009). At an institutional level, international aid agencies (such as AusAID, USAID, and IrishAid), institutional grants, and sponsorships have strengthened foreign influence to promote mutual interests such as the internationalisation of higher education, sustainable development, and democracy building. There are no official statistics on foreign investment and donation and how these funds work is unclear to the public (George, 2010).

Foreign domination and *Đổi Mới* have influenced many aspects of Vietnamese higher education and have strongly informed the way that institutions have perceived their civic engagement role. It is also important to note that civic engagement in Vietnamese universities is deeply underpinned by common religious and ideological values. Confronting many foreign invasions, Vietnamese people are proud of their creativity in adapting external influences while preserving traditional culture (Nguyen, 2021; Nguyen 2016). Drawing from the *Tam Giáo* (Three Religions: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism) that came to Viet

Nam under Chinese domination, Vietnamese people collectively share an appreciation for education, an obligation to family and community (Dalton et al., 2002; Pham, 2003), respect for others and higher authority (Truong, 2013), and a desire for harmony (He et al., 2011). Vietnamese culture also encourages acts of benevolence and tolerance and a belief in Karma, the rule of cause and effect (Q. T. N. Nguyen, 2016). Since the country's independence, contemporary socialist ideologies have been built on the values of independence and freedom, along with a focus on happiness, democracy, justice and civilisation (Phan, 2015). Given the richness of this values system, Q. T. N. Nguyen (2016) has proposed that policy makers should identify which values are suitable for the current context in order to develop effective pedagogical methods and professional learning for teachers. My study looks at how service learning operates as one such values-led pedagogical approach.

The historical, cultural, and social backdrop to Vietnamese higher education, together with contemporary economic and educational policy settings, have been described in the previous two sections. This contextual outline is cogent first because it introduces a recurrent theme throughout this thesis: the influence of complex interactions between colonial influences, socialism, and a global market economy on higher education in Viet Nam. Second, it highlights the importance of attending to the specificity of the Vietnamese local context in which service learning has been contextualised.

1.5 Thesis Organisation

This thesis has eleven chapters. The current chapter has provided an introduction to the research gap and questions, and has provided the historical and social context of the study. The literature review is presented as two chapters. Chapter 2 introduces the changing mission of higher education in Western settings and reviews the international literature on civic engagement, including in Asian universities. As a function of globalisation, Vietnamese higher education is very much part of an increasing focus on civic engagement in universities around the world. However, beyond general aims having been stated in legislation, there has been little in the way of explicit policy direction as to how civic engagement is expected to be implemented in Vietnamese universities. Chapter 3 examines the literature on service learning as an emergent and 'bottom-up' form of civic engagement in Vietnamese higher education. The chapter examines how service learning has been conceptualised and practised in Western, Asian, and Vietnamese contexts. The chapter also analyses frameworks for this

approach in Western contexts to lay a foundation for considering service learning in Asian and Vietnamese higher education in subsequent chapters. The final part of the chapter presents the rationale, research problems, and the research questions for the study.

The study's theoretical foundations are discussed in Chapter 4, and involve two orientations: interpretivism and Kuan-Hsing Chen's (2010) *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (hereinafter referred to as *Asia as Method*). The interpretivist lens is introduced as a discussion of its tenets and critiques, as well as the intended application to the research questions. This chapter raises concerns about the inadequacies of an interpretivist approach to understanding an educational issue in Vietnam, and defends the need for an additional lens. Chen's *Asia as Method* has been used to enrich an interpretive approach and inform the decolonising intent of this study. The origins and theoretical influences of *Asia as Method*, its key concepts and limitations, and reasons for using this theory are discussed. The chapter also explores the researcher's positionality in relation to the two theoretical frameworks.

The qualitative, multisite case study research methodology is outlined in Chapter 5, as well as the reflexive, thematic approach to analysing interview, document, and observation data. An interpretive study requires sufficient detail about the complex cultural conditions and significance of the phenomenon as the foundation for 'thick description' and meaningful interpretations. Chapter 6 therefore presents the institutional contexts of the four sites that are the focus for this study, including the development, actors, and structures of the service learning courses.

The study's findings are then explored over three chapters. Chapter 7 highlights how communities have been embraced in service learning as partners to promote educational change. Service learning with communities brought about various prospects for the higher education reform, the opportunities to enhance moral values in young people, and the revelation that service learning teachers could become the agent of change. Chapter 8 examines how service learning practitioners have navigated power relationships in order to sustain their service learning initiatives. The complex relationship ties between administrators and teachers, teachers and students, institution and community representatives, and service learning initiators and faculty members have disclosed not only the physical challenges but also the constrained interpersonal communications within a higher education institution. Chapter 9 reveals how service learning practices have been influenced by benevolence, a

widespread value among Vietnamese people, and demonstrated through the concept of *tâm*, harmonious behaviours, and respect for causality law.

Chapter 10 highlights the significance of the findings in the context of international and regional literature about service learning and civic engagement, and in light of *Asia as Method* perspectives. The chapter discusses the insufficiencies of the current frameworks for service learning, and considers the challenges and opportunities of looking for a model of service learning that reflects both Vietnamese ideologies and Western characteristics. A conceptual framework and an operating model are developed on the basis of an 'East meets West' approach to propose a way to better understand and contextualise service learning in Vietnamese higher education.

Chapter 11 discusses how the thesis addresses the research questions and achieves the research objectives. It highlights the potential contributions of this study, together with its limitations. Recommendations for policy makers and practitioners are then proposed in order to inform the future implementation of service learning in the context of Viet Nam. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research and reflection on my research journey.

CHAPTER 2: ENGAGED UNIVERSITIES IN GLOBAL CONTEXTS

In addition to the longstanding missions of teaching and research, higher education institutions around the world have recently developed a sharper focus on civic engagement and social responsibility, highlighted by the now ubiquitous use of the term 'engaged' universities (Benneworth, 2013; Hollander & Saltmarsh, 2000; Hoyt & Hollister, 2014; Watson et al., 2011). Universities have sought to build connections with community sectors and stakeholders, and with one another, to address local, national and global issues such as economic development and environmental degradation. By working to enhance the relationship between higher education and wider society, 'engaged' universities also aim to influence public debate, government policy, and societal values. Greater acknowledgement that different knowledges can be produced in communities beyond the 'ivory tower' has enhanced present-day views about the knowledge production and transfer roles of universities. The contribution to the public good of higher education has been re-envisioned and reinvented, responding to the questions of "whose knowledge is valued, where knowledge is managed and how knowledge can serve society" (Hoyt & Hollister, 2014, p. 130).

As introduced in Chapter 1, Vietnamese higher education has a long history of responding to external influences, from the earliest institutions that produced scholars for the Confucian feudalist state, to the university under French colonialism and American imperialism whose graduates were to serve these regimes (Nguyen, 2012; Pham & Fry, 2004; Welch, 2010). Since the 1986 economic reform *Đổi Mới*, Viet Nam has opened its doors to a socialist, market-oriented economy which has entailed a new role for higher education to prepare the workforce for "industrialisation, modernisation and global integration" (Ngo et al., 2006, p. 31). Of particular importance for this thesis, Viet Nam's HERA (2006-2020) has aimed to find a unique model of civic engagement in order to recover "the idea of the university as a public good, focusing on academic freedom, autonomy, and human development" (Nguyen, 2012, p. 117). In the past two decades, the term *phục vụ cộng đồng* (community service) has become popular in an increasing number of universities, appearing in their educational goals and philosophies, as well as in curricular and extra-curricular programmes. Government policies, such as the *Higher Education Law* (Law 08/2012/QH13,

2012; Law 34/2018/QH14, 2018), have also specified serving people and the community, and knowledge/technology transfer[3] as among the goals of Vietnamese higher education.

The literature review is presented as two chapters firstly to emphasise the importance of civic engagement for Vietnamese universities before focusing on service learning as an approach to civic engagement. Service learning has attracted growing attention in university offerings and practices, but it is important to see it as nested within wider conceptualisations of the role of universities in Vietnamese society. Civic engagement has appeared on the horizon of educational policy but has not been explicitly adopted as a new mission for Vietnamese higher education and, in my view, the relationship between universities and their communities warrants further consideration. By reviewing the literature on two separate but related areas of civic engagement and service learning, I hope to contribute to debates about recognising civic engagement, its potential contribution to social development, and the role that service learning could play.

This chapter is the first of two narrative literature review chapters that highlight the significance of my study, identify gaps in the research area, and provide a basis for defining my research questions. This chapter locates my study within the context of civic engagement in universities around the world. Within the international literature, 'civic engagement' signifies a broader conception of the relationships between universities and their communities, and service learning is often positioned under this banner as a tool or strategy for civic engagement. The orientations towards, and motivations for, civic engagement among higher education institutions are important to consider because of the influence on the conceptions and practices of service learning in Vietnamese higher education. This chapter reviews the literature regarding what it means to be an 'engaged' university and demonstrates diverse notions of civic engagement in higher education. As the chapter proceeds, the discussion narrows from the international, to the Asian, and then to the Vietnamese context. The final part of the chapter raises questions about the extent to which Vietnamese universities are achieving the intent of recent policy reforms, especially the expectation that they become more engaged.

[3] The term 'knowledge/technology transfer' refers to the process of bringing university knowledge, research, products, and/or services to the market and society. It also refers to the process of bringing knowledge from outside into the university to serve teaching and learning, research, and administration (Vietnam National University - Center for Enabling Start-ups and Knowledge Transfer, n.d.).

2.1 The Changing Mission of Higher Education in Western Contexts

Recent decades have witnessed significant changes in the role of higher education globally. Traditionally, higher education has been responsible for two primary missions: teaching and learning and research. Another contribution of higher education is civic engagement, a means for social development and citizenship education that preserves and progresses social, political and cultural ideals by drawing on community capacity (Annette, 2010). A number of authors have referred to civic engagement as the 'third mission' of contemporary universities (Annette, 2010; Bender, 2008b; Goddard, 2009). The term 'third mission' has become popular in the West since the 1980s (Zomer & Benneworth, 2011), and has been used to refer to outreach attempts through technology transfer services, the commercialisation of university research, and the exercise of responsibilities as neighbours and citizens. This mission includes providing a practical foundation for teaching and research and preparing graduates for a competent civic life. Universities have long recognised contributing to the public good as their responsibility. However, in order for higher education institutions to verify their aims and identities, they need to add the community as "an intimate and necessary component" (Reich, 2014, p. x) by amplifying their civic role, taking social responsibility of disciplinary knowledge, and contributing to democratic citizenship (Saltmarsh, 2005).

The number of universities now committed to civic engagement and social responsibility has increased so remarkably that it is arguably a global movement (Hoyt & Hollister, 2014; Jacoby, 2009). An enhanced focus on civic engagement emanated from North America in the 1980s, migrating to Sub-Saharan Africa in the mid-1990s, and has been gradually recognised in the Asia-Pacific, Europe, and Arab regions (Hoyt, 2014). Watson et al. (2011) identified 22 regional, national, and international networks founded between 1985 and 2010 that focused on civic engagement, involving thousands of universities and organisations. Hoyt (2014) has similarly noted the increasing number and diversity of 'engaged' universities, including public and private, small and large, urban and rural. 'Engaged' universities were also manifested under different fields of study and forms of organisation. Different social sectors have also been involved, including public/private partnerships established under community engagement programmes, which have created more opportunities for knowledge and research to be developed outside the university campus (Brackmann, 2015).

A key example of a civic engagement network, and a significant milestone in the changing mission of Western higher education, was the foundation of the *Talloires Network of Engaged Universities* in 2005 as an outcome of a global conference on civic engagement in Talloires, France. The *Talloires Declaration on the Civic Roles and Social Responsibilities of Higher Education* (2005) (hereinafter referred to as *Talloires Declaration)* employed the term 'engaged' to refer to the commitment of a university to mobilise human, intellectual, and infrastructural resources to achieve civic engagement objectives (Watson et al., 2011). The network has expanded from 29 signatory countries in 2005, including An Giang University of Viet Nam, to 410 members in 2020 (Talloires Network, n.d.).

2.1.1 Conceptions of Civic Engagement

The term civic engagement includes a wide range of meanings and practices. For some authors, such as Saltmarsh and Zlotkowski, civic engagement "can be understood as discipline-based work such as a course assignment, a research project, an internship, field work, a clinical placement, and so on that occurs in a non-academic community (local, national, global)" (2011, p. 7). Other authors see civic engagement as part of a much wider set of commitments in higher education associated with, for example, developing civic sensitivity, participating in building civil society, and benefiting the common good (Jacoby, 2009). Using the definition from the *Coalition for Civic Engagement and Leadership* at the University of Maryland (n.d.), USA, Jacoby (2009) explains that civic engagement could involve any of the activities below, selected by each institution as best suited to their mission and culture:

- Learning from others, self and environment to develop informed perspectives on social issues
- Valuing diversity and building bridges across difference
- Behaving, and working through controversy, with civility
- Taking an active role in the political process
- Participating actively in public life, public problem solving, and community service
- Assuming leadership and membership roles in organizations
- Developing empathy, ethics, values, and sense of social responsibility
- Promoting social justice locally and globally. (Jacoby, 2009, p. 9)

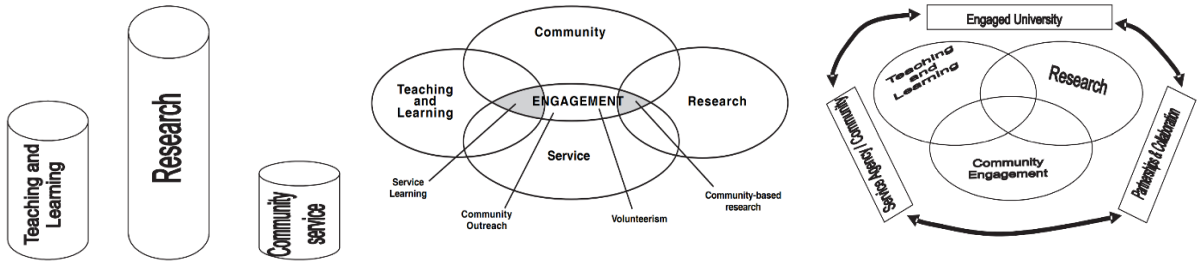
The *Talloires Declaration* has specified 11 civic engagement roles and responsibilities of its members, including contributing positively to local, national, and global communities through the processes of education and research, fostering a sense of social responsibility and commitment, and participating actively in the democratic process to empower those who are less privileged (Talloires Network, n.d.).

It is important to note that the terms 'civic' and 'community' engagement are often used interchangeably. 'Civic engagement' is used in the Vietnamese higher education policy context to refer to community engagement and comprehension of the legal system and socialist civic ideologies. Research studies in Asian contexts mostly use the term 'community engagement' to refer to community service, collective action, and/or social change (e.g. Ma & Tandon, 2014; Ngai et al., 2016; Xing & Ma, 2010). 'Civic engagement' is often reserved for activities that involve political engagement, such as voting or understanding a country's constitution (e.g., Chow & Kennedy, 2015; United Nations Children's Fund - East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office, 2008). In this thesis, 'community engagement' is used where necessary to maintain authors' original uses. However, my preferred usage is 'civic engagement,' especially for Asian contexts. I use 'civic' to include community involvement, political participation, and an ethical dimension that involves consideration about how to conduct a justifiable life within a community. Different conceptualisations and practices of civic engagement in various contexts serve different purposes: as community service, as collective action, as political involvement, and as social change (Adler & Goggin, 2005). My research adopts an encompassing definition for civic engagement[4] as "the interactions of citizens with their society and their government. It describes how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future" (Adler & Goggin, 2005, p. 241).

The relationship between teaching and learning, research, and civic engagement will differ according to a university's priorities. For example, Bender (2008b) proposed three models (see Figure 2.1) for community engagement (Bender's preferred term) for South African higher education: Silo, intersecting, and infusion (cross-cutting). In the Silo model, teaching and learning, research, and community service develop relatively independently

[4] This definition is drawn from *Social Capital Inc*., a US organisation that helps strengthen communities by connecting diverse individuals and organisations through civic engagement initiatives, and *Campus Compact*, a coalition of over 1,000 higher education institutions across the US and elsewhere committed to the public purposes of American higher education.

from each other. Involvement with the community is generally limited to outreach and volunteerism, activities that have often been viewed by institutions as inferior to teaching and research. The intersecting model recognises that research and teaching activities can be involved in community engagement, directly or indirectly, and that this does not require a radical shift in the core functions and activities of an institution because "universities are *always* and *already* engaging with communities in various ways" (p. 88). The infusion (cross-cutting) model, also referred to as the community-engaged university, conceives community engagement as informed by and informing teaching and research. Community engagement is positioned as the central goal of higher education, embedded in teaching, learning and research activities, and underpinned by institutional structures, policies, priorities, and other commitments. Bender has argued that none are ideal, but that institutions could adopt any model that was suitable to their vision, mission, objectives, values, paradigms for community engagement, and context. A university could also begin with one model and shift to another over time to suit its priorities.



The Silo model *The intersecting model* *The infusion model*

Figure 2.1: Three models of community engagement (Bender, 2008b)

Evaluative criteria have been proposed to assist universities in clarifying and realising civic engagement initiatives. Hollander et al. (2001), for example, have specified such indicators of engagement as the existence of certain institutional policies, its pedagogy, epistemology, and mission, as well as resource allocation among others. Likewise, in a project that involved 20 universities around the world, Watson et al. (2011) proposed a set of self-assessment standards for evaluating a university's commitment to civic engagement. Among these were their "mission and goals; governance, leadership and management; main lines of activity; availability and allocation of resources; relevant partnerships; range of

impacts (inside and outside the university) … cultural specificities; reputational implications; prospects of sustainability; and potentially transferable initiatives" (p. 37).

2.1.2 Drivers towards Civic Engagement

There have been at least three key drivers towards civic engagement in higher education: creating economic sustainability, preparing citizens, and addressing local and global problems. These drivers are discussed in this section in order to provide readers with an understanding of the motivations behind the appearance of civic engagement in Western contexts.

First, the massification of higher education in the context of increasing restrictions in public funding has meant that universities have needed to expand physically and financially (Brackmann, 2015; Ostrander, 2004). Zomer and Benneworth (2011) explain that economic stagnation and neoliberal economics in the West during the 1980s led many Western universities to partner with businesses, and justify their economic contribution to national innovation and competitiveness. For some universities, civic engagement has consequently been linked to entrepreneurialism because one of the primary strategies has been to ally with businesses to increase investment in research, development, and innovation.

Second, there has been a growing decline in formal political engagement among young people in Western democracies (Colby et al., 2000; Putnam, 2000; Saltmarsh, 2005; Zomer & Benneworth, 2011) although an increasing body of literature has pointed out that young people participate differently and informally in relation to issues of concern, through social networks for example (Abrams et al., 2011; Campbell, 2013; O'Neill, 2007; Zhang & Chia, 2006). Putnam's (2000) influential book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* raised a concern about the decreasing interest of American (and other Western democracies') citizens in participating in social networks, with the effect of weakening civil society, democracy, and human rights. Putnam urged that higher education should focus on strategies to strengthen civic engagement and enhance social capital. Putnam's argument adds to a longstanding critique that higher education and scholarship should not simply serve market goals, pass on traditional and established knowledge, and produce new knowledge, but should also prepare citizens for civic participation and democratic enhancement (Ostrander, 2004).

Third, there has been an urgent need for societies, within which higher education plays a leading role, to work together to address local and global problems. Governments have realised the importance of cross-sector cooperation to solve problems such as food and housing insecurity, environmental degradation, and poor educational and health outcomes (Bawa, 2007; Hoyt & Hollister, 2014; Ostrander, 2004), and international cooperation to address global challenges such as economic crisis, pandemics, and terrorism. Lorenzini (2013) has emphasised the central role of higher education and the need to expand both local and civic engagement skills and knowledge so that students have the capacity to respond to the problems of the increasingly interdependent world. Universities around the world are increasingly engaging with their communities in various forms such as service learning, volunteerism, extension, applied research, participatory action research, and engaged scholarship to address these problems. Additionally, many authors have argued that higher education needs to ground teaching and research in real-life issues and questions because the quality of academic knowledge can be threatened by disengagement with practical issues (Bawa, 2007; Ostrander, 2004; Renwick et al., 2020; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011).

A further, future motivation for civic engagement may involve a radical consideration of the role of higher education. Arguing that the modern university is facing a dilemma of authenticity (an inward quality and sense of its true self) and responsibility (the outwards realm of values, service, or engagement), Barnett (2011) has advocated for an ecological university as the future; that is, "a university that takes seriously both the world's interconnectedness and the university's interconnectedness with the world" (p. 451). Barnett maintains that the ecological university could bridge the gap between authenticity and responsibility as two complementary but competing dimensions of a university. The ecological university is not, he argues, a university *in-itself* (like the research university), nor *for-itself* (like the entrepreneurial university), but *for-others* with "a mission of service to the world and civic engagement" (p. 451).

2.2 Civic Engagement in Asian Universities

Recent years have witnessed the increasing attention of Asian universities to civic engagement (Ma & Tandon, 2014; Ngai et al., 2016; Tran, Tran, Nguyen, & Ngo, 2020; Xing & Ma, 2010). However, it is notable that this is not a new phenomenon. Historically, the ideas of 'social practice,' 'societal engagement,' and 'social responsibility' had been

promoted by Chinese, Indian, and Korean governments to their students throughout the 19th and 20th centuries (Hoyt, 2014). Compared to the growth of civic engagement in the United States, Asian civic engagement has been found to develop within a slightly different time frame, beginning with "the era of student volunteerism in the mid to late 1980s" (Ma & Tandon, 2014, p. 199), which was focused on preparing students for active and engaged citizenship, and contributing to the fast-changing global society.

The development of civic engagement in Asia is a response to regional and international problems, just as it has been for many universities in the West. Yet, despite international influences, civic engagement in Asian universities cannot be considered a direct copy of Western trends. Universities have confronted different challenges as they have developed their approaches to civic engagement. Cultivating social responsibility has also been a pillar of contemporary Asian higher education (Hoyt, 2014) and religious influences have been particularly important (Ma & Tandon, 2014). For example, the *United Board for Christian Higher Education*, an organisation originating in China, partners with over 80 Asian institutions to enhance community engagement (United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, n.d.). Islamic universities in Indonesia, as another example, are publicly-funded higher education institutions where the vision and mission often include the central importance of contributing to the community. Similarly, Confucianism, with its emphasis on holistic development instead of specialised knowledge – "education is not about *having*; it is about *being*" (Ma & Tandon, 2014, p. 198) – has been the foundation for wider engagement in many higher education institutions with Confucian heritage.

Increased recognition of indigenous worldviews has led many Asian-Pacific universities to engage more closely with their indigenous communities to fulfill religious self-cultivation and preserve indigenous knowledge. For example, 'extension work' has been integrated into Indian universities to encourage students to understand the cultural realities of local communities and learn indigenous knowledge (Ma & Tandon, 2014). In another example, students of Payap University in Thailand have digitised rare materials to preserve Northern Thai dialects, folk songs, recipes, architectural designs and other cultural artifacts (Xing & Ma, 2010). These kinds of knowledge belonged to public intellectuals – such as writers, artists, traditional scholars, and religious leaders – who had influence over public opinion, and religious and social reformation. Preserving cultural resources has been seen as

a way to resist the domination of Western-style universities on regional intellectual and social life (Nandy, 1996).

Another major difference from the Western imagination has been that Asian universities do not necessarily prepare graduates for participation in liberal democracies. As Asian countries are becoming economic competitors to the West, the universality of Western values, including democratic ideologies, is being challenged (Kennedy, 2004). The common imaginaries and values of Asian people are not simple to describe, given the diversity of Asian contexts. Although civic engagement is perceived as holding "potential to promote more democratic forms of engagement between citizens and state" (United Nations Children's Fund - East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office, 2008, p. 7), Asian countries have different understandings and interpretations of democracy than the West (Sen, 1999). As these nation-states developed from different histories, cultures, and societies, "Western democratic values are neither natural nor necessarily consistent with local values and culture" (Kennedy, 2004, p. 10). Specifically, Fukuyama (1995) maintained that there were four levels on which the consolidation of democracy occurred (Level 1: *Ideology*, Level 2: *Institution*, Level 3: *Civil society*, and Level 4: *Culture*). While Western democracy worked towards levels 1 and 2, Asian democracy focused more on levels 3 and 4. Another point to consider is that while Western democracies are founded on notions of rights, individuation, and individual responsibilities, the East has focused on the development of a different kind of individuality; that is, self-enrichment for the purpose of spiritual development that may or may not lead to political action (Lee, 2004). Lee has explained that this is associated with the acceptance of soft authoritarianism and soft democracy in this region:

> To Asian citizens, it does not matter who rules and in what way the country is ruled, as far as they are in a situation where they can live their lives, maintain their relationships, and pursue their individuality (in terms of spiritual development). (p. 31)

Asian community engagement programmes have produced positive results (see, for example, Boothroyd & Fryer, 2004; Ma & Tandon, 2014). However, improving the status of civic engagement in the eyes of policy makers and university administrators has been difficult, and there has been a lack of explicit supporting policies and resources to support the institutionalisation of civic engagement. Top-down policies were extremely important in allocating facilities and seeking training opportunities, as well as providing legitimacy for building partnerships with communities, organisations and agencies (Ma & Tandon, 2014).

However, for any university that decided to underline community engagement through research, education, and service, challenges have emerged, including but not limited to the need for senior and middle management capacity, clarity of conceptualisation, quality assurance, capacity building, reward and recognition, and funding (Gill, 2012).

Another issue was the question of public accountability of higher education institutions and fair allocation of resources to all communities (metropolitan communities are more easily accessible, for example, so may benefit more than poorer, rural communities farther away from universities) (Ma & Tandon, 2014). This desire for accountability to the community also manifests in caring for and acknowledging community knowledge and expertise. In India, for example, Dash (2018) maintained that a university engaging with a community (whether indigenous or other) needed to recognise both the 'knowledge system' (i.e., framework of understanding) and 'action system' (i.e., framework of values, skills, goals, structure of privileges, management regimes, etc.) related to that community. Overlooking these systems could result in "compromising the integrity of community life and exposing the communities to disruptions they are not equipped to handle" (Dash, 2008, p. 5).

Lastly, although civic engagement has developed vigorously in Asia, there has been insufficient systematisation, documentation and dissemination, and rigorous research and critique. In Malaysia, for example, even though community engagement has been an important element of university internationalisation, few studies have investigated community engagement initiatives by Malaysian institutions (Shuib & Azizan, 2015). A UNESCO report entitled *Young People's Civic Engagement in East Asia and the Pacific* has emphasised that the positive effects of civic engagement have been evident, but "more rigorous impact research in developing countries on a broader range of youth civic engagement activities is greatly needed" (United Nations Children's Fund - East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office, 2008, p. 59). A recent study on youth and democratic citizenship in East and South-East Asia of the United Nations Development Programme was conducted in response to the lack of concerted research into how the youth in the region participate in processes (United Nations Development Programme, 2014). This problem of lack of information makes it harder for stakeholders to access and assess approaches to civic engagement (Ma & Tandon, 2014).

2.3 Higher Education in Viet Nam

As an Asian country, Viet Nam has been unable to resist these regional challenges and influences, and has focused on civic engagement much more in recent decades than ever before – arguably more than some other countries in the region. The three decades of *Đổi Mới* reform has been pushed forward by an economic acceleration stage with the three *Five-year Socio-economic Development Plans* (Resolution 56/2006/QH11, 2006; Resolution 10/2011/QH13, 2011; Resolution 142/2016/QH13, 2016). Accordingly, the higher education reform has been continued with the HERA (2006-2020) in order to consolidate the changes in the previous phase and set even more progressive objectives, among which the intention to become more 'engaged' seems tangible, as described in the next section.

2.3.1 The Higher Education Reform Agenda (2006-2020): Visions and Effects

After 30 years of *Đổi Mới* and significant changes in higher education, a range of concerns were raised by scholars about the economic reforms (Beresford, 2008; Marginson, 2013; Pham & Fry, 2004; Pham, 2011; Salomon & Vu, 2007) and determining the influence of a socialist orientation (Masina, 2012; Ngo, 2018). Universities were experiencing problems including constrained and centralised management, a limited range of skills and capacities of graduates, high staff-student ratios, and low remuneration for staff that engendered little interest in research and pedagogical change (Pham & Fry, 2004). The government determined to continue the economic reforms, with further three *Five-year Socio-economic Development Plans* (Resolution 56/2006/QH11, 2006; Resolution 10/2011/QH13, 2011; Resolution 142/2016/QH13, 2016) to achieve its socialist-oriented market economy and vision of industrialisation and modernisation. In this 2006-2020 stage of economic acceleration, the Vietnamese government introduced the HERA (Resolution 14/2005/NQ-CP, 2005). This expressed Viet Nam's strong determination to make fundamental and comprehensive changes to its higher education system. The aims of HERA included support for greater self-governance in higher education, and stricter control over the quality of teaching, learning, and research. HERA set four prominent objectives: (1) giving public higher education institutions full legal autonomy, (2) eliminating line-ministry control and reducing the university's governing council's accountability to the State, (3) developing quality assurance and accreditation, and (4) developing a higher education law (Hayden & Lam, 2010; Nguyen, 2012).

From 2006 to date, these objectives have been realised in a series of related policies that have produced more autonomy in public higher education institutions in terms of governance, greater privatisation, expansion, increased funding, and curriculum restructuring. The number of students enrolling in higher education increased 10 times from 1986-2006 (from about 135,000 to about 1.4 million) and reportedly reached 1.7 million in 2017, according to the General Statistics Office of Viet Nam. To respond to this expansion, the education system needed more than 170,000 new academic staff by 2020 (T. L. P. Pham, 2010). Considerable efforts have been made to develop an internationally competitive higher education system (Hayden & Lam, 2010). From 2005 to 2006, for example, funds were granted to 20 institutions for their self-evaluation processes, and a commitment to quality accreditation became increasingly important in Vietnamese higher education (Westerheijden et al., 2010).

Despite these gains, there is a considerable gap between top-down expectations and the reality of policy implementation. At least four issues have been highlighted in the literature: the influence of neoliberalism, the conditions for reform, the motivation and philosophy behind the HERA, and the effects of policy borrowing. First, some authors have observed that neoliberalism has produced inequities that could harm socialist ideals and values, especially in higher education. Bui (2014), for example, was concerned that poorer and less competent students have been unable to access high-score public schools or afford high-fee private education. The pervasive problem of illegal programmes (launched without the agreement of MoET) in certain private institutions, or some fee-paying non regular programmes or side business activities to maximise income have resulted in low-quality educational products, a shift in focus from the main teaching and learning mission of higher education, and public frustration (Bui, 2014; Do, 2014). Moreover, the massification of higher education has created stronger competition and less employability, especially when students tended to choose marketable disciplines such as finance, banking, and business management (Lao Động, 2017) and ignored sciences, social sciences, arts, and health sciences. According to the report of the World Bank entitled *Vietnam: Higher Education and Skills for Growth* (2008), the skilled and high skilled workforce of Viet Nam remained low by the standards of the East Asian region due to the concentration on limited disciplines that focused more on services than manufacturing and construction sectors. Moreover, employers have highlighted gaps in employability skills such as problem-solving, leadership, information technology, creativity, and intercultural communication (Tran, Admiraal, &

Saab, 2017; World Bank, 2011) in Vietnamese employees. Not only has there been a struggle for jobs among domestic students, there has also been competition with foreign institutions, which have been allowed to enter the market under the open-door policy (Dang, 2009).

The university changes in making the first two missions, especially research activities, more community engaged under the socialisation/privatisation of education has been criticised for serving the aims of university excellence rather than the demands of community. For example, as Tran, Tran, Nguyen, and Ngo (2020) pointed out, because many studies with local communities are foreign-funded, the transfer of research results to these communities is often challenged by the patents or copyright of the foreign partners. Moreover, there were some concerns that community-based research is mainly for developing institutional strategic research areas rather than the local communities' real needs (Tran, Tran, Nguyen, & Ngo, 2020).

Many scholars have also been concerned about whether there are adequate institutional conditions to achieve the aims of HERA. In addition to gaps in real autonomy, financial resources and quality assurance faced by the institutions themselves (Dao, 2015), teachers have also grappled with low salaries, changing teaching methods, high student-teacher ratios, and high workloads (Le & Hayden, 2017; Nguyen, 2014; H. Tran, 2019; T. T. Tran, 2013b). This is despite the top priority of educational reform to improve teacher qualification-levels, capacity, and quality. Although Western conceptions of teacher and learner autonomy have been encouraged by the government and have become increasingly popular in Vietnamese education (Tran, Tran, Nguyen, & Ngo, 2020), their implementation has been challenged by local infrastructures and cultural barriers (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020; T. H. T. Pham, 2010; Phan, 2012). This has affected students' ability to gain practical experience and, in turn, graduate employability. T. T. Tran (2012, 2015) argued that until the problems of finance, governance, and teacher professional development are recognised and settled, Vietnamese higher education will find it hard to provide a qualified, highly skilled labour force. Poor research performance (due to poor facilities, slow changes in teaching and learning styles, weakness in foreign languages, etc.) has also been the focus of criticism (Hayden & Lam, 2010; Pham, 2012; Tran, 2012). Every year, a portion of the state budget is distributed to various levels (university, MoET, state, provincial) for the purposes of research and technology transfer (Dao, 2015), but not all of the budget has been used for various reasons, including the inadequate research capacity of

the lecturers within tertiary contexts (Huynh, 2016) and the complexity of the paperwork for research applications and disbursements (Nhật, 2019).

A different line of critique related to how Viet Nam's social and cultural ideologies have been considered in the reform agenda. Some scholars have argued that privatisation has affected the socialist ideals of the nation (Bui, 2014; Dang, 2009). This reformed higher education system has been criticised for focusing more on knowledge and technology than creating a balance through a variety of disciplines (World Bank, 2008). It was easy to recognise the focus more on outside demands to serve the economy than on inside needs for personal orientations, civic responsibility, and citizenship education (Lê, 2012; Pham, 2017). Moreover, there seemed to be the ignored duty of knowledge production, research, and innovation (Pham, 2019; World Bank, 2008). Above all, concerns have been raised over the suggestion that students' ethics were apparently on the decline (Lê, 2012; Lê, 2017) and moral and character education in higher education was allegedly one-sided, overlooked, fragmented, and impractical (K. T. Nguyễn, 2015). The national conference titled *Moral and Character Education for High School and Tertiary Students*, organised in 2014 by the MoET, pointed out that there existed a lot of shortcomings in this responsibility of the education system. In particular, the ideology of whole-person education had not been practicalised into the curriculum. Some have argued that there is a mismatch between what are perceived to be outdated philosophies and teaching methodologies focusing on morals and building character, and the modern demands of producing graduates to serve the economy and participate globally (S.H., 2014). Nguyen (2012), for example, claimed that young people in Viet Nam lacked the "opportunities for intellectual development, and critical reflection about themselves, and their society – both their country and the world at large" (p. 134). Likewise, Marginson et al. (2014) urged that students be given opportunities to foster their self-cultivation, through Confucian teachings embedded in Vietnamese culture and contemporary society, because these capacities were "fundamental to their learning and their engagement with others and with the community" (p. 230).

Deeper concerns have also been raised about national and personal identity in the context of globalisation and the continuation of economic colonialism and imperialism (Mikander, 2016; Vilas & Pérez, 2002). Nguyen (2012) argued, for example, that one of the challenges of higher education reform has been a tendency to de-emphasise indigenous worldviews, which can endanger national development.

As well as being concerned about this potentially dismissive attitude towards indigenous knowledge, researchers in Viet Nam and the wider international academic community have also questioned the extent and effects of 'borrowing' policies from foreign countries. Currently, this borrowing strategy has been embedded in the agenda of socio-economic development, especially education reform, and has become the topic of a growing literature (Bengtsson, 2016; Nguyen & Hamid, 2015; Tran & Marginson, 2018; Vũ & Marginson, 2014; Tran, Tran, Nguyen, & Ngo, 2020; Welch, 2010). Phillips and Ochs (2004) presented a policy borrowing process including four stages (1) cross-national attraction; (2) decision; (3) implementation; and (4) internalisation/indigenisation (p. 9). Besides the process, these authors also expressed their concern about the "complex significance of context" (Phillips & Ochs, 2003, p. 457) in which the motives, catalyst, stage, process, and implementation play a crucially important role in the policy development process. To discuss the borrowing policy of Vietnamese higher education, Vũ and Marginson (2014) highlight *openness* and *a sense of self* as the two basic qualities a nation needs in order to operate globally. This borrowing practice

> requires that Vietnam, on the one hand, be open to new ideas and systems and professional practices from abroad and, on the other hand, adapt and change those ideas where necessary to fit Vietnam's context and the long-term interests of the country and people. (pp. 152–153)

Policy borrowing, besides offering some benefits, has resulted in several tensions between imported ideologies and Vietnamese identity and values, goals and strategies, and incompatible philosophies (Le, 2014; Le, 2016; Pham, 2019; Tran, Ngo, Nguyen, & Dang, 2017; Tran, Tran, Nguyen, & Ngo, 2020; Vũ & Marginson, 2014; Welch, 2012). For example, when Vietnamese authorities decided to adopt the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for language assessment for Vietnamese learners, they failed to apply the other beneficial uses of CEFR: *learning* and *teaching* as well as *assessment*. This resulted in over-reliance on Western textbooks and testing materials, a poor sense of ownership and lack of curricular engagement, and the absence of learner empowerment tools (Nguyen & Hamid, 2015). In another study that investigates how Western quality assurance has been perceived and practised in several Vietnamese universities, Pham (2019) found out that to a country with no culture of evaluation like Viet Nam, it is necessary to conceptualise and build capacity before widely applying quality assurance as the means for institutional and international accreditation. Therefore, Nguyen and Tran (2017) suggest that policy borrowing

should take an “inward looking” approach to include the centuries-long Vietnamese cultural values with a “culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy” that recognises the role of teaching and learning tradition (p. 1). This inward-looking strategy would complement the outward perspective in providing a thorough and firm understanding of globalisation forces and powers in which Vietnamese higher education is located.

2.3.2 Vietnamese Higher Education: ‘Engaged’ Universities?

While the achievements and challenges of *Đổi Mới* and HERA in terms of teaching and research in higher education have been well reviewed in the scholarly literature, civic engagement in Vietnamese higher education has received less attention, in part because the term has not been directly employed in policy. It is important to note that some features of civic engagement in Adler and Goggin’s (2005) broad definition have appeared in Vietnamese higher education over time. This section charts how universities have engaged with their communities through traditional curricular and extra-curricular approaches, a range of disciplinary practices, and more recent legislative changes.

2.3.2.1 Traditional Curricular and Extra-Curricular Approaches

In traditional practice, the connection between university learning and the community appeared in undergraduate curricula as two primary components: civic education and community engagement. Civic education comprised compulsory political courses that addressed knowledge about the judicial system, Viet Nam’s cultural and historical foundations, rights and responsibilities, and socialist and communist ideologies. Community engagement involves extra-curricular programmes organised by each institution to enhance the relationship between university and community and strengthen community capacity. These two components are discussed in turn in this section.

A first dimension of civic engagement has been the civic education curriculum, regulated by the Ministry of Education and Training. An undergraduate programme normally includes two main blocks: *Khối kiến thức giáo dục đại cương* (General Education Knowledge) (21%) and *Khối kiến thức giáo dục chuyên nghiệp* (Professional/Disciplinary Education Knowledge) (70%). Among the compulsory courses in the General Education Knowledge block, political courses include Marxist-Leninist Philosophy, Marxist Political

Economics, Scientific Socialism, Ho Chi Minh Thought, and History of the Vietnamese Communist Party (Phong & Thu, 2020).[5] Alongside these mandatory political courses, frequent extra-curricular activities held by the Office of Political and Student Affairs include talks, seminars, and contests to inculcate the revolutionary tradition of the Communist Party, provide updates about current political issues, and orient young people's political views.

The compulsory General Education Knowledge block has been controversial. Policy makers, teachers, and specialists in the field have been worried that globalisation could expose students to democratic viewpoints that contradict socialist values (Đinh, 2015). In support of the curriculum, for instance, Phùng (2017) contended that civic education develops students' political reasoning, love for their nation, and support for Vietnamese socialism and the leadership of the Communist Party. By contrast, other authors have been concerned about the effectiveness and practicability of these courses. Confronting the perception that Viet Nam was facing a decline in young people's morals, Doan (2005) has advocated for focusing more on moral education rather than over-emphasising political education. Furthermore:

> Higher education students are not really convinced that those subjects are necessary for their intellectual and moral development. In contrast, they easily find the principles and ideologies taught in classroom are contradictory to what they experience in real life. (p. 458)

Doan pointed out, for example, that students see big gaps between rich and poor in the market economy, while learning that socialism ensures equality for everybody. They may also see contradictions between the egalitarianism of socialism and the current national objective of "wealthy people, strong country" (Nguyen, 2004).

A second dimension of civic engagement has been extra-curricular programmes for, with, and within communities. Over many years, the central Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, with its divisions in every university and locality, has been responsible for youth community engagement. The Union includes students over 16 years old and others interested in community activities. It was established in 1931, one year after the birth of the Communist Party, and was considered a nurturing ground for the Party (Trung Ương Đoàn TNCS Hồ Chí Minh, n.d.). During the anti-colonialist Indochina War and American wars, the Union played

[5] Interestingly, foreign universities in Viet Nam (e.g. RMIT University of Australia, Fulbright University of the United States, Vietnamese-German University of Germany) do not incorporate these political courses in their curriculum despite the compulsory mandate supposedly covering every single state, public, and international university, college, and vocational institution.

a significant role in building infrastructure, recruiting soldiers, and leading non-violent campaigns, for example. Such community-focused activities continued through post-War reconstruction and development, and continue today.

Recent years have witnessed the blossoming of community engagement in universities across the country, associated with notions that are relatively new in the Vietnamese context, such as *'Kết nối cộng đồng'* (Connecting with the community) or *'Học tập cùng cộng đồng'* (Learning with the community). Almost every university has programmes, activities, or projects that are related to local communities, businesses, and/or councils. Information about these can be readily found on university websites that highlight various forms of engagement such as volunteering opportunities, cooperative construction projects, grants and scholarships, and cultural and environmental preservation efforts. One of the long-lasting and noteworthy programs of the Union have been the Green Summer Campaigns, launched in 1993 and continuing to date, in which students are mobilised to engage with communities during their summer holidays. The number of participating students, and the extent of their responsibilities, has expanded over the years. The initial duties were purely on a volunteer basis; for example, volunteering in literacy programmes, infrastructure projects, and public health activities in remote areas. In recent years, the campaigns have gained more academic (although not credit-bearing) content such as conducting research, providing medical care, and addressing environmental pollution. The variety of the campaign activities has been a magnet for increasing numbers of Vietnamese and international students.

Civic engagement activities, like civic education, have received a range of criticisms. For ease of understanding, this paragraph uses 'civic engagement' to refer to the term 'community engagement' originally used by Vietnamese scholars to connote community service, collective action, social change, and to some extent political involvement. Pham (2015), for example, has argued that civic engagement lacks an underpinning philosophy in Vietnamese higher education. Civic engagement remained vague in the policies of the government and higher education and there has been no explicit national policy on the civic engagement mission for Vietnamese universities (Nguyen, 2010; Pham, 2015; Tran, 2009). As Nguyen (2010) observed from institutional websites, many universities have focused on technology transfer rather than a wider conception of civic engagement. Universities have also sometimes confused civic engagement with the second mission of research (Pham, 2015;

Tran, 2009). Conversely, Vietnamese (state) universities have often overlooked the contribution of communities in knowledge production (Pham, 2015). Pham (2017) has also noted that Vietnamese citizenship education focused on building capabilities required for economic development, in contrast to other countries that emphasised civic responsibilities within higher education programmes.

Given the potential of civic engagement to improve educational outcomes, greater attention to its conceptualisation and formalisation in action plans has been urged (Nguyen, 2010; Pham, 2015; Tran, 2009). Pham (2017) has argued that Viet Nam's education reforms need to address a fundamental question about what kinds of citizens the socialist-oriented market economy seeks to produce. Pham (2015) has further remarked that the Green Summer Campaigns, although good for capacity building, "is still a mode of education rather than truly services that universities offer to transform the community" (para. 7). Although positive reports can easily be found, official reports and research to measure the effectiveness and impact of the Green Summer Campaigns are rare. Most critiques have appeared in personal or unofficial social media. Questions have been raised about the positive outcomes of the programs, a false motivation due to social pressures, the lack of skills that had led to unfortunate incidents, and the irrelevance of the tasks to students' fields of study (Khải, 2016). These critical views, despite their unofficial status, have contributed to amendments to the organisation of Green Summer Campaigns.

2.3.2.2 A Range of Disciplinary Practices

Other forms of 'discipline-based civic engagement' (Saltmarsh & Zlotkowski, 2011) – such as community-based research, internship, and practica – have also featured in Vietnamese higher education. However, discipline-based civic engagement has occupied only a minor part of the vast landscape of curricular and community programmes. Practicums have tended to involve partial credit and have required students to learn course-related content from a community organisation or undertake projects as a course requirement. Internships have often been stand-alone, credit-bearing courses at the end of a curriculum, requiring students to spend from one to several months working with a community organisation to satisfy the requirements of their qualification. Community-based research and knowledge/technology transfer can be co-curricular or sometimes course-related (e.g. research courses for Honours Programmes), where students, under the supervision of a

course teacher or a designated mentor, conduct a study within, or project for, a community. These often require synthesised knowledge and skills, not necessarily confined to specific course content. Some community-based projects were part of research activities or volunteering campaigns encouraged by an institution or faculty. These were not credited in academic coursework, but could be recognised within the Self-improvement Grade (discussed below).

2.3.2.3 Legislative Changes

The motivations and characteristics of *Đổi Mới* and HERA have particularly shaped the development of civic engagement in Vietnamese higher education. Partnerships with businesses and industries and the commercialisation of research and services, are examples of private and social organisation participation in the education sector often referred to as '*xã hội hóa giáo dục'* (socialisation/privatisation of education). The pursuit of decentralisation, marketisation, and privatisation, outlined in Chapter 1, could be considered an early move towards entrepreneurial civic engagement in Vietnamese higher education, associated with neoliberal drivers experienced in Western higher education (Beresford, 2008; Marginson, 2013; Pham & Fry, 2004; Pham, 2011; Salomon & Vu, 2007) and similar financial tightening (Brackmann, 2015; Ostrander, 2004; Zomer & Benneworth, 2011).

Three notable changes in the development of civic engagement have occurred during the period of the HERA reforms. In 2007, through Decision 60/2007/QĐ-BGDĐT (2007) on the regulations for the assessment on training (*Quy chế đánh giá kết quả rèn luyện* – Self-improvement Grade), the participation of students in extra-curricular community engagement programmes was officially recognised by the Ministry of Education and Training. A grade was to be recorded in the final transcript, independent from the academic grade, and derived from five criteria including:

> participating and achieving good results in socio-political, cultural, performance, and sporting activities and fighting against social vices (20%); performing civic quality and community engagement (25%); and leadership ability or achieving special awards from either academic or extra-curricular activities (10%). (Circular 16/2015/TT-BGDĐT, 2015, translated by me into English)

This recognition significantly contributed to students' curriculum vitae and their scholarship and award applications. In particular, it emphasised the importance of balancing

academic study and social responsibilities, and encouraged students' engagement with community issues.

Second, the *Higher Education Law* (Law 08/2012/QH13, 2012, translated by me into English, below) detailed the two general objectives:

> a) Training human resources, enhancing people's intelligence, and doing science and technology research in order to create knowledge and new products to serve the socio-economic development and assure national defence and security and international integration;
>
> b) Training students to possess political qualities and act ethically; to demonstrate knowledge and professional practical skills; to be capable of researching and applying science and technology corresponding to their grade; to show creativity, professional responsibility, and adaptability to the working conditions; and to be ready to serve people. (Law 08/2012/QH13, 2012)

The expectation that students would be taught "to be ready to serve people" is a strong articulation of the connection between university students and community members, and using academic knowledge to serve society. Although amendments to the law were made six years later (Law 34/2018/QH14, 2018), the objectives have remained unchanged. This has reflected a consistent educational goal to produce well-rounded citizens: first from the notion of 'good person, good citizen' influenced by Confucianism and second from Ho Chi Minh's socialist ideology '*Vừa hồng, vừa chuyên'* (Both socialist-minded and professionally competent).

Third, and significantly, with the *Project to Enhance the Quality of Higher Education, 2019-2025* (Decision 69/QĐ-TTg, 2019), the government has for the first time set general targets for research, technology transfer, and community service, although the definition and scope of civic/community engagement has not been clarified (Nguyen, 2010).

2.4 Chapter Summary

As reviewed in this chapter, civic engagement has become part of the changing mission of higher education internationally and has been contextualised in Asia to address local values, problems and requirements. In Viet Nam, there has been a lack of clear conception, rationale, and policies for civic engagement within governmental guidance and

university visions and strategic plans. In other words, Vietnamese higher education has appeared to integrate traditional values, socialist ideologies, and demands for economic development into its role of an increasingly 'engaged' university but there have been very few legislative and official documents specifying this mission. Moreover, in the absence of research literature, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which civic engagement has been implemented and how the differing demands, ideologies, and aims have been weighed. In response to these shortcomings, a growing body of literature and public opinion has raised concerns about the importance of civic engagement and the mismatch between social demands and higher education's responses. Such advocacy and critique are expected to create stronger pressure for policy change in the future. Among the borrowed policies that are becoming popular, one educational approach to civic engagement that some Vietnamese universities have adopted – albeit sporadically – is service learning, the topic of this study. The next chapter discusses the international and local literature on service learning to explore the foundation for the appearance and practice of this approach in Vietnamese higher education.

CHAPTER 3: SERVICE LEARNING IN GLOBAL AND VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION

Associated with the idea of 'engaged' universities, higher education systems around the world have incorporated various pedagogical approaches to enhance students' active participation in society and to contribute to "the re-shaping of higher education to better meet its academic and civic missions in the twenty-first century" (Hartley et al., 2010, p. 404). Service learning has become a well-recognised and popular form of civic engagement, to the extent that it is believed to be "now a part of the permanent landscape of higher education" (O'Meara, 2011, p. 181). The Tailloires Network (introduced in Chapter 2), for example, has partnered with university associations focusing on community and service learning engagement across Asia, Ireland, Latin America, Australia, the Middle East, Russia, South Africa, and the United States (Jacoby, 2014). The Europe Engage project, founded in 2011 and funded by the European Union's Erasmus+ programme, has enabled 12 universities from 12 European countries to share knowledge and develop capacity related to service learning pedagogy (McIlrath et al., 2019). Countries in other parts of the world have also embraced service learning for a range of reasons (Furco & Norwell, 2019). For example, South African universities have seen the potential of service learning for building national unity after the end of apartheid.

The growth of interest in service learning is intimately connected with milestones in the civic engagement movement, introduced in Chapter 2. Saltmarsh has noted that the early 1990s saw reflective service learning pedagogies beginning to be developed and employed in relation to mastering course concepts, although little attention was paid to the explicit teaching of the civic dimensions of service learning or fostering civic learning outcomes. By the mid-1990s, service learning practitioners identified that, although students were interested in volunteering activities, there was a need to connect service learning with education for democratic participation in order to encourage greater political involvement (Annette, 2008; Saltmarsh, 2005). The turn of the 21st century saw a shift in focus from "academic work done *for* the public" to "academic work done *with* the public" (Hartley et al., 2010, p. 402). In contrast to conceptions of civic engagement that had been framed by activity and place, and where universities positioned themselves as expert knowledge generators, a stronger focus on purpose, process, and partnerships with communities took hold. A shift in practices also

occurred, including the move from a focus on co-curricular activities to curricular service (Bringle & Hatcher, 2007) and developing interest in pedagogies to support civic learning (Annette, 2005; Saltmarsh, 2005; Saltmarsh & Zlotkowski, 2011). This orientation to civic engagement has been observed as "the leading edge of an academic 'glasnost' to create democratic, engaged, civic universities" (Benson et al., 2005, p. 191).

This second literature review chapter focuses on service learning as a tool or strategy for civic engagement, and is organised around two main themes. The chapter first and largely considers how service learning has been defined in Western contexts, frameworks that have been used for conceptualising and implementing service learning, and debates about its effectiveness. Looking outwards to the international context is important because approaches to service learning in Viet Nam appear to have inherited characteristics of Western practices, while at the same time incorporating distinguishing ideologies of Viet Nam as a socialist nation. The chapter then surveys the literature about the prevalence of approaches to service learning in the Asian region, and Viet Nam. Noting the dearth of research literature about service learning in Vietnamese higher education, this chapter establishes the focus and rationale for this study.

3.1 Defining Service Learning in Western Contexts

The term 'service learning' appears to have been coined in 1967 by Robert Sigmon and William Ramsey in the United States (Giles & Eyler, 1994), and ever since, there have been regular efforts to define what it means in different contexts and around the world (Annette, 2008; Furco & Norwell, 2019; Giles & Eyler, 1994). In an influential article that investigates the theoretical roots of service learning, Dwight Giles and Janet Eyler (1994) highlighted the influence of John Dewey's work on the development of service learning, particularly in relation to notions of reflective inquiry and experimentalism (citing Dewey 1933, 1938) and concepts of citizenship, community, and democracy (citing Dewey, 1916, 1946). They also showed that service learning is aligned with experiential learning pedagogies as expounded by David Kolb (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Annette, 2008). Broadly, service learning has been defined as a form of experiential education and civic engagement that addresses human and community needs, together with structured reflection, to achieve expected learning outcomes (Jacoby, 2014; Jacoby & Associates, 1996). It occurs within formal courses in which students engage in addressing community problems, often defined

by themselves, to enhance the knowledge they learn from diverse subject areas and develop their lifelong citizenship knowledge and skills. The literature commonly refers to Bringle and Hatcher's (1995) definition of service learning, which is adopted as this study's definition, as being a:

> course-based, credit-bearing educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility. (p. 112)

Two crucial elements of service learning are therefore its experiential and academic dimensions (Howard, 1998; Jacoby & Associates, 1996; Tapia et al., 2006). That is, a service learning programme supports practical knowledge and skills that enable students to connect academic concepts and practice. The reciprocal nature of service learning, argue some of the key proponents of service learning such as Sigmon (1994), reaches its full intent when "there is a balance between learning goals and service outcomes" (Furco, 1996, p. 3). The popular use of 'service-learning' with a hyphen in the literature has emphasised the equal weight given to, and reflective dynamic and symbiotic relationship between, service and learning (Jacoby, 2014). More recent usages have dropped the hyphen, as is the case in this thesis, whilst retaining the emphasis on the equal importance of and the interplay between service and learning.

These conceptions are helpful for distinguishing service learning from other forms of educational experiences – such as cooperative education, extension service placements, field-education, internships, and practicums – in that service learning is usually connected to a course *and* has civic learning outcomes. Service learning is also distinguishable from other community service programs – such as work-study, volunteer, or community outreach programmes – because it allows for formal evaluation of academic learning in relation to course content and community service activities. Service learning students are given credit not merely for engaging with the community but also for academic learning outcomes (Bringle & Hatcher, 2007).

3.1.1 Conceptions of Service Learning in Practice

Despite a reasonably settled broad definition in the literature, there has been a wide range of models for conceptualising and implementing service learning in practice. Some proponents have argued that no boundary of a course is needed (cf., Jacoby & Associates, 1996). The first example was, Heffernan (2001) proposed six categories of service learning but two of them were defined with no connection to a specific course. These two categories were service *internships* and undergraduate community-based action *research*, while the others were "pure" service learning *courses*, discipline-based *courses*, problem-based *courses*, and capstone *courses*. By arguing that "while there should be standards that guide faculty through the classroom, there must also be room for risk, creativity, and exploration" (p. 3), Hefferman extended the possibilities of service learning, suggesting that it could be included at any point comfortable for faculty to apply. A second example was, Gemmel and Clayton (2009) defined that the conceptualisation in the Canadian context allowed service learning to be used "in any discipline, department, program, course, or activity" (p. 9) as long as it was appropriate to the instance and fit between identified goals and the design of the process. A third example was a programme designed for students from many disciplines to work together under a service learning project that required interdisciplinary knowledge and this project did not relate to any specific course (Anderson et al., 2019).

Recognising that service learning is a highly contextualised practice, a set of core practices and principles have appeared to promote the most effective outcomes and promote a deeper understanding of service learning pedagogy. Furco and Norwell (2019) provide a very helpful summary of the development of these good practice principles for service learning, and show that early models developed between nine and 11 principles that share a lot in common, regardless of the context. One such set of good practices (Toole & Toole, 1998), based on wide research across the United States, labelled as the Essential Elements for Service Learning Practice, has remained even in the new century a helpful and well-validated set of principles that can help guide the establishment of service learning initiatives. The 11 elements fall into three clusters: learning (including such elements as clear educational goals, challenging tasks, and appropriate assessment); service (including genuine and consequential service tasks, and systematic evaluation); and critical components that support learning and service (including maximising student voice, valuing diversity, and promoting communication). Furco and Norwell (2019) noted that over the years there have been few

changes in these basic core principles, and that they seem to remain valid in new and various contexts. For example, indicators similar to those in Toole and Toole's list of essential elements can be found in the outcome of a recent European project (McIlrath et al., 2019) involving 12 higher education institutions, which developed 14 quality standards for service learning. This project developed a survey drawn from three sources: (1) the REAP principles (Reciprocity, Externalities, Access, Partnership) of Bradford University, UK, built in 2006 to describe the framework for all service learning activities; (2) the essentials of service learning practices shared by scholars and practitioners of the field; and (3) the best practice standard for service learning from Furco (2002a), Hart and Northmore (2011), and NCCPE (2012) (all cited in McIlrath et al., 2019). The 14 standards are summarised in Table 3.1.

1. Meeting real needs
2. Partnership
3. Reciprocity
4. Defined goals
5. Link to the curriculum
6. Civic learning
7. Learning in real-world settings
8. Students' active participation
9. Facilitation of systematic student reflection
10. Support and coaching for students
11. Adequate time frames
12. Evaluation and documentation
13. Transdisciplinarity
14. Sustainability

Table 3.1: Fourteen quality standards for service learning practices developed by the Europe Engage project (McIlrath et al., 2019)

The findings of the Europe Engage survey revealed that some new trends in the development of service learning were emerging and the need for sustainable, transdisciplinary, and international service learning projects are predicted to rise in the future.

Although there may be some variables in different contexts, the models presented by Furco and Norwell (2019) have provided practical and basic indicators for service learning success. It is not necessary for service learning in a certain context to meet all the criteria proposed by these scholars, but these sets of good practices and standards serve as a useful

frame of reference for any service learning initiative to evaluate operation, and have been helpful in my study.

3.1.2 Frameworks for Implementing Service Learning

Proponents of service learning have developed frameworks to support the implementation and sustainability of service learning. This section outlines a number of frameworks for service learning that have been proposed by Western scholars from various disciplines, institutions, and countries. These frameworks are important to consider because, through the work of this thesis, I am interested in a conceptual framework that is cogent for the Vietnamese context.

These frameworks generally involve three main topics: course design, curriculum or programme development, and institutionalising service learning. The common criteria for a successful service learning course include the rigorous integration of course content with practical work outside campus, the reciprocal interests and benefits of both students and community agents, the flexible role of teachers/instructors, the agency of students in owning their learning, and the reflection practice as the critical power of service learning (Ellenbogen, 2017; Howe et al., 2014; Roakes & Norris-Tirrell, 2000). It is also essential to consider the effectiveness of a service learning course through the combination of diagnostic, formative and summative assessment, and the values earned such as skills and knowledge for civic engagement, appreciation of diversity, and social responsibility (Brower, 2011). Some models have been structured under an 'instruction' form with specific components and steps, making the process of designing a service learning course simple and easy for faculties to follow. For example, Hervani and Helms (2004) describe a service learning course for Economics students that uses the PARE (Preparation, Action, Reflection, and Evaluation) model designed by the University of Maryland (n.d.). Another example of an instruction model was the 'Three-Phased Model for Course Design' of Howe et al. (2014), which included Exposure, Capacity Building, and Responsibility together with the considerations for each phase. Zhang et al. (2011) used the CIPP (Context, Input, Process, and Product Evaluation) model of Stufflebeam (2003) to develop a comprehensive framework to guide the planning, implementation, and assessment of a service learning programme or project.

For institutionalising service learning, a number of frameworks have been introduced that specify varied levels of commitment, from comprehensive and top-down

institutionalisation to bottom-up initiatives that inspire others. For example, Bennett et al. (2016) describe a series of tactics adapted from the United States (Young et al., 2007) to an Australian context, which saw bottom-up service learning initiatives proceed to what they describe as 'institutionalisation.'

The five tactics proposed by Bennett et al. (2016) were suitable to their small-scale project and lack of institutional support compared to the well-established service learning tradition of the American context of Young et al. (2007). These tactics included:

1. a champion or zealot in the faculty or institution
2. a groundswell from interested parties
3. a grant opportunity
4. student zealots or champions, and
5. institutional commitment. (Bennett et al., 2016)

The champions (defined as 'authority,' 'active,' or 'community' champions) initiated and pushed service learning from the bottom-up, while helping generate a groundswell that saw new parties develop further service learning initiatives. Grant opportunities included 'hard money' (from state funds, tuition and fees, or certain income from endowments, etc., controlled by the university), 'soft money' (gifts, grants, contracts, etc., provided by external agencies and subject to certain contractual commitments), or a combination of the two. Concerning 'student zealots or champions,' Bennett et al. (2016) admitted that student buy-in was a challenge for compulsory service learning initiatives. For that reason, they were considered as receivers rather than initiators. The final tactic, 'institutional commitment,' was particularly crucial in the Australian context (Bennett et al., 2016) because the "small nature of many service learning initiatives" and the fact that "few initiatives are institution-wide or program-wide" (p. 153) made institutional commitment in terms of structure, process, and funding a significant challenge to overcome. Institutionalisation has been the challenge facing many institutions with long service learning establishments in the United States, not only in small-scale service learning in Australia.

Furco (2002b, 2007) has offered a framework that helps service learning proponents to self-assess their programs at scale, and with long-term institutionalisation in mind. The framework comprises five dimensions, which are echoed in Bennett et al.'s (2016) above tactics:

1. Philosophy and mission of service learning
2. Faculty support for and involvement in service learning
3. Student support for and involvement in service learning
4. Community participation and partnerships
5. Institutional support for service learning. (Furco, 2002b, 2007)

Each component of these five dimensions constitutes three stages: the 'Critical Mass Building' stage in which an institution begins to recognise service learning and build a campus-wide constituency for the effort, the 'Quality Building' stage in which an institution starts to focus on developing the quality to replace the quantity of service learning activities, and the 'Sustained Institutionalisation' stage in which a campus fully institutionalises service learning into the fabric of the institution. Clearly, given all these dimensions and stages in both Bennett et al. (2016) and Furco's (2002b, 2007) frameworks, institutionalising service learning requires significant time, commitment, and persistence (Zlotkowski, 1999) from a lot of different people.

Frameworks must take account not just of all the actors involved but also of the local context. In Ireland, for example, Boland and McIlrath (2007) emphasise that borrowing an existing model or framework requires the prudential observation of how the philosophy, principles, and practices of that model or framework should be "adapted (or even subverted) to reflect and serve local culture, context and conceptions" (p. 83). These authors associated the contextualisation of service learning into the country's higher education system with the term 'localisation process' used by industry to refer "to the way in which products are adapted to non-native environments – often involving translation – to reflect local language and other practices" (p. 83). According to their study, the first problem of localising service learning concerned the incompatible terminology and labels. Although the term 'service' may resonate positively in the United States, it appeared to be inappropriate and unhelpful to many people in Irish academic and public life. Moreover, the term 'community based learning' was considered unsuitable because the meaning of and place for community was itself contested at the developmental stage. Boland and McIlrath (2007) therefore used the term 'Pedagogies for Civic Engagement' (PfCE) as a label for 'service learning' or 'community based learning' practices. Their study found that despite supporting a civic dimension, the local legislative framework was not effective in bringing about changes to

civic engagement in higher education due to a lack of awareness and a shallow approach to implementation.

Frameworks in other jurisdictions have also recognised the need to take account of all the actors and systems that might be involved in the implementation of a service learning initiative. For example, in the South African context, Bender (2008a) has conceptualised what she calls ‘curricular community engagement’ as a two-level curriculum model in which service learning was the only form that met the criteria for community-engaged teaching and learning at universities in South Africa. The institutional/faculty level of the model (Figure 3.1) was built with the assumption that teaching and learning and research ultimately involved engagement with the community and included teaching and learning and research activities and projects in various formal academic programmes. The programme/module level included all the necessary requirements to design a service learning programme/module. The area where the three missions of higher education intersected was identified by Bender (2008a) as the ‘scholarship of engagement.’

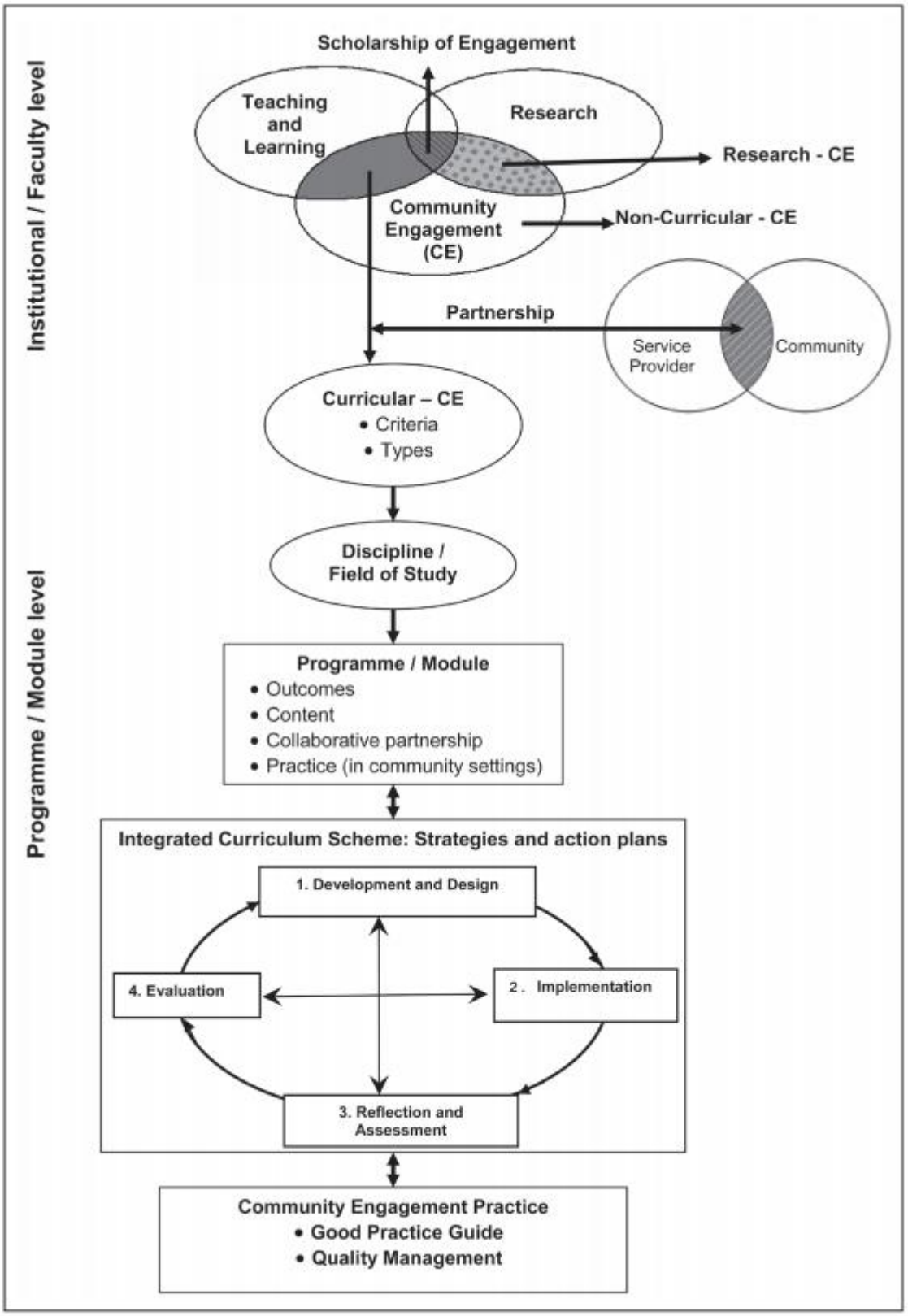


Figure 3.1: A conceptual and curriculum scheme for curricular community engagement (Bender, 2008a)

Many proponents have called for recognition of the need for an interconnection of the personal, internal and external sectors of educational change to create pathways for community service learning to become institutionalised in the core curriculum. In South Africa, for example, Bender (2007) identified the need for explicit education policies that mandated curricular change towards more community engagement, but she did not necessarily see that those external changes had influenced the internal sector (the higher education institutions themselves). She called for more internal management support to create the changes within the institution to encourage academic members to get involved in curricular community engagement, particularly in community service learning. Bender (2007) believed that the institutionalisation of service learning depended on an accepted internal institutional mission, along with the personal missions of the staff involved, aligning with the external reform policies of the government. The next section of this chapter considers some examples of service learning initiatives in various contexts, sharing some positive outcomes as well as barriers to implementation.

3.2 Affordances and Challenges of Service Learning in Practice

In the past few decades there has been a growing literature on the positive effects of service learning. Alongside these positive outcomes, there have been questions about its effectiveness. In part, this is related to the logistical and structural barriers to implementing service learning, but the limitations also relate to more foundational questions about motivations, power relations, and ideological orientations.

3.2.1 Positive Outcomes

Service learning initiatives around the world have been shown to meet many of Chickering and Gamson's (1987) 'Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education,' including encouraging contact between students and faculty, developing cooperation among students, using active learning techniques, giving prompt feedback, emphasising time on task, communicating high expectations, and valuing diverse ways of learning. For example, Bringle and Hatcher (2007) noted from the following studies on service learning in American and South African contexts, that students: (a) have increased contact with faculty (Eyler & Giles, 1999), (b) interact and collaborate with others as they

provide service (Eyler & Giles, 1999), (c) engage in active learning at their service activity and through reflection activities, (d) devote more time to coursework (Sax & Astin, 1997), and (e) participate in diverse ways of learning (Kolb, 1984) (Bringle & Hatcher, 2007, p. 82).

Together with positive attitudes towards learning, students participating in service learning courses in an American university demonstrated that they had longer plans for continued study, and they felt their class had a great influence on their persistence in college (Gallini & Moely, 2003). This finding on student retention was useful for other universities in similar contexts to develop and support service learning as a means for attracting more future students.

Service learning has contributed significantly to other outcomes such as increasing civic, personal, social and work-based skills, along with the abovementioned academic outcomes. For example, Conway et al. (2009) investigated service learning practice from 103 samples reported in 78 separate sources across the United States and elsewhere, and found that service learning produces positive changes in academic, personal, social, and citizenship outcomes, among which academic and social changes were more significant than personal and civic attitudes. In terms of social skills, service learning also brought students a closer connection to the community. Students in Gallini and Moely's (2003) study indicated that the service learning course strengthened their interpersonal and community engagement. In working with people different from themselves in terms of race, social class, and other characteristics, they learned how to cooperate to solve the community's problems, to take initiative, and to interact with new situations and individuals with different backgrounds with understanding and flexibility.

Similarly, in an intercultural communication service learning course with students from European and African origins (Borden, 2007), research showed a connection between service learning and the development of intercultural competence. Students reflected that through the awareness of cultural diversity, they could reduce ethnocentrism, learn a lot from the community members and their problems, and become more sympathetic. An inductive, qualitative, and grounded theory study in the United Kingdom (Deeley, 2010) also highlights that service learning not only potentially affects students' minds and emotions, but also nurtures their critical thinking, and facilitates their ability to think outside the box. The positive outcomes of service learning are necessary for confronting global issues, such as the financial crisis of 2008 in Europe and all over the world, and these kinds of situations have

also made universities (and students) reconsider the prospect of service learning for enhancing students' employability (Millican et al., 2019). According to Millican et al. (2019), there has been evidence that students of the 21st century are as concerned with their future employment as they are with meaningful work and experience. Students' struggles to pay fees and compete for future employment may distract them from full commitment to service learning courses, but if service learning is managed well, it can make a valuable contribution not just to the communities being served but also to student employability.

Managing service learning courses well requires sensible frameworks (as mentioned earlier). An Erasmus-funded project involving six countries in Europe investigated several models for implementing service learning and identified numerous examples of good practice across the six partnering countries: Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Romania and Slovakia (Service-Learning in Higher Education, 2017). The researchers found that most of the courses/projects offered clear credit points; thought about the scope of the community's engagement and strategies for engaging students; focused on supporting the teacher and providing good institutional and community support and resources; included clear learning outcomes and service goals; and incorporated some form of technology enhancement (for example, an e-portfolio, Moodle, website, project landscape with videos and abstracts, etc.). The courses have been repeated for several years with the same or different partners and research into their effectiveness included interviews and/or feedback forms to allow students to contribute suggestions for the courses. Students stated that they improved their communication and networking skills, became active in creative ways, and developed their decision-making capabilities in specific situations. Community members appreciated the open ways of communicating and the new ideas as well as the support of the students. However, the researchers noted that the projects took more time than expected and there should have been more follow ups.

Another good example from the United States context was described by Hervani and Helms (2004), in which a well-planned service learning course brought about the combined effects of empowering students and developing the degree of integration between university and community agencies. The course was for students of Economics, and required them to address various community issues by working with, interviewing, and/volunteering with community members to find possible solutions for those issues. A four-step implementation procedure was prepared beforehand with specific goals for each phase: Preparation, Action,

Reflection, and Evaluation so that students could easily monitor their learning. The project was significant in that it created opportunities for students' independent planning, decision-making, and action, which resulted in the inclusion of a wide variety of community partners and suggestions for a number of issues. The importance of institutional support was revealed through the existing resources and the role of the Service Learning Office in evaluating the strengths and shortcomings of the course. This practice is especially useful in localising the practice of service learning in Viet Nam, as will be described in more detail in Chapters 8 and 10.

Currently, service learning in higher education is being reimagined in more diverse forms and across various disciplines, and is reaching numerous community organisations. Unlike traditional practice where course-based work has been regarded as a prerequisite criterion for organising a service learning programme, the United States service learning programme studied by Anderson et al. (2019) was disconnected from a specific course and credit hours. The project was offered to students from all disciplines, and the study found that students still developed essential learning outcomes and made connections to their courses, to non-course elements of the programme, and to the literature.

Other innovations in service learning have included growth in e-service learning (Waldner et al., 2012). In Brockmeier's (2017) study, for example, e-service learning has brought learners' skills to work in global and cultural contexts through technological tools. Particularly amidst the global pandemic of Covid-19 with its negative influences on aspects of traditional service learning such as modes of delivery (face-to-face/physical), reduction or cancellation in student placements at community workplaces, and decreases in student enrolment, e-service learning has become a safe alternative strategy for some service learning programmes. This finding was the result of an online survey conducted by the Service-learning Australia Network with service learning teachers in Australia and New Zealand in the middle of 2020 (Griffith University, n.d.). Besides the impacts of Covid-19, this survey further pointed out that online communication and virtual projects have helped universities partly maintain service learning curricula while providing safety and support during uncertain times.

Further innovations in recent years have witnessed the integration of service learning with the participation of different kinds of students such as master's students (Zweekhorst & Essink, 2019) and students with severe disabilities (Bonati & Dymond, 2019). Service

learning has also been applied in art disciplines such as choreography (Duffy, 2019) and creative music making with a community music therapy approach (Kwoun, 2019). Involving diverse communities' perspectives towards students' performance and community-university partnership has also become the focus of many studies. One study chose participants mainly from non-profitable organisations with diverse backgrounds (African American; Asian; Latino; and White) (Petri, 2015). Another study involved community organisations with vulnerable populations such as children with disabilities, hospitals, homeless shelters, low income childcare and legal services, and other community services such as family resource centres, boys and girls after school clubs, youth tutoring and mentoring, recreational centres, and parks and recreation (Blouin & Perry, 2009). The study of Suckale et al. (2018) even worked with a particular state ministry to evaluate service learning effects. The survey of the Europe Engage project on the best service learning practices found that the community partners in their cases were varied, from cultural institutions, schools and education centres, social service delivery organisations, health organisations, and organisations dealing with the development of civic processes, to rural communities abroad (Preradović & Stark, 2019). The insights of these community partners will be discussed later in Section 3.2.4.

3.2.2 Logistical and Pedagogical Barriers to Implementation

The most common concerns about service learning relate to logistics and pedagogy. Preparation time and time management have always been pressing issues. A service learning course requires careful planning and preparation (Schelbe et al., 2014). Teaching content needs to connect closely to the service component. It is essential to provide sufficient training for students to work in the field. Initial contacts with community organisations and matching students with suitable communities and services also requires a time-intensive workload for the service learning coordinators and/or teachers. Students' time conflicts with other course schedules as well as teachers' lack of time to fulfill other duties adds to the time limitations of service learning. Other logistical challenges include student transportation to service learning sites, the time commitment and duration both for students and community members, mentors' supervision at the sites, safety for students during the field-work, agencies' time and efforts to support insufficiently-trained students, and the failure to realise stated goals (such as reciprocity, examination of root causes of problems, or commitments to social change) due

to the time constraints of short-term courses or programmes (Eby, 1998; Jones et al., 2013; Schelbe et al., 2014).

In regard to pedagogy, difficulties lie in concern around how course content is incorporated into service work providing the complexity of academic disciplines (Butin, 2006), and if there are sufficient academic issues covered in these practical courses (Ziegert & McGoldrick, 2008). Moreover, the role of teachers has also been challenged: most of them will need to change their normative mode of teaching, they might have less control than in a traditional classroom where student experiences are more predictable, their knowledge could be contested by real-life unexpected occurrences, and they need to have various assessment schemes (both formative and summative) to ensure that students' performance is fairly measured (Butin, 2006; Ziegert & McGoldrick, 2008). Therefore, in order to successfully teach a service learning course, some teachers experienced pressures to meet the expectations of the new teaching environment.

For the limitations on pedagogy, Ziegert and McGoldrick (2008) introduced several strategies useful for teachers. Instead of controlling the learning environment, teachers can design "the necessary learning and follow-up activities that promote structured, reflective learning" (p. 52). Unexpected experiences could be used as material for classroom discussion to reinforce deep learning and avoid rote learning, which helps offer preparation for life beyond college. More independent learning could also be taught to students so that class time could be saved for richer content analysis. Ziegert and McGoldrick (2008) further contended that service learning should not be considered as a quantitative change in the amount of knowledge, but as a qualitative change in students' ways of seeing, experiencing, understanding, and conceptualising the real world's issues. In service learning, they argued, learning occurs from experience, which was why providing feedback whenever adjustments could be made was extremely important.

Given that not all teachers will have experienced these different kinds of teaching and pedagogical approaches, Welch (2009) suggests that there should be faculty development and support for course design (which was echoed strongly in the findings from the more recent SLIHE (2017) project in Europe). Welch (2009) also argues that it is essential to cultivate partnerships between faculty and student affairs experts to bring about civic engagement possibilities related more to the curriculum. Including other experts from around the university in the development (and even the teaching) of service learning courses is one way

of helping meet some of the challenges of getting service learning underway and sustaining its momentum for wide benefit across an institution. Other challenges for making service learning an institutional priority and focus will now be laid out in the next section of this chapter.

3.2.3 The Challenges of Institutionalising Service Learning

Institutionalisation is considered one of the strategies for the sustainability and future advancement of service learning in higher education (Bender, 2007) but it is also viewed as "a complex process that is shaped by the confluence of a variety of factors" (Furco, 2007, p. 65). According to Furco and Holland (2004), service learning should be institutionalised when "it becomes an ongoing, expected, valued, and legitimate part of the institution's intellectual core and organizational culture" (p. 24). Service learning can be institutionalised in two vertical ways: top-down as service learning actions, activities, and policies initiated from the highest level, and bottom-up as service learning courses initiated by individual faculty (Meijs et al., 2019). While bottom-up approaches need synergy, supportive structures, and policies consequently developed by the institution, top-down approaches require developing structures and policies for service learning before it is popularised and practised by faculty and staff. Many studies have proposed various processes and resources to support the institutionalisation of service learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Furco, 2002b, 2007; Klentzin & Wierzbowski-Kwiatkowski, 2013; Morton & Troppe, 1996). Specifically, Klentzin and Wierzbowski-Kwiatkowski (2013) gathered a related database to produce a list of indicators of institutionalisation. Institutionalisation of service learning, they argue, should incorporate, but is not limited to, the following indicators: inclusion of service learning language in the institutional mission statement; a centralised service learning office; a dedicated staff; internal hard funding and supplied physical resources, including space; training/development opportunities, including active organisational membership; faculty rewards, including release time; program assessment; and a service learning advisory board comprised of multiple stakeholders.

Despite clear guidelines and indicators like these, service learning institutionalisation around the world has encountered different barriers depending on various local contexts. For example, Mouton and Wildschut (2005) evaluated five higher education institutions in South Africa and revealed that the problems of institutionalisation mainly related to the lack of clear

commitment articulated in the mission and philosophy of the institution, explicit policy and clear rules/regulations about service learning courses, a service learning office/officer dedicated to the promotion of service learning on campus, funds and other resources for service learning initiatives, and support and capacity-building for service learning staff. In a United States context, Stater and Fotheringham (2009) found that the choice of strategies and the level of resource distribution towards community partners in the institutionalising policies greatly affected the quality of service learning projects. By contrast, the incorporation of service learning into faculty tenure evaluations and the inclusion of service learning in the university's strategic plan did not result in remarkable community outcomes. Instead, funding and student participation were most critical for community benefits. Several studies in the Australasian context signified the challenges in achieving institutional support for service learning ideas. For example, at one New Zealand university, some service learning ideas had been proposed to an institutional level for nearly 10 years by several teachers from different disciplines but remained tenuous until some major earthquakes occurred in the local area. These devastating incidents in Christchurch, New Zealand became a powerful catalyst for a service learning course called *CHCH101: Rebuiding Christchurch* to be approved in the University of Canterbury's curriculum and gained unexpectedly large enrollment despite its elective status (O'Steen & Perry, 2012). The service learning ideas, as these authors pointed out, required not only the *people* and *ideas* but also the *context* to gain momentum in an institutionalising process. In the context of Australia, Bennett et al. (2016) found that the challenges to institutional commitment were mostly related to structure, process, funding, and resolution depended on the actions of individual active actors. The Europe Engage survey (McIlrath et al., 2016) on the service learning practice of 12 participating countries and universities identified six main sets of barriers to institutionalisation including lack of time, knowledge and expertise, funding, national and institutional prioritisation, a coordinating unit, and reward and recognition. Heras-Colàs et al. (2017) investigated the institutionalising status of 75 members of the Spanish University Service Learning Network based on Furco's (2002b) rubric. The results indicated that most Spanish universities were at the very early stage of institutionalisation with little awareness and interest. The challenges facing the intitutionalisation of service learning in this country were the lack of financial support for infrastructure, staff, and technical assistance, as well as the insufficient extra time and effort of academics.

There have also been a number of recommendations responding to the challenges of institutionalisation. Bender (2007), for example, developed a hypothetical institutional model of curricular community engagement that included what an institution should adjust in terms of management and infrastructure: from institutional leadership and management, quality management, and faculty/school/department, to programme/module and curricular community engagement practices to initiate and promote the institutionalisation of service learning. By proposing the five dimensions of service learning institutionalisation, Furco (2007) insisted that the most important considerations were the alignment of service learning to the institution's mission, the long-term visions and strategic goals for institutionalisation, and the understanding of all the institutionalising dimensions and their components so as to best secure the long-term survival and success of service learning in higher education. For small-scale service learning projects and/or initiatives that involve indigenous communities like in the study of Bennett et al. (2016) within an Australian context, it was suggested that the fluidity of interactions, triggers, and tactics of service learning directors throughout the delivery of service learning initiatives was significant in dealing with barriers in institutional commitment. The recognition of this fluidity, on the one hand, could help foster academic legitimacy and the institutionalisation of service learning so that initiatives would not lose their specificity and reciprocal relationships of trust. On the other hand, it could call attention to and reduce the dependence on individual goodwill that appears to be a key factor of any service learning initiative.

3.2.4 Motivations and Power Relations

Eby (1998) has pointed out that the negative aspects of service learning, especially on the students and community perspectives, have often been overlooked by "the excitement and euphoria" (p. 2) in the academic areas. Service learning programmes can sometimes grow from mixed motives among which each stakeholder (institution, students, agencies, business) has certain pragmatic reasons to *use* individuals and communities. The needs of the agency and community might come after the needs of an institution, students, instructors, or a course, and community members could become the subjects of experiment who received students' practice of their course content, rather than active participants. Service learning can also promote a false understanding of response to need when service learning students perceive that they are the people who fill the community's deficiency. This phenomenon "exaggerates

the importance of the person who serves, demeans the person served and ignores resources in the community such as peers, families and community leaders. It fails to recognize the political, social and economic factors which create the need" (Eby, 1998, p. 4). Moreover, ignoring these realities can contribute to a false belief that service learning programmes can alleviate some burden for the government and thus might deter governments from taking appropriate actions and adjusting social policies. Later studies from Blouin and Perry (2009) and Petri (2015) also identified these problems from the perspectives of community representatives. Even though there were benefits from student assistance in terms of labour and resources, there were costs for their community organisations and the investment of resources due to the risk of students' breach of conduct and commitment, the gap between programme-oriented and project-oriented goals, and potential miscommunication between parties. Other studies have similarly shown that although the learning component was elevated in the students' perception, the service learning programme did not fully meet the expectations of the service partner (Suckale et al., 2018).

Eby (1998) recommended the following criteria that practitioners should bear in mind when conducting service learning:

- Service Learning must incorporate the perspectives of all of its stakeholders …
- Authentic partnerships between colleges and communities are essential …
- Principles for good practice must be followed …
- The learning agenda must include social structural issues and…
- Advocacy and community development must be included. (pp. 5–7)

In addition, Eby proposed that there should be an agenda for future research that included case studies reporting the creative and innovative ways to practise effective service learning, investigations into short term service and volunteerism and its effects on agencies and communities, the critical factors determining the outcomes of service learning so as to improve its quality and impact, and a checklist for planning the service components. From the community viewpoint, it has been suggested that to achieve reciprocal outcomes, there should be collaborative planning and clearly defined course objectives, roles, and expectations (Blouin & Perry, 2009). Petri (2015) has also proposed institutionalisation of service learning with university official recognition and support as the solution for mutual benefits and long-term partnership.

3.2.5 Ideological and Philosophical Orientations

Although traditional approaches to service learning provided students with the awareness and experiences of social issues, it has been critiqued for its emphasis on community-based pedagogy rather than on the underlying reasons for those issues (Saltmarsh, 2005; Welch, 2009). Based on Dewey's idea (1966, cited in Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011) that mere activity in a community did not constitute civic engagement, and experience only became educative when critical reflective thought created opportunities to inform actions to be taken, Saltmarsh and Hartley (2011) emphasised that democratic education should include "the values of inclusiveness, participation, task sharing and reciprocity in public problem solving, and an equality of respect for the knowledge and experience that everyone involved contributes to education and community building" (p. 17). As a result, only after nearly one and a half decades of integration since the early 90s in the American context did service learning begin to "consciously link civic renewal with education for democratic participation" (Saltmarsh, 2005, p. 50) as a response of higher education towards the students' increasing indifference to political involvement.

As service learning carries the mission to cultivate civic engagement, a common question has been how to integrate civic learning into the disciplined-based courses which were not related to political science. This ran the risk that teachers who integrated service learning into the teaching of their discipline might lack the pedagogical techniques to deliver the concepts and practice of civic engagement (Welch, 2009). In discussing the criticism that higher education is leaning towards a liberal agenda, Butin (2006) contended that in order to survive in higher education, service learning would have to become balanced, and it could not escape from the dilemma that "service learning has positioned itself as a universalistic and thus neutral practice" (p. 486). The dilemma was that, on one hand, if service learning included liberal ideologies of political transformation, it may encounter criticism, censure, and sanctions. On the other hand, if this practice attempted to be politically balanced to avoid such an attack, it might lose its power to make real differences to society. Butin suggested that we should not "think *about* service-learning as a politics to transform higher education and society…[but] begin to think *through* service-learning about the politics of transforming higher education and society" (Butin, 2006, p. 492). This is an exciting challenge for many in Western higher education institutions, and also holds promise for universities in Asian countries as well. While this chapter has so far provided a range of perspectives about how

service learning has been conceptualised and organised in Western traditions, its implementation in non-Western contexts can be a different story. Through awareness of the variation of service learning frameworks and the considerations of *localising* them into another context, the next section discusses how the various conceptions and practices of service learning have been realised in the Asian region in general, and particularly, in Vietnamese higher education.

3.3 Service Learning, Higher Education, and the Asian Regional Context

The integration of service learning into Asian higher education agendas has been spreading impressively in the last couple of decades. Service learning has appeared in both public and private universities across many Asian countries – Cambodia (Ly, 2013), China (Wang et al., 2019), India (McEachron & Ghosh, 2012; Slowik et al., 2009), Indonesia (Vidyarini & Sari, 2018), Hong Kong (Chan et al., 2019; Ka et al., 2019; Ma et al., 2016), Korea (Ryu & So, 2020; Walsh et al., 2014), Japan (Ballou, 2019; Miyazaki, 2013), Malaysia (Sandaran, 2012), Philippines (Sescon & Tuano, 2012), Singapore (D'Rozario et al., 2012), Taiwan (Fang, 2016; Lin et al., 2014), Thailand (Nuangchalerm, 2014), Viet Nam (Halimi et al., 2014; Le et al., 2019; Phung, 2007) – within both curricular and extra-curricular activities, and on various disciplines, and representing different religions (Christian, Buddhist, Islam, etc.) (McCarthy et al., 2005; Wong, 2018). These studies have generally focused on three main themes: the conceptual research on the effects of service learning (e.g. Sandaran, 2012); the practice of service learning in specific module/course/discipline/ contexts and the lessons learned from these practices (e.g. Ballou, 2019; Chan et al., 2019; Le et al., 2019; McEachron & Ghosh, 2012; Nuangchalerm, 2014); and the effects of service learning on students (e.g. Ly, 2013; Ryu & So, 2020; Wang et al., 2019) and academic staff (Fang, 2016). For example, Chan et al. (2019) investigated the post-experience of 756 service learning students and found that they had better experiences than their initial expectations. In Hong Kong, Ma et al. (2016) investigated the long-term impacts of service learning on graduate students in three domains: (1) adaptability, brain power, and creativity skills; (2) civic responsibility; and (3) career exploration. This was considered the first attempt in Hong Kong to discuss the effects of service learning on graduates. Although there were several limitations, their study appeared to signify that the practice of service learning in Asia has

begun to concern itself with the qualitative development as well as the quantitative expansion of service learning practice.

Many service learning centres or programs have been initiated by leading universities and colleges throughout Asia, providing support for an increasing number of students in the region (Xing & Ma, 2010). In particular, the Service Learning Asia Network (SLAN) was established in 2004 by the International Christian University (ICU) in Japan under the combined sponsorship of the Japanese Government and the United Board For Christian Higher Education In Asia (UB) (Ma et al., 2018), and is now considered a robust network for service learning in the Asian region, connecting more than 30 colleges and universities interested in service learning in Asia for student exchanges, faculty research, curriculum development and program evaluation. The Asia-Pacific Regional Conference on Service-Learning (APRCSL) was first organised in 2007 by Hong Kong Lingnan University with the expectation "to involve and engage key stakeholders in theoretical development, and [the] sharing of experiences and challenges faced in service-learning" (Lingnan University, n.d.). With an increasing number of participants and seven biannual conferences to date, APRCSL has become the credited platform for educational institutions and non-profit organisations in the Asia-Pacific region to share insights and concerns about service learning.

The conception of service learning in Asia, however, has been perceived differently from Western traditions. While service learning has often involved experiential and credit-bearing academic characteristics in Western contexts, in Asian contexts service learning is generally defined as "intentionally structured activities that engage students in social services to solve problems encountered by community members" (Nishimura & Yokote, 2020, p. 187). Therefore, many service learning activities that are non-course-based, short-term, and/or related to a graduation requirement and not credit-bearing have existed. Asian civic engagement, especially in liberal arts service learning, has also received critiques for its pragmatic motivation to catch up with the economic leader position of the West while ignoring the ideological and philosophical orientations embedded in education like Western traditions. In other words, East Asian societies have caught up with the practical Western mindset, but they lack the focus on the moral underpinnings of Asian education systems. Few concerns have been raised over critical perspectives such as politics, structural problems, and social justice, especially power inequality between service learning students and the deprived or marginalised communities (Nishimura & Yokote, 2020).

Moreover, the prolific development of service learning in Asian regions has not been fully reflected in academic publications. Most of the written work on service learning has been published as monographs, anthologies, and guidebooks in the United States such as series and booklets coming from the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE), International Partnership for Service-Learning (IPSL) and Campus Compact (Xing & Ma, 2010). This could be due to the fact that the United States has a stronger and established tradition of civic engagement and service learning compared to other areas in the world. Another reason could be the lack of specific publication arenas reserved for the issues of service learning in Asian higher education, as this region is new to the practice. Even when publications have appeared on service learning in Asia, such as the special issue of the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* on "Service-Learning and Community Engagement in Asian Higher Education" (2016), they have been limited in their reach, incorporating research only from Hong Kong and Taiwan universities with a strong traditions of service learning, and missing the dynamic research of other Asian countries. There have been edited books, such as Xing and Ma's (2010) volume *Service-learning in Asia: Curricular Models and Practices* but single books cannot fully capture the wide variety of offerings in such a diverse region. Indeed, the book has been criticised for including case studies mainly from institutions influenced by Western and Christian concepts of service learning and lacking cases from institutions representing Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic traditions, as well as more comprehensively critical analyses of the constraints and risks of service learning as lessons for regional practitioners (Kusujiarti, 2011). That being said, Kusujiarti (2011) also notes that the book has made a great attempt to point out some distinctive features of service learning in the Asian region such as prioritising disadvantaged and marginalised groups, highlighting indigenous cultural traditions, and educating for social justice and multicultural symbiosis (i.e. people with diverse cultural backgrounds coming together to offer relative benefits to all involved). These issues resonate in the Vietnamese context as well, and in the next section, I outline the emergence of service learning in Vietnamese higher education.

3.4 Service Learning in Vietnamese Higher Education

The emergence of service learning in Viet Nam has been a comparatively more recent phenomenon than within Western and other Asian contexts. In the past decade, service

learning has emerged as a form of community engagement in higher education in Viet Nam, mostly embedded in course-work, but sometimes under voluntary programmes related to academic study broadly. This appears to date back to 2007 when the Centre for Educational Excellence (CEE) – in the HCM University of Sciences (HCMUS) – was established under the calls of HERA and with funding from the United States Agency for International Development through the Office of Higher Education for Development (Centre for Educational Excellence, n.d.). The main objective of the centre was to improve teaching and learning pedagogies to solve practical community problems. This approach has been applied as Service Learning, Community-Based Learning, and Community-University Engagement in international universities (Centre for Educational Excellence, n.d.). In the first stage, service learning was integrated into some courses of the Faculty of Biology as a model for other faculties. By November 2017, CEE had reportedly provided training for over 3,424 teachers and 9,357 students on innovative approaches both in HCM city and in other provinces, where service learning had been the key focus (Centre for Educational Excellence, n.d.).

The spread of service learning to other public universities has also been witnessed throughout the country. After the HCMUS, the HCMUSSH appeared to respond quickly to this approach. With the support of CEE, this university organised an orientation workshop entitled 'Service Learning Project' in May 2014. On this occasion, the rector of the HCMUSSH predicted that service learning would become a preeminent approach in the higher education's fundamental and comprehensive transformation. Later that year, in November 2014, the first training on 'Service Learning and Curriculum Integration' occurred in this institution with the sponsorship of Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southeast Asia (Germany). This organisation had established bilateral cooperation with the Vietnam National University in 2002, with the aim of creating opportunities for studying the socio-economic-cultural bases and conditions of policy-making. The university established a Board of Management for Service Learning Projects and had two faculties planning to revise their relevant course syllabuses to include service learning and launch a website about service learning projects for other faculties to learn from (Ho Chi Minh University of Social Sciences and Humanities, n.d.).

Recently, students of Da Nang University of Foreign Language Studies, took part in a service learning course in which they helped Da Nang Museum promote Cham people's sculpture to high-school students (Bảo tàng điêu khắc Chăm - Đà Nẵng, 2015). In 2017, the

University of Foreign Languages, a member of Hue University, organised a service learning conference under the sponsorship of the United Board (University of Foreign Languages – Hue University, 2017). The conference was an opportunity for teachers, students, and experts of the field to share their experience and practice models. Since 2015, An Giang University has coordinated with Hong Kong Polytechnic University in community activities such as eye examinations for pupils, surveys and consultations on diet, and nutrition and health care for people in An Giang province (An Giang University, 2017). To date, as mentioned, this university has been the only Vietnamese university to become a member of the Talloires Network. The motivations for An Giang University to get involved in civic engagement were as follows:

> The need for the recovery of a war-devastated country, and a sense of responsibility as a learning institution in an inadequately educated society. This orientation has provided students and faculty with opportunities to practice their knowledge and skills in real-life settings, and obtain new scientific and empirical results that could be applied to other situations. (Tailloires Network, n.d.)

Service learning has also piqued the interest of non-governmental organisations and private universities. The ECO Vietnam Group (EVG), a non-governmental organisation, was established in 2009. This was largely through the efforts of Pham Van Anh, a Vietnamese student at Singapore Nanyang Technology University, who aspired to bring the model from Singapore to Viet Nam (Phan, 2014). EVG introduced service learning through various workshops and field trips for both Vietnamese and international young people (ECO Vietnam Group, n.d.), and later cooperated with Hoa Sen University on several projects to promote service learning to a larger group of students who were interested in the field. In 2013, after a few years of applying service learning to aspects of its operations, Hoa Sen University established its first service learning centre which was initially an information and liaison hub for service learning projects. By 2017, the university had integrated some courses that explicitly included service learning into the syllabuses (Hoa Sen University, n.d.). In October 2018, the Service Learning Centre was merged into the Faculty of Social Sciences together with the Department of Liberal Education, the Department of Psychology, and the Psychological Counselling Centre. Elsewhere, in 2020, the University of Economics and Finance, another private university, celebrated the first service learning course on Trademark Management with reportedly positive outcomes on students' practical experience, active learning, and planning skills (University of Economics and Finance, 2020).

While an increasing amount of information about service learning can be readily found in public media and on university websites, it appears to be an under-researched aspect of Vietnamese higher education. For example, after a Google search with the keywords *'học tập phục vụ cộng đồng'* (service learning) and *'đại học'* (university), the first 10 pages showed articles on nearly 20 universities across Viet Nam involved in service learning activities. However, academic publications on service learning could not be found from a public Google search but required further techniques and processes. For example, the study by Nguyễn et al. (2012) was posted on personal blogs and service learning websites, and it is unclear whether these findings have been published in academic journals. This study shared the experience of HCMUS on their two service learning courses on Environmental Science and Treatments for Waste Water with Dam Sen Cultural Park as the community partner. These authors found that the interests of students and the community partner played an important role in the success of the courses. They encountered some difficulties with a large class of 200-300 students, time limitations, students' passiveness in catching up with the new learning approach, and some hesitation from the community partner due to an unclear understanding about service learning. A second example was the paper on a service learning project of English majors at Thu Dau Mot University which was presented by H. T. Nguyen (2016) at the Thammasat University Annual International Conference. This project, designed for students to teach English to disadvantaged children, was reported to promote a heart-centered approach to language education and resulted in a sense of students' personal satisfaction and a meaningful way to create values in the community. A third example was the paper of T. K. O. Le (2017) published in institutional journals with limited access. As discussed, T. K. O. Le (2017) reported on a service learning course with Da Nang Museum in which students carried out some projects to help high-school students understand about the Cham people's sculptures. Their findings showed that students not only achieved most of the academic learning objectives but also recognised their responsibilities towards their local community and had more positive attitudes towards approaching local culture. T. K. O. Le also pointed out certain problems, some echoed in the study of Nguyễn et al. (2012), such as students' lack of service learning skills and specific knowledge about community cultures, time constraints, and management of big classes. Research has been undertaken, but not yet published, by some of HCMUS's lecturers (Centre for Educational Excellence, n.d.) and some of Hoa Sen University's lecturers and students. In terms of publication, there was only one co-authored book chapter (Halimi et al., 2014) on the international service learning

partnership with Portland State University in Portland, Oregon and two other papers (Phung, 2007; Phung & Mol, 2004) associated with community engagement in the field of environmental studies that can be readily accessed. To date, it appears that there has been no research or peer-reviewed publications on the institutionalisation of service learning in Vietnamese higher education.

3.5 Rationale and Research Problem

Chapters 2 and 3 have reviewed the literature about civic engagement and service learning in higher education. The chapters have presented civic engagement and service learning as two interconnected conceptions that have become increasingly important in international, regional, and local higher education in the past few decades. The review shows that service learning has suggested a re-orientation in the mission of many higher education institutions, a significant attempt to relate civic engagement to teaching and learning and research, and a driver to enhance graduates' social responsibility and civic competence.

The first literature review chapter defined the Western conceptions, opportunities and challenges of civic engagement as an umbrella term of and an educational philosophy for service learning. By analysing the initial conceptualisation of Vietnamese higher education towards the civic engagement role, the chapter identified the attempts of the government and institutions to make universities more 'engaged,' but these attempts have been criticised by many scholars to be carried out with too general and ambiguous policies as well as practices. The presence of the political courses and the volunteering engagement programmes, as well as a range of disciplinary practices, have not adequately transformed the civic engagement mission of Vietnamese higher education to the appropriate position.

The second literature review chapter depicted the growth of interest in service learning as a practical approach for the civic engagement role of higher education. Although the service learning practices in Asian and Vietnamese contexts share common drivers and practices with Western approaches to service learning, there have been various differences related to embedded cultures, beliefs, and systems of values. The last two decades have witnessed the interest and development of civic engagement and service learning in an increasing number of Vietnamese universities. However, this expansion seems to lack consistent conception, guidance, and good practice due to a weak research culture and knowledge disseminating tradition, which could hinder the development and sustainability of

service learning practice and the bigger mission of Vietnamese higher education to become more 'engaged.'

Looking across the literature reviewed in Chapters 2 and 3, the more recent appearance of service learning in Viet Nam may be driven by a range of factors, which this study aims to identify and explore in greater depth. Initially, there appear to be at least three drivers: developing a better qualified workforce; reforming teaching and learning; and increasing civic responsibility amongst young people.

In line with the international literature on service learning and the expectations of the higher education reforms, service learning appears to build more effective human resources and a better qualified workforce for the economy. Since higher education for Asian people has traditionally been considered preparation for a career as opposed to personal development and expansion of knowledge like in the West (Ngai et al., 2016), the common highest expectation of the society is for university graduates to get employed and be well-paid. Also, under the demands of regional and international integration, Vietnamese tertiary students increasingly need to acquire not only hard skills – the knowledge of their disciplines – but also the soft skills required by global citizenship, such as communication, multicultural awareness, professionalism, and flexibility (Nguyễn et al., 2012). The practical aspects of service learning can prospectively help higher education realise these expectations.

Service learning also appears to respond to an increasing pressure to reform teaching and learning. Vietnamese higher education has variously been criticised for the reliance on rote-learning and teaching methodology (T. T. Tran, 2015), a lack of connection between civic education and civic engagement (Doan, 2005), a perception that civic education is too theoretical and dogmatic (Nguyen, 2017), and a failure to integrate academic knowledge into volunteering projects (Phạm, 2016). It could be that service learning is a pedagogical choice to improve these shortcomings in the curriculum of Vietnamese universities.

Additionally, service learning appears to address the perceived concerns by a number of commentators about young people's indifference to community problems, the deterioration of traditional values, and the decline of civic responsibility. It looks like service learning could become a tool to bridge the possible conflicts between the individualistic values of the market economy and a socialist orientation that focuses on the welfare of the community and equality among people (Nguyễn et al., 2012). Dr. Pham Quoc Loc, the former vice-rector of

Hoa Sen University, has emphasised that "universities cannot ignore social responsibility. Service learning will help us achieve this mission" (Nhu, 2015).

With these speculations on the motivations and so little published research on service learning in Viet Nam, questions are still open about the accurate motivations and ideologies embedded in the appearance of service learning in Vietnamese higher education. International and Vietnamese scholars and practitioners of the field are similarly interested in knowing more about the origin of service learning conceptions (whether it is a borrowed policy or a traditional feature of Vietnamese higher education), and the experience of the insiders (what are their concerns and satisfactions), as well as the positive and negative effects of a service learning approach on a university's stakeholders. Teachers who wish to integrate service learning into their teaching will expect to learn what pedagogy and strategies have been applied to these service learning courses. Administrators also need to know how service learning is organised within Vietnamese university structures. This thesis aims, therefore, to contribute to the small, but developing, body of literature by looking to reveal what has not been known about how service learning is conceptualised and practised in Vietnamese higher education.

This study focuses on contributing to the Asian regional literature where, as stated by Kusujiarti (2011), service learning practices have been influenced by a range of Western and non-Western ideologies. As Xing and Ma (2010) have remarked, "Service learning, like any learning, is not culturally-neutral, but deeply embedded in the historical and social contexts of each educational system" (pp. 3–4). Viet Nam is no exception. The traditional high regard for education, the influence of Confucianism, the remnants of colonisation, the ideologies of the socialist and one-party state, and the effects of the market economy are likely to have shaped the approaches to service learning in Vietnamese higher education. This study aims to investigate these and other influences on the nature of service learning in Viet Nam, and to consider how service learning could be conceptualised in the Vietnamese context. This study's argument is that it is time for Vietnamese higher education to consider service learning more seriously so that a principled and discipline-based engagement with the community might enhance the development of education and society. Drawing on a diverse range of voices, including university staff and administrators, students, community partners, and the Communist Party Youth Union, this study explores the following questions:

1. Why has service learning emerged, and how is it conceptualised and practised, in Vietnamese universities?
2. What are the constraints to, and what are the opportunities for, service learning in Vietnamese higher education?
3. How could service learning be further contextualised for Vietnamese higher education?

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

This chapter outlines two theoretical orientations that have informed my research: a broadly interpretivist research paradigm and *Asia as Method* (Chen, 2010) as an additional theoretical outlook. The chapter explains how interpretivism and *Asia as Method* have worked as lenses to answer my research questions and outlines the underpinning ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. The lenses have been useful because of their attention to the socially constructed nature of knowledge and the interplay between Western and Asian knowledges. They are cogent for the overall purpose of my study, which is to understand how Vietnamese participants think about and experience service learning. The lenses have also held significance for questioning my own worldview and assumptions as a university educator in the Vietnamese post-colonial context.

4.1 Interpretivist Research Paradigm

Broadly speaking, interpretivism refers to approaches that look for "culturally derived and historically situated interpretation of the social life-world" (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). The term has often been used to make a distinction between hard sciences and social sciences. This contrast appears to emerge from the 'paradigm wars' of the 1970s and 1980s (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) in which researchers using post-positivist and constructivist lenses sought to develop naturalistic inquiry[6] in the social sciences (Dean, 2018). Researchers using an interpretivist theoretical orientation are concerned that objective research methods can narrow the variety of questions, and argue that rehumanised and reflexive approaches can support the exploration of questions that require "sensitivity to contextually specific meanings" (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013, p. 435).

Interpretivism is among a range of theoretical paradigms that inform qualitative research in Western traditions. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) have noted that, at the most general level, qualitative research can be thought of as a continuum with five major

[6] Naturalism is the view that the real world is an intact system in which all the components are interrelated to and influenced by each other. Therefore, to understand one specific component, it is necessary to examine it in the connection with other parts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

interpretive paradigms: positivist and postpositivist, constructivist-interpretivist, critical, feminist, and participatory-postmodern-poststructural. In frame of reference, the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm is often referred to as interpretivism; this is how interpretivism is used in the context of my thesis. The interpretivist paradigm has been described as an umbrella term covering several different streams of thought including, but not limited to, phenomenology (with Edmund Husserl and Arthur Schultz as the main thinkers), hermeneutics (with Wilhelm Dilthey and Han-Georg Gadamer as the main thinkers), symbolic interaction (with Herbert Blumer as the main thinker), and ethnomethodology (with Harold Garfinkel as the main thinker) (Counsell, 2013; Crotty, 1998; Mack, 2010). Although these streams of thought employ different theoretical assumptions and methodological approaches, they share a common emphasis on qualitative methodology and understanding the phenomena that we perceive through our senses in daily life (Cohen et al., 2007).

The idea that human subjective experience can be the basis for inquiry is a comparatively recent development. In the 18th century, the common philosophical belief was that the physical and social sciences required the same approaches to research (Counsell, 2013). Droysen (1808-1884) was considered the first person to challenge this position by naming two types of knowledge: *erklaren* (explanation) and *versterben* (understanding). While research on physical phenomena involves observations for normal understanding, research on social phenomena calls for *versterben,* which "allows insight into the hidden meaning behind human actions" (Baronov, 2004, p. 119). However, interpretive researchers are interested in not only explaining "isolated personal agency" (Potrac et al., 2014, p. 32), but also referring to the interpretive understanding of social action; that is, how the personal agency interacts with the surrounding world. In other words, the mind influences how people interpret, and that interpretation is based on a social world in which there are interactions between people.

According to Counsell (2013), what we know as *versterben* as the interpretivist approach has appeared in many forms, such as symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ethnomethodology. While forms of interpretivism vary, approaches to understanding the social world often assume a relativist ontology combined with subjectivist epistemology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In other words, interpretivists believe that reality is multiple, subjective, and shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values. A relativist ontology holds that there are multiple truths because "with multiple

interpretations of experience come multiple realities – there are as many different realities as there are people" (Levers, 2013, p. 2). The social world can only be understood from inside, where the researcher shares the same frame of reference such as culture or language with their participants. Rather than examining meaning objectively from outside, interpretivists aim to understand the way people make meaning by interpreting the cultural context. The role of interpretivist social scientists is therefore to "understand, explain and demystify social reality through the eyes of different participants" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 19) and, in this way, the researcher becomes "the instrument through which the topic is revealed" (Angen, 2000, p. 391). Only with the awareness that a phenomenon can have multiple meanings and that inquirers can have different ways of knowing can interpretivist researchers develop their understanding of the topic.

Interpretivists base their interpretations on data sources such as interviews, observations, and secondary data such as policy documents with the aim of investigating the topic in its natural settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Interpretivist methods such as these are intended to provide rich descriptions of the context and an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being researched, which contributes to the validity of the research (Adom et al., 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Researchers using this paradigm attempt to understand a phenomenon from the experience of the study participants, often involving participants constructing meanings from their own interpretations and interacting with the researcher's interpretation (Adom et al., 2016). Understanding the social and cultural context is essential to analysis, because researchers and their participants interpret their experiences and construct their own meanings based on their social, political, and cultural settings (Potrac et al., 2014). Further, it is the social context that forms a foundation for researchers to tie together and verify different interpretations in order to find the commonly agreed upon realities (Williams, 2000). In-depth descriptions of context, together with the triangulation of data sources, are believed to provide researchers with a strong foundation for their understanding.

In summary, my interpretivist research position is founded on the ontological assumptions that truth is many and reality is subjective and constructed. My epistemological assumptions are that meaning can be constructed through understanding the interactions and subjectivities of the researcher and participants, and that communication about meanings is made possible through common social, political, historical, and cultural contexts.

4.1.1 Critiques of Interpretivism

Although interpretivism reflects the ontological and epistemological position of a lot of researchers in finding the answers to their inquiries, there exist some concerns arising from the drawbacks of this paradigm that should be put into consideration.

Common criticisms have been that the subjective nature of qualitative, interpretive work lacks scientific rigour (Mishler, 1990) and that the researcher's bias may "distort the findings and their interpretations" (Mustafa, 2011, p. 25). Qualitative researchers, including those with an interpretivist approach have favoured moving away from the use of positivist concepts such as validity and reliability to concepts such trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability (Creswell, 2007). They strive to arrive at robust interpretations at different levels through strategies such as prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer review or debriefing, negative case analysis, clarifying researcher bias, member checks and external audits (Angen, 2000; Creswell, 2007; Scauso, 2020). Thick description plays a vital role in interpretivist inquiries. The goal of thick description is to describe a situation and to provide sufficient detail so that readers can understand the complex cultural conditions and significance of the phenomenon (Denzin, 2001). However, many interpretive researchers resist the idea of determining validity through specific criteria because it implies a positivist belief about external reality (Angen, 2000). Angen further emphasises that from an interpretive perspective, validity is a moral question that the researcher must address from the beginning to the end of their study. Any pretense of neutrality and impartiality is, in this view, a morally irresponsible position because all knowing is perspectival and open to interpretation. Therefore, an interpretive study should base its validation on "how carefully the research question is pondered and framed, how respectfully the inquiry is carried out, how persuasively the arguments are developed in the written account, and how widely the results are disseminated" rather than "any criteria-based process of accounting that occurs after the research is completed" (Angen, 2000, p. 387).

A second line of critique relates to the generalisability of interpretive research to other situations, as this approach may lack the verification that scientific procedures have to follow (Cohen et al., 2011; Mack, 2010). Williams' (2000) counter-argument has been that if generalisation is broadly conceived as "a general notion or proposition obtained by inference from particular cases" (p. 212), then interpretive research is full

of generalising value. The reason, as mentioned above, is that common settings with cultural consistency allow for generalisability. The aim of interpretive research is to understand the subject matter in one time and place so that other researchers can *compare* how similar subject matter works in different times and places (Cohen et al., 2011; Mack, 2010; Willis, 2007).

A third line of critique has been that interpretivism has been perceived as not as radical as, for example, critical, feminist, and participatory-postmodern-poststructural paradigms. This is because the purpose of an interpretivist study is simply to understand a situation rather than to propose a different social order (Mack, 2010). Nevertheless, as Gadamer (1976) maintained, "to understand is always to understand differently" (Chowdhury, 2014, p. 436). Interpretivist researchers may create new and rich understandings and interpretations of the social world, thus providing a foundation for decision-making. Therefore, it is unnecessary to require interpretivist studies to be radical, they instead contribute to the political and ideological sphere by their own ways and with their own means.

A fourth criticism, which has concerned me most, is that Western theories cannot fully inform non-Western research issues and contexts (Darder, 2019; Schroeder, 2014); in the case of my thesis, an assumed-to-be Western educational phenomenon is applied to a postcolonial Asian country. This concern was raised by Zhang et al. (2015) after seeing a considerable number of doctoral students and researchers undertaking Asian educational studies in Western countries and employing Western concepts and theories to interpret the issues. While some scholars seem to "accept the situation", others are "visibly and vocally uneasy" (Zhang et al., 2015, p. 1) because accepting Western intellectual values and academic traditions risks undervaluing Asian intellectual knowledge and practices, and can lack suitability for diverse Asian contexts. This criticism is part of a larger global debate and counter-hegemonic movement in relation to Eurocentrism. The view that "West is the best" has imposed Western interpretations of the world on oppressed countries, and championed the idea that a Western model is the best, as if it were salvation for the world's mankind (Alatas, 2000; Kuhn, 2013). An outcome of this has been an academic dependency, where the:

> social sciences in intellectually dependent societies are dependent on institutions and ideas of western social science such that research agendas, the definition of problems areas, methods

> of research and standards of excellence are determined by or borrowed from the West. (Alatas, 2003, p. 603)

The response from those who strenuously resisted the "West is the best" view has been a call for more serious research dealing with the issues of academic dependency, especially that there should be more interactions among social scientists from the "Third Worlds" (Alatas, 2003, p. 610). For example, Alatas (2003) has emphasised the important role of education in developing societies to realise the significant philosophical and theological contributions of Asian civilisations. In developing and extending 'Southern theory,' Connell (2017) and Manathunga (2020) have similarly contested the hegemony of the global North, and advocated that university systems in the global South have a responsibility to highlight the diversity of knowledge projects in their curricula and intellectual workforces. As my study reflects an Asian educational issue, I share similar concerns with these scholars and see it as my responsibility also to respond to these calls. I sit towards the 'uneasy' end of the responses mentioned above by Zhang et al. (2015), and have taken a cautious approach in employing interpretivist perspectives to make sense of educational practices in Viet Nam.

4.1.2 The Intended Application of Interpretivism to Answer the Research Questions

This section discusses how an interpretivist outlook is deployed in my study, how the central tenets of interpretivism have been useful, and how my study responds to the four critiques that were outlined in the previous section.

First, in order to investigate the emergence, conceptions and practices of service learning in Vietnamese higher education, I needed to look into and interpret the experiences of the people who have been involved with service learning. The participants' subjective interpretations of their experiences became my focus, and I saw my researcher role as interpreting their accounts to bring deeper understanding to the phenomenon of service learning.

Second, because service learning courses in Viet Nam normally involve various actors and contexts, the reality is multiple and shaped by people from different social, political, hierarchical, economic, ethnic, and gender values. My common frame of reference with participants, as a Vietnamese educator, is an advantage in understanding how Vietnamese culture and society has influenced the subject of my inquiry. Interpreting an action, idea, or attitude from a cultural position requires researchers to balance criticality and

sympathy with participants' differing subjective interpretations. In this sense, interpretivism allowed me to recognise that there "is not a single understanding of the 'right' way of viewing a particular situation. Instead, it is an understanding of multiple perspectives on the topic." (Willis, 2007, p. 113). By using interpretivism to look into the interrelations among people within a system, I was able to compile institutional case studies that may represent different possibilities for service learning, to find how the individual data fits within the institutional case, and discover how the cases fit together to produce the representative findings.

While the subjectivity inherent in an interpretivist approach may prevent generalisations from being made, it is this the very subjectivity that appeals to me as a researcher attempting to understand the possibilities for my country's higher education system. Unavoidably, my research questions and approach are informed by my own ontological assumptions and by my cultural background. Vietnamese culture highlights the importance of relationships and an interpretivist approach enables me to harness this collective culture by engaging in relational research that seeks to understand multiple perspectives and possibilities. The thick descriptions of the cases capture thoughts and emotions, point out motivations and intentions, provide rich accounts of details, and detail the meaningfulness of the situations. My interpretations included consideration of participants' interactions, non-verbal communications, and emotions and feelings, and involved the triangulation of data sources.

The aim of my study is not to build an ideally common model, but to help other people who are doing service learning in Viet Nam find part of themselves in the picture so that they have some ideas for where they might head with their own practices. I believe that the particular stories will help individual actors make changes to improve their work, and these cautious changes will result in more powerful effects than a stiff model proposed by generalisation.

4.1.3 The Need for an Additional Lens

This section turns to an axiological concern about the radicality of an interpretivist approach. As outlined in Chapter 1, the purpose of my study is not simply to understand service learning in Vietnamese higher education, but to provide provision for change. Originally, my intention was to investigate service learning in the Vietnamese higher

education context solely for better understanding. However, along my research journey, I felt an increasingly urgent need to respond to my participants' expectations for change in terms of how service learning is valued and enacted, and to my own emotional responses in listening to their accounts. At one level, the fact that this study has allowed previously marginalised voices to be heard calls attention to the effects of power relations in Vietnamese higher education (as discussed in Chapter 8); this is in itself a strategy for change.

However, I found myself needing to look for an additional lens that would fully inform my study. In fact, this search did not diverge from the principles of interpretivism. The principle of looking for the inner factors of a phenomenon shed light on my suspicion that under the more noticeable drivers for the emergence of service learning, there would likely be other motivations and practices deeply rooted in Vietnamese cultural beliefs and values. Although I was confident that my Vietnamese background was an advantage in doing this research, there were times when I was confused by, and could not explain, the participants' actions or thoughts. My inadequate understandings of multilayered influences on my participants' experiences – such as tradition, religion, colonialism and imperialism, modern Communism, and globalisation – became a barrier to my interpretations. Even though interpretivist principles require a rich understanding of context, I wanted to address my uneasy feeling about studying Asian education through Western eyes and presenting Asia through a homogeneous lens in order to persuade international and domestic scholars of the cogency of my research. Another consideration was the usefulness of my research for other interpretivist scholars, who wish to research Vietnamese higher education but do not originate from Viet Nam – an additional lens that could provide insights into the contextual factors would be greatly useful for their understandings and interpretations.

4.2 Kuan-Hsing Chen's (2010) *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*

In the search for an approach to research Asian issues, I found Kuan-Hsing Chen's (2010) *Asia as Method* outlook compelling for my research. This was because Chen advocated for looking at a subject of inquiry from historical and local perspectives. Investigating service learning in Vietnamese higher education from Chen's frame of reference allowed me to be aware of the highly contextual interpretations held by my participants and supported my interest in understanding a phenomenon by studying embedded cultural beliefs and values.

Asia as Method has received a lot of attention from Western and Eastern scholars whose research interests are in Asian studies (see, for example, Anderson, 2012; Fan, 2016; Lin, 2012; Park, 2016; Zhang et al., 2015). This interest has been enlivened by the *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies: Movements* project that Chen has contributed to since the late 1990s. The project has been an attempt of Asian scholars to tilt the scale of knowledge flow from the hegemony of 'the West as method.' Their initial aims were to:

> (1) generate and circulate critical work in and out of Asia and beyond; (2) slowly link and facilitate dialogues between the disconnected critical circles within Asia and beyond; and (3) provide a platform on which academic and movement intellectual work can intersect. (Chen & Chua, 2015, p. 1)

Within this flow was the birth of *Asia as Method*: "Using the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other's point of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt" (Chen, 2010, p. 212). In the context of modern East Asia, Chen aimed to reconcile the conflict between formerly colonised countries and their colonisers in order to advance global democracy, particularly as a response to the contested democracies in formerly colonised territories. He called for critical intellectuals to deepen and widen their decolonising movements, using the term 'decolonisation' to refer to former colonised countries' efforts to restore justice through economic, cultural, and especially psychological freedom. He argued that dialectical interaction was a prerequisite for justice, reconciliation, and relieving West-East tensions. These studies, he further contended, needed to engage with different frames of reference and blended strategies that acknowledge colonial influences and the internal heritages of Asian nations.

Asia as Method addressed three streams of cultural studies: postcolonial, globalisation, and Asian studies. Having observed postcolonial critiques of the West, which were often expressed with a sense of resentment, Chen suggested shifting the focus of analysis to Asian contexts, multiplying the objects of identification other than Western contexts, and establishing different reference frames. In other words, only when Asia moved beyond the resentment towards and comparisons with the West could new forms of intellectual alliance be established to prepare for the new context of globalisation. This process started with looking at non-Western or postcolonial models to find out the solutions for common problems and to collaborate with each other to create a counter-balance with the West. Witnessing the intensification of unequal power relations and new forms of

imperialism produced by globalisation, Chen stressed a need for imperialising powers "to examine the conduct, motives, desires, and consequences of the imperialist history that has formed its own subjectivity" (Chen, 2010, p. 4). Chen further noted the preponderance of Asian studies that had mainly emanated from the United States and Europe, and argued that they lacked consciousness about the particularism of Asia. Chen argued that it was crucial to produce *self*-understanding, including of neighboring spaces and the region, by removing Asia from an imperialist eye: rewriting history, redrawing the map, and liberating Asia from a preoccupation with colonialism and imperialism. On this basis, Chen offered a framework to meet the challenge of redefining Asian studies in Asia, and to explore its prospective accomplishments from a different perspective.

4.2.1 Origins and Theoretical Influences

This section presents Chen's personal background and his discussion on the insights and scholars that influenced his thinking as a means to understand the social and historical conditions that shaped *Asia as Method.*

Taiwan, Chen's home country, had experienced nearly three centuries of foreign colonial control by the Chinese Empire, Japan, and the modern People's Republic of China, before becoming an independent government. Taiwan remains under the auspices of China's *One-China Policy*, which claims Taiwan as an inalienable part of its territory (Hsieh, 2009). Chen's family background was inevitably affected by the colonised status of his country. He was born in Taiwan and grew up Taiwanese, but his parents' origin was Mainland China and they spoke Mandarin-Chinese. Growing up as an outsider, Chen thoroughly understood how deeply colonialism had influenced the social structure and imagination of the nation.

The phrase 'Asia as Method' appears to have been first introduced by Takeuchi Yoshimi, a leading Japanese thinker, as a critique of an East-West binary relationship and as an alternative strategy to resist post-war Western hegemony. Takeuchi presented a lecture titled "Asia as Method" to members of a critical intellectual circle in Tokyo in 1960 and it was later published in 1961 (Chen, 2012). Takeuchi's method challenged the tendency of the Third World to look up to Euro-America in the hope of one day becoming superior. Takeuchi suggested, for example, that Japanese intellectuals not only look to Euro-American modernisation but also conceive modernisation in a more complex framework, looking elsewhere to countries like India, China, and Japan for insight. He argued that looking at

similar historical experiences would provide important reference points for knowledge production, rather than being trapped into a "catching up" game with Western ideologies (Chen, 2012, p. 321). Takeuichi acknowledged at the end of his lecture that while he had called these ideas "Asia as method" it was "impossible to definitely state what this might mean" (Chen, 2010, p. 211), and Chen's (2010) book of the same name continues to grapple with this concept.

Chen (2010) notes in the Preface to his book that *Asia as Method* owes a debt to the work of several scholars concerned with the effects of colonisation, and singles out the following writers, in particular: Lu Xun (1918, 1921), Chen Ying-Zhen (1998), Frantz Fanon (1967 [1952]), Stuart Hall (1980, 1992a, 1992b, 1995), Partha Catherjee (2000), and Mizoguchi Yuzo (1996 [1989]) (all cited in Chen, 2010). I briefly summarise below some of the ways in which Chen identifies these thinkers as having influenced his work.

Chen (2010) states early in *Asia as Method* that his interest in critical cultural studies was influenced by Lu Xun's efforts to place social and political contradictions at the centre of analysis. Lu Xun's stories *Diary of a Madman* (from 1918) and *The True Story of Ah Q* (from 1921) were, Chen claims, the "first psychoanalytic self-criticisms of the feudal elements of a Chinese culture confronted by imperialism" (Chen, 2010, p. 68) and strongly influenced critical circles in China, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, including Taiwanese socialist novelists such as Yang Kui and Chen Ying-zhen. Lu Xun, Chen argues, created the cultural spaces to "ground ourselves in the cultures of our own – that is to address the issues arising out of our own puzzling environments" (2010, p. xi). As a result of Lu Xun's method of putting "himself inside the event itself and, with no trace of self-indulgence, attempt[ing] to intervene" (p. xi), Chen lets his own readers know that he desires to continue this strand of Lu Xun's critical tradition and to always provide historically grounded explanations for his arguments.

Frantz Fanon's works were among the critical discourses of colonial identification that informed *Asia as Method*. Fanon, a psychiatrist and philosopher from the former French colony (now department) Martinique, was a key figure in anti-colonial theory and national liberation movements around the world, with writing such as *Black Skin, White Masks* (published and translated in the 1950s and 1960s). His work explored the complexities of psychoanalytic identification with colonisers, arguing that, in crude terms, black men saw their only destiny as becoming white. Fanon saw this impossible demand for recognition as a

permanent crisis: “the foundational logic of colonialism is racism, and essentialized racialist differences cannot be overcome” (Chen, 2010, p. 77).

Stuart Hall, a Jamaican-born British sociologist, identified three contradictory effects of globalisation: (i) the concept of national identity being challenged by global flows of capital, technology, and people, causing cultural homogeneity around the world, (ii) a rise in nationalism that aimed to preserve national and local identity, and (iii) new forms of hybrid identity that challenged dominant ethnic constitutions. Confronting such conditions, Chen (2010) contended that the contemporary decolonisation movement needed to actively search for alternative objects of identification. In Asian contexts of globalisation, Chen further sensed from Hall’s work that it was hard to transcend sentiments and horizons of nationalism. This is because it was impossible and unnecessary “to ask people to give up their national identity to pretend to be world citizens” (p. 101). However, through a constant suspension of national interest, we can become others. Chen’s proposal for a critical syncretism starts with this alternative understanding of subjectivity.

Later, among a surge of social protests in Taiwan in the late 1990s (over issues such as licensed prostitution, foreign workers, and religious discrimination), Partha Chatterjee’s series of lectures entitled *Locating Political Society: Modernity, State Violence and Postcolonial Democracy* (in Taiwan, 2000) became influential for Chen. Taking the view that it was impossible to understand one’s own conditions if the similar pressures of others were ignored, Chen advised colonised peoples to shift their points of reference; that is, to know each other’s issues and experiences in order to generate more strategically useful knowledge. In addition, based on Chatterjee’s subaltern studies, Chen attempted to analyse the political conditions in Taiwan through the lens of marginalisation. He compared the concept of *mínjian* that “roughly describes a folk, people’s, or commoner’s society” (Chen, 2010, p. 237) to the Western concept of civil society. *Mínjian* differed from civil society in that it was the space of historically constituted groups and remained the negotiating force with civil society and the state. The tradition of networking and mutual support that *mínjian* extended to subaltern, marginalised, and colonised groups protected them from the pressures of civil society and violence from the modernising state. Learning from *mínjian,* Chen argued that a better understanding of the location and direction of social forces could help intellectuals use local resources and networks to empower subaltern groups, which might include “ignoring civil society, opposing it, or working with it” (p. 233).

Chen was also truly inspired by Mizoguchi Yuzo's essay *China as Method* (1996 [1989], cited in Chen, 2010) and adopted his emphasis on multiple reference points. From Mizoguchi's insights, Chen learned that "to reach a deeper understanding of the Other is a precondition of transcending one's self. To reach a different understanding of the self is a step towards the Other's understanding of itself" (Chen, 2010, p. 252). In other words, to understand ourselves and each other, it is necessary to understand others' motivations, values, and philosophies, and reasons for their reactions to us. Chen's confidence that Mizoguchi's notion of dialogue could be applied to other Asian countries was the basis for him urging critical intellectuals to multiply their reading sources to include works produced in other parts of Asia.

Chen's conception of power and power relations in *Asia as Method* was largely influenced by Marxism and the understanding that structural conditions underpin the capacity of human beings to fulfill their needs and aspirations (Nigam, 1996). This may explain why *Asia as Method* begins with Karl Marx's words: "Men make their own history, … but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (Chen, 2010, p. 1). As Nigam (1996) contended, Marxism "insists on studying power and politics in the operations of specific mode of production/social formation in which it exists and is exercised" (p. 8). Therefore, when discussing any phenomenon, including power, it is necessary to put it in the context of its social and historical relations. For Marx, power was the origin of class struggle and social revolution, and "the exploited class must first seize power and then reorganise the economy and production relation" (Nigam, 1996, p. 8). Chen brought this conception of power into ideas about colonial power relations and the struggle of the oppressed subjects towards the dominant ones in Asian societies. Thus, power and resistance are intertwined: power is "the necessary mediation through which human action 'comes to be,' i.e. realize itself. And to the extent that human societies embody different entities, different interests, different wills, often incompatible, power does also involve domination and resistance" (Nigam, 1996, pp. 7–8).

4.2.2 Key Constructs

Having established the aims of *Asia as Method*, this section outlines three constructs that are central to Chen's ideas – geo-colonial historical materialism, critical syncretism, and inter-referencing – and how they are cogent for my research.

4.2.2.1 Geo-Colonial Historical Materialism

Geo-colonial historical materialism suggests understanding a phenomenon within its social, historical, and spatial contexts. In other words, the best way to understand a phenomenon is to look at its relations to society, history, and geographical space. The construct has its roots in Marx's notion of historical materialism. Confronting the peak of European colonial imperialism, Karl Marx (1818-1883) realised that capitalism and the working class were the two important and historical elements that drove towards revolution. Central to Marx's ideology was the view that the historical development of human societies and cultural institutions is the result of material and economic conditions, rather than philosophical ideals. Over time, the contradictions within any society become antagonistic, and as a consequence a new society needs to be forged. Therefore, changes in economic organisation cause changes in social institutions. Marx offered socialism as an alternative to capitalism, raising the awareness that capitalism was just a product of history and thus could be replaced.

However, Chen also took the view that Marxism was unable to lift itself from Eurocentrism because, inherited from the Enlightenment tradition and view of history, it used a universal narrative to discuss phenomena in all geographic spaces. Therefore, Chen proposed the concept of geo-colonial historical materialism to emphasise the significance of geographical space and the specificity of dynamic local histories as an alternative strategy. According to Chen:

> To spatialize historical materialism is not only to remove Eurocentrism, but also to launch another round of spatializing (after historicizing) epistemology. For instance, the analysis of the Asiatic mode of production can no longer take the European mode of production as the ideal model or point of comparison. It is no longer a question of explaining why a Chinese mode of production cannot develop into a real (European) capitalist mode of production. Instead, the question becomes: within the imminent historical-geographical formation, how does a geographical space historically generate its own mode of production? (Chen, 2010, p. 106)

In Chen's view, the capitalist world could not use liberal democracy to criticise undemocratic practices in former socialist regimes because this argument lacked geographic and historical contingency – and neither could academics in South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan

use their tools to explain the structural operating logic of the state and societies in mainland China, Viet Nam, and North Korea.

Geo-colonial historical materialism is useful for me to conceptualise a framework for service learning in Vietnamese higher education. First, the application of this construct caused me to consider the outer drivers and also the contextual influences such as local history, traditional culture, and beliefs on the service learning practice. Second, the construct informed my interpretations of people's meaning-making in relation to service learning in a socialist country and how they perceive and practise democracy, and assisted me in realising the deeper and structural implications of their desires and expectations for change. Third, the construct also called for my consideration towards the power relations among actors and the inner motivations of the initiators in order to describe opportunities and constraints for service learning in Viet Nam.

4.2.2.2 Critical Syncretism

Chen defined critical syncretism as "an alternative strategy of identification" (Chen, 2010, p. 99) that shifted the object of identification towards the self, in contrast to colonised subjectivities that had been passive and taken the coloniser as the object of identification. For Chen, this process enabled connections to be made across structures to seek alliances outside one's limited frame. The notion of syncretism, drawn from Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, "not only emphasised a process of mixing," but also represented "the active participation of the involved subjects" with a much more reflective consciousness (p. 98). According to Chen (2010), the intent of critical syncretism was:

> to become others, to actively interiorize elements of others into the subjectivity of the self so as to move beyond the boundaries and divisive positions historically constructed by colonial power relations in the form of patriarchy, capitalism, racism, chauvinism, heterosexism, or nationalistic xenophobia. Becoming others is to become female, aboriginal, homosexual, transsexual, working class, and poor; it is to become animal, third world, and African. Critical syncretism is a cultural strategy of identification for subaltern subject groups. (p. 99)

Subaltern groups, according to Chen, struggled with the coloniser within a colonial structure and were preoccupied with addressing their difficulties and confronting their antagonists. Looking at other suppressed groups' models of struggle and stepping out of

one's boundaries to see how the world is confronting its problems is a strategy to practise critical syncretism. The purpose of critical syncretism "is not simply to rediscover suppressed voices and social formations, but to generate a system of multiple reference points to break away from the self-reproducing neo-colonial framework that structures the trajectories and flows of desire" (Chen, 2010, p. 101). Chen (2010) stated that critical syncretism "is not only spotting out neglected subjectivities but assuming them or, better, becoming one of them with an active and reflexive consciousness" (p. 98) and forming powerful alliances across different structures, concerns, and priorities.

The notion of critical syncretism added to my research because it led me to be interested in my participants' strategies of identification, with the awareness that they may act unintentionally, in relation to their conceptions and practices of service learning. In the Vietnamese context, 'critical' means taking actions with judgements and 'syncretism' as combining different sources of reference. With that in mind, I would analyse how my participants were aware of and reflected on their constraints compared with other stakeholders' so as to adjust their actions, which will be more clearly illustrated in the use of various strategies to navigate power relationships. To a deeper extent, critical syncretism became important for the ultimate objective of this study, as this construct would provide me with more critical thinking and enable me to consider various perspectives to develop a conceptual framework for Vietnamese service learning, as discussed in Chapter 10.

4.2.2.3 Inter-Referencing

Using *Asia as Method* also means looking beyond one's country borders. Chen explained that "Asia and the third world provide an imaginary horizon for comparison, or a method for what I call inter-referencing" (p. 223). This idea, Chen (2012) writes, originated from Takeuchi Yoshimi. For Takeuchi, Euro-America was not a perfect model to duplicate because it was confronting different problems than Asia. Takeuchi proposed to stop comparing Japan with advanced Western countries and "began to realize the importance of conceiving of Japan's modernization trilaterally by reference to different types of modernization, such as, for example, that of China and India" (Takeuchi, 2005, p. 156). Chen's (2010) concept of inter-referencing holds that:

> Rather than being constantly anxious about the question of the West, we can actively acknowledge it as a part of the formation of our subjectivity. In the form of

> fragmented pieces, the West has entered our history and become part of it, but not in a totalizing manner. The task for Asia as method is to multiply frames of reference in our subjectivity and worldview, so that our anxiety over the West can be diluted, and productive critical work can move forward. (p. 223)

This is not necessarily an anti-West gesture and, in Chen's view, inter-referencing avoids total negation of the West.

The construct of inter-referencing related to my research in two ways. First, I was interested in how it informed service learning in Vietnamese context. Inter-referencing helped me find out the agents and connecting points that adapted Western influences on service learning to suit the local context, pedagogy, education philosophy, outcomes, and benefits. It allowed me to explore in my thesis how the conception of service learning has been contextualised by adjusting the existing practice to fit the situation and referring to the common belief of Vietnamese people in doing good work to bring authenticity to their projects. Second, it was fundamental to my conceptual framework because it helped me refer to non-Western alongside Western frameworks and consider their challenges and opportunities before proposing a model suitable to the Vietnamese context.

4.2.3 Limitations of *Asia as Method*

While *Asia as Method* has built on longstanding arguments about identification, subjectivity, and Western hegemony, Chen's work has been subjected to considerable critique.

A first line of critique is that many of his terms are not well-defined and that they have essentialised and over-generalised regional and cultural experience. Ng (2013), for example, notes that Chen's definition of Asia needs clarification at the outset, particularly because his project discusses this in relation to the "ambitious task" of de-colonisation and de-imperialisation (p. 90). Ng also remarked that what Chen calls "the Chinese world" (Chen, 2010, p. 40) was so complicated that it deserved some "book-length analysis" (p. 90). In another example, Fan (2016) cautioned that 'Asia' and 'East Asia' have not been politically settled and questioned if Asia was worth a common method.

A second line of critique is that *Asia as Method* relied too heavily on history. For example, while Fan (2016) agreed with Chen that the methodological insights of *Asia as*

Method offer possibilities for "historical thickness" (p. 366), he questioned why everything had to be understood in relation to European imperialism and colonial modernity. Fan argued that the terms that Chen used such as 'Eurocentrism,' 'Western imperialism,' and 'Cold War' geopolitics were not always fully historicised and contextualised and, moreover, that Chen's emphasis on colonialism and imperialism may overlook other social forces such as the emerging influence of China in the region. Duara (2011) has consequently suggested that new forms of domination should be taken into consideration. These could challenge older structures, systems, and orders and may become the elements that created new ones, upon with which Chen would surely agree.

Third, Chen's work has been criticised for its generalisations and moral position. Although Chen posited that postcolonial reflection was important for decolonisation and deimperialisation, from Duara's (2011) perspective, Chen's assertions that Japan and Taiwan did not have any opportunity to reflect on their imperial and colonial experiences due to the sudden coming of the Cold War, while Korea and the mainland China did undergo such reflection, were unfair. It appears that Duara (2011) disagreed with Chen's generalisation in that, many colonised countries, due to various reasons, did not have enough conditions to practise postcolonial reflection as well, not only Japan and Taiwan. Ng (2013) analysed other generalisations, especially that East Asian people have been prevented from recognising their identity by the effects of neo-colonisation and neo-imperialisation. He suggested that there should be more research on how different subjects, – for example, Taiwanese people working or settling in the mainland, or their mainland counterparts in different fields of Chinese society – thought about each other.

Chen's naming of *Asia as Method* has also raised many questions about his methodology. Park's (2016) review of approximately 250 publications using *Asia as Method* asked three questions "(1) Is Chen's proposal Asia as method or 'Asia as issue?' (2) Does it effectively articulate an 'Asia and the rest' worldview and to what extent? (3) Does it free researchers from 'Western methodology' and philosophy of science?" (Park, 2016, pp. 205–206). Park's response to the first question was that Chen's theory prompted attention to 'Asia as issue' more than offering a method by pointing to emerging discourses from the global South and the "peripheries" (p. 761) that deserve more attention. In relation to the second question, Park found that *Asia as Method* did articulate an "Asia and the rest" worldview but it was further necessary to define an "eastern identity" of "eastern forms of knowledge" (p.

221). With the use of inter-referencing and critical syncretism, Park assumed that Chen was calling on Asian scholars to produce new knowledge to describe their identity without referring solely to the West but to other Eastern traditions. His response to the third question was that *Asia as Method* did not free a researcher from Western methodology as it is dependent on Western narrative and discursive methods. In Park's view, if a method is discussed in terms of philosophy, framework, and approach to analysis, Chen's could not "be regarded as … a new philosophy of science" (p. 768). Park further noted that, while education researchers had seen Chen's work as method, it was more commonly used to identify research problems and as a narrative tool. Park argued that *Asia as Method* is an outlook rather than a method of inquiry: "an attitude and epistemological orientation to overcome several historical and political impasses that hinder peace and solidarity in the modernization process of Asia" (p. 214).

Returning to the problems of essentialism and over-generalisation that have been mentioned above, Park also questioned why, among a proliferation of theories and paradigms, Asia should follow *Asia as Method*. And if there were a method for Asia, what part of Asia should the movements come from? More developed countries (such as Hong Kong, Japan, and Singapore) or developing countries (like Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Nepal)? A range of authors have also questioned whether the postcolonial imprint in *Asia as Method* is germane to Viet Nam's experiences of imperialism and colonialism (Nguyễn, 2014; Nguyễn, 2013; C. Phạm, 2013). Although postcolonial discourses have been extensively employed in Western research culture, restricted access to academic journals means that it is not as explicit or prominent in research carried out by Vietnamese scholars within the country. A prominent hesitation is that postcolonial theory is largely considered a Western conception, and therefore there are concerns about its applicability to the Vietnamese context. For example, whether or not there exists a postcolonial psychology in a country that has prided itself as the winner of many wars is an open question.

4.2.4 Reasons for Employing Chen's (2010) Outlook

Given the limitations and critiques outlined above, why did Chen still hold an appeal for my research? This section provides reasons for my interest in this theoretical framework.

While the salience of postcolonial theorising is yet to be explored further in Vietnamese academic discourse, it is difficult to ignore the deep-rooted impacts of

colonialism in the minds and actions of Vietnamese people, especially in literary works (Inrasara, 2006; Nguyễn, 2000). Despite the common psychology as the winner of the resistance wars, pro-Western and anti-Western discourses have coexisted in the minds of Vietnamese people – as admiration for and being mesmerised by the foreign world and, at the same time, negative feelings such as fear, isolation, and even opposition to the West (Inrasara, 2006; Nguyễn, 2000). In the context of higher education, for example, a colonial psychology exists (though not explicitly named) in the practices of policy borrowing and research publication. Vietnamese higher education is heavily influenced by external systems, especially China and the West, in terms of organising structures and policies, curriculum content, intellectual influences, teaching methodology, and quality assurance, for example (Le, 2014; Nguyen & Hamid, 2015; Tran, Ngo, Nguyen, & Dang, 2017; Tran & Marginson, 2018; Tran, Tran, Nguyen, & Ngo 2020; Welch, 2010). Studies have identified a range of reasons for weak research capacity (Pho & Tran, 2016; Ta & Zyngier, 2018), but underneath the individual and institutional difficulties lies a lack of confidence in building an independent research system and foregrounding a distinctive voice. Some scholars have therefore called for greater scepticism of employing postcolonial theorising in literary criticism (Nguyễn, 2013) and knowledge production in general (C. Phạm, 2013). It was these progressive and critical discourses that related to my curiosity about Chen's approach.

Asia as Method has been helpful for me as a Vietnamese researcher because I have tended to assume that Western theories are better than Oriental philosophies. In my experience as an academic, for example, I have sometimes applied Western pedagogical methods, thinking that they are effective without considering their suitability for my context, which has affected learning outcomes and caused confusion among my students. Chen's (2010) work has helped me clarify and be proud of my identification, and has felt like a warm companion in my travels with theory. Like many Vietnamese university lecturers, I felt intimidated and discouraged by Western research paradigms. Chen helped me understand that non-Western traditions, like Western ones, have their own potentials and challenges, that I have my own strengths and value in doing research, and that I need to make my voice heard like countless other non-Western or colonised people, especially academics who have overcome their inferiority complexes, to attempt to make a significant contribution to knowledge.

Although my view is that Chen's (2010) theory largely contributes a theoretical outlook to my study, rather than a research methodology, Asia as *issue* has contributed to a more comprehensive and compelling exploration of my research questions. This theory has helped me expand on the primarily descriptive nature of this interpretive research by moving towards considering how service learning could be conceptualised, implemented and practised differently, adding a more critical edge that is sometimes absent in interpretive research. His outlook and constructs have enabled me to interpret my own and others' feelings and actions, become more empathetic to others including my research participants, and see myself when looking in the mirror rather than using others as the object of identification.

4.3 Bringing the Frameworks Together

As my study brings together the interpretivist paradigm and *Asia as Method* in one research project, this section discusses the similarities and differences between these two frameworks.

It is first important to note that subjectivity is a foundational concept in an interpretivist paradigm and *Asia as Method.* Both approaches hold that truth is many and that reality is subjective and socially constructed. In an interpretivist approach, researchers investigate the social world by making sense of individual or group subjectivity, while simultaneously exercising their judgement and making meaning. Their own subjectivity is engaged in the research, and in order to achieve credibility, researchers must be reflexive about how this affects their research findings. In Counsell's (2013) view, "true understanding results from distancing oneself as one observes. This distancing makes us 'objective' – object-oriented rather than subject-oriented" (p. 311). However, it is not easy to exhaustively separate research from researchers' own subjectivity, and Counsell considers subjectivity as the quality that both creates challenges and offers opportunities in interpretivist research.

Second, both the interpretivist paradigm and *Asia as Method* pay great attention to cultural context. Interpretivist researchers look for "culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world" (Crotty, 1998, p. 67), and Chen has similarly recommended the search for meaning in relation to cultural and historical conditions. However, it is important to note that interpretivist schools of thought, such as symbolic interactionism and phenomenology advocate quite different views of culture. While symbolic

interactionism treats culture as the "meaningful matrix that guides our lives," phenomenology treats culture "with a good measure of caution and suspicion" (Crotty, 1998, p. 71) because it may impose certain meanings, exclude others, and "serve particular interests, and will harbour its own forms of oppression, manipulation and other forms of injustice" (p. 81). Significantly, both these positions are encompassed in *Asia as Method* and cognised by Chen's notions of critical syncretism and inter-referencing. Studying the culture and history of a subject matter is fertile ground for a more widely accepted interpretation, and a more skeptical view acts as a warning for researchers not to put all their trust in cultural and historical information without searching for meaning from multiple reference points.

Third, and importantly, more recent interpretivist approaches have encompassed a decolonising spirit (Scauso, 2020). Most interpretive theories have sought to "uncover aspects of domination, listen to previously marginalized voices, unveil hidden variations, and highlight alternatives" (p. 2), which at least partly aligns with Chen's conception of critical syncretism. Scauso has argued that some postcolonial authors can be considered interpretivists due to their related concerns. For example, the work of Frantz Fanon (1952) and Edward Said (1978) provided postcolonial insights for scholars of International Relations and supported their interpretive studies of colonial legacies. Although there may be epistemic disagreement, their works have led "to fruitful discussions of the problem of difference, the complexity of meaning, and the relationships between power and knowledge" (Scauso, 2020, p. 16).

Despite the previously described congruences, the objectives of researchers are an important difference between interpretivism and *Asia as Method.* Although Chen may share the same initial objective with interpretivists – that is, to understand research topics in a different way – his contribution is ultimately aimed at the reconciliation between the colonised and colonisers. This goal carries the extremely ambitious aims of transformation and liberation, requiring research efforts to mobilise around these aims. Research with an *Asia as Method* outlook arguably inclines more to an examination of the power relations and social-political conditions, thus requiring consideration of political, moral, and ethical ends.

4.4 Conclusion

For the purposes of my research, I take interpretivist research and *Asia as Method* to be broadly complementary approaches, the latter providing a greater depth of interpretive

insight in relation to the Vietnamese context and suggestive of directions for change. While a number of researchers have used interpretivist approaches in their studies of Vietnamese education (Nguyen, 2017; Tran, 2020; T. T. B. Tran, 2015; Truong, 2013), the research literature using *Asia as Method* has not commonly been located explicitly within an interpretivist paradigm. Not all authors in the edited book *Asia as Method in Education Studies: A Defiant Research Imagination* (Zhang et al., 2015) reported their research paradigm, for example. However, some authors appear to have used interpretivist approaches and tools in their research (e.g. Nguyen & Leihy, 2015; Vu & Le, 2015). This chapter has outlined the philosophical foundations of my theoretical approach to using an interpretivist paradigm amplified by *Asia as Method*. This two-fold theory is necessary for my inquiry because, in answering my research questions, I seek to give voice to the spirit and values of an Asian formerly colonised country in order to contribute unique insights to the literature on service learning in higher education.

CHAPTER 5: METHODOLOGY

In light of the theoretical frameworks discussed in the previous chapter, this chapter outlines the qualitative nature of the research, describes the multisite case study methodology of the study, and explains the compatibility of the methodology with the purposes of my study. The next part reports the methods and the procedures used throughout the study including data collection, data coding, and data analysis. Finally, the trustworthiness and ethical considerations are discussed and followed by a chapter summary.

5.1 Qualitative Case Study Research Design

This study used a qualitative methodology, informed by an interpretivist paradigm and Chen's (2010) *Asia as Method.* Four characteristics of qualitative research are it focuses on process, understanding, and meaning; the role of the researcher as the first and most important 'instrument' in the data collecting and analysing procedure; the way the research process is conducted inductively, producing general findings from particular instances; and the fact that the product is drawn from thick illustration and is therefore richly descriptive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Qualitative research has been defined as "an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world" (Van Maanen, 1979, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15). Qualitative research seeks to understand how people interpret their experiences, construct their worlds, and attribute meaning to their experiences (Merriam, 2009). It was therefore helpful for me to explore the experiences of service learning practitioners and to assess the opportunities and challenges of this form of experiential learning in Vietnamese higher education. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), qualitative researchers use a variety of empirical materials such as "case study, personal experience, introspection, life story, interview, artifacts, and cultural texts and productions, along with observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives" (p. 4). To focus on the depth, richness, and context of the phenomenon, they frequently use more than one interpretive practice and collect a large

amount of data with a small number of participants (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Given these characteristics, these authors also pointed out that qualitative research requires from a researcher such qualities as a questioning stance towards their work and life context, a tolerant personality of ambiguity; a careful observer; a good question maker, an inductive thinker; and a delightful manner for writing (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The case study is one of a variety of qualitative research designs and I found my study largely leaned towards Merriam's (1998) approaches. Stake (1995), Yin (1984), and Merriam (1998) are considered foundational methodologists in case study research and their guidelines have widely influenced educational researchers' decisions on case study design (Yazan, 2015). Although these methodologists have different approaches, I am influenced by Merriam's (1998) emphasis on constructivism, that is "the view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds" (p. 6). Merriam shared my view that reality is not an objective entity, and that it can rather be interpreted with multiple meanings. Her constructivist view on the philosophical assumption of qualitative researchers aligns with my interest in understanding the meaning or knowledge constructed by people. Moreover, I agree with Merriam that meaning making and knowledge construction undergo two layers of interpretation, one brought to the research situation by the researcher, and the other produced from interaction with others' views through the researcher's filter. For data analysis, I am interested in Merriam's (2009) viewpoints on the process of making sense out of the data and analysing data simultaneously with collecting it. Making sense out of the data involves "consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read – it is the process of making meaning" (Merriam, 1998, p. 178). Analysing concurrently with collecting data is an interactive process that encourages recursive and dynamic data collection. It makes analysis more intensive as the study progresses and all data is collected. This approach also helps make suitable changes in the following phases of the research. Merriam's (2009) perspective on making sense of and analysing preliminary data is largely similar to the reflexive thematic analysis method that I am using in this study.

For Merriam (2009), a *case* is defined as "an in-depth description of a bounded system…a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries which I can 'fence in' what I am going to study" (p. 40). It can vary from a single person, a programme, or a group, to an institution, a community, or a specific policy. A case is characterised by the unit of analysis and the focus of the study, and the unit of analysis determines if a study is a case study or not.

In Viet Nam, service learning courses are part of an established curricular system with approved syllabi, assessment schemes, and participants (for example, teachers, students, administrators, and community partners). My study considered a service learning course at a Vietnamese university with the stakeholders connected to the course as the unit of analysis. The stakeholders included people involved in the course directly, such as teachers, students, and community partners, and indirectly such as rectors, deans, and youth union leaders. While service learning courses can be cross-faculty or inter-disciplinary, the focus for this research was courses within individual faculty contexts. My view was that "an intensive, holistic description and analysis" (Merriam, 1998, p. xiii) of service learning courses, as bounded sub-systems with various local practices and miniature structures, would provide insight into the structure of service learning in Vietnamese higher education.

Multisite case studies[7] are a common strategy to enhance the strength of these studies' findings. They involve "collecting and analyzing data from several cases and can be distinguished from the single case study that may have subunits or subcases embedded within (such as students within a school)" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 40). The more cases that are included in a study, the more significant interpretations the study is likely to make. According to Miles et al., (2014), "by looking at a range of similar and contrasting cases, we can understand a single-case finding, grounding it by specifying how and where and, if possible, why it carries on as it does. We can strengthen the precision, the validity, and the stability of the findings" (p. 33). Multisite case study enabled me to not only describe service learning practices in a range of university faculties but also to uncover common rationales, constraints and opportunities behind those practices in the Vietnamese context.

5.2 Research Methods

5.2.1 Selection of Sites and Participants

I used the purposive sampling technique to select the sites and participants for my study. Purposive sampling is "the practice of selecting cases that are likely to be information-rich with respect to the purposes of a qualitative study" (Patton, 1990, p. 169). With this technique, I could "intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central

[7] Multisite case studies are also called comparative case studies, collective case studies, cross-case studies, and multicase studies.

phenomenon" (Creswell, 2012, p. 206) and could find people who were willing to provide information related to their knowledge or experience (Long, 2005). The selection of sites followed a rationale to ensure that they provided the richest data. First and foremost, as defined by Bringle and Hatcher (1995), service learning should be "a course based, credit-bearing educational experience" (p. 112). For the purposes of this study, I developed the following additional criteria from best practice principles for service learning courses or programme designs (Bringle & Hatcher, 1995; Howard, 2001; Kendall & Associates, 1990; Quiring, 2010):

1. The content of service-learning activities should be relevant to the course content or particular concept(s) of a course within a faculty.
2. The service should meet one or more course objectives, explicitly stated in a course assessment scheme or academic results.
3. The service should involve addressing community problems or issues, involve outcomes transferred to the community partner, and include assessments by a representative from that partner.
4. The course should involve reflection (e.g. journal, report, meeting, diary) on the students' experiences and recommendations as one of the assessment criteria
5. There should be continuity in the connection with the community, evidenced by the frequency of activities, e.g., once a year/semester/month.
6. There should be evidence that the course has been or will be maintained over time.

These criteria limited the number of service learning courses that could be included in my study. A number of service learning programmes were offered at the time of data collection but most were characterised as volunteering rather than as discipline or course-based. Some projects, including competitions, were initiated as extra-curricular activities for students from disciplines such as architecture and construction, biology, education, technology, agriculture, rural development, and business. Only six programmes could be identified as related to course contents. Within this pool, five universities with various disciplines were chosen as possible research sites. Due to the lack of publicly available information on the service learning practices in the Northern regions, the selected cases were geographically limited to universities in the Middle and the South of Viet Nam. To optimise diversity, I selected different university types (national, regional, and provincial), a variety of

disciplines that represented a range of approaches to the practice of service learning, and different geographic locations. As the number of service learning courses that met the proposed criteria were very limited, the available disciplines were confined to the fields of social work, maths pedagogy, business English, and Oriental cultural studies. This explains why there was not more variation in the disciplines included in this study. One university was not accessible due to a restructure, so four universities were shortlisted with the pseudonyms Evergreen, Olympia, Resina, and Universal (see Section 5.6 for more details about choosing pseudonyms). If there was more than one service learning course in an institution, I selected the courses that best fit the selection criteria above.

Six types of participants in each university were invited due to their connection to a service learning course (Figure 5.1). Those who directly participated in the course were the teacher(s), the students, and the community representative. Other participants that were indirectly related to the course were the rector, the faculty dean, and the Youth Union secretary who managed the community engagement programmes.

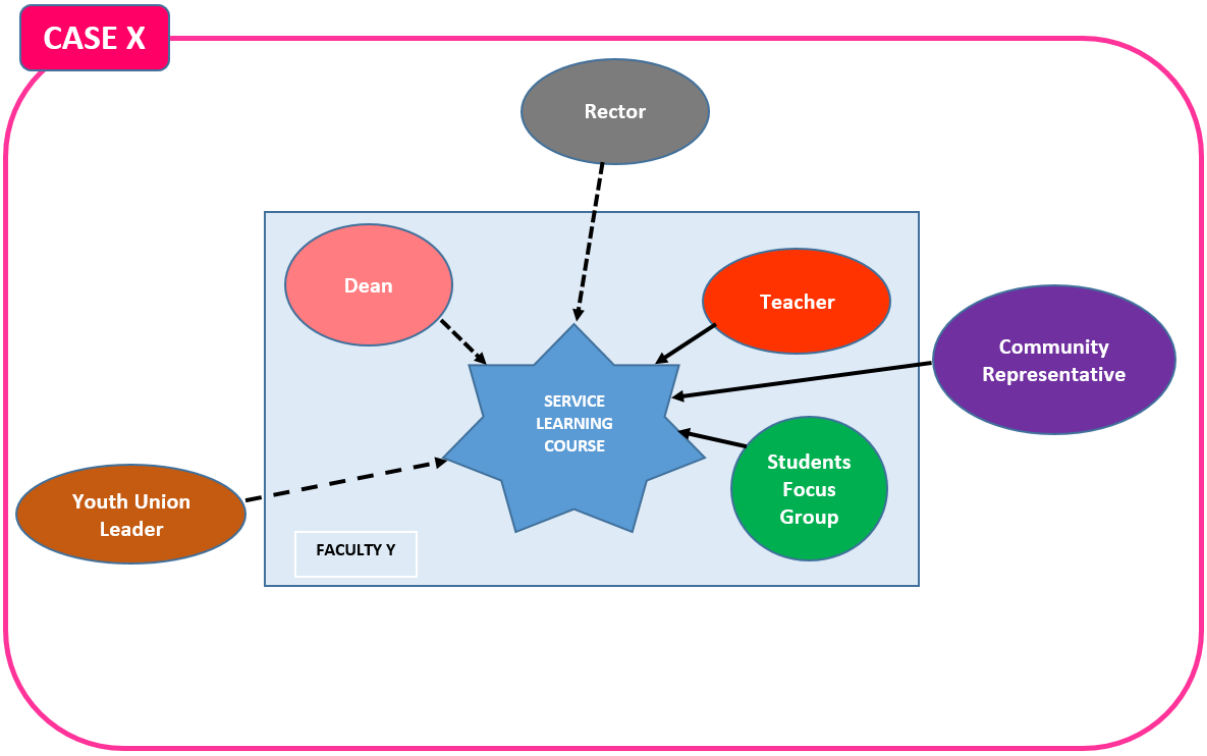


Figure 5.1: Six types of participants in a typical case

Teachers typically decided how service learning would be incorporated into the course, identified community partners, and developed teaching and assessment methods.

Teacher participants were identified based on the media information about the service learning course(s) of an institution. In the planning phases, I contacted these teachers to confirm that they were doing service learning. As mentioned above, if I found more than one service learning course in a university, I would choose only the course that best met the criteria for a unit of analysis. As a service learning course in Vietnamese higher education is usually team-taught (usually from one to three teachers), I decided to include two teachers for each case (one lead teacher and one team member) in my study. However, as two of the four courses were taught by one teacher, only that teacher could be included in the case. After I received the rector's permission, I would email the lead teacher requesting their participation and asking them to refer me to another team member.

As suggested by Leung and Savithiri (2009), the teachers recommended student participants from their courses. Each head teacher gave me a list of all students in the course and their contact information and I approached the students to request their participation. The number of students in the list of the Evergreen University was 82, Olympia University was 16, Resina University was 28, and Universal University was 55. For the purposes of manageability, I randomly selected students from each list until I had a sufficient number for a focus group.

Community representatives – who could be a manager, school principal, local officer, or Youth Union secretary of a community organisation, and who worked closely with the service learning teachers to allocate roles, assign site mentors, manage community resources, and provide assessment – were also recruited from the teacher's referral. A service learning course often involved many community organisations and there could be more representatives than I could manage. Therefore, based on the teacher's preference list, I contacted one representative and waited for their response before deciding to contact another.

I approached the rector participants through their secretary or the Administrative Office. As a rector is often responsible for general administrative roles, the other members of the Board of Rectors (usually including one rector and several vice-rectors) are assigned specific fields of responsibility such as research and academic issues, public relations and partnership, or finance and resources. Although I obtained permission from the rectors at all four universities to conduct research in their university, not all of them were able to be interviewed for my study due to their busy schedule, and two assigned their vice-rectors in charge of academic affairs, instead.

A faculty dean is responsible for academic matters and human resources, including assigning teaching staff to courses and dealing with course-related issues on the recommendation of the department head. They were involved in this study because they could decide on the curriculum structure that may or may not facilitate the integration of service learning. At three of the universities in this study, the dean/vice-dean was also involved in the service learning course, so I interviewed them in their capacities as both teacher and administrator.

A Youth Union secretary generally has no direct connection to academic affairs but is involved with the community engagement role of the institution. I included these participants in this study because their experience working with communities and connecting students and social organisations could be useful for the integration of service learning in curricular programmes. I approached the Youth Union participants with the rector's permission and was able to interview the secretary or their deputy at all four universities.

Table 5.1 summarises basic information about the sites, the participants, and the number of interviews.

	Evergreen University	**Olympia University**	**Resina University**	**Universal University**
Type of university governance	National university	National university	Provincial university	Regional university
Focus faculty	Sociology Faculty	Mathematics Faculty	Foreign Languages Faculty	Oriental Studies Faculty
Case (service learning course)	Social Work	Mathematics Pedagogy	Internship on Business English	Oriental Cultures
Top administrator interviewed	1 vice-rector	1 vice-rector	X	X
Faculty/Middle administrator interviewed	1 dean (of Social Work Faculty)	1 dean 1 manager of the Centre for Teaching Innovations	1 dean	1 vice-dean and teacher
Service learning teachers interviewed	1 teacher	2 teachers	2 teachers	
Student focus group	6 students	1 student (individual interview) 4 students (focus group interview)	5 students	5 students

Community partner/ representative interviewed	1 head of Social Work Office at the Hospital	1 principal of the School for Children with Disabilities	1 local ward's Youth Union Secretary and Organiser of the Class for Migrant Children	1 manager of the Creative Arts[8] Organisation
Youth Union secretary	1 Youth Union's deputy secretary	1 Youth Union's deputy secretary	1 Youth Union's deputy secretary	1 Youth Union's secretary
Total of interviews and participants	6 interviews 11 participants	9 interviews 12 participants	6 interviews 10 participants	4 interviews 8 participants

Table 5.1: Sites and participants

5.2.2 Participant Recruitment

To invite participation in my study, I prepared a range of documents in Vietnamese (Appendices A-F). A referral letter (Appendix A) was needed to introduce me to the rector of the site institution, signed by the Head of the Office of Administrative Affairs of my home institution and presented to the Head of the Office of Administrative Affairs of the site institution, so that they could arrange an appointment with their rector. A letter to the rector (Appendix B) was then prepared to introduce details of the study to request their permission for me to collect data from their institution. This letter with the rector's signature enabled me to officially collect data from the institution. Adapted versions of the information sheet (Appendix C) were sent via email to potential participants before the interview so that they had time to ask questions and decide whether or not to participate. Different versions of the consent form (Appendix D) were prepared for each type of participant, and participants' consent was required before the interview occurred.

My procedure for approaching participants in each institution was similar. As discussed, before I went to the fields, I contacted the (head) service learning teacher to confirm that they did/were doing the service learning course. Then I started with a request to talk to the rector to ask for permission to do research in their institution. I then met with the dean, who provided contact details of other service learning teachers. The head service learning teachers then introduced their student group and the community representative. In the meantime, I approached the Youth Union's secretary and relevant people upon the rector's reference. At two sites (Resina and Universal Universities) I was unable to meet the rectors in person; however, they agreed to sign the letter of permission for me to do research

[8] The exact art form is not named in order to protect the identities of the university and its participants

at their institutions. The dean of the Sociology Faculty of Evergreen University declined my invitation because she did not have much information about the service learning course, so I invited the dean of Social Work Faculty instead. As described above, I approached a potential participant in person or via email, presented the rector's letter of permission, introduced the purpose of the research, and explained the interview's main points and procedures. If they refused to participate, I would thank them and approach another potential participant. If they agreed to participate, we made an appointment for the time and venue of the interview. Before each interview, I sent through the information sheet and consent form so that the participants had enough time to read thoroughly, ask questions, consider if they would like to join the study, and sign the consent form.

5.2.3 Data Sources

One characteristic of the case study method is the use of multiple sources of evidence. I collected data from individual and group interviews, course-related policy documents, and observations. As qualitative interpretive research requires the thick description of the cases as the foundation for meaningful interpretations, this triangulation of three data sources allowed me to approach the units of analysis from different perspectives, providing detailed pictures of the cases in order to make relevant explanations and convincing discussions.

5.2.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

This study employed semi-structured interviews to elicit participants' views about service learning in their institutions. Like other research tools, semi-structured interviews have their strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, they give the participants freedom to express their views and the researcher a more thorough understanding of the participants' opinions (Carruthers, 1990). On the other hand, discussions can diverge from the focus of the interview (Stuckey, 2013). To avoid some of the pitfalls associated with semi-structured interviews, I tried to be well-prepared and developed my interviewing skills through a pilot interview.

The interview questions elicited responses to the study's research questions, which included topics such as the emergence of service learning, the practice of service learning, opportunities and challenges, and suggestions for improvement. I planned prompts for each

question so that I could flexibly respond to the interviewees and the context. The prompts were tailored to different types of participants, especially the students, community agents, and Youth Union representatives (see Appendix E). The interview protocol for all participants, except the students, began with ice-breaking questions (including the background of the participants and their institution/ faculty/ organisation), and ended with a question that allowed the participants to refer me to other places that were practicing service learning, and an open question to which the participants could add more comments/ information/ ideas about service learning.

Student focus groups

To collect data from student participants, I chose to use focus group interviews after weighing the advantages and disadvantages (Merriam, 2009). Focus group interviews started to be used in the field of social psychological research nearly a century ago and became popular in market and educational research lately (Liamputtong, 2011; Vaughn et al., 1996). Another reason for my interest was that student focus group interview has been a well-used research method in a number of Vietnamese studies in a wide range of fields in the past decade, probably because of its effectiveness in collecting data from participants of Confucian heritage and collectivist culture (Le, 2016; Tran, 2014; T. T. Tran, 2015; Tran, 2021; Trinh & Connor, 2019; Truong, 2016; Vo, 2021).

I anticipated that focus group interviews would be suitable for my research for several reasons proposed by researchers (e.g. Morgan & Krueger, 1993; Patton, 2002; Vaughn et al., 1996). First, they would provide a secure environment for students to express their opinions in circumstances where they held less power and professional expertise than policy makers and teachers. Second, part of my goal was to learn more about the diverse opinions and experiences of students in each course. The participants' exchanges within a focus group interview would enable me to evaluate the degree of consensus on topics, clarify information, and observe how reality is constructed from the different perspectives of student participants (Vaughn et al., 1996). Third, the focus group interview would provide a friendly environment and group dynamic that would enable the students to build on each other's ideas to express their opinions overtly. Moreover, as Vietnamese students are influenced by Confucian and collectivist culture, my view was that they would feel more comfortable voicing their pressing issues in a group (Hofstede, 2001; Koski 2009). In this way, focus groups could yield richer data than individual interviews. Furthermore, as the data collection period was

limited, focus group interviews were a practical method to help me gather a large amount of data in the time available than if I had conducted one-on-one interviews.

There were, however, concerns about conducting focus group interviews, especially in Vietnamese culture. On one hand, it was unavoidable that some participants could be more outspoken, sway others' opinions, or become involved in disagreements or off-topic discussions that distracted from the interview focus (Kohn & Christiaens, 2012; Leung & Savithiri, 2009; Pawi et al., 2010). On the other hand, one major challenge could be the tendency of participants from Confucian heritage cultures to give short answers, to confine interactions among themselves, or to be more active outside an interview (Lee & Lee, 2009). I found strategies identified in the literature (Lee & Lee, 2009; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2019; Vaughn et al., 1996) and my teaching experience extremely helpful to manage these challenges. For example, I used various moderator techniques to encourage less outspoken participants, reinforce the focus of the interview questions when there was distraction, and ask confirming questions when there was conflicting information or when individuals had changed their minds.

For each case, I decided to conduct one focus group, and the number of students in each focus group interview varied from four to six. The interviews were organised in private rooms where participants could feel comfortable to discuss and interact with me and each other. Before the student group interview at Olympia University, one student participant requested to have an individual interview after the focus group interview due to an urgent task. Therefore, I conducted one individual and one focus group interview, which resulted in two student interviews for this case.

5.2.3.2 University Policy Documents

While interviews were the main tool for data collection, I also gathered policy and course-related documents as secondary sources. These types of documents, presented in Table 5.2, were collected to support the information given in semi-structured interviews. The policy documents were collected from institutional webpages and public media communications about service learning in the selected institutions. Not all the original course-related project documentation, such as the students' products, had been kept, which made this aspect of data collection challenging. Some examples of course related products

were mathematics teaching tools for disabled students and costumes designed for creative arts performances, which I have seen on pictures but did not have an opportunity to gather.

Data source	Type of Documentation	Site A	Site B	Site C	Site D
Policy documents, public information, and records	Strategic plan	✓			
	Mission	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Vision	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Philosophy	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Media news about service learning	✓	✓	✓	✓
Other course-related documentation	Course syllabus and assessment scheme	✓	✓	✓	
	Facebook group (invited membership)		✓	✓	✓
	Student reports/diary/reflection	✓		✓	✓
	Photos of service learning activities	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Videos of students' service learning projects		✓		✓
	Published research on service learning		✓		✓

Table 5.2: Supplementary data sources

5.2.3.3 Observations

As most of this study's data sources were reflections from the participants' past experiences, it was nearly impossible to collect data from observations. This is because the service learning courses had already occurred and I could not observe classes or the progress of students' projects. However, I managed to get permission for three official observations. I was allowed to attend the last class at Evergreen University, where the students presented their projects and the teacher wrapped up the main points of the course. I had an opportunity to watch students at Olympia University operating the 3D printer to make a teaching tool for children who had a particular disability. At Universal University, I was invited to observe a creative arts performance, which was the result of high school students' efforts to promote creative art to this school age.

During these observations, I took descriptive notes, recorded discussions with relevant people, and wrote about my feelings when witnessing significant moments. For example, when one group of students was presenting their project, I asked clarifying questions about the project and documentation to other groups' members and the teacher sitting near me, who were very happy to explain further. In the observation of a creative arts performance, when

the artists were performing, the manager explained the meanings of the costumes and actions of each artist. Although I had participants' verbal permission for these observations, I decided not to report directly on this data, but instead used it as a backdrop for my analysis. The observations strengthened my understanding of the data collected, provided material for thick descriptions, and brought more depth to later analysis.

5.2.4 Data Collection and Preliminary Processing

During the process of data collection, I checked the newly obtained data to address any problems where possible, which is often referred to as preliminary processing in the qualitative case study method (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994; Zucker, 2009). This is also part of the "recursive process" that a case study researcher uses to constantly interact with the information, and to examine and interpret the data collected so as to draw sensible conclusions and clarify the research questions (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, p. 56). Immediately after each interview, I listened to the recording, wrote an analytic memo, and clarified unclear information with the participant(s) as soon as possible (but no longer than one week later, in case they forgot about the content of their interviews). I also wrote a thank-you email to them and reminded them about any documents they had wanted to share or receive after the interview. Together with a summary of each interview, I wrote reflective comments about the strong impressions these people had left on me, in order to capture "the quotes or passages that strike you – those 'codable moments' worthy of attention" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 19) in the precoding stage. This technique helped me document my thoughts while the memories of the interviews were still fresh. Importantly, the codable moments that most resonated with me related to values in Vietnamese culture that influenced my coding decisions in the later stage (Creswell, 2013; Mason, 2002).

This ongoing practice became significant and prompted me to adjust some of the data collection methods and processes.

One example of the timely correction that I made after a preliminary check was a technical problem. When I was interviewing the student focus group in Resina University, one of the recorders did not play the sound from minute 14:10 to 34:03 although the recording signal was working, and I could not find the reason why this occurred. Unfortunately, my other recorder (a cell phone) was damaged right afterwards, in an accident during heavy rain while I was travelling to the next interview. This meant that the transcript

for this interview was shorter than others. I was lucky enough to check the audio immediately afterwards and took corrective action by noting down details of the interview while my memories were still fresh, and checking with the group participants by calling or emailing them to confirm the unclear information. A lesson learned for me was to prepare different types of backup recording devices and to store them in a waterproof place when travelling, even for a short distance.

For all the sites, I kept a record of the participants, their demographic information, and the types of documents collected, to monitor the data collection progress and to ensure the follow-up was completed. After I finished collecting data, I assigned pseudonyms to each university and participant. As service learning cases were potentially easily recognisable, I modified the physical descriptions of the universities, course names and characteristics, names of the community organisations, and descriptions of the projects.

I began to transcribe the data by using Otranscribe,[9] an online application. However, I found that my transcribing speed was very slow, and found I had more success by using the recording function in a Google document. With the Google app, I selected Vietnamese as the language. On a different device, I played an interview recording on the Otranscribe application so I could manipulate the recording with my fingers. The Google document could then 'listen' to and 'type' the transcripts. The combination of these two applications significantly accelerated my transcribing speed.

I decided to leave the transcripts in Vietnamese because it would be better to code in my first language, as suggested by Morrow (2005), as I had more opportunities to catch the codable moments within a shared mother tongue and cultural concepts. I did, however, translate six sample extracts into English and used these to practise team coding with my supervisors so that I knew how experienced researchers code their data. I began by using Google Translate and then edited these app-translated versions using my experience as a teacher of English and consulting experts for difficult terms and concepts. Once I reached the coding stage, however, I wrote the codes and themes in English so that it would be easier to discuss these with my supervisors. Any participants' comments that I needed to include in my thesis were translated into English.

[9] https://otranscribe.com/

5.3 Approach to Data Analysis: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Themes reflect a pattern of shared meaning that is organised around a core concept or idea (Braun et al., 2018) and, in the case of my thesis, revealed the nuances of my participants' thoughts about service learning. I looked for replication (both literal and theoretical) of common themes across the cases, not just within a data item (such as individual interview).

I used reflexive thematic analysis as my approach to data analysis, and was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase process and recommendations for good reflexive thematic analysis. For Braun and Clarke (2019), this approach aligns with their view of qualitative research as "creative, reflexive and subjective" (p. 591). Reflexive thematic analysis is distinguishable from a 'coding reliability' approach to thematic analysis, which has a (post-)positivist underlying logic that requires the reliability and replicability of observation. It is also different from 'codebook' thematic analysis, which shares "the structured approach to coding with coding reliability thematic analysis (though often without the use of coding reliability measures)" in which "some if not all themes are determined in advance of full analysis, and themes are typically conceptualized as domain summaries" (Braun et al., 2018, p. 7). However, Braun et al. (2018) point out that reflexive, codebook, and coder reliability thematic analyses are not mutually exclusive and share some common characteristics. In the coding phases, I was guided by Saldaña's (2013) coding strategies as a means to ensure a consistent and reliable approach to my analysis.

Reflexive thematic analysis is a fully qualitative approach that highlights "meaning as contextual or situated, reality or reali*ties* as multiple, and researcher subjectivity as not just valid but a *resource*" (Braun et al., 2018, p. 6). Reflexive thematic analysis calls for researchers' thoughtful engagement with their data and their analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Themes do not passively emerge from data or exist in the data and wait to be identified by the researchers. They are creative and interpretive stories about the data, which are told by the researchers through the intersection between the data, the researchers' theoretical assumptions, and their analytic resources and skill. Reflexive thematic analysis is flexible in that "it can be used within different theoretical frameworks (although not all) and can be used to do different things within them" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81).

The data in my study was analysed at a latent level rather than a semantic level because I examined "the *underlying* ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations – and ideologies – that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). This theme developing process, in turn, required much interpretative work, and the produced analysis was not just descriptive but also theorised. I also conducted both within-case (the focus of Chapter 6) and/or cross-case analyses (Chapters 7-9) because within-case analyses provided in-depth descriptions of each case to highlight its specificity, and cross-case analyses brought about a more complete picture of the similarities and differences between cases. Both procedures were crucial to draw out the thick description of service learning in the Vietnamese context.

The data analysis was reflexive in the way that I always brought myself to the analysis, considered my positionality as a researcher, and engaged with the research literature. Some of the themes that I identified strongly resonated with my personal experience and positionality. For example, as a teacher, I understand the pressures and constraints of higher education reform and the micro-politics of relationships between faculty members. Other themes were analysed through my Vietnamese cultural lens, including traditional and religious traits that are highly influential to the behaviours and lifestyle of Vietnamese people. Other concerns that I identified in the data connected to issues that I had reviewed in the literature. The reflexive moments in my thematic analysis will be highlighted throughout the following section.

5.4 Coding Phases

Using Word documents, I began the pre-coding process by highlighting significant words or phrases and noting down relevant codes related to these words. These preliminary notes were written in my first language because I believed they best described my first impressions of the data. I then moved to using NVivo: a popular programme for qualitative data management. My supervisors and I decided to team code portions of the transcripts so that they could guide me through my first coding experience. We began by coding separately on the same extracts, then compared and contrasted our coding and explored possible missing codes. When I moved to solo coding, I often discussed and checked my interpretations with my supervisors and participants (if possible) via email or phone calls. These discussions were valuable in that they "not only [provide] an opportunity to articulate your internal thinking

processes, but also [present] windows of opportunity for clarifying your emergent ideas and possibly making new insights about the data" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 36).

5.4.1 Inductive Coding

I used both inductive and deductive approaches to coding. Initially, I applied an inductive approach to allow space for possible themes to arise from the data collected. My first cycle of inductive coding was divided into three stages. In the first stage, the data remained its original language, while the codes were written in English so that it would be convenient for me and my supervisors to discuss the coding. The product, looking back, was obviously from an inexperienced coder. After further reading, I learned that the number one problem of inexperienced coders was a one-to-one relationship between codes and interview questions. This approach did not allow new themes to emerge because my coding was framed by seeking direct answers to these questions. Although the results of this first-time coding were not used to serve the findings, this practice provided me with some experience for later attempts. Alongside the literal codes responding to the interview questions, another node called *Vietnamese styles* was added as my first impression on the practice of service learning in Vietnamese context was different from that which was described in the literature that I read from Western and other Asian contexts. The codes within this *Vietnamese styles* node later became significant as I began to notice the importance of power relationships for my participants.

In the second stage, I searched for repeated ideas expressed by various participants. This is called 'structural coding' by Saldaña (2013). The ideas were grouped under five nodes: *operation concerns* (e.g. time, funding, students' safety), *disciplinary needs, motivations and drivers* (e.g. improve teaching, student employment, care for society), *unvoiced issues* (issues that were unspoken between parties due to cultural influences, such as low pay, jealousy, and assessment design), and *Vietnamese styles* (in particular Vietnamese characteristics affecting the operation of service learning such as relationships, hierarchy, and the importance of paperwork). Although these ideas were more abstract than those in the first stage of coding, I could not find any relevant points to connect them to each other.

In the third stage, I became more confident in handling the functions of NVivo and expressing a code in abstract rather than descriptive terms. I started to see the relevance between codes and rearranged the coding. As a result, four major themes came up at the end

of this stage: *social communities* (communities as the purpose for educational reform), *authenticity* (as an outcome of service learning), *teacher autonomy* (teachers' roles in ensuring the success of the service learning course), and *readiness* (such as preparation and training before the service learning course).

5.4.2 Deductive Coding

Deductive coding allowed me to start with the pre-existing set of codes from the inductive phase and enabled a more comprehensive exploration of the data, particularly at the point where I could not identify any further codes. I felt the need to identify the stronger themes and eliminate or restructure the weaker ones. Using a process similar to Saldaña's (2013) 'axial coding method,' I started to reorganise the data set, grouping the similar codes, deleting minor or redundant codes, and choosing the best representative codes that served the major themes. I identified three themes at this point: social communities, readiness and limitations, and adaptation/contextualisation. Guided by Braun et al. (2018), I understood that these themes could be temporary and might change during the report writing process. I began to write the findings with the expectation that the themes would become clearer as I provided evidence from the codes. According to preliminary feedback on the first version, the themes were not well woven into a cross-cutting story.

While writing up the themes, there were remaining codes related to the participants' sentiments and body language that I did not want to discard because they kept touching my emotions. When participants were talking about disadvantaged communities, they usually changed the tone of their voice and speed at which they spoke, facial expressions, and/or posture to convey a mixture of feelings such as interest, pride, and concern. When I delved into further reading about Vietnamese traditional culture, I realised that these codes were too strong to set aside. Then I decided to explore one more theme on the distinctive characteristic of service learning in Vietnamese context: *benevolence*. While the themes had previously characterised the participants' thoughts (head) and actions (hand), this theme captured their dispositions and aspirations (heart), which had been expressed through their emotions.

I also found that the *readiness* theme was not strong enough. I realised that preparation was just one of the challenges of service learning that the participants were reporting. Moreover, it appeared that their reports on these challenges were ignited from the constrained relationships with other actors. There was a subtle protocol of hierarchy

(discussed further in the Ethical Considerations section) that affects all aspects of our lives. Motivated by my personal experience and understanding of this cultural value, I scanned again all the relevant codes and noticed that most participants were navigating power relationships to achieve their goals.

The coding process finished with three major themes, listed in Table 5.1. The second column of the table specifies the number of interviews in which each code featured (out of 25 interviews). The third column indicates the number of statements in which a code was mentioned, including repeated mentions from a participant.

THEMES	**Interviews mentioned**	**Frequency**
1. Embracing communities as partners in educational change	24	576
1.1. Service learning as a means for higher education reform	23	283
• Development of soft skills → employability	18	148
• Authentic learning experience	23	93
• Shifts in assessment practices	11	42
1.2. Communities helping enhance moral values in young people	20	126
• Student awareness of diverse communities and needs	17	64
• Learning from community knowledge	12	25
• Maturity in students' emotion	9	37
1.3. Teachers as unsupported agents of change	19	167
2. Navigating power relationships	24	287
2.1. Constrained agency: Administrators-Teachers	17	118
2.2. Hopeful but constrained autonomy: Teachers-Students	14	98
2.3. Re-charting Hierarchy: Universities-Communities	11	52
2.4. Distressed micro-political horizontal relationships: Initiators-Faculty Members	6	19
3. Honoring benevolence as a prerequisite for service learning	19	86
3.1. *Tâm* as the motivation for good work	15	49
3.2. Achieving harmony as a means for practicing service learning	8	15
3.3. Good fruits from good actions: causality law	10	22

Table 5.3: Final themes and codes

5.5 Trustworthiness and Limitations of this Study

Instead of using the positivist criteria of validity, reliability, and objectivity, interpretivist research ensures trustworthiness and authenticity through four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). I used Shenton's (2004) framework for the strategies that a researcher can use to achieve the four criteria. For example, I have discussed the philosophical assumptions that have informed my use of an interpretivist theoretical framework and Chen's (2010) constructs to analyse and develop my arguments. The literature review chapters (Chapters 2 and 3) and detailed attention to individual cases (Chapter 6) are indications of my awareness of the context that frames my findings, and I developed early familiarity with the cultures of the participating organisations by paying preliminary visits to become familiar with the environment and culture of each site as early as possible. In terms of transferability, I have provided background data to establish the context of the study and detailed descriptions of service learning to allow comparisons to be made. Detailed information about the number of sites, participants' demography, method of data collection, and limitations of my study have also been described as a reference for further research.

Other strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of my study relate to my methodological choices. I have provided in-depth methodological descriptions to allow my study to be repeated, and chose qualitative multisite case study methodology as a well-recognised research method. To triangulate my data, I used different informants, sites, and data sources, and employed overlapping methods to verify the information and strengthen the dependability of my findings. According to a review on the university website and a personal communication with the service learning teacher in 2020, the lack of institutional support and the relocation of the teacher initiator to another university has put an end to the service learning practice in this institution. To promote honesty among my participants, I clearly explained to the participants that there would be no right or wrong answers to the questions, that despite my relation to one of the institutions, I would try my best to conduct the role of an independent researcher, and that participants had the right to withdraw from the research. I was also aware of using iterative questioning in interviewing to detect contradictions in participants' accounts. To make sure that all the remarkable moments were recorded, I created a reflective commentary in the interview transcripts and used member checking of the data collected with participants via emails and phone calls to confirm my interpretations.

However, I recognise the shortcomings in my methods and the limitations of my study. One obvious limitation is that my study does not cover all Vietnamese universities, especially from the Northern regions, subject areas, or service learning offerings due to the limited number of service learning courses that were available in the public information and met the criteria of a case at the time of data collection. However, I selected multi-disciplinary universities with the expectation that this would provide insight into the multi-faceted view of service learning practice in Viet Nam. One university declined to participate due to their restructuring, meaning that my study is missing the perspective of a private institution. However, I included as much publicly available information about service learning in private universities as possible.

Another key limitation relates to the timing of my study. The fact that my research was conducted after the service learning projects had concluded made it difficult for me to collect related documents and harder for the participants to recall their memories and emotions, which influenced the trustworthiness of the study.

As part of my study involved interviews, there were advantages and drawbacks with this method and I was concerned about the following three issues. First, as the students were referred to me by their teachers, the groups may have included only high-performing students, which may have presented some biased opinions. Second, group interviews run the risk that one or more participants may feel under pressure to agree or disagree with the majority view. Third, it can be difficult for researchers to control and manage group discussions and keep everyone focused (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Mansell et al., 2004). Being aware of these problems, I sought and practised various techniques, such as describing in detail my expectations of the students and how the interview would be conducted, recorded, and transcribed (Morrow, 2005); systematic planning and coding (Gunawan, 2015); and keeping the discussion focused and bringing everyone into the conversation (Kohn & Christiaens, 2012).

A further limitation to my study relates to the selection of participants. Some interviews did not yield much in the way of significant information. For example, Mr. Sang (community agent, Evergreen University), Dr. Quyen (vice-rector, Olympia University), and Ms. Nhan (Youth Union secretary, Universal University) were interested in my study but knew less about service learning practice in their institutions. These conversations did at least

highlight varying levels of engagement among stakeholders and the need for strategies to involve them more closely in service learning initiatives.

5.6 Ethical Considerations

My research was conducted according to research ethics guides (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 1998; Punch & Oancea, 2014; Yin, 2014), approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Policy (Number 25688, see Appendix F), and met the conventions of doing research in Vietnamese higher education which is explained next. Knowledge-sharing in Viet Nam faces a range of challenges, including a lack of coordination, information scattered across different agencies (Bauer, 2011), and an under-developed research culture in higher education (Huynh, 2016; Nguyen, 2013; Tran, Tran, Nguyen, & Ngo, 2020). One problem that I expected was that people would be hesitant to participate in my study. To my surprise, I was welcomed by most people I approached, as long as I had a valid reference from VUW and my home university and declared my relationship to the referees. Relationships are of primary importance in Vietnamese culture and I had allowed sufficient time to establish the relationship with university managements and build trust with participants. Although I was aware that the problem of hierarchy and the official referral letters may make some participants feel obligated to participate, the fact that some potential participants refused to participate, others expressed their interview requirements, and many were willing to participate gave me confidence in the ethics of my approach. Moreover, I did not sense any obligatory attitude from my participants.

A range of ethical principles were observed and practised during the research process. The number of service learning examples in Vietnamese higher education that met the definition and criteria (see pages 41, 96) at the time of data collection was not abundant. Detailed decriptions of each case were therefore carefully and selectively provided so as not to reveal the identities of my participants. The pseudonyms for the participating universities were chosen on the basis of characteristics or geographical features that I associated with each institution rather than any other special connotations.

The wording of my interview protocol, for example, was thoroughly considered to ensure cultural acceptance. I was concerned about these because they were first designed in English and needed a back-translation (Chen & Boore, 2010) into Vietnamese. I was aware of the requirements for translators proposed by Geisinger (1994) that they “must be fluent in

both languages, extremely knowledgeable about both cultures, and expert in both the characteristics and the content measured on the instrument and the uses to which the […] instrument will be put" (p. 306), I decided not to use back-translation, but to rewrite the Interview Protocols, Information Sheet, and Consent Forms in Vietnamese without looking at the English versions to ensure the natural flow of the language, then compare these with the English versions and make amendments where necessary. Because all my participants were Vietnamese, I did not want these documents to be affected by an English translation if I had translated from English into Vietnamese. I had both versions double-checked by my other Vietnamese doctoral students and two experts in the field to ensure that they were culturally appropriate; one is the head of the Translating and Interpreting Department in a credited English Faculty, and the other is an experienced translator at the Ho Chi Minh City Research and Translation Association. I conducted two pilot interviews with a teacher and a faculty dean in English faculties so that I could adjust any points that could cause misunderstanding in Vietnamese culture. The appendices of this thesis provide the English version of these forms; Vietnamese versions can be supplied upon request.

Another ethical concern was the minimising of any conflicts of interest that could occur at any stage of my study and put "the whole research process at risk" (Curzer & Santillanes, 2012, p. 114). I anticipated that conflicts of interest might exist in the power relationships between the participants and my status as an investigator, and the hierarchical relationships between my research participants (Resnik, 2007). Therefore, I arranged separate interviews for each type of participant and, due to the potentially identifiable nature of the participants, clearly stated the limits to confidentiality in the information sheets and consent forms. Critically, I was a lecturer at one of the four proposed sites but from a different faculty. However, except for the vice-rector, I did not know most of the participants at this university and they did not feel any need to participate to preserve their relationship with me. Admittedly it was easier for me to approach the vice-rector in the recruiting process compared to other institutions because the administrators appeared to favour research of their teachers. I was aware of maintaining a neutral attitude during the data collecting process at this site, and I regularly reiterated my relatively independent position to the participants in this institution so that they would feel comfortable sharing their opinions. This independence was confirmed first through my position as a researcher not related to their faculty. Second, the research field was neither on their discipline nor on my discipline, but on the discipline of education. And third, I confirmed that their viewpoints, whether proposing or opposing,

would contribute to the improvement of service learning status in the institution and in Vietnamese higher education.

An ethical dilemma that I encountered at Universal University was due to the hierarchical nature of Vietnamese culture (Phan, 2008; Różycka-Tran et al., 2017; Vo, 2020). The referral letter from my home university was signed by the deputy manager of the Office of Administrative Affairs, which, according to Vietnamese regulations, only enabled me to address the same administrative level at other universities. When I presented the letter to the Administrative Office of Universal University, they approved it and allowed me to talk to the rector. However, when I approached the rector with that letter, he refused to receive me, explaining that I should have obtained the signature from the rector of my home university in order to approach a person on the Board of Rectors in another university. I justified that, in my home institution, providing referral letters was the function of the Office of Administrative Affairs, not the Board of Rectors. Then I fixed the problem by requesting a referral letter from my vice-rector (as the rector was away to attend international meetings) and presented it to the rector of Universal University, together with my apologies for not understanding the communication protocols between universities. Finally, he approved my data collection in his institution but refused to be interviewed. He appointed the vice-rector to participate, but I was unable to approach the vice-rector either because he was away at a political education camp for leaders for two weeks. This incident emphasises how important it is to respect the hierarchies within higher education administrative systems.

Another dilemma was that two participants at Olympia University refused to have their interviews recorded. Although they did not state their reasons at the outset, it was revealed in their interviews that they were sensitive about people who were opposed to their use of service learning in the curriculum. Together with the challenge of accurately taking notes on these conversations, I was worried about the risk of revealing the identities of participants. I was acutely aware of the need for prudence in assigning pseudonyms and reporting the contexts and accounts of participants in this thesis. Protecting the confidentiality of my participants required safeguarding measures at all the stages of this research. The identities of the participating universities, service learning courses, and projects have been generalised and/or fictionalised, and all participants in the study were asked to respect the confidentiality of other participants.

A final concern related to the place of interviews. Although I requested an isolated interview space, due to a lack of rooms some interviews were conducted in less private spaces such as a small section of a common room, a table in the university canteen, a meeting table in a faculty office divided by blinds, or a corner in a library. The interview with one student in the focus group at Olympia University had to be conducted separately because she was completing an urgent job on her computer while I was interviewing the others. These conditions held the potential to affect the confidentiality of the information provided, and often made it difficult to record the interviews. However, I was lucky enough to ensure privacy within these small areas because people outside the interviews were too busy doing their jobs to intrude.

5.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented information about the methodology employed to address the research questions. It has explained the choice of qualitative multisite case study as the research methodology. It has then provided the reasons for, and detailed descriptions of, the methods and procedures throughout the study including data collection, coding, and reflexive thematic analysis. It ends with a discussion about trustworthiness and ethical considerations related to my study. The next chapter will describe the individual cases in detail as a foundation for thick description.

CHAPTER 6: INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS

As case study research highlights the importance of thick description, this chapter provides a detailed within-case summary of the four cases. The summaries are based on the experiences and perceptions reported by the research participants in their interviews, which were sometimes partial and contradictory, and so they have been interwoven with analyses of key university documents as well as my interpretations and experiences as the researcher. The specific contexts of service learning courses are rich material for the deeply descriptive interpretation of complex cultural situations, and underpin the significant findings presented in Chapters 7 to 9.

Each case summary shares the key features of, and issues related to, the practice of service learning in each institution. This includes the history of service learning programmes, internal actors, course structures, and systemic barriers. The institutional contexts appear in this chapter according to the length of time that the participants reported that their university had offered service learning courses. The order of appearance of each participant in the cases relates to the centrality of their role in the service learning course. I have given each university, and all participants, pseudonyms in order to protect their identities.

6.1 Evergreen University

- *The institutional background for the appearance of service learning at Evergreen University*

Evergreen University became a member of National University under the *Đổi Mới* policy of merging existing universities and research institutes into larger, multidisciplinary, and research-oriented universities in the 1990s, as discussed in Chapter 1. However, the university was founded several decades earlier. It is now a large public university focusing on humanities and social sciences. The university's long history may explain why it is the earliest institution in my study to have initiated service learning, probably since 2000 when teachers started to teach the experiential learning course. Experiential learning has been a requirement for some courses before the term "service learning" was introduced into this institution through a teacher training workshop, according to a teacher's statement.

- *The actors surrounding the service learning course*

Figure 6.1 depicts the relationships among the participants of the service learning courses in Evergreen University.

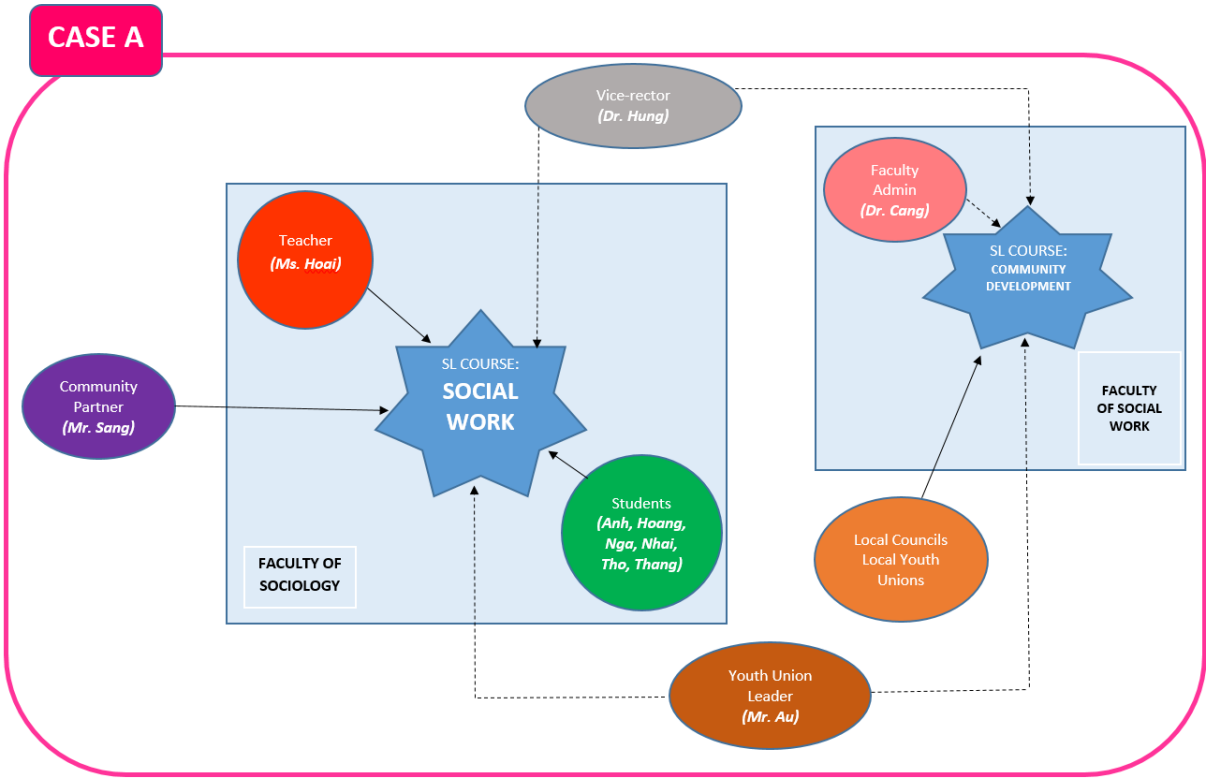


Figure 6.1: Research participants from Evergreen University

The Social Work course in the Faculty of Sociology was the unit of analysis. The participants from this course included Ms. Hoai, the teacher, a group of six students (Anh, Hoang, Nga, Nhai, Tho, Thang), who mostly were leaders of different projects, and Mr. Sang, the manager of the Social Work Office and community supervisor from the Hospital, which was one of the communities.

As the Faculty of Social Work was originally the Department of Social Work within the Faculty of Sociology, Dr. Cang, the dean of the Faculty of Social Work, has a close connection with Ms. Hoai as a former supervisor and dean. Therefore, Dr. Cang had a more comprehensive view of this course than the current dean of the Faculty of Sociology, which clarifies why the dean of this faculty refused to participate in my study (see Section 5.2.2). The Faculty of Social Work has a course in which students work three weeks with a community to help build a project based on their resources but it was not chosen as a unit of

analysis, because it has an internship, rather than a service learning focus. However, Dr. Cang's experience in working with the local communities and local Youth Unions provided precious lessons for other service learning practices in this study.

Dr. Hung, the vice-rector, as a former head of the Undergraduate Affairs Office, had a comprehensive understanding of individual faculty curriculum. Mr. Au was the deputy secretary of the Communist Youth Union, operating under the leadership of the institution's Communist Party Committee. Mr. Au was also an alumnus of the Faculty of Social Work, therefore he could give some comparisons between an experiential learning course and a volunteering community engagement programme of the Youth Union.

- *The structure of the service learning course*

The course was taken by third-year students on the basis of student's enrolment and consisted of 60 periods (two credits): 30 for theory and 30 for practice. Ms. Hoai chose to use the 30 practice periods for service learning. The service learning component was not informed to students before enrolment, which means that all of them had to take it without other choice. However, placements were made upon students' choice from a list of communities provided by the teacher, including service learning with children in a hospital, a school, or an orphanage, or with adults in a rehabilitation centre.

Ms. Hoai was responsible for placing students into their chosen communities. The teacher said that most of the communications were made directly between her and the community representatives. However, it appears that conversations between the two parties were not strongly evident in this case. One example was that Mr. Sang could not tell the difference between the partnership with Evergreen University and student programmes from elsewhere.

Assessment for this course was more varied than non-service learning courses at the university. It included peer and self-evaluation, teacher's observations, field reports, and a survey on community satisfaction, whereas non-service learning assessment normally comprised summative tests. Another difference was a celebration at the end of the course for the groups to present their projects and reflections in which Ms. Hoai and class members commented on how individual groups should incorporate the techniques they learned into their services. Students were also asked by Ms. Hoai to do an anonymous informal course evaluation from which she took their feedback to improve future courses.

- *The institutional constraints*

As this and subsequent chapters will show, participants at all four case sites identified several problems with both implementing service learning initiatives and keeping them going. Not all case sites experienced the same problems and this chapter identifies specificities at each site. The first problem participants at Evergreen University identified was the credit values for and organisation of the service learning component within the curriculum. For example, Ms. Hoai and her students complained that the ratio of 1:1 (30 periods for theory and 30 for practice) was not reasonable because practice time and payment should have been higher than theory time. She raised these problems with the institution, but nothing changed because the increase in time for practice could affect the rigid number of credits within the curriculum. She also pointed out that she had to build partnerships with the communities and had to teach big classes with about 80 students without any teaching assistant. Dr Hung acknowledged the special contributions that teachers and community agents had made to improve teaching quality through the experiential learning courses (a more common term at Evergreen University than 'service learning'); however, he noted that the institution could not increase pay rates for these teachers, nor change the funding policies for service learning because the budget was too tight.

Mr. Au also identified institutional and curricular problems, commenting that the current service learning courses within individual faculties were not well organised, as they seemed to be disconnected chunks within a curriculum. Instead, he thought they should be offered recurrently in specific communities over longer terms so that more significant service could be provided. He also felt that the institution should more clearly recognise the significance of and develop more supportive policies for service learning practice. Some students also found the lack of wider institutional support frustrating, noting that it was not clear which office they could get the Letter of Reference from because this function overlapped among the faculty's administrator, the Student Affairs Office, and the Undergraduate Affairs Office.

Another constraint related to the differently perceived roles of the institution's Youth Union. On the one hand, Ms. Hoai complained that the Youth Union's engagement programmes tended to spoon-feed the communities with material rather than academic services. On the other hand, Mr. Au and Dr. Cang's descriptions of the Youth Union functions were quite different. Dr. Cang appreciated the liaison roles of the local Youth

Unions because they knew about the geographical conditions of the area as well as the villagers' needs and customs and could facilitate the relationship between university and community. Participants also noted that the Youth Union's community engagement programmes used to be purely volunteering work, but had recently started to relate more to academic content, aiming to offer more choices to attract students' interests. However, this academic content remained un-credited to academic scores.

More significantly, there existed a lack of internal and external mutual understanding among the actors. There seemed to be very limited collaboration between the internal units and operation such as the Social Work and the Sociology Faculties, the Student Affairs and the Undergraduate Affairs Offices, the service learning course of Ms. Hoai and the Youth Union's community engagement programmes. Moreover, the connection between the university and community agents was not strong due mostly to the lack of communication between the partners.

6.2 Olympia University

- *The institutional background for the appearance of service learning at Olympia University*

This institution has been a member of National University for more than 20 years. However, this public university was founded more than 50 years before that, and is now well-known for its specialisation in sciences. Its long history has been a solid foundation for developing a lot of experiential learning practice in faculties such as Electronics & Communications, Environment, Geology, and Mathematics & Computer Sciences. The service learning faculty included in my study has developed this practice since 2012, but some service learning activities in the university reportedly date back to 2007. This university was the only one across the cases where the website's main page stated one of its core values as civic engagement, and it has a centre for teachers providing training on service learning among other innovative teaching approaches, the Centre for Teaching Innovations (CTI) (a pseudonym).

- *The actors surrounding the service learning course*

Figure 6.2 depicts the relationships among the participants of the service learning courses in Olympia University. Although the focus of this institution was the Mathematics

Pedagogy course in the Faculty of Mathematics, the CTI played a significant role in motivating teachers to start incorporating service learning.

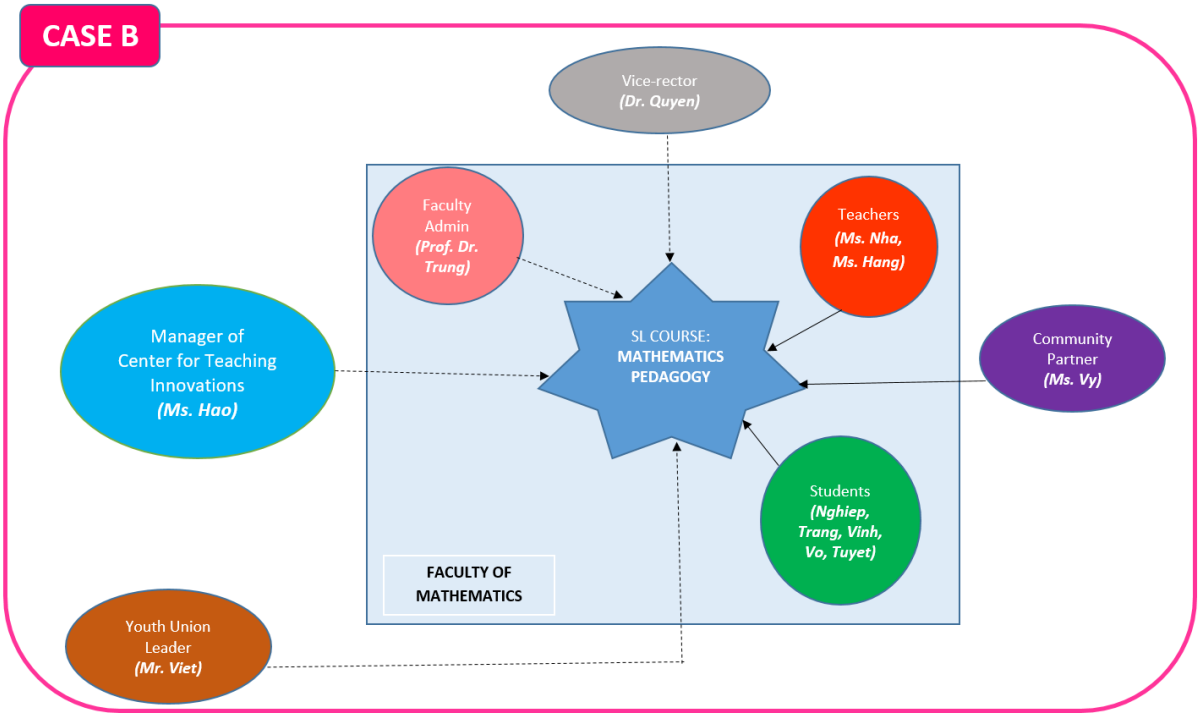


Figure 6.2: Research participants from Olympia University

Ms. Hao, the manager of the CTI, reported that along with teacher training, the centre had also built many partnerships with various businesses and organised several events to connect university students with organisations. Dr. Quyen, the vice-rector responsible for curriculum and training, was familiar with the operations of the CTI but had very little information about the service learning practice of Ms. Nha, claiming that he had no official report from this teacher.

Ms. Nha combined the training content from the CTI with her background master study on service learning in a European country to become the initiator of service learning practice in her faculty. She established a teaching team together with another teacher, Ms. Hang, and two alumni volunteers, Vo and Tuyet (as mentioned in Section 5.2.3.1, Tuyet participated in an individual interview while Vo was included in the student focus group, both with the 'teaching assistant' label). This teaching team mainly partnered with the city's school for children with disabilities, where the principal was Ms. Vy. Most of the service learning projects involved inventing or creating practical tools for teaching mathematics. Along with Vo and Tuyet, the other three students in the focus group interview, Nghiep, Trang, and Vinh,

were participants from different cohorts. Prof. Dr. Trung, the faculty dean, acknowledged Ms. Nha's service learning courses and reported that he had several times visited the school for children with disabilities.

Mr. Viet, the deputy secretary of the Communist Youth Union, shared that they had organised some service learning projects for international students. They were also doing a lot of community engagement programmes related to students' disciplines, and he noted that the communities they served were not confined to people with disabilities, and the focuses included wider community issues like discipline orientation for high-school students, and research on geology and environmental pollution for a specific local community.

- *The structure of the service learning course*

The organising model of this case was more established than other cases. Students were allowed to choose to enrol online in a service learning course with a limited number (10-20) on a first-come-first-served basis. There were four service learning courses distributed from second year to fourth year. As there was only one partner in this case (the School for Children with Disabilities), all students in these service learning courses were placed in different classes in the school with different community teachers. A typical course included regular and casual meetings with the course teachers and the community teachers to create teaching tools for students with disabilities. Some groups had to learn engineering techniques to manipulate a 3D printer to produce the required products. According to Ms. Nha, the invention of these tools has allowed her school to bring positive effects to social development and humanity because it enabled disabled secondary students to continue their studies through to high school, and reduced the dropout rate due to a lack of the right tools for learning.

The assessment scheme was similar to the non-service learning courses, but the components were different. With 30-40% for mid-term and 60-70% for end-of-term evaluation like other courses, the components included peer and self-evaluation, reflections, and evaluations from both the course and the community teachers. Teachers at the community school worked as mentors to students. They were the ones who designated the requirements for and gave feedback on students' projects, and students redid their projects until their mentors approved. Ms. Nha had frequent discussions with Ms. Vy on the community needs, the quality of the programme, and other logistic issues. Although the service learning teachers complained about the funding and the limited space for students to

make their projects, they did not want to propose that higher level administration make changes.

- *The institutional constraints*

Like the case of Evergreen University, although the service learning teachers and students were very excited about their courses, the first challenge to them was largely the lack of institutional support and resources. While creating new teaching tools normally required rare and costly materials, Dr. Quyen, Prof. Dr. Trung, and Ms. Nha confirmed that these expenses were not funded by the institution's budget, forcing Ms. Nha to look for funding from outside donors. A related, and more frustrating, problem was that teachers had to take on an accounting role to disburse these funds because outside funds were not the function of the institution's Office of Finance and Accounting. Also related to resourcing (or lack thereof), students complained about the lack of room reserved for them to develop their projects. When I had an opportunity to observe a group of students working on their 3D printing machine, the tiny area of about eight square metres became a multifunctional room that was used as the meeting space, the staff office, the workshop for current projects, and the storage for the past projects' products. Teachers also expressed frustration that their students had no access to official training on service learning, nor any official support to develop connections and cover the expenses on their projects. However, Ms. Hang was afraid that if they proposed that the CTI undertake these functions, they would need to pay fees which their budget could not afford.

The second limitation, similar to that of Evergreen University, was the rigidity of the curricular framework. The fact that the teaching team had developed four service learning courses indicated that adaptations were allowable, but Ms. Hang still wished to make their service learning courses separate rather than integrated within existing courses. In accordance with this opinion, Mr. Viet expressed his expectation that the youth programmes that related to academic content could take up one credit to encourage students to participate. However, he also acknowledged that not a single institution in the higher education sector could change the tight undergraduate curriculum framework regulated by the MoET.

Similar to the case of Evergreen University and despite the more popular service learning practice, this case showed evidence of insufficient mutual understanding between internal actors: teachers and leaders, faculties and the Youth Union, and teachers and the CTI.

However, communications between teachers and community agents were more connected, which could be the foundation for their long term commitment.

6.3 Resina University

- *The institutional background for the appearance of service learning at Resina University*

Resina University is a public university under the management of a province. It was upgraded from the precursor as a provincial teacher training college to a provincial university about two decades ago, with the mission to produce a workforce for the region. To date, the university has become a multidisciplinary institute that is well-known for its generous policies to attract academics from other areas within Viet Nam and from foreign countries.

Service learning appeared to emerge in 2015, with several faculties applying experiential learning initiated by teachers rather than as an institutionalised policy (it was not called 'service learning,' except within the Faculty of Foreign Languages). The idea of service learning came to the dean of this faculty from a teacher who had studied in the United Kingdom and the Republic of South Africa, where service learning had been popular.

Unlike other cases, service learning in this faculty conveyed quite a different motivation. The term 'service learning' was interpreted as *'phụng sự vì cộng đồng,'* unlike other places where it was called *'học tập phục vụ cộng đồng'* or *'học tập với cộng đồng.'* In Vietnamese, service/serve' translates to *'dịch vụ/ phục vụ,'* and 'learning' to *'học tập.'* While other institutions used the word-by-word translated versions, in this case the dean preferred to use the term '*phụng sự,'* which also means 'serve' in English, but in Vietnamese it carries a more sacred religious connotation of a blessed or called duty to serve Jesus Christ (aligning perhaps more with 'vocation' in English).

- *The actors surrounding the service learning course*

Figure 6.3 depicts the relationships among the participants of the service learning courses in Resina University.

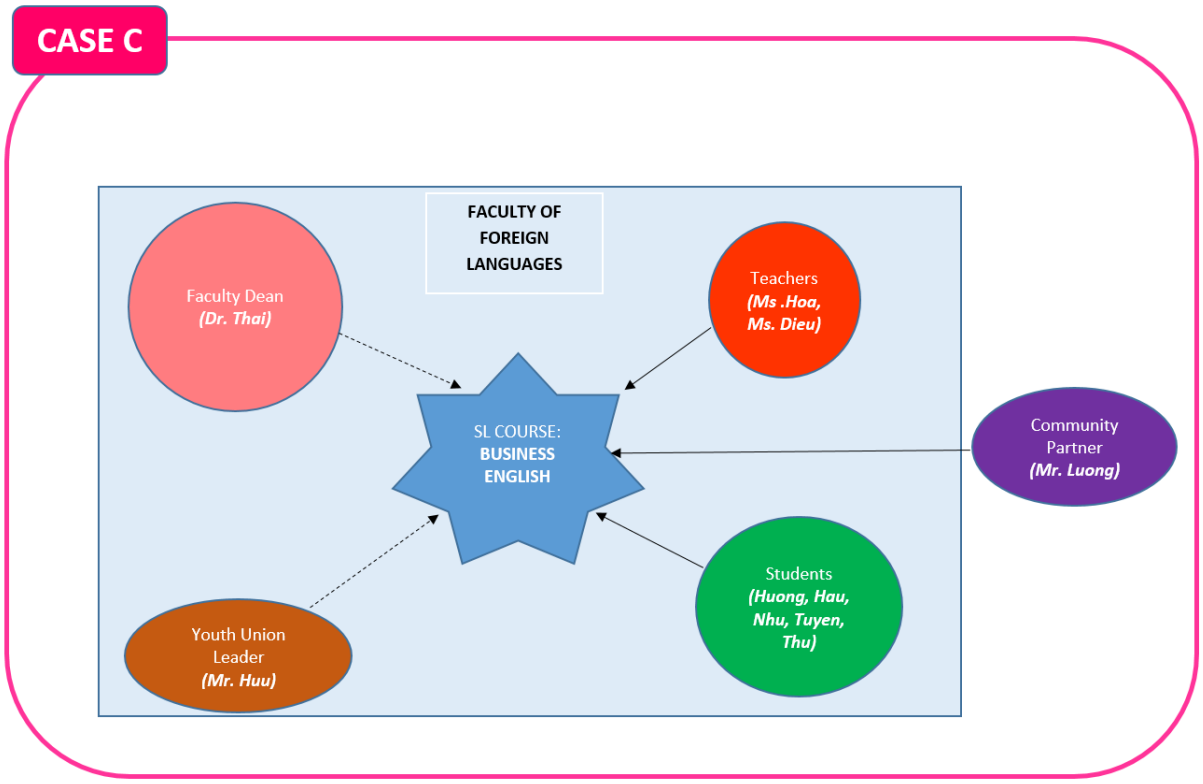


Figure 6.3: Research participants from Resina University

Dr. Thai, the dean of the Foreign Languages Faculty, initiated the service learning idea. For many of his plans and coordinating roles, he relied on the secretary of the faculty Youth Union, Ms. Hoa, who later became the main service learning teacher. Ms. Hoa worked closely with the university's Youth Union and persuaded the 14 local wards' Youth Unions to allow her students to teach English to the existing classes for disadvantaged children so they could learn Vietnamese literacy and numeracy. Ms. Dieu was another teacher who took over Ms. Hoa's service learning job. The student focus group included Huong, Hau, Nhu, Tuyen, and Thu, all of whom were from different cohorts.

As the community representative and the Youth Union secretary of Ward 8, Mr. Luong was a dynamic agent among the communities. He actively participated in the service learning project and was thankful for the partnership because, he noted, the student teachers were more available and energetic than primary school teachers with whom he previously partnered.

As discussed above, Ms. Hoa's plan for teaching English was an extended part of the institution's Youth Union's project to teach Vietnamese literacy and numeracy to these

children. The institution's Youth Union had founded this partnership with the local communities as one of their community engagement programmes, which meant that the Union had mobilised students from various faculties to participate, in addition to the students of the Foreign Languages Faculty. However, Mr. Huu, the Youth Union's deputy secretary, preferred students to work for these projects on a volunteering rather than credit-based basis because he did not want their good will to be affected by course scores.

- *The structure of the service learning course*

The service learning practice initially started as a volunteering project. With the wish to get students engaged in the community, Dr. Thai asked Ms. Hoa to connect the local wards of the city with students to teach English to children of immigrants. The placement of students was based on the proximity between a student's place and the local ward where the community class took place. The community representatives organised the children's classes and coordinated with the student teachers to allocate them to these classes. Before teaching, students were trained in techniques for teaching English to young learners because their major was originally Business English. Later, Dr. Thai and Ms. Hoa decided to let students earn credits for their service in the Internship Course because they wanted students' work to become disciplined-based rather than volunteering. Their scores were based on the internship reports which included lesson plans, diary, reflection, recommendations, and emotional development. After the internship, some students continued teaching those classes, even after graduating and getting jobs as teachers of English although teaching was not their major. According to Dr. Thai, his project garnered a lot of praise from the provincial authority and brought pride to the university. However, the faculty could maintain only one-third of the classes because the student-teacher resource was not regular and consistent. At the time of the interview, the faculty was planning to launch a new course called Service Learning with the intention of transferring service learning from a volunteer-based to a course-based programme.

- *The institutional constraints*

As the service learning practice at Resina University had been developed from a volunteer based programme, it encountered similar but less obvious constraints compared to those of other institutions.

The first problem was the unstable position of the service learning component within the curriculum. The service learning practice began as a volunteering trial, then upon its

stability, the teachers decided to recognise it as internship credit. However, the practice had to return to volunteering because English literacy was not a fundamental need for the community and the internship content was not relevant to the programme's structure. This may explain why Dr. Thai decided to add a two-credit course into the curriculum called Service Learning, in which students learned about teaching methodology and reflective writing to prepare for the practice component. At the data collection time, this course had not been implemented, so further information could not be obtained.

The second issue was the teachers' participation. The appearance of the service learning two-credit course was the result of great efforts from the faculty to bring service learning into the mainstream curriculum and to recognise teachers' participation with an official service learning payment. However, Dr. Thai, Ms. Hoa, and Ms. Dieu suspected that only a limited number of teachers were willing to teach the course because their motivation was affected by the requirement that they had to frequently go to the evening community classes to observe and supervise their students, which could be a challenge for teachers from distant areas.

The third problem was the shortage of structured communications among some actors. Ms. Hoa usually got feedback from community representatives but it appeared that she could not gather all the comments from students, teachers, and community agents through a formal channel except for the students' reports. This was evident in her general evaluation being mostly positive while the other stakeholders still built negative accounts of course organisation, the engagement of community agents, or students' discipline. Moreover, the stories provided by the participants implied that most communities did not have a strong need for their English teaching service. This could inevitably affect the sustainability of the course if the matter of commitment was not supported by both parties.

6.4 Universal University

- *The institutional background for the appearance of service learning at Universal University*

This institution became a member of one of the large universities in the middle of Viet Nam in the early 2000s. This regional public university was originally founded in the mid-1990s by combining several universities. The university was responsible for providing the

workforce with knowledge of foreign studies to contribute to national construction and development, and international integration.

The university began service learning projects in the academic year 2015. Service learning did not appear to be popular in this institution; at data collection time, there was only one example of service learning practised on several courses within one faculty. The service learning initiator had been interested in active learning, but she was concerned that her approach was more active teaching than active learning, so she sought out different approaches elsewhere and found out about Olympia University's service learning practice. Then she did some research on the practical experience of this university and adapted that model into her courses.

- *The actors surrounding the service learning course*

Figure 6.4 depicts the relationships among the participants of the service learning courses in Universal University.

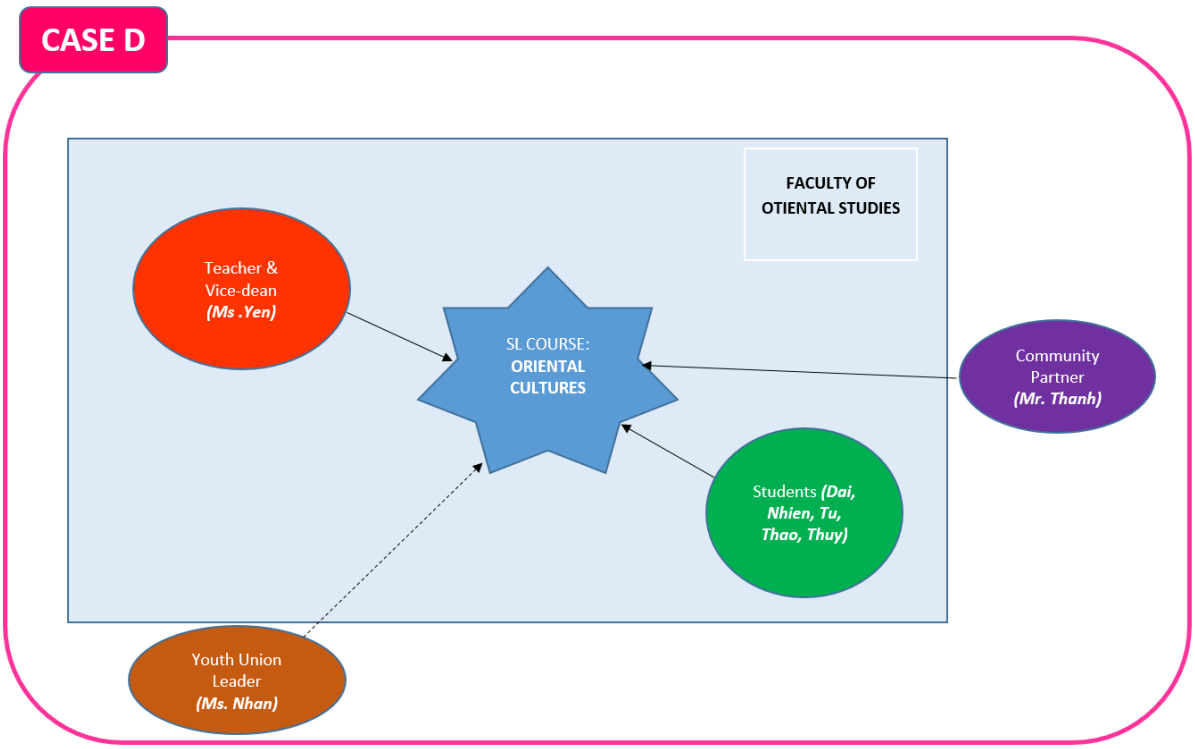


Figure 6.4: Research participants from Universal University

Ms. Yen was the service learning teacher and initiator of the service learning practice in this institution, and concurrently the vice-dean of her faculty. Before starting, she applied for

and won a research grant to run her service learning course and received great support from the communities she was working with, especially the Creative Arts Organisation. By the time of this research, she had finished teaching two service learning courses with the communities and additionally supervised one student doing research on a topic involving the efforts to preserve the Vietnamese creative arts. She expressed her intention to repeat this approach with an upcoming cohort.

The student focus group included Dai, Nhien, Tu, and Thao, who were service learning students, and Thuy, who was a research student on Vietnamese creative arts. In general, they were satisfied with their projects because they had the opportunity to visit the Creative Arts Organisation, to witness the way in which the artists were passionate about their jobs, and to learn and then promote various aspects of the art through different means.

Mr. Thanh, the manager of the Creative Arts Organisation, was excited to share that the partnership with the university was one of their achievements in promoting Vietnamese creative arts to the public, which, he said, was increasingly less knowledgeable about such traditions.

Unlike other universities, the civic engagement programmes of the institution's Youth Union were rather limited because most majors were foreign languages and were not considered necessary for the remote communities. Three prominent Green Summer projects were teaching foreign languages to children in rural areas, organising English Clubs for interested community people, and improving community's facilities such as consolidating road surface, planting greens, or building soccer field. This may explain why the Union was not well aware of Ms. Yen's service learning courses. Ms. Nhan, the institution's Youth Union's secretary and concurrently the deputy manager of the Office of Foreign Relations, additionally indicated that the Union was not involved in these courses because they were responsible for volunteering community engagement rather than academic disciplines. When I asked her about the possibility of students integrating their academic work into volunteering programmes, she was concerned about the undergraduates' academic competency. She believed that students should earn at least a relevant certificate to work with community people, insisting that students' competency of skills and knowledge before serving the community would be extremely important.

- *The structure of the service learning course*

The service learning approach was applied in the second year Oriental Cultures course of this faculty. Similar to the case of Olympia University, the placement to the only community organisation (the Creative Arts) was compulsory to all students. However, different groups of students were allowed to choose the content of their projects. The course comprised two credits within 30 periods: 16 periods on theory and 14 periods on practice. Originally, the course included the teacher's lectures, students' presentations, and class discussions. With the service learning component, students visited the organisation and the artists' workplaces to learn about the history of this particular art and the performing techniques. The projects included student-made video clips, collected documentaries and articles, and personal reflections posted on the course's Facebook page. Students were encouraged to invite their friends and relatives to join the page, read the content, and leave comments on their posts.

The assessment scheme included peer and self-evaluation, reflections, and the number of views for each Facebook post. The community's evaluation of students' products was also included in the final assessment. This service learning project was highly appreciated by the Creative Arts Organisation's authority and staff. Ms. Yen shared her first attempts to experiment with the new teaching approach in papers published in research journals.

- *The institutional constraints*

Although Ms. Yen obtained an agreement from the Department for Academic Affairs and the faculty's dean and teachers, her service learning initiatives did not gain much institutional recognition. First, other than in her self-authored journal papers, her courses were not popularised in the institutional and public media, as they had been in the other cases. Second, the practice seemed to be unknown to other offices within the institution. For example, when I asked to interview the rector and the Youth Union secretary about the service learning practice, neither was aware of the case. Such unfamiliarity hinted that the courses were confined within Ms. Yen's faculty's scope, and were not yet pervasive enough to leave a deep impression on the institution at large.

A second issue related to a lack of clarity around who benefitted from and had responsibility for the faculty-community partnership. Ms. Yen shared that Mr. Thanh had misunderstood that the service learning students were beneficiaries as well as service providers. He did not seem to recognise that the students' projects were promoting the art to

the public to bring back its popularity. Being aware of this, Ms. Yen revealed that she had several times communicated her course's objectives but was not sure if Mr. Thanh had changed his preconception.

Concerning course organisation, the unexpected changes to the original plan greatly affected students' confidence in the course assessment. Ms. Yen initially planned to hold a student performance at the end of the course, but the plan did not come to fruition. Instead, she required students to promote their products on their Facebook accounts. Students, however, were reluctant about expecting their Facebook friends and audience to watch and vote for their posts within the required time. The abovementioned constraint indicated the weak communicating ties among the actors. The university's leaders did not seem to be aware of the service learning practice. Ms. Yen and the Youth Union secretary did not find common interest in their functions. There also existed some misunderstandings between Ms. Yen and Mr. Thanh, and between the teacher and her service learning students.

6.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the main features and characteristics of four cases in different Vietnamese universities that were employing service learning as an approach in teaching and learning. It appears that service learning ideas originated from a mixture of incentives towards experiential learning that already existed in Vietnamese higher education and imported Western conceptions of service learning. The case summaries in this chapter have shown that, as with other service learning initiatives around the world, this practice in Viet Nam has also encountered various challenges including institutional reluctance, lack of knowledge of the benefits, resistance from various parties, and underfunding. Moreover, this chapter has shown that service learning was practised within an interconnected web of relations that the practitioners had to skillfully manipulate. One relational and organisational aspect that appears unique to the Vietnamese context is the role that the Youth Unions play in supporting service learning initiatives.

While the case descriptions have provided an overview of each case's context, the following chapters focus on cross-case findings that explore in more depth the underpinnings of, and challenges, prospects, and possibilities for service learning in Vietnamese universities.

CHAPTER 7: EMBRACING COMMUNITIES AS PARTNERS IN EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

The previous chapter highlighted the contexts for the service learning courses in individual cases and provided backgrounds on the establishment of service learning courses, the participants and their relationships, and the courses and their organisation. It also identified some of the institutional constraints that will be discussed in greater depth in the cross-case findings presented in Chapters 7 to 9. This first finding chapter explores the most significant theme: embracing communities as partners in educational change. This theme occurred with the most frequency in my interviews and relates to higher education reform as a compelling issue of this sector. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, communities have been closely connected to universities throughout the historical and developmental stages of higher education in Viet Nam, most recently through the Green Summer Campaigns. However, with the introduction of service learning courses, communities have emerged as a resource for learning, less likely to be mere recipients of university services but rather embraced as engaged partners with universities.

The central theme of this chapter is that communities have become a means for educational change. They have become the sites and partners for universities to contribute to higher education reform, to respond to the perceived need to enhance moral values in young people, and for the reinvigoration of teachers' roles as agents of change. As a requirement for higher education reform has been to enhance practical curricular outcomes, teachers have integrated more experiential learning by incorporating academic content into community service projects. The desire is that higher education will produce more competent employees who can meet the demands of various industries of a developing country like Viet Nam. Teachers have also confronted the perceived decline in professional ethics and social behaviors of students by raising students' awareness of and responsibility towards people with needs in the community. The hope is that students will become competent citizens, who know their rights and responsibilities, and contribute positively to the development of their communities, organisations, and ultimately their country. However, higher education reform has placed a great deal of pressure on teachers, reducing the autonomy that used to be respected under Confucian teachings (Tran, Tran, Nguyen, & Ngo, 2020). Teachers have felt

the need to unite themselves by taking action, making changes to their courses, and choosing to serve the community's needs despite various challenges.

7.1 Service Learning as a Means for Higher Education Reform

A first principle sub-theme was that embracing service learning with communities as partners has emerged predominantly in response to the pressure of reform in Vietnamese higher education. Although not all participants mentioned reform itself as the objective of their actions, my analysis revealed that they were aiming at a change in education. For example, Ms. Nha (teacher, Olympia University) recited that her biggest motivation was helping improve her students' self-confidence, communication skills, and practical opportunities after graduation, and raising their sense of responsibility to as well as social awareness of their communities. Across 23 (out of 25) interviews, there were 283 (out of 576) references in which my participants constructed this account, the highest frequency across the three sub-themes of this chapter. This finding was perhaps unsurprising, given the pressures on reform outlined in the earlier chapters, but this appears to be the first research confirming that the reform has influenced the civic engagement practice of higher education, especially service learning pedagogy. The changes that service learning has suggested to the reform include the development of soft skills, a focus on authentic learning experiences, and shifts in assessment practices.

7.1.1 Development of Soft Skills

The perception that service learning brings more opportunities for students to learn and practise soft skills was strongly evident across most of the interviews. One of the objectives of the higher education reform was to provide career orientation in which soft skills were the catalyst for discipline-based job performance. While the term 'soft skills' was not directly used in HERA, it could be interpreted as developing learners' "capacity to work within community and ability to start a career" (Resolution 14/2005/NQ-CP, 2005). However, in the recent Decision 69/QĐ-TTg (2019) on improving higher education quality during 2019-2025, the term was clearly specified as one of the included learning outcomes that all graduates must meet. Across my collected data, the development of soft skills was mentioned in nearly 75% of the interviews. Most participants identified a wide range of skills, which I have categorised as nine general groups and definitions in Table 7.1 below,

ranging from the highest (41) to the lowest (7) frequencies over the total of 148 excerpts mentioning soft skills.

	Soft Skills	Definitions	Frequency
1	Self-managing	The ability to overcome difficulties with one's own resources or efforts, perseverance, adaptability, and flexibility	41
2	Problem solving	The ability to solve work-related problems based on the knowledge learned and existing skills	23
3	Team work	The ability to work with different kinds of people in a team, learning from others, resolving conflicts, negotiating interests, and producing satisfying projects with effective group communication skills	20
4	Initiative taking	The ability to think about or create something new, or the willingness to learn new skills or take on new responsibilities as required by the job task	16
5	Interpersonal communication	The ability to communicate effectively with different kinds of people, understanding others from different perspectives and achieving agreement effectively	11
6	Responsibility	The willingness to put in more time and effort to fulfill their job tasks outside the requirements of the service learning project	11
7	Leadership	The ability for planning, public speaking, managing time, organising groups, distributing resources, and creating tools that reduce human workload	8
8	Awareness of the field risks or culture	The awareness of workplace difficulties, risks, or any cultural regulations that are different from an academic place and having appropriate cautions, responses or reactions	7

Table 7.1: Most frequent soft skills identified by participants

Some participants indicated that traditional courses, unlike work-based learning ones, did not provide sufficient opportunities for the development of these skills. For example, Dr. Thai (dean, Resina University) felt that students liked their experience in service learning teaching disadvantaged children "because it was no longer the teaching matters but the

solving problem and adapting situations that made them learn a lot . . .” Another dean, Dr. Cang (Evergreen University) noted that the community connections developed social awareness and initiative because “when students came to the field, they interacted with the community and discovered some new problems in that community. . . then they initiated some side-programmes beside the mainstream project.” Vo (teaching assistant, Olympia University) emphasised the ways in which students developed intellectual independence and self-management:

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

Indeed, these opinions verified the perception that students and graduates often lack problem solving skills (creativity, the ability to handle information, the ability to identify a problem), learning skills (initiative, self-confidence, the ability to plan career development), and decision-making skills (critical thinking, the ability to identify causes, the ability to set goals) (Tran & Swierczek, 2009; T. T. Tran, 2012, 2013b, 2015). This explains why soft skills play an important role in enhancing graduates' employability.

As a result, developing more chances for employability became a good demonstration of effective soft skills. Commenting on the students' performance at their graduate destinations, some participants considered employability as a positive outcome of service learning work. For example, Ms. Hoai (teacher, Evergreen University) reported that many of her service learning graduates gained employment within the communities they used to serve, or in other non-governmental organisations, social shelters, and open homes. Tuyet (teaching assistant, Olympia University) indicated that besides the teaching assistant role, she was also working part-time for a Singaporean company with a stable income. She did not seek a full-time job just because she did not like commitment, not because she was unable to find one. Dr. Thai (dean, Resina University) was very proud of his service learning students when he indicated that all of them were employed and had become the main forces in many language centres and training organisations because they possessed such skills as flexibility, problem solving, active organising, and strong leadership.

These stories appeared to confirm that through the service learning projects, students were provided with many situations for soft skills to be developed and practised, thus increasing their chances of meeting employers' requirements for the labour force. By increasing chances for graduates' employment, service learning shows promise for meeting the objectives of higher education reform, especially by engaging with communities as a learning resource.

7.1.2 Authentic Learning Experiences

The development and practice of desirable soft skills among students in the previous findings would not have happened without an authentic experience, and service learning with communities has brought about that authenticity. The second change, particularly from the students' perspectives, was that they had more opportunities to apply the theories they learned to life outside the classroom. Twenty-three out of the 25 interviews (92%), including all of the student participants, confirmed that the practical aspect of their service learning courses linked classroom contents to life application. Table 7.2 summarises how students transferred course content to the service requirements and realised what they learned after the courses. The first column specifies the theoretical issues. The second column describes the communities' needs. The third column demonstrates the authentic learning – what students ended up learning after theory came into contact with practice. While traditional course structures included only lectures, group presentations, and classroom discussions, it is interesting to learn from the interviews that all the service learning courses had been organised with a combination of lectures (50% of the courses even had community members as guest lecturers), field trips to investigate problems, discussions with community and group members to plan solutions, and consultations with teachers and community members in every stage of the process or when problems arose.

Case	Course	(I)	(II)	(III)
		Specific Theory Issues	**Communities' Needs**	**Actual Learning Experience**
A	Social Work	Observing, interviewing, evaluating techniques	Support for groups of LGBTQIA+, orphans, children	How to use observing, interviewing, and evaluating techniques to consult with varied groups of people

			in hospital, disabled people	
B	Mathematics	Using pedagogies that work for different needs	The creation of 3D models for students with disabilities	How 3D models can positively change the learning experience for students with disabilities
C	Business English	Methodologies for teaching	Improving the English language skills of migrant children aged 5-14	How to teach English to young learners
D	Oriental Cultures	The values of intangible heritage	Preserving Vietnamese creative arts	How values from the past contributed to the moral education of young people Efforts that people in the field were making to preserve spiritual values for younger generations

Table 7.2: How theory was transferred to authentic learning experience

When comparing contents across the columns, the issues taught in the university curriculum were more general and theoretical. Meanwhile, the community and workplace problems were extremely varied and specific, requiring students to flexibly transfer their learning and often revealing that solutions were not as simple as what they had learned in the classroom. This finding indicated that the authenticity created by working with communities could become a new approach for teaching and learning innovation in which the learning no longer happened in class, but in the real environment where students had to learn and manipulate their soft skills. A community problem usually requires motivation, emotion, responsibility, conscience, add-on techniques and skills, and many other elements to produce a response. The authenticity of service learning lay in the fact that the students were forced to manage their resources to address real-life problems, which is often what future employers are seeking.

Another dimension of authenticity was that service learning, especially the experiential learning involved, required the combined knowledge of various disciplines. Most participants (in 17 out of 23 interviews where it arose as a theme) identified inter-

disciplinarity as a key benefit from their service learning experience. For example, Social Work students at Evergreen University revealed that the opportunity to develop project management and community development skills had stimulated the desire to take courses in Psychology and Anthropology because their work would mostly deal with people of various backgrounds and characteristics. Similarly, Business English students in Resina University were required to relieve Vietnamese literacy and numeracy teachers and needed to learn a lot about teaching English to young learners in order to work more effectively with the children. Ms. Yen (teacher, Universal University) reported that her students had to learn about Vietnamese creative and performing arts, including performance styles, singing techniques, and face painting, among other new skills. Of all the cases, the Mathematics Pedagogy students of Olympia University possibly had to work across the most disciplines, because they took on the responsibility of producing 3D models for use not only in Mathematics but also in subjects such as Physics, Geometry, and Chemistry, as required by the school for disabled children (Ms. Hang, teacher, Olympia University). Moreover, to produce these three dimensional models, they also needed to learn skills and acquire knowledge that was not in their curriculum, such as computer skills, printing techniques, Corel Draw application, and choosing cohesive materials.

In Vietnamese culture, and from a Confucian viewpoint, there is a proverb commonly used to compliment knowledgeable people: *'Trên thông thiên văn, dưới tường địa lý'* (People mastering the astronomy above their head and the geography below their feet). This is to illustrate how Vietnamese society highly appreciates a person with knowledge from various disciplines. Service learning provided authentic learning experiences where students had to skillfully weave the knowledge and practice from various fields into their services, thus enhancing students' adaptability in their future workplace. Producing graduates with such qualities as adaptability, proactiveness, and willingness to learn could be another prospect for Vietnamese higher education reform.

7.1.3 Shifts in Assessment Practices

Service learning conducted within the communities also had a positive impact on assessment structures, which had been remodeled to better capture students' experiential abilities. In 11 (out of 23) interviews related to this sub-theme, teacher, student, and dean participants talked about changes in components for assessment. Traditional assessment

schemes normally comprise 30–40% for mid-term and 60–70% for final summative assessments, involving multiple-choice tests, essay writing, oral tests, or project reports. In contrast, assessment for service learning components used tools such as journals, reflections, peer assessment, and field observation. Significantly, for the courses that combined theory and practice components, the theory component was tested with summative forms while the practice (service learning) component had its own forms of assessment as described above (Evergreen and Universal Universities). In the other two cases, summative mid-term examinations were dropped in favour of such assessments forms as project reports, group work, skills performance, and community assessment.

It is interesting that most of the teachers' assessment practice appeared to be an intertwined product of exam-oriented tradition and formative types of assessment imported from Western traditions. First, while traditional assessment has relied on marking student papers, the service learning teachers drew on a wider range of evidence. For example, Ms. Hoa (teacher, Resina University) noted that she felt the need to incorporate new forms of assessment such as feedback from the local agent, the students' reflective writing, and her classroom observations. Ms. Hoai's (teacher, Evergreen University) assessment consisted of student journals, formative evaluations, peer assessment, field observation, and feedback from the community agent. Different from the summative examinations often found in Vietnamese education, these formative and summative forms of assessment, borrowed from the West, have become increasingly popular in project-based courses, especially service learning.

Second, the teachers wanted to use the community's opinions and suggestions to monitor students' performance. Most teachers were in the process of refining the weightings involved. Ms. Nha (teacher, Olympia University), for example, asked the community partners to evaluate students' projects (50% of the final score), but then recognised that they were diplomatic by giving high scores but asking the students to improve their 3D tools for teaching afterwards. She decided to reduce the weighting to a third of the final score and required the community partner to include suggestions for improvements in their written comments. This negotiating process has demonstrated that service learning assessment schemes were more flexible than the 40–60% ratio in traditional assessment which is often a rigid institutional regulation in a number of universities.

Last but not least, peer assessment has become an official channel for teachers to evaluate students' performance. Student participants reported that it created an open atmosphere where they could see how their efforts were appreciated by others. Students also mentioned that peer assessment enhanced group members' creativity, involvement, leadership, and teamwork spirit. Nearly half the students reported that they cared less about their scores than the practical experience they learned from the project, which is especially unusual in an exam-oriented culture like that in Viet Nam. The reason for the difference may lie in the fact that the service learning teachers had created an active learning environment to support the formative assessment. The formative assessment also reflected a new learning process where the teachers were no longer the only fountain of knowledge, as is often the case in discussing Confucian heritage cultures; instead, knowledge from community and peer learners had become equally important.

Recognising students' performance from various perspectives and stages appeared to help lift the pressures of the exam-oriented assessment system that has limited the teaching and learning effectiveness of Vietnamese higher education. Moreover, the consideration of community agents' opinions towards students' performance demonstrated that the community has become increasingly engaged in the knowledge transferring process of universities.

Through the three changes that service learning has made to the current situation of teaching and learning, community has been highlighted as a potential learning asset that universities should explore.

7.2 Communities Helping Enhance Moral Values in Young People

The second important sub-theme suggested by the study's participants was that service learning carried out among communities could reinforce traditional moral values in young people. This argument was constructed in 20 out of 24 interviews related to the overarching theme of this chapter, and appeared in 126 references, the lowest frequency among the three themes of this chapter. However, it was considered the second most important theme because more interviews mentioned this account than the third sub-theme. As discussed in Chapter 2, in response to a perceived moral decline among young people, the second objective of the *Higher Education Law* (2012, [2018]) was to produce students with political qualities, morals and ethics, and an awareness of serving people. However, one of

the critiques towards the realisation of this responsibility was that higher education put too much focus on civic education with political courses while the content of moral education seemed to be absent from the curriculum (Doan, 2005). The students in this study, according to their teachers and themselves, were more aware of various community needs because they had more opportunities to learn from community insights, and were prepared to undergo the emotional work of responding to community challenges. This resonates with some popular Vietnamese sayings: *'Tiên học lễ, hậu học văn'* (Learning manners first, learning the letters later) and '*Học để thành nhân trước khi thành danh'* (Learning to be before learning to know).

By providing service to disadvantaged people and communities, the service learning teachers wished to awaken their students' kindness and benevolence, and awareness of the diverse community needs. For example, Ms. Yen's (teacher, Universal University) motivation was to demonstrate to her students that cultural issues explored in classroom lectures directly affected themselves: young generations inclining away from traditional performance arts means less contact with traditional teachings. This may lead to the erosion of traditional values and beliefs, and the risk that they will be replaced by practical or imported ideologies, and influenced by Western or trending cultures. Alongside practising their discipline-related content such as teaching English or Mathematics, or preserving traditional culture, students were given an opportunity to learn to be their best selves: to empathise with others, recognise the root causes of problems, develop positive self-identity and respect for self and others, and to take suitable actions.

In a wider sense, service learning could additionally help strengthen the civic engagement mission of higher education towards community. As mentioned in the literature review, Asian cultures are concerned about individual duty fulfillment, therefore the moral self-cultivation and the responsibility towards community become a lively demonstration of higher education's civic engagement. The response of service learning practice to the perceived decline in young people's ethics is illustrated through the following dimensions: students' awareness of diverse communities and needs, students' learning from community knowledge, and expansion of students' awareness and experience.

7.2.1 Student Awareness of Diverse Communities and Needs

The participating students became more aware of the various and authentic needs from the communities through the service learning field trips and projects. This dimension was invoked more by service learning teachers and community partners, who reported that there were many tasks in which service learning students could become involved. Students' awareness of communities' needs was sometimes evident, though not strongly, in their accounts. One probable reason was that they were not familiar with reflective practices that required them to critically review their activities and perceptions. When teacher participants were asked about the reasons why they decided to do service learning, Ms. Nha (teacher, Olympia University) shared that her biggest motivation (along with developing students' soft skills, as mentioned earlier) was to bridge the gap between university and community. Many other teachers in my study also agreed that their service learning courses have brought students a greater awareness of community issues and the need for them to address these issues from their academic perspectives. For example, Table 7.3 indicates the community needs and problems arising during and after students' service learning projects. These needs and problems were not expected or foreseen in the preparation stage of the projects and thus were not present in teachers' and students' action plans. However, when the projects were going on or have finished, these needs arose and were identified by the participating actors. These accounts were constructed in the interviews with the participants specified in the second column.

Further Needs or Problems	Participant
Raising funds for religious open homes or hospitals	Ms. Hoai, teacher, Evergreen University
Opening homes for children with special needs or women who are unexpectedly pregnant	
Teaching literacy for children in hospital	Mr. Sang, community agent, Evergreen University
Solving environmental pollution from tourism	Dr. Cang, dean, Evergreen University
Eradicating hunger and alleviating poverty	
Popularising 3D models and tools for all schools, but especially for schools teaching children with disabilities	Prof. Dr. Trung, dean, Olympia University Vo, teaching assistant, Olympia University

Training in the use of 3D models and tools for teachers of other inclusive schools	Ms. Vy, community agent, Olympia University
Raising funds to buy materials for service learning projects	Dr. Thai, dean, Resina University Huong, student, Resina University
Teaching vocational skills and life skills for migrants' children	Mr. Luong, community agent, Resina University
Teaching English to migrating workers in industrial zones	Ms. Hoa, teacher, Resina University
Consulting the community organisation on how to promote Vietnamese creative arts to wider audiences	Mr. Thanh, community agent, Universal University

Table 7.3: Further community needs or problems

From the information in the interviews, I could infer that the service learning projects were able to build trust within the communities, and as a result, the communities were seeking further support from the universities. This widening trust and scope for making a difference appeared to spur those involved in service learning to continue to support the communities. In this way, the students came to understand that their learning was actually a part of the life around them.

7.2.2 Learning from Community Knowledge

By involving the communities, the service learning projects enabled the students to explore folk experience ('*kinh nghiệm dân gian'*), or indigenous knowledge. The community agents, despite their humble positions compared to people from the higher education sector (as commonly perceived in Vietnamese culture), were extremely enthusiastic about sharing their experiences but were hesitant to mention their expertise or give advice about the service learning projects, possibly due to the social respect for learned people. These inferior feelings were best captured in the narratives of the community agents, which vividly demonstrate the unbalanced relationship between community and university. For example, as a manager of the Vietnamese Creative Arts Organisation, who was granted the 'Excellent Artist' award by the Vietnamese state, Mr. Thanh (community agent, Universal University) was invited by the

university to talk about the roles of traditional creative arts in folk literature. His first thought was:

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

Not only did Mr. Thanh feel the honour of being useful to university students, but his staff members were alaso similarly excited when they were asked to teach students to do the creative arts. Mr. Thanh recited this account in the following statements:

> Vietnamese [creative] artists here and everywhere alike have a great conscience [for their career]. Although they don't do teaching jobs, if you ask them to teach their majors, they are sure to say yes because it is like something always ready in their body. Maybe they're not good at speaking methodology, but they know how to share their expertise because they were trained methodically by masters of the field.

One exception to this was in the case of Olympia University, where the principal of the school for children with disabilities indicated that they occasionally proposed their needs for the service learning team to consider. This confidence, as explained later, may be due to their longer-term partnership with the service learning team.

With more opportunities for community members to share their skills, experience, and insights, learning from the community became another important feature that service learning brought to higher education. This was significant to foster the life-long learning spirit among undergraduates and to raise their awareness towards the importance of community knowledge. Moreover, this also suggested that students were not turning their backs on traditional values, particularly transferred by community people, as long as the higher education curriculum created opportunities for them to learn.

7.2.3 Maturity in Students' Emotions

The service learning courses were satisfying to most teachers because working with communities brought growth in student's awareness of and respect for diversity as well as supporting their academic learning. This dimension was constructed by teachers and also in

the students' reflections (although reflection was not an obligatory requirement in all cases). The awareness was practical in that students were psychologically prepared to work with many kinds of people in the society related to their future jobs. Figure 7.4 below lists the diverse people with whom students collaborated throughout their projects.

Evergreen University	Olympia University	Resina University	Universal University
- LGBTQIA+ - Children with disabilities - People with drug dependencies - Elderly people - Sick children in hospital	- Students with disabilities, and the teachers at their school - 3D printing experts - Students from other disciplines	- Migrant children - Parents - Community coordinators	- Community managers - Artists - Creative Arts Organisation staff - Local high-school students

Table 7.4: Different kinds of people with whom students worked in their projects

According to Ms. Hoai (teacher, Evergreen University), students came to be aware that the world around them was not always homogeneous; instead, there were many people different from them. Students needed to continuously check their egos, show empathy, and avoid discrimination; that is, develop their social and emotional capabilities. The concept of emotional change was strongly evident in the teachers' comments on their students' performance and in students' own reflections. For example, Ms. Hoai (teacher, Evergreen University) observed that her students changed their perspectives on LGBTQIA+ people and they themselves also benefited from those changes as they had more chances to learn from these people. Similarly, Ms. Hoa (teacher, Resina University) described how much her students felt they had grown up after all the difficulties they had overcome, such as adapting coursebooks, teaching the 'naughty' children, raising funds for their projects, and travelling long and difficult routes to the community classes. The service learning experience helped them recognise their inner feelings and love, their emotions, as well as other's emotions. As a former service learning student, Vo (teaching assistant, Olympia University) stated that he improved his attitude with regard to learning about and being aware of the difference. More interestingly, when asked if they were afraid of the people they were serving in the community (such as the elderly, children with disabilities, and drug addicts), all students from the Evergreen University focus group expressed that they felt very comfortable after a short

time working with their community partners. Sparse data on students' reflections from Facebook groups (Olympia and Resina Universities), video presentations (Universal University), reports and diaries (Evergreen, Resina, and Universal Universities) also showed that the students' recognised that their perception had changed from being outsiders to insiders in relation to the community's problems. The maturity in students' emotion appeared to accentuate the character building effects of service learning, addressing the perceived concern relating to the perception of a deterioration in the moral values of Vietnamese youth. More significantly, it could potentially become good preparation for global citizenship education, for which respect for diversity has always been a prerequisite.

These findings suggest that service learning could provide a remedy for perceived deficiencies in moral education within the Vietnamese higher education curriculum. Moreover, this sub-theme has pointed out that service learning could serve as more than a learning instrument; it could become a means for moral education and character building, a responsibility of the Vietnamese education system.

7.3 Teachers as Unsupported Agents of Change

All the differences outlined above would not have been possible were it not for the teachers, a factor that brings about changes within the university by embracing communities. As was discussed in Chapter 2, while educational reform has supposedly given teachers more autonomy, they instead report that they have experienced tightened obligations, pressures, and limitations in their professional roles. My teacher participants were no exceptions to these pressures, and accounts of struggling were common across multiple teachers' discourses. Although this third sub-theme had the second highest frequency among the three sub-themes of this chapter (167 out of 576 references), it was invoked in fewer interviews (19 out of 24) by mostly teacher participants, so I am reporting on it after the preceding two themes. The teachers found it hard to maintain a balance between rights and responsibilities, and their wishes and the expectations from society. They were concerned about, for example, the unreasonable distribution between theory and practice hours in practical courses (Evergreen University), feeling as if their teaching was focused on mass production with little room for creativity (Olympia University), teaching content with a lack of practical dimensions (Resina University), and a mismatch between academic disciplines and practical needs (Universal University). As a result, these teachers were determined to initiate service

learning without waiting for top-down institutional policy changes. They were willing to devote a great deal of time and even their own budget, and to take more risks – with a very strong belief that this would help raise their voice, change the constrained situations, and bring back the central role of the teacher which has always been highly valued in Confucian and Vietnamese tradition.

To ensure the success of their service learning courses, the teachers had to play many roles. As they were among a minority of teachers doing their courses differently, they could not get much support from their institutions, had to start everything from scratch, and were left to problem-solve largely on their own. Table 7.5 highlights the multidimensionality of the teachers' roles that they had to fulfill from before, during and after a service learning course. This information was gleaned from various communications with the teachers who, as part of the face-saving aspect of Vietnamese culture (Phan, 2008), were modest about the roles they undertook, especially when talking about themselves.

	Ms. Hoai	Ms. Nha	Ms. Hang	Ms. Hoa	Ms. Dieu	Ms. Yen
Teacher	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Coordinator	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Mentor	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Syllabus designer & adapter	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Project funder	✔			✔		✔
Assessor	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Fund raiser or finder	✔	✔		✔		
Service learning initiator	✔	✔				✔
Quality assurer	✔			✔		✔
Administrator						✔
Project accountant		✔	✔			✔
Service learning researcher		✔				✔
Service learning self-trainer			✔	✔	✔	
Student skill-trainer	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Student recruiter				✔	✔	

Table 7.5: The multidimensionality of teachers' roles in a service learning project

The teachers' complex feelings have troubled and intrigued me ever since the interviews, particularly because their efforts to initiate a different teaching approach caused so much suffering for them. Given the unique and difficult challenges and unsupported conditions they described, I felt certain that no other teacher would dare to take over these service learning responsibilities. This sense arose from the depth of emotions evident in the teachers' discourse. The following stories, though a little lengthy, convey some of the mosaic of challenges that the service learning teachers encountered in their efforts to achieve their passions.

Ms. Hoai (teacher, Evergreen University) said that she often worked online at night to respond to students' questions when they were writing up their social work service learning plans. She could not stay up late due to illness, but always left her Zalo

or Facebook status active so that she could give students advice as soon as she woke up. Sometimes she was called in the middle of her sleep when some students had problems in the field. Maybe due to the highly demanding nature of the job, no younger teacher wished to become her successor on this service learning course, which she expressed with considerable disappointment.

Ms. Hoa (teacher, Resina University) recalled the first day when in a meeting of 14 leaders of community wards she asked for the meeting members' permission to squeeze into the meeting to present her plan. Although her baby was still little, she was totally absorbed in organising the teaching groups in the community wards, some of which even required cutting through a forest to reach. Later when she was promoted to a new position and busy with new training, the project faded. She could not stand that because, "If we stop, I'm afraid we may affect our institution's reputation. Moreover, if later we wish to resume, the communities would no longer trust us." She then had to apologise to the community representatives and try other ways to maintain the projects, and still worried about the quality when it might be passed on to other teachers: "If I had more time, I very much wish to keep the idea going with all my heart and mind." When she was asked about other teachers' opinions, she simply said, "No other faculty member cared about what I was doing, possibly because no one knew about it."

Ms. Yen (teacher, Universal University) was luckier in that she was also a vice-dean. This may have helped her avoid explicit clashes of opinion from other faculties, but she also tried to discuss her problems in a faculty meeting to seek consensus. When I asked if there was any faculty wanting to do as she had, she laughed and lowered her voice: "No," she explained. "I encountered a lot of pressures from colleagues, from lower up, from top down, and even from people at the same level." She regretfully assured, "If I stopped doing this service learning initiation, nobody would take over." It is worth noting that the first thing she did after her maternity leave was to resume her unfinished service learning research and teach a new service learning course.

The story of Ms. Nha (teacher, Olympia University) was the most compelling when she revealed that some other teachers expressed prejudice towards or felt confronted by her idea, maybe due to the fact that they were afraid of changes or that she was more popular. She even received some anonymous letters of denunciation. which shocked her and took her a long time to recover from, having a long lasting effect

on her, as evidenced by a suspicious attitude from her when I first approached Ms. Nha for the interview.

Unlike the two male counterparts (Dr. Cang and Dr. Thai), who expressed their difficulties in a more objective and seemingly calm manner, the struggle between personal ties and strong determination was palpable in the female teachers' interview responses. For example, Dr. Cang (dean, Evergreen University) also mentioned the stress and hectic workload of the service learning season, but did not hint at any family or personal effects. Similarly, when discussing the lack of funding and students' safety, Dr. Thai (dean, Resina University) expressed his concerns in a neutral manner. On the other hand, the female teachers revealed their worries with much more emotion. Some felt that the service learning projects were like a spiritual child, which explained why they were willing to protect and sustain these projects regardless of the challenges. The reasons for the differences could be traced back to the managerial positions, the gender norms, and the social expectations for women in Vietnamese culture.

7.4 Chapter Summary

The findings outlined in this chapter indicate that, through service learning courses, universities appear to embrace communities as a tool for higher education reform and traditional values reinforcement. The university influences the community, which, in turn, shapes the students themselves and the service learning courses in which they participate. Service learning courses have sought to enhance the development of moral values and community-mindedness in young people, including their awareness of diverse communities and their needs, the benefits of learning from community knowledge, and actively and wholeheartedly participating in community life. Service learning courses have also enabled teachers to demonstrate their autonomy under the requirements of social development and higher education reform, and align their practices to their own values as they embrace social communities as a means for educational change. However, it appears that much of the work of community partnerships is shouldered by teachers, while university structures and systems remain largely unchanged. This raises a question about the mechanisms required to integrate service learning and the actions needed by various players to ensure positive, reciprocal relationships and outcomes for all involved. The next chapter examines key findings of

power relationships among service learning actors and practitioners, and the strategies employed to navigate these power relations.

CHAPTER 8: NAVIGATING POWER RELATIONSHIPS

This chapter explores the second key theme that I identified in the data: navigating power relationships. The strongly hierarchical and high-context[10] nature of Vietnamese culture and higher education was strongly evident in the participants' responses and, not surprisingly, the emergence of service learning has presented difficulties and conflicts that have needed to be constantly negotiated among its actors. The relationship constraints and the participants' strategies have also represented the perception and practice of democracy of Vietnamese people: respect for higher powers, maintain their relationships, and pursue their individuality, which is typical of Asian cultures (Lee, 2004). This chapter explores four different, and largely asymmetrical, axes of power relations between people involved in service learning projects: teachers-administrators, teachers-students, universities-communities, and initiators-faculty members. Each of the relationships highlights a different key sub-theme related to the imbalances in power relationships that were experienced and reported by the study's participants. The sub-themes also reveal the strategies they used to navigate these power relationships, including how service learning proponents negotiated their constraints to ensure the survival and evolution of the service learning projects they had invested in. Each section that follows begins by describing the relationships and conflicts between the two groups of actors, several of which were evident in the findings presented in the previous two chapters. I then present the strategies that these actors were using to navigate their power relations in order to address the constraints they were working within.

8.1 Constrained Agency: Administrators-Teachers

Conflicts between administrators and teachers often stemmed from institutional and governmental policies, including the MoET and the VNU. Most of the rector, dean, manager, and teacher participants' concerns were related to the systemic limitations of the current

[10] In high-context cultures, communications are mainly exchanged through the use of contextual elements (i.e., body language, a person's status, and tone of voice) and not explicitly stated. This is opposite to low-context cultures in which information is communicated basically through language and rules are explicitly stated (Williams, 2015). Vietnamese culture and communication style is classified as high-context (Hall & Hall, 1990; Hofstede, 2001).

curriculum framework and the payment mechanisms, discussed in Chapter 2. Integrating service learning and applying a new teaching approach was constrained by having to meet regulations on the number of credits, the compulsory and optional knowledge blocks, and the fact that teachers could not be paid for the extra time and work especially in the context of tight institutional budgets. To address these challenges, the administrators and teachers resorted to different ways of facilitating the service learning practice in their institutions. However, it appeared that the teachers encountered more constraints towards their agency.

Although most of the administrators confirmed that the policies for service learning teachers remained unchanged compared to their non-service learning counterparts, they suggested alternative options to support these teachers. Both (vice) rector participants, for example, were aware that their conventional budgets did not allow for pay raises or funds for service learning, but stated that teachers could use annual research funds from different resources, especially from the provincial level (as discussed in Chapter 2), to launch their course as action-research or as community engagement research. At the faculty level, although a faculty could not interfere with the institutional payment regulations, the deans indicated that they could support the changes in curriculum. Dr. Thai (dean, Resina University) confirmed that teachers had the right to design or adjust the curriculum, if this did not affect the total credits of the programmes. Therefore, teachers could try out their service learning ideas within their own courses and, when those courses proved successful, they could propose a curriculum change to their faculty. In the case of Olympia University, seeing the potential of service learning in several courses, Prof. Dr. Trung (dean, Olympia University) was persistent in his efforts to legitimise the Mathematics Pedagogy discipline as one of the faculty's departments to gain more recognition for this discipline, although his proposal to higher level was rejected.

Besides these actions, the Evergreen and Olympia universities have recently organised several training sessions on service learning for teachers. Specifically, Ms. Hao (manager of CTI, Olympia University) informed me that her centre had provided a lot of professional development on innovative teaching approaches in higher education, including service learning content. The centre also functioned on behalf of the university to establish partnerships with community organisations. Although this had not met all the expectations of the service learning teachers, since they were not able to provide free training to students (Ms. Hang, teacher, Olympia University), according to Ms. Hao, many teachers attended the

CTI's training workshops, which may become an incentive for them to start doing service learning afterwards. From all of the abovementioned strategies, one thing was clear: the administrators were trying to empower teachers to use available resources, while at the same time maintaining the status quo of curricular and financial policies. By empowering teachers, the administrators at these institutions were trying to minimise the power distance between them and teachers.

However, whether teachers were aware of these efforts or made use of the proposed resources was another story. Despite the established rules and regulations, the service learning teachers intimated their disappointment with institutional policies. Nearly three-quarters of the participants, including most of the teachers and students, agreed that service learning courses took much more time and work than other courses. For example, Ms. Hoai (teacher, Evergreen University) estimated that she worked 120 over-hours for a 30-hour service learning component of a course. She further expressed her frustration about the same payment rate for a theory lecturing hour compared to a (service learning) practice hour, arguing that practice required more work. Specifically, the expectation to extend a 30-hour course to a 60-hour course, for example, was impossible because it raised not only the number of credits in the curriculum but also the payment for teachers. As well as the two most compelling issues of the credit values and payment schemes, teachers also complained about the institutional failure to provide such support as coordinating with community, accounting, student training, teacher training, and assistant teaching. As discussed in the previous chapter, this meant that teachers had to take various roles so that their courses could run smoothly.

In order to overcome these barriers, teachers revealed that they had to take multiple actions. First, concerning the course syllabus, all of them tried to build on an existing course, altering the practice section into service learning so as to ensure the unchanged number of credits. For example, in three out of four cases, the existing courses were the combination of 50% theory credit and 50% practice credit, hereinafter called combined courses. Teachers of the combined courses had used the 50% practice component to do service learning, intending for their students to apply what they learned in the theory part into practice. Resina University was rather different in that in the beginning teachers could not find any matching course, and they ended up choosing the internship one. In the combined courses, teachers and students had to work too many over-hours on the practice part while assessment had to be

divided equally for the two components. Moreover, when teachers wanted to apply a form of formative assessment, they had to replace it with a current summative form so as not to affect the percentage of the general scores. All teacher and student participants expressed that they needed more time for service learning, and they proposed to split the current course into two separate ones.

Second, in response to the financial problems and despite their modest salaries, most teachers hinted that they either used their own money or some other external source of funding to support their service learning course. For example, teachers in half of the cases tried to manage within their budgets or allowed students to call for donations. Meanwhile, the other half chose to apply for a grant to relieve the cost of service learning projects. One grant from a foreign government aid fund enabled Ms. Nha (teacher, Olympia University) to fund her students' projects quite generously (from VND 300,000 to 3,000,000/project, equivalent to USD 13.00 to 130.00/project). It is helpful to know that each of her courses included at least five students' projects and she funded all of them. In addition, Ms. Yen (teacher, Universal University) asserted that it was the institutional research grant that enabled her to pay for the fees to hire equipment and costumes for students' performances. Further benefits, as she expected, were that the grant allowed her to repeat the service learning idea on the same community site with different student cohorts and to raise her voice to related people with her research papers. Indeed, under the condition that a university lecturer's average salary was less than USD 200 monthly (Dang & Dong, 2015; V. S. Le, 2017; Pham, 2013), there was no way a teacher could resort to only their own salary for the expenses on service learning and needed to look for other resources.

Last but not least, regarding other relevant but unsupported tasks, most of the teachers found they needed to take on various duties of coordinating, accounting, student training, self-training, and sole-teaching. Olympia University was a lucky exception because some alumni volunteered to assist teachers in guiding students' projects.

The findings of this sub-theme depict the vertical relationship between university administrators and teachers. While the administrators celebrated the efforts that they and their institutions were making to support service learning, the teachers emphasised the practical difficulties they encountered and expressed a sense of constrained agency in their attempts to enhance the quality of their teaching. As teachers were excited about the possibilities for service learning, they tended to have hurried expectations about quicker changes in the

system. The reason was, the institutional support may relieve much of their work related to service learning. Despite the administrators' reported attempts to empower teachers, the pressures of social expectation, the lack of available funding, and the slowness of higher education reform appeared to weigh down teachers' agency and ultimately limit their impact.

As discussed in Chapter 2, along with constraints in teacher autonomy, learner autonomy has also been one of the challenges of higher education reform. The next sub-theme indicates that these two constraints seem inseparable when concerning the improvement of teaching and learning quality.

8.2 Hopeful but Constrained Autonomy: Teachers-Students

The conflicts in power relations between teachers and students were not easy to recognise because, under the influence of Confucianism's respect for teachers and the high-context culture, my participants seemed to take the unequal nature of this relationship for granted. In other words, although these conflicts were perceived from an outsider's perspective, it appeared that neither teachers nor students recognised the power imbalance between them. Teachers did not feel that they were imposing many restrictions on the organisation of the service learning courses, and students did not realise that they were obliged to follow such decisions. For example, in most cases, teachers tended to choose the communities where the service learning course would happen. In the cases of Evergreen University and Resina University, teachers provided students with a list of communities with whom they had connected, and students could choose from that list for their projects. Moreover, students were not consulted on how the community members would evaluate their projects or performance. Some students at Universal University indicated that they did not know that their service learning products would be given feedback and assessed by the staff members of Creative Arts organisation.

Despite these limitations, it is necessary to recognise the teachers' desire to nourish students' agency and autonomy as part of their motivation for the service learning courses. For example, in all of the cases, students were allowed to decide the focus of their projects by discussing them with community members or representatives under the teachers' supervision. Most deans, teachers, and students acknowledged that not all students' plans were successful: some had to be amended several times to meet the community's needs (Tuyet, teaching assistant, Olympia University), some mistakes could not be fixed (Ms. Yen, teacher,

Universal University; Dr Thai, dean, Resina University), and some projects were even unused (Dr. Cang, dean Evergreen University). However, at least students learned to make independent decisions and take responsibility for those decisions.

Further evidence of this developing sense of agency is demonstrated by students in their service learning courses being given some control over the way they were assessed. In many cases, students were offered alternative forms of assessment such as peer feedback on their projects. Additionally, in half of the cases, students discussed their peer assessment criteria and then designed an appropriate form. Most students who experienced peer assessment reported feeling more relaxed and confident in the fairness of this form compared with testing assessment. However, Ms. Yen (teacher, Universal University) was concerned about students' perception of the fairness of the general assessment. Her service learning students often expected a high score in accordance with their hard work, which was not always the case because a weak project could still gain a lower score than a stronger one. She concluded that what a teacher thought to be good for students could turn out to be under-appreciated by them: "I mean, what I wanted may be different from the reality. That's another problem. There's nothing for sure that the receiver really wants what we give [smile]."

Another feature of service learning that developed student autonomy, though often with quite severe constraints, related to how projects were funded. As mentioned in the previous section, teachers tried various ways to fund or allow students to raise funds to spend on project materials, snacks, drinks, or travel fees in the field, or expenses on special occasions. This action, on the surface, could be perceived as a person with higher power granting a favour to the lower ones, but underneath the surface, it also conveyed the teachers' expectations towards students' independence, proactiveness, and problem-solving skills.

Along with budgeting skills, teachers also felt that the students needed preparation and training in a wide variety of skills before heading into the community, but this kind of training was not provided centrally by any of the universities. So, all teachers stated that they provided students with training on not only service learning knowledge and practice but also other soft skills, especially communication. Ms. Hang (teacher, Olympia University) expected that there should be free such training organised by the university. However, a more experienced person, Ms. Hao (manager of service learning centre, Olympia University) held the opinion that as course teachers knew most about the requirements for the specific projects

in their disciplines, it would be better to let them do the training jobs. According to Olympia University's website, the service learning team, including this study's teachers and alumni participants, have been providing a lot of free training for their students and others under a foreign aid project. Despite all this training, the teachers reported that not all students immediately picked up the skills or exercised their autonomy in the ways that teachers hoped. Ms. Hoai (teacher, Evergreen University) disclosed that despite all the training she provided in class, she had to constantly give advice via phone when students encountered problems in the field. Similarly, Ms. Yen (teacher, Universal University) admitted that there were unexpected situations where she could do nothing except let students learn from their mistakes.

By letting students work independently within communities, teachers were empowering students but at the same time putting students and themselves in a vulnerable situation. All the teachers, and two out of three dean participants, repeatedly reported a concern for students' safety when they were working in the community. Specifically, some hidden risks included female students being teased by male patients in the rehabilitation centre, students being exposed to chemical odours in the hospital's chemotherapy zone, students being threatened by drug addicts, and students travelling long distances to the community sites. This anxiety is especially prominent in Vietnamese culture where the teacher's role is highly accountable and students are treated protectively, like family children. Public opinion is extremely skeptical of any mistakes teachers make, as the more respect they earn, the more accountable they are. If there had been any problem for students, teachers would have been the first people liable to parents, faculty members, and even public opinion. In order to deal with this problem, a couple of teachers reported employing strategies such as limiting the distance students had to travel to the community (Ms. Nha, teacher, Olympia University) or imposing more rules explicitly stated in the course syllabus (Ms. Yen, teacher, Universal University).

According to my interviews, the teachers of service learning courses appeared to be more open than teachers of traditional classes in their strategies to empower students. This was possibly due to the nature of service learning which required students to learn outside the classroom. Moreover, although there were some imperfections in these actions, they illustrated the teachers' determination to bring students' autonomy to a higher level. It can be said that their efforts resulted in the outcomes found in Chapter 7 that service learning has

brought to the changes in higher education reform and enhancement in students' moral values. The actions of empowering students were also their strategies to invigorate their important role in society. In other words, if the findings in the previous chapter were the fruits, the findings of this sub-theme indicate that teachers were the seed sowers. By using their power to develop relationships, these teachers wanted to influence their students' behaviours, enhance their motivation, and improve their learning outcomes. It appears that teachers, like administrators in the previous relationship, were making efforts to reduce the power relation gap with students.

Next, I explore how students responded to the teachers' strategies. In short, the service learning students were aware of the power given to them by their teachers and showed signs of responding positively to this, but did not yet fully escape certain constraints. This account is evident in the following findings.

Although the student participants emphasised satisfaction with their teachers' efforts, discontentment in relation to a range of concerns was also stated, albeit softly. For example, students from Evergreen University were frustrated with the lengthy process of obtaining referral letters from their institution, some wished to have better organised time for their service learning component so that they could do more intensive work, and one of them complained about the delivery skills of a community speaker invited by their teacher. Most participant students at Olympia University complained about the lack of space for a workshop to develop their projects. They had to occupy the hallways for groupwork and therefore were often 'shooed' away by the cleaners. Nghiep (student, Olympia University) revealed that his family was worried about his long hours and hard work in the community; his parents asked him to quit several times. Huong and Nhu (students, Resina University) questioned why some disadvantaged children were not enrolled in their community classes, while most student participants at Universal University expressed their disagreement with the way the teacher wanted them to promote and attract Facebook supporters to their products. While students expressed these gentle frustrations at what sometimes amounted to constrained autonomy, teachers also shared concerns about student autonomy but for vastly different reasons. For example, Ms. Yen (teacher, Universal University) told the story of a group of students who, she believed, misused their newfound freedom when they took field trip time for a group picnic. To her, this was an unacceptable action because going elsewhere beyond the university campus and community locations could bring unexpected problems for

students, which could have affected their safety and the teacher's accountability. This incident alerted Ms. Yen to the need for appropriate warnings and training that would keep students safe but still allow them to feel empowered.

The findings of this sub-theme suggested that the autonomy that students experienced through the service learning practice was promised, but still constrained. Despite students' excitement at the extensions to their power in the teacher-student relationship, there were some disagreements that they could not communicate to their teachers. Vietnamese values such as face-saving, harmony, and hierarchy (as discussed in Chapter 1) no doubt prevented students from criticising their teachers' decisions and regulations. This may also explain why students navigated their power by expressing their disagreement to *other* people (such as me, as researcher) rather than the teachers as the power holders. The vertical power relationship between teachers and students may seem less steep than that between administrators and teachers, but it was no less problematic. As the last subject in the power relations chain, and through their disclosure, students appeared to need some channel in which they could share their opinions about better ways for developing service learning in higher education.

With the addition of service learning into the curriculum, there similarly needs to be attention paid to community autonomy, alongside greater teacher and student agency. The following sub-theme explores how the rights and responsibilities of community partners were manipulated in this triangle of relationships.

8.3 Re-charting Hierarchy: Universities-Communities

The findings of this sub-theme signify that the hierarchical power relationship between universities and communities was being re-charted under the service learning practice. The first findings chapter noted an imbalanced power relation between these two actors and how service learning started to engage communities more as a learning resource. This sub-theme discusses teachers and community agents' strategies in navigating this relationship to sustain the operation of service learning. Although this relationship was vertical like the first two mentioned in this chapter, the power balance seemed to be tilting more towards the community through the community engagement nature of service learning. The increasingly important role of community constructed by participants of this study indicates that the traditional hierarchy between university and community is being re-charted.

Despite the traditional assumption of community members that the university is an intellectual zone, all the administrators and teachers stated that their institutions have started to take community service as one of the subjects for regular or compulsory activities or action plans. The teachers, in their attempt to develop their service learning courses, have applied several strategies to empower community agents who represented their community members. As mentioned in the previous chapter, teachers had different plans to include the community agents' opinions in students' assessment. Moreover, teachers in most cases expressed their trust in the practical experience of the community agents by inviting them to become guest speakers or field mentors to their service learning students. In particular, teachers felt that they listened to the community's needs and requests, and within the university's conditions, they acted upon these requirements. Some teachers, like Ms. Nha (Olympia University) and Ms. Yen (Universal University) revealed that they adapted their course syllabuses to suit the nature of the community. As previously mentioned, to avoid the misunderstanding of Mr. Thanh (community agent, Universal University) about who were the beneficiaries of the service learning course, Ms. Yen intended to work more closely with community agents in future courses so that they could clearly understand the course objectives as well as the responsibilities and benefits for all parties.

However, there have been some mismatches between what the teachers assumed they were communicating and what the community agents perceived. Some agents remained hesitant when proposing their requests (Mr. Luong, community agent, Resina University; Mr. Sang, community agent, Evergreen University) or disseminating their practical experience (Mr. Thanh, community agent, Universal University). Moreover, Mr. Luong (community agent, Resina University) told me that he failed to hold a meeting with the service learning students to discuss the disciplines and the organisation of the community children classes because he was afraid that he did not have the power to mobilise people from university. Notably, the conversations with Mr. Sang (community agent, Evergreen University) and Mr. Thanh (community agent, Universal University) revealed that they were not quite clear about the objectives, motivations, and planning of the teachers towards the service learning course.

As a result of these limitations, the community agents applied different strategies to navigate their power relations. The first strategy, like the students with the face-saving principle, was raising their voices with people (such as their friends, other teachers, or me as the researcher of this study) other than the perceived power holders. Second, they found other

ways to develop their projects, for example, by cooperating with other partners like in the cases of Evergreen University and Resina University. Mr. Sang (community agent, Evergreen University) indicated that they cooperated with some other volunteering projects with larger scales and longer terms than the current service learning course. Alternatively, in Resina University's case, after the teaching children project was delayed for a while due to an amendment in the faculty's curriculum, some community agents partnered with private language schools to have alternative teachers for their children's classes. Even worse, in the case of Resina University and according to Ms. Dieu (teacher, Resina University) and Huong (student, Resina University), some community agents seemed to not care much about the children's classes and the service learning teachers and students (no further explanation was provided by the participants)

Although service learning teachers were clearly attempting to bring the university closer to the community through incorporating academic learning into what had previously just been volunteering, it seems that there is still room to allow space for community agents to engage more purposefully with students and teachers. Some clearly still feel constrained by their 'lower position,' and more conversations will be needed to truly re-chart the hierarchies that exist between universities and the community.

The triangle relationships among the three important actors of service learning have illustrated how navigating relationships is an important concept in Vietnamese higher education. However, the specificity of Vietnamese culture is clearly demonstrated through following the constrained relationships evident among actors at the faculty level.

8.4 Distressed Micro-Political Horizontal Relationships: Initiators-Faculty Members

As service learning was a new approach applied in the Vietnamese higher education context, the initiator of the idea in each faculty often encountered different reactions from other faculty members. This problem of faculty opponents will now be explored under the theme Distressed Micro-Political Horizontal Relationships. These relationships are considered micro-political because they occurred among small groups within the boundary of a faculty, rather than an institution as a whole. In this section, I define an 'initiator' as the first or the only person who introduces the idea of service learning to their faculty. In my study, they were Ms. Hoai (teacher, Evergreen University), Ms. Nha (teacher, Olympia University), Dr. Thai (dean, Resina University), and Ms. Yen (teacher, Universal University).

Noticeably, it is useful to remember that Ms. Yen was also a vice-dean of her faculty. Unlike the other relationships, the power gap between the two sides was smaller (dean-teacher) or zero (teacher-teacher), which explains the term 'horizontal.' Therefore, I am not going to discuss how one side was imposing power over and/or empowering the other. I instead present the challenges in these relationships through the manifestations of the opposition (because the opponents were only anonymously mentioned) and the strategies of the initiators in response to those challenges. The purpose is to depict part of the power relation picture within the scope of a faculty.

Although there was no explicit complaint, the challenges that the initiators experienced varied in seriousness. First, they could not find many faculty proponents of their service learning idea. In the case of Ms. Hoai (teacher, Evergreen University), she complained that she could not ask for a teaching assistant to help her with the huge workload of a service learning course with up to 80 students, although teaching assistants were available for other courses, especially those of the faculty administrators. Likewise, Ms. Dieu (teacher, Resina University) and Ms. Yen (teacher, Universal University) commented that other teachers were not interested in doing service learning, possibly because they could not find the balance between duties and benefits from this work. Most initiators were worried about finding successors to follow up their service learning idea, which entails the second challenge: the people who took over the job might not share the predecessors' motivations. Initiators with higher power (dean or vice-dean) could receive the surface consent from faculty members but it did not mean they were totally supported, suspected Ms. Yen (teacher, Universal University). For instance, when Dr. Thai (dean, Resina University) introduced a service learning component into an official course and invited other teachers to teach it, Ms. Hoa – the first teacher to teach the service learning course – was not sure if these followers would do it wholeheartedly. In the case of Ms. Yen, she heard a rumour about complaints from other teachers, but these complaints were not made directly to her. Most seriously for a horizontal power relationship, as previously discussed, Ms. Nha (teacher, Olympia University) even received an anonymous letter defaming her work, the reason for which, she guessed, was due to some jealousy over her popularity.

In response to these disagreements, these initiators shared that they had employed different strategies. First, towards the issue of no assistant or successor, the teacher had no choice except to propose in vain or to accept the situation. Ms. Hoai admitted that she tried to

cover all the duties for a big class and only asked a student to help out with entering course scores into a document processor. Although sometimes she received requests from teachers elsewhere to learn about her service learning model, she never had any such request from any faculty member in her own university. Second, in the case of Ms. Nha, she was initially shocked by the anonymous letter because the education environment is often assumed to be less competitive and directly confrontational than other industries. However, her reaction later was to ignore it and try to do her best to prove that the anonymous critic was wrong. The third strategy was negotiation. Ms. Yen, having learned from Ms. Nha's experience, explicitly proposed her plan in a faculty meeting to see if there was any objection. The result was that there was no other concern except for students' safety and the potential neglect of other teachers' courses, if the students were working too hard on their service learning course. She revealed that although other members expressed support for her work, she really suffered pressure from not only the top (administrators), and the bottom (students), but also horizontally, from her peers (teachers). Fourth, initiating a service learning course from the position of a dean may have brought less trouble to Dr. Thai, but in order to develop this new idea, he was expected to take into account the benefits for the future service learning teachers besides calling for their voluntary participation, as indicated by Ms. Dieu (teacher, Resina university).

This problem of power relationships between service learning initiators and other faculty members presents evidence that conflicts between colleagues can exist in an education environment. Traditionally, disagreements in this environment in Viet Nam are normally tactically avoided. Contributions, suggestions, or disagreements are often expected to be made subtly and implicitly. Clearly, the service learning initiators needed to develop skills in navigating complex, but often under-stated, power relationships in order to avoid the risk of undermining or completely derailing their initiatives.

8.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has explored the complexity of the power relations among the various service learning actors and how they steered those relationships to sustain service learning practices. Each axis of these relationships had its own characteristics: teacher-administrator relationships were largely top-down and constrained teachers' agency; teachers aimed to enhance their students' autonomy but this was constrained by their institutions; university and

community relationships and hierarchies appear to be slowly being re-charted; and initiators and faculty members faced troubled micro-politics in their arguably more horizontal relationships. Notably, teachers – and particularly those who initiated service learning projects – faced acute challenges and needed to navigate complex power relationships across every relational axis identified in this chapter. If the teachers' motivations to bring about changes in education, as explored in Chapter 7, are to be metaphorically compared to the 'head' work that was required to implement service learning, the findings presented in this chapter highlight their 'hand' work, that is, the strategies that they manipulated to address the practical challenges and power struggles that required them to pay careful attention to inter-personal relationships.

Maintaining relationships has and always will be an extremely important facet of Vietnamese culture, and is therefore a 'must-learn' lesson for future practitioners if service learning is to survive and develop in Vietnamese higher education. This is also how Vietnamese people perceive and practise democracy. Significantly, the strategies employed by all the participants to navigate their power relationships have revealed historical influences and hinted at the system of values of Vietnamese people. These are explored to a deeper extent in the next chapter, which provides the third group of findings of the embedded beliefs that characterise service learning in Viet Nam.

CHAPTER 9: HONOURING BENEVOLENCE AS A PREREQUISITE FOR SERVICE LEARNING

The findings discussed in previous chapters have highlighted the potential of service learning as a means for change in higher education and as an outcome of strategies to navigate power relationships. This chapter explores how service learning practices are strongly connected with the concept of benevolence, an inherent virtue of Vietnamese people (Nguyen, 2012). '*Lòng nhân từ'* (or *'lòng nhân ái/ sự tử tế')* in Sino-Vietnamese can be translated as 'benevolence' or 'kindness' in English. Being a considerate human being is associated with two qualities: *nhân* (human) and *tâm* (heart). *Nhân* is the first of five fundamental virtues that a *quân tử* – a good citizen in Confucian society – needs to achieve and perform, the others being *'lễ'* (decorum), *'nghĩa'* (uprightness), *'trí'* (wisdom), and *'tín'* (faithfulness). Learning to be a good person is the aim of self-cultivation and self-improvement, a value that is present in most of the principal religions in Vietnamese culture, especially Buddhism and Christianity. Although the concept of benevolence is not unique to Viet Nam, its distinctiveness in Vietnamese culture draws from a confluence of traditional, Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist beliefs about leading a balanced life.

While benevolence was the least commonly mentioned of the three main themes (see Table 5.3), in terms of what the participants directly reported, it was an absorbing finding because it captures Vietnamese characteristics and supports a deeper understanding of participants' strategies for navigating power relationships that were discussed in Chapter 8. The findings presented in this chapter underscore the significance of maintaining harmonious relationships in Vietnamese culture and how participants in my study went about achieving that. If we return to the metaphor of 'head' work in Chapter 7 and 'hand' work in Chapter 8, this chapter could be considered as characterising the participants' 'heart' work and strong beliefs.

The benevolent nature of service learning in the Vietnamese context is investigated through three sub-themes: *tâm* (kindness, conscience), achieving harmony (as a Vietnamese habit of caring for the heart rather than the head) and causality law (the expectation that from the good seeds sown today, people have the right to hope for abundant crops in the future). These themes are not discussed in order of their strength. Instead, I recognised the causal

connection among the three sub-themes: from the preparation stage expressed in the first sub-theme, to the process stage represented in the second sub-theme, and the expected results illustrated in the third sub-theme.

9.1 *Tâm* as the Motivation for Good Work

There was broad consensus in the narratives of the participants that engaging with communities flowed from their *tâm*. *Tâm* is widely practised in Vietnamese culture. It means 'heart' in Sino-Vietnamese and 'kindness' or 'conscience' in English. It can be interpreted into various meanings related to 'heart,' but all are convergent into a quality that is precious and essential in building a humane society. The single word *tâm* and the compound words in which *tâm* conveyed the connotation of 'from one's heart' such as *tâm huyết* (resolution from one's heart), *tâm từ* (benevolence from one's heart), *bận tâm* (concern from one's heart), *quyết tâm* (determination from one's heart) were evident in all four cases and among various participants as an account for the inner motivation for doing service learning. Traditionally, Vietnamese teachings always remind people to do everything with their *tâm* not just their *tài* (talent or skills) because only with *tâm* could people wholeheartedly practise their jobs. As a popular expression from the great Vietnamese poet Nguyễn Du's classic work entitled *Truyện Kiều* goes: '*Chữ Tâm kia mới bằng ba chữ Tài'* (Kindness is three times as valuable as Talent).

Doing service learning requires a person, particularly a teacher, to have a lot of *tâm* because their work involves love, sacrifice, tolerance, and even bravery, qualities that cannot be solely quantitatively measured. In other words, as mentioned in Chapter 7, a service learning component of a course could last 30 periods and take approximately triple the teacher's allocated work time, but their worries, their mental health, or their sacrifice of family care could never be calculated in numbers. The word *tâm* was surprisingly invoked 49 times by participants, the highest frequency for a major word throughout the study, and was widespread in 15 of the 19 interviews. It was mentioned by most teacher, administrator, and student participants as if it were a prerequisite for doing service learning. Sometimes, it was recited by community agents as a widely agreed upon characteristic for practicing a good job in daily life. The following discourses illuminate the significance of *tâm* for participants.

To Ms. Hoai (teacher, Evergreen University), *tâm* was a prerequisite quality for a person to do service learning. She reported that "one of my advantages was that I started

doing [service learning] from my *tâm*. . . which was the most important and the strongest motivation to make me love this career." From this comment, it could be inferred that doing service learning, not from a *tâm*, could be a disadvantage for a teacher. Regardless of the extra time and money spent on the service learning projects, this *tâm* required not only a strong motivation but also the sacrifice of personal considerations; for example, a health concern (Ms. Hoai), childcare duties (Ms. Hoa and Ms. Yen), and tension in colleague relationships (Ms. Nha). Furthermore, Ms. Hoai warned that service learning could become a real burden or even tragedy for any teacher who took it on but did not love it. For example, one could imagine what would have happened to students if they had had a problem in the field but did not receive timely support from their teacher. In that case, students would suffer deeply from the lack of *tâm*.

High motivation could be the attribute to describe the *tâm* of Ms. Nha (teacher, Olympia University). Similar to Ms. Hoai's perspective, Ms. Nha shared the opinion that one positive aspect of her service learning projects was that all the teachers were very *tận tâm* (devoted/ dedicated). Actually, it was the only service learning project across the cases that mobilised several teachers in a team working under a common *tâm*. In addition, some students reported that they enrolled in her course because they could see what she did from her *tâm* to help disadvantaged people. Ms. Nha must have been a very motivating teacher because she could pass on her passion not only to students but also to the teachers in her team. In this case, like a Vietnamese metaphor often goes, her *tâm* had greatly moved others' *tâm*.

To Ms. Hoa (teacher, Resina University), *tâm* was something more voluntary rather than obligatory. Unlike Ms. Nha's case, she got help from other teachers, but their motivations – the levels of *tâm* – were different from hers. She revealed that after doing service learning for a while and being promoted to a new position, she was really exhausted. Therefore, in a faculty meeting, she decided to call for other teachers' *tâm* to share her service learning job. However, when some teachers were assigned a service learning course, she was still concerned that they might not pay as much *tâm* as she did. In this case, it is significant that what she was expecting from her successors was first their *tâm*, before their ability or their duty. She knew for sure that the assignment or order from a faculty administrator could make a teacher fulfill their duty and perform to their ability, but it would be hard to force them to devote their *tâm* if it was not ignited from an inner desire.

Ms. Yen (teacher, Universal University) associated *tâm* with resolution and passion. She explained that "one must have *tâm huyết* [resolution and passion] to do service learning. . . In reality, many teachers wanted to be involved in my project, but they did not have enough time and *tâm huyết*." This case demonstrated another shade of *tâm* in which a teacher's interest needed to combine with resolution and passion in order to incite them to take action. Without these elements, their *tâm* was absolutely inadequate to lead them through the challenges of service learning.

Furthermore, the concept of *tâm* was illustrated by the administrators from a more general perspective. For example, Mr. Hung (rector, Evergreen University) believed that teachers with their *tâm* would overcome any poor conditions to do whatever they believed to be necessary for their teaching. He mentioned this idea when discussing various international accreditation procedures that the institution was doing (e.g. AUN-QA, CDIO). Therefore, this concept was not confined to service learning teachers, but generalised to most of the teachers who shared common expectations of higher education reform. From this statement, he also hinted that while his institution could not contemporarily afford to make changes, the treasure that they already had was the *tâm* of the teachers.

Tâm also meant something sacred to Ms. Hao (manager of service learning centre, Olympia University). When she was asked if the institution wished to use service learning as a promotional or selling point to recruit more students, she rejected that idea because she was determined that service learning should remain a practice from the *tâm* as it has always been, rather than being borrowed to polish a brand name. This viewpoint was significant in that when people did something from their *tâm*, it became so valuable that it was untradeable, even for the institution's trademark.

The Resina University case was a remarkable instance of doing service learning from pure *tâm*. Dr. Thai (dean, Resina University) admitted that his motivation when he initiated the project was to lead students to learn what Vietnamese people often called *sự tử tế* (kindness) and *tâm từ* (benevolence) so that they could understand, share, and practise in their future. Unlike the phrase 'education reform' that people often used, his first and foremost inspiration was to change something from the inside. This inner self, as expressed in Confucian traditions, has the immense power to change the outer world.

This value is so popular in Vietnamese culture that it can become an ultimate standard to evaluate a person's job. A job that satisfies all the necessary conditions is

considered a good job, but it is required to meet a further condition of *có tâm* to become a desirable job in the common perception of Vietnamese people. Some participants never mentioned the word *tâm* to describe their job, but from their detailed descriptions, any Vietnamese person reading their story would be persuaded that they were *có tâm* (being conscientious/considerate). Some examples of individuals exhibiting *có tâm* behaviours include Dr. Thai (dean, Resina University), who transferred a Western conception into a domestic programme full of benevolence; Ms. Hoa (teacher, Resina University), who passionately insisted on maintaining her project despite various disruptions; Ms. Nha (teacher, Olympia University), who had to overcome psychological shocks to carry on her project; the service learning students (Resina University), who cut through the forest or managed to come to their class under heavy rain or flooded roads; or Mr. Luong (community agent, Resina University), who actively assumed the project as part of his life with all the challenges to improve it day by day.

9.2 Achieving Harmony as a Means for Practicing Service Learning

The concept of harmony became a living principle of Vietnamese people as the combination of the wet-rice cultivation civilization and the influence of the Three Religions (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism). Harmony can be achieved by balancing oneself and one's relationships with other people and nature, observing moderation and avoiding extremes. Reaching harmony is not an easy task to perform; it is an art of synthesising similar characteristics and negotiating conflicts within an entity. In Eastern philosophy, there always exists the flexibility and the relativity that accept that there is goodness inside the badness, or badness inside goodness. This is why Vietnamese people often try to prastice the communication skill called *'dĩ hòa vi quý'* (A bad compromise is better than a good lawsuit). They are taught to avoid giving extreme remarks on a person or an issue. This also explains the habits of sympathy, tolerance to vagueness, face-saving, and respect to hierarchy in Vietnamese culture (Tran, Ngo, Nguyen, & Dang, 2017). Due to the respect for *tâm* in communication, Vietnamese people often take sentiment as the principle for their behaviours. Moreover, any daily life or legal problem is often solved on the basis of *'hợp tình, hợp lý'* (caring not only for reasons but also for the sentiments) or even *'Một bồ cái lý không bằng một tí cái tình'* (A tiny amount of sentiments outweighs a barrel of reasons). Knowing how to

balance one's benefits with others' is a solid foundation for a harmonious and humane society.

The relationship between teachers and students in my study showed implicit evidence of some disagreements, as mentioned in the previous chapter, but they treated each other with a lot of care and understanding. Teachers were always concerned about students' safety, like parents; moreover, they were quite tolerant of and patient towards students' mistakes. Although sometimes they got upset with students' breach of discipline, their verbal expressions while guiding students through their problems conveyed not only duty but also affection and consideration. Ms. Hoai (teacher, Evergreen University), for example, revealed that she bought students food and drink while they were on the project because [affectionately lowered her voice] "most students are poor, they don't have much money." In her case, Ms. Yen (teacher, Universal University) was trying to defend her students by saying, "[I admitted that they made some mistakes in communication], but [you know] nobody could avoid making mistakes." Moreover, when talking about another problem with her students, she conveyed her concern like a mother with a worried facial expression and verbal intonation, "I couldn't monitor their safety, which worried me most." In another instance, while reporting on the graduate destinations, Dr. Thai (dean, Resina University) happily raised his voice when saying, "All the 28 students were highly appreciated by their employers. They became *con cưng* to any place they came." It is useful to note that the phrase '*con cưng'* (beloved child) is often used to refer to family members but rarely to workplace employees. By using this metaphor similar to the Vietnamese expression *'Con hát mẹ khen hay'* (A mother always praises whatever her child sings), Dr. Thai hinted at his pride in the students' service learning performance as if he were a parent complimenting his children's achievements.

In return, despite their disagreement with some aspects of the courses, most of the students confirmed their agreement, and to some extent, their satisfaction with their teachers' service learning courses. In particular, Trang (student, Olympia University) was not only content with the course organisation, the teacher's funding for each project, and the experiential part of the course but also proud of it when noting that other students wished to participate in such a service learning course. Even in Universal University where students were not satisfied with the approach to promote their service learning products, they chose to disclose this to me rather than raising it as a deep objection. As explained by Dai (student,

Universal University), “I understand that she [the teacher] wanted us to perform on stage but she finally changed her plan because she didn’t have enough budget for that. . . And I sympathised with her because it would take higher risk: we didn’t practise enough for such a performance.” As a common behaviour, Vietnamese students rarely confront their teachers, not because they are uncritical, but because they choose to express their points in less direct ways in order to demonstrate respect and maintain harmonious relationships.

The attitude of harmony could also be found in the relationship between administrators and teachers. Although on the surface teachers complained about their unfair or low pay, they, by and large, understood that it would take a lot of effort and time for the administrators to change the institutional mechanisms that meant a lack of autonomy. That was why they chose to start changes by themselves with the assumed belief that rewards would come down the road. For example, after making a suggestion for her institution to reduce theory courses, Ms. Hoai (teacher, Evergreen University) corrected herself, stating that she was wrong because there were purely theory courses that could not be replaced by practice ones. Through this, she signalled her sympathy towards the administrators, noting that they had their own problems in negotiating the common policies for all the faculties’ different requirements. The practice of putting oneself in the other’s shoes is widely used in other cultures, but it is overtly evident in the high ambiguity tolerance in Vietnamese culture. On the administration side, the administrators highly appreciated the teachers’ work and were thankful for their sympathy. This point was reported in the first subtheme of this chapter, and it was also evident in Dr. Hung’s (vice-rector, Evergreen University) recognition:

> If conditions allowed, we would absolutely pay more for the teachers, and even for the mentors from communities. . . However, while we don’t have these conditions, I truly believe that teachers can still achieve whatever they wish with their duty and the *tâm* in their career. . . In order to improve teaching quality, we’d rather seek the agreement between teachers and the institution rather than exert our power.

As mentioned above, the concept of *tâm* was invoked in Vietnamese culture as if it were the teacher’s quality in practising their highly-valued job. In this respect, teachers were working more on the basis of *tình* (sentiments) rather than *lý* (reasons). It can be assumed that the understanding between people on these two levels was an important aspect for maintaining the practice of service learning in such unfavourable conditions. At this point, one may wonder whether it was a form of exploitation when the administrators expected devotion from teachers without the ability to pay them back. In fact, teachers of this

institution have been practising experiential learning over the years and this approach remains sustainable, which arguably shows that spiritual trust appears to be more important than materials in nurturing innovative teaching in Viet Nam.

The relationships between community agents and students as well as between teachers and community agents also conveyed the harmony values. Although the service that students provided was sometimes not as expected, the community agents were always welcoming and supportive. As mentioned, the community agents working with Olympia University gave students 'diplomatic' generous scores even for their imperfect products, possibly due to the habit of respect in Vietnamese culture. Mr. Luong (community agent, Resina University) reported that he was unable to call a meeting on the community's regulations with all the student teachers because their times did not match. Lowering his tone, he further expressed his understanding that the students could have used their time for a paid job. Therefore, he could not demand too much devotion from them. In another story, Mr. Thanh (community agent, Universal University) mentioned that his staff corrected very minor terminology or caption mistakes in students' reports before publishing. Although his reporting manner seemed quick and easy, the account implied a lot of *tâm* (attentiveness and responsibility) of his staff to both their jobs and the students. Their actions conveyed not only respect for their professional careers (the need to use correct terms) but also generosity (a tolerance towards students' mistakes).

Teachers and community agents sometimes implied misunderstandings but both parties sought compromises rather than giving direct complaints. For example, in regards to the generous scores, Ms. Nha (teacher, Olympia University) decided to tactically adjust a lower percentage for the community agent's evaluation and required them to comment on the project weaknesses. As for Universal University where the communities always took for granted that they were creating opportunities for students' experiential learning rather than for mutual benefit, Ms. Yen (teacher, Universal University) indicated that her strategy was simply repeating more service learning courses until they could recognise her intentions in helping them promote the cultural heritage to young people. These strategies may have taken teachers more time and work, just like the 'beat-around-the-bush' strategy Vietnamese people often take in communication, but it helped to avoid any unwanted partnership breakdowns that could affect the sustainability of their service learning practices.

9.3 Good Fruits from Good Actions: Causality Law

Within the conversations with these service learning people, and despite all the challenges or complaints from their verbal expressions, I often noticed their pride, the peace in their mind, and their strong beliefs that good seeds would produce good fruits. Originating from an agricultural culture, Vietnamese people put much confidence in the causality law in many aspects of their life (Hoang, 2017). This rule suggests that whatever happens to a person today has been caused by their past events. People believe that supernatural forces like God[11] are always observing human actions, and these forces are people who practise justice. Consequently, a person's success or failure, wealth or poverty, peace or strife does not happen randomly, but lies in their behaviours (Pham, 2005). A Vietnamese expression often goes, *'Lởi xởi trời gởi của cho, so đo trời co của lại'* (God will give treasure to a generous person, he will take it back from a mean person). Similarly, a large part of Buddhist teaching is dedicated to doing charity. Buddha believed that doing good jobs could bring peace to one's mind, happiness to others, and exemption from misery. This explains why Vietnamese people believe that doing good for others also means doing good for themselves.

One striking finding that could be recognised across the cases was that teachers often prioritised disadvantaged communities for their service learning courses: for example, a school for children with disabilities, an orphanage, a rehabilitation centre, or an organisation working to preserve an endangered cultural artform. This is different from other cultures, where service learning might be done in any community requiring the expertise of university students. What was not being explicitly stated by teachers, but is widely understood in Viet Nam, was that some people require more immediate assistance. This belief is best related to a Buddhist proverb, *'Cứu một mạng người bằng xây bảy tháp phù đồ'* (Rescuing one life merits as building seven temples), which means both actions can result in merit, but a critical situation brings more. In this respect, as their will coincided with public opinion, they could easily find consensus from relevant people. In particular, my participants constructed this belief as naturally as their breath, not as a deliberate choice. Although no one expressed the expectation that they would receive good fruits in the future, this can be explained by it being too obvious to utter verbally. The following narratives provide evidence for this account.

[11] 'God' is used as an equivalent term for 'Trời' in Confucianism. The concept of 'Trời' has various references in and different influences on Vietnamese culture (Nguyen, 2020).

When Prof. Dr. Trung (dean, Olympia University) remarked that he thought the needs of special education organisations took most of their energy, I asked if this meant they only served these types of communities. He immediately rejected this, saying, "No, no," and justifying that "it was just a coincidence, not because we wanted to limit to these subjects." Yet, when teachers chose a community to serve, it was usually a group of people for whom life had presented particular disadvantages. In a larger sense, this also indicated the compassionate approach and benevolent tradition of Vietnamese people.

When asked why he chose to enrol in Ms. Nha's service learning course, Vinh (student, Olympia University) answered that he was impressed by the teacher's *tâm*, especially when she tended to choose people who needed more help so that she could prioritise producing tools to assist them: "When students understood her [the teacher's] intentions, they liked to choose her course in the hope to contribute their part." Through this, he also implied that the benevolence the teacher was practising was also a quality that Vietnamese people agree with and value strongly.

Dr. Thai (dean, Resina University) advised that other faculties started to launch programmes on the basis of *tâm từ* (benevolence). Then I asked if it was his faculty that initiated such a movement. He humbly refused, further explaining that "maybe our [service learning] work just left some influence [on other faculties' similar projects]." It is easy to recognise that the fruits that the project bore resonated with other faculties. Again, the account further revealed that the idea of doing good was widespread because it represented a common quality of Vietnamese people.

The sense of causality law additionally led the way for some participants to overcome their difficulties. They believed that their good causes would lead them to resolve even the hardest problems. For example, Ms. Nha (teacher, Olympia University) revealed that she encountered serious shock when she was informed about the complaints from her colleagues. However, her strong belief in her moral conduct inspired her to believe that she could overcome, so she carried on. At that point, her team had gone beyond providing service learning training for a lot of interested teachers and students. The fruits that her efforts were offering were the support from her students, the gratitude from the disabled community, and the trust from the fund donors, which together promoted the sustainability of the service learning practice in her faculty.

From another perspective, Dr. Thai (dean, Resina University) constructed this account with peace in his mind and various shades of satisfaction:

> Me: Do you know why [students didn't quit the project despite all the hard work]?
>
> Dr Thai: They did it from their *tâm* and they started to love the kids. It was the kids who retained their flames of passion during the progress.
>
> Me: Do teachers and students complain that they have to spend so much time? Have they always been happy like this?
>
> Dr Thai: Yep (laughed). They don't find much *bận tâm* [concern] about this. Because when you have *tấm lòng* [kindness], you will feel happy. And such happiness itself can solve the problems. . . . When we do this [service learning] from our kindness, this would naturally entail goodness. It comes by itself, it comes to arrange everything for us . . .

He further hinted that this good job would result in solutions for their problems:

> I think if we do such things [service learning courses] and constantly require financial support then the job will never yield good results. It must be from the heart and the common work. It [a service learning course] can lack this or that condition, but we can gradually add in and build up. It is the process of the students' projects that solves its problems. The students themselves found the solutions for the problems.

His viewpoint illustrates what a Vietnamese person expects from their good deeds: they will spread and pay off in one way or another. This may explain the reason why he felt they did not need so much institutional support. He further believed that only when his project created its own values would the students start to spread these values to others. The result was that they did not have to advertise their programme; it promoted itself in a natural way. More and more people were getting to know about it: communities, teachers, beneficiaries, service learning practitioners, and even institutional administrators. Some good news was that his project had become an exemplary model for the whole province at large.

In summary, the findings presented in this chapter have emphasised how benevolence was honoured as it governed many aspects of service learning practices. This quality accompanied participants' journeys from the idea phase when they prepared to do service learning with *tâm.* During the process, they used harmony as a leading light for their actions. As the practice of service learning appeared to be a new entity to Vietnamese higher

education, the practitioners tended to care deeply about its harmonious performance, because respecting others and nature to lead a life of harmony is an important lesson for any Vietnamese student. The newer the entity, the more efforts people need to take to achieve harmony for its sustainability. Throughout this sub-theme, people doing service learning have provided more evidence for how Vietnamese people respect this belief in their work. As in the causality law, they believed that honouring benevolence would bring good fortune to their projects. With these characteristics deeply rooted in Vietnamese culture, I predict that the future of service learning will be inseparable from the quality of benevolence. The findings of this chapter show how 'honouring benevolence' is a key component of Vietnamese service learning, along with 'embracing communities' and 'navigating power relations.' These characteristics can be considered a 'tripod' that supports the weight and maintains the stability of Vietnamese service learning. This tripod concept is important in that it provides stability against downward forces, horizontal forces, and movements across horizontal axes of service learning practice. While embracing communities to bring about educational change is the work of the 'head,' navigating power relations is the work of the 'hand,' and honouring benevolence is the 'heart' work. These can serve as the three legs of the tripod for Vietnamese service learning, and the absence of any will likely threaten the stability of the whole tripod. I pull these concepts together to provide a summary of my findings in Figure 9.1, below.

9.4 Summary of the Key Findings

The findings presented in Chapters 7 to 9 have shed light on how service learning has been conceptualised, practised, and experienced in Vietnamese higher education. They represent connected characteristics that interweave international philosophies of civic engagement and local Vietnamese cultural values and beliefs about doing good work. Service learning in Viet Nam has emerged as an instrument for civic engagement with the aims of increasing the social responsibility of higher education, strengthening communities and universities to promote sustainable development, and preparing students for their lives beyond the campus, just as in Western traditions. Additionally, service learning in Viet Nam may contribute to the country's higher education reforms, economic development, and addressing the perceived moral decline of young people.

A map of the key themes and sub-themes is provided in Figure 9.1. They can be thought of as intersecting as a triangle, with the ‘head,’ ‘hand,’ and ‘heart’ connection among the three main themes and their linkages to the sub-themes.

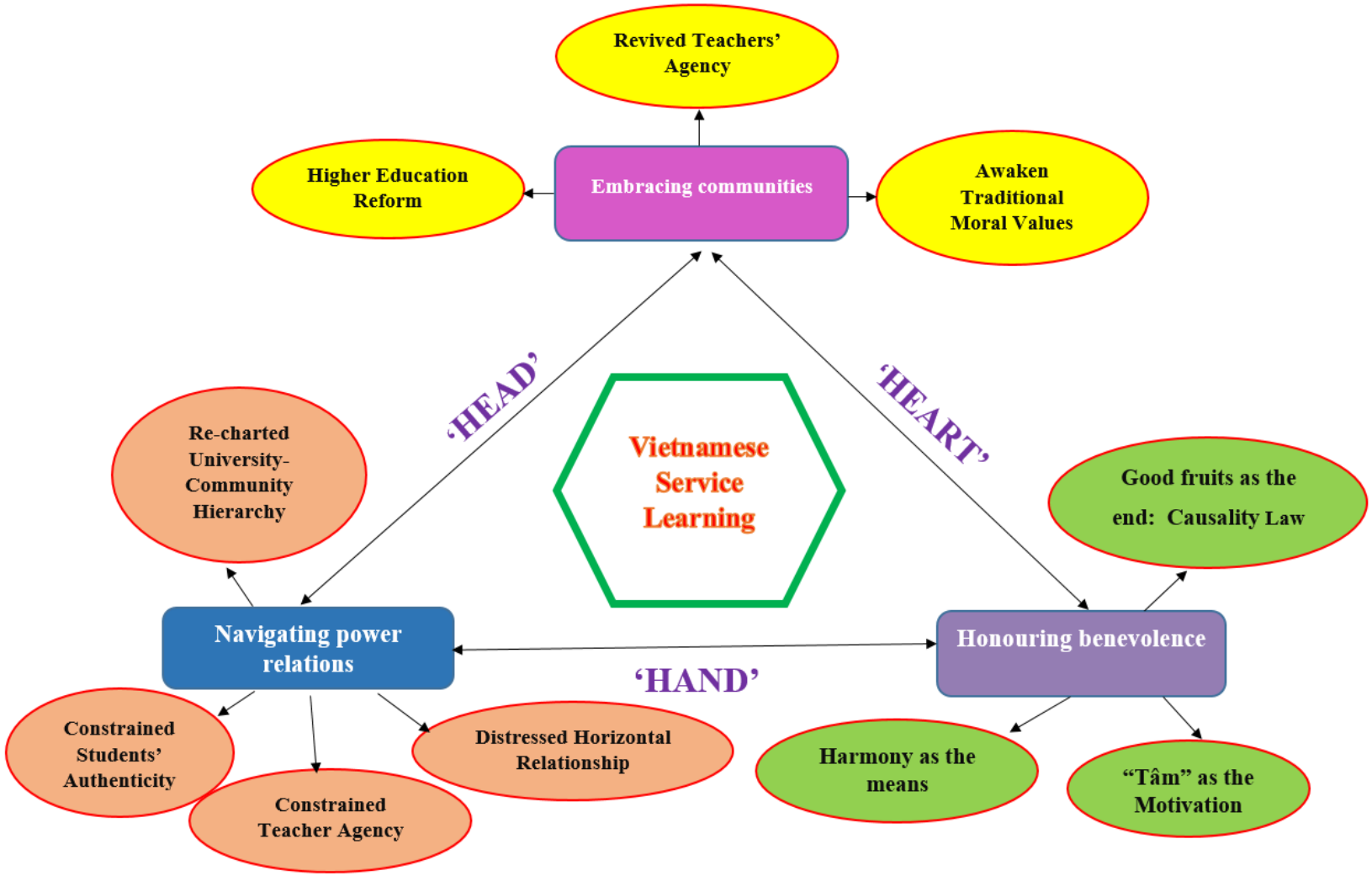


Figure 9.1: Map of the study's findings

The findings in Chapter 7 emphasised the importance of standing on the shoulders of the communities. Communities have traditionally and largely been the recipients of university charity or volunteerism, rather than being viewed as potential partners for academic teaching and learning. Service learning has drawn the learning resources of community organisations closer to the work of universities and has highlighted their potential contribution to changes in Vietnamese higher education. For example, service learning practitioners have drawn on the expertise and input of community organisations to develop students' soft skills, expand their awareness of the diversity of community needs, and learn from community knowledge. Initiating service learning projects with community partners has helped revive teachers' morale and sense of purpose in a university system that has been increasingly restricted by market-oriented pressures. By recovering their traditional active roles, the teacher participants in my study felt they were meeting the wider expectations of their communities and society.

Chapter 8 highlighted the importance of power relationships in contextualising service learning. Misunderstandings and traditional barriers of Vietnamese high-context culture (Williams, 2015) accounted for many of the relationship issues reported by the participants. Organisational power relations are common to all higher education institutions, but how these relations were performed and negotiated in relation to service learning courses reflected the specificity and complicated nature of Vietnamese higher education cultures. For example, the ways that people at different university levels received and interpreted information from each other, the approaches they used to express disagreements or appreciation, and the strategies they chose to propose new ideas appeared to be more indirect, but no less strained, than other organisational cultures.

Chapter 9 examined the embedded cultural values and beliefs that shaped power relationships between actors and the actions of the participants. Benevolence appeared to lie at the 'heart' of the participants' conceptions and practices of service learning. The accounts of *tâm*, harmony, and causality law in their interviews were strongly related to their motivations for engaging with community organisations, desire for wholehearted and altruistic work, and expectations of promoting good within society. While the findings in Chapters 7 and 8 focused on the relationships between service learning and the development of education, the economy, and society, this quality of benevolence is strongly related to self-cultivation in Confucian heritage education systems.

The linkages among the three themes are represented in the internal arrows of Figure 9.1. The idea of embracing communities flowed at least in part from a 'head' motivation to reform higher education and pedagogical approaches. This 'head' work invigorated the participants to find suitable strategies ('hand' work) to navigate interpersonal relationships and hierarchies to develop and sustain their service learning initiatives. However, the actions of the participants would not have been possible without the engagement of the 'heart'; that is, the underlying value of benevolence, which in turn served as the home for the 'head' to explore new possibilities. In other words, and particularly for the teachers, the room for self-improvement embedded in notions of benevolence provided the foundation for community engagement, the desire to persist, and an openness to further change.

The findings presented in Chapters 7 to 9 have provided insight into the conceptions and lived experiences of those involved in service learning in four Vietnamese university contexts. Chapter 10 turns to a discussion of the significance of the findings in relation to the international and regional literature on civic engagement and service learning. Through Chen's (2010) *Asia as Method*, Chapter 10 considers the implications of my study for the ongoing contextualisation and sustainable development of service learning in Vietnamese higher education.

CHAPTER 10: DISCUSSION

This thesis is intended to make a two-fold contribution to the literature about the conceptions, practices, and experiences of service learning in Vietnamese higher education: (a) understanding the phenomena as it currently exists, and (b) proposing a way of thinking about how service learning can be further contextualised. The findings presented in Chapters 6 to 9 have provided insight into the contingent nature of service learning in Viet Nam, and have recognised the centrality of communities, power relations, and benevolence to any consideration of how service learning initiatives could be developed in the future. This discussion chapter brings together the findings from my study as well as theoretical and empirical insights from the literature. It is organised as three main sections that (i) situate my findings in the international and regional literature about service learning and civic engagement, (ii) critique current frameworks for service learning in light of my findings, and (iii) culminate in some ideas for embedding service learning in Viet Nam.

10.1 The Making of Service Learning in Vietnamese Higher Education

This section considers how the findings from my study confirm, complement, and/or challenge the existing international and regional literature about civic engagement and service learning, discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. Service learning in Viet Nam holds potential to contribute to educational reform and support local communities, and is responding to the international and regional landscape, in three main ways: contextualising notions of civic engagement, highlighting the ideologies of Vietnamese people, and promoting 'East meets West' strategies for the sustainability of service learning. First, the Vietnamese context provides new conceptions for us to understand the 'engaged' university as increasingly discipline-based, progressively community-based, and working from the bottom-up initiation. Second, the practice of service learning in Vietnamese higher education has been initiated in response to and embedded as a result of local, Vietnamese needs and ideologies, including fulfilling economic development demands, performing responsibilities to the community, and enhancing moral beliefs. Third, various 'East meets West' creative strategies were employed by my research participants to maintain their service learning initiatives, such as promoting hybrid pedagogies, invigorating teachers' agency, and navigating power relationships.

10.1.1 Contextualised Perceptions of 'Engaged' Universities

The integration of service learning into the curricula in my participant universities offers a new way of conceiving an 'engaged' university from the conceptions currently offered in the international literature. My study's findings show that the 'engaged' role of Vietnamese higher education is being realised through the growing involvement of academic disciplines, community embracement, and bottom-up initiation.

As suggested from my findings, civic engagement in Vietnamese universities appears to happen not only through the compulsory civic political courses and the extra-curricular volunteering programmes like the Green Summer Campaigns, as reviewed in Chapter 2, but also through the asynchronous appearance of many institutional discipline-based activities. The descriptions from all of the Youth Union leaders in my study suggested that the Green Summer Campaigns have increasingly added disciplined-based dimensions in their programmes. Some examples of the institutional discipline-based activities were the practicum at Evergreen University, the technology transfer projects at Olympia University, the community-based research at Universal University, and the illiteracy eradication programmes at Resina University. These findings indicated that the civic engagement activities of the participating universities were leaning towards the 'discipline-based' definition of civic engagement promoted by Saltmarsh and Zlotkowski (2011). The integration of service learning into the curriculum is different from other forms of civic engagement like volunteering or charity because it is credit-bearing and allows students to make more structured commitments to the community. While volunteering campaigns were reported to involve some academic content for the sake of diversity, service learning took relevant academic knowledge and skills as the requirement and foundation to address the community's problems. The findings of my study indicated that discipline-based civic engagement has been attracting considerable interest in higher education. A geo-colonial historical materialism outlook (Chen, 2010) encourages Asian countries and scholars to investigate phenomena within their social, historical, and spatial contexts. So, while some scholars (Doan, 2005) and even some of my participants have criticised the political courses and volunteering programmes, my research has shown that those forms have served civil defence, character building, and charity purposes. These courses and programmes have also contributed to the unique nature of service learning in Vietnamese universities by combining

with the discipline-based activities to bring about *knowledge-informed* products, services, and learning that are uniquely Vietnamese. These practices have helped realise the expectation of the Vietnamese government for graduates who are "ready to serve people," as stated in the *Higher Education Law* (Law 08/2012/QH13, 2012; Law 34/2018/QH14, 2018), and the *Project to Enhance the Quality of Higher Education, 2019-2025* (Decision 69/QĐ-TTg, 2019). These findings have also met many of the Western civic engagement roles discussed in my literature review (see Jacoby, 2009 and the *Talloires Declaration*) such as learning from others, self, and environment, developing informed perspectives on social issues, and contributing positively to local, national, and global communities through the processes of education and research.

My study can also be considered a further step from Tran, Tran, Nguyen, and Ngo's (2020) concern, discussed in the literature review, that most Vietnamese community-engaged studies served the institutional research areas and faced challenges in transferring the outcomes to communities due to the foreign-funded mechanism. The findings of my study have proven that disciplined-based civic engagement considered the balance between the needs of community and the strengths of university, like in the statements of Dr. Cang (dean, Evergreen University) and Ms. Yen (teacher, Universal University). Moreover, these projects did not entirely rely on foreign sponsorship but mostly on existing resources and/or teachers' budgets, so the transferability was easier.

Alongside the disciplinary knowledge that students in my study brought to their service learning projects, they also treasured their involvement in the community and the reciprocity of their learning. My participants noted that students benefited deeply from the practical experience, as well as from broadening their awareness of communities' needs and learning from community members' knowledge. Similarly, community members learned from students, and in these reciprocal processes and engagements, we can see Chen's (2010) notion of critical syncretism in action. Where prior volunteering activities from students had cast the communities as 'others,' the reciprocal service learning projects described in my research show evidence of them becoming one in mutual support of and learning from one another. With the previous volunteering approaches, communities were only perceived as the beneficiaries and the places for charity, which was criticised as "giving a fish rather than a fishing rod," and thus creating a dependent rather than a stronger community (Ms. Hoai, teacher, Evergreen university). With the disciplined-based service learning projects,

communities instead shared their own insights, knowledge, and experience, and became students' and universities' partners who could participate in knowledge sharing processes to strengthen both parties. Many participants also told me that the service learning courses had enabled them to learn much more than they had imagined possible. This corresponds with Chan et al.'s (2019) study discovered in Chapter 3 that despite a debate on compulsory service, students' total experience had a stronger impact on learning than their initial inclination and interest. My findings have also shown an alignment with the desire of other Vietnamese scholars (Nguyen, 2010; Pham, 2015; Tran, 2009) to address the urgent need to take this civic engagement mission into greater consideration because of its potential for improving teaching and learning quality, empowering teachers, students, and communities, reviewing the power relations between university and community for sustainable partnerships, and most importantly, reviving traditional values.

My study's findings have shown that discipline-based service learning practices did not require top-down support to be *initiated*, but *will* require this support to become embedded within the university system. In contrast to the existing volunteering programmes and civic political education components that have long existed within institutions and are well-supported from the top-down with resourcing, funding, and a firm place within the curriculum, service learning has yet to be cemented as a solid component within universities. However, there are excellent lessons to learn from these existing curricula components, in an inter-referencing sense (Chen, 2010), that Vietnamese service learning practitioners were using these existing resources to produce new knowledge. In most of my cases, the service learning practice started from the bottom-up, as teachers initiated the courses with very little institutional support. Yet, they persevered and developed courses that were acknowledged not only by many teachers within the same and other universities but also by their faculty and institutional administrators. However, the bottom-up nature may also hinder the future maintenance of the courses. As Bennett et al. (2016) have shown, elsewhere, many such service learning initiatives started with a lack of institutional support. However, a bottom-up model is likely feasible only in the initial stages because there seemed to be some exhaustion by the end of their projects. Furthermore, my participants shared that they were concerned about future funding, training resources, and the lack of successors to carry on their course/s, among other issues relating to course sustainability. Although most participants were aware that their institutions' limited budgets did not allow them to be funded for small-scale application of a new teaching approach, they did imply some hope for future institutional

sustaining measures. While this bottom-up approach was realised as one of the two vertical ways of institutionalising service learning proposed by Meijs et al. (2019) in the literature review, it seems that in the Vietnamese context, it will certainly require top-down supportive structures and policies to work most effectively and sustainably.

10.1.2 Unique Ideologies Driving Service Learning in Vietnamese Higher Education

One of the distinguishing features of service learning in Vietnamese higher education comes from the influence of ideologies particular to the Vietnamese context. This study's findings suggested that Vietnamese universities practised service learning under the country's distinguishing ideologies to provide a more capable workforce for the globalised economy, to fulfill socialist responsibilities, and to cultivate moral values (Figure 10.1).

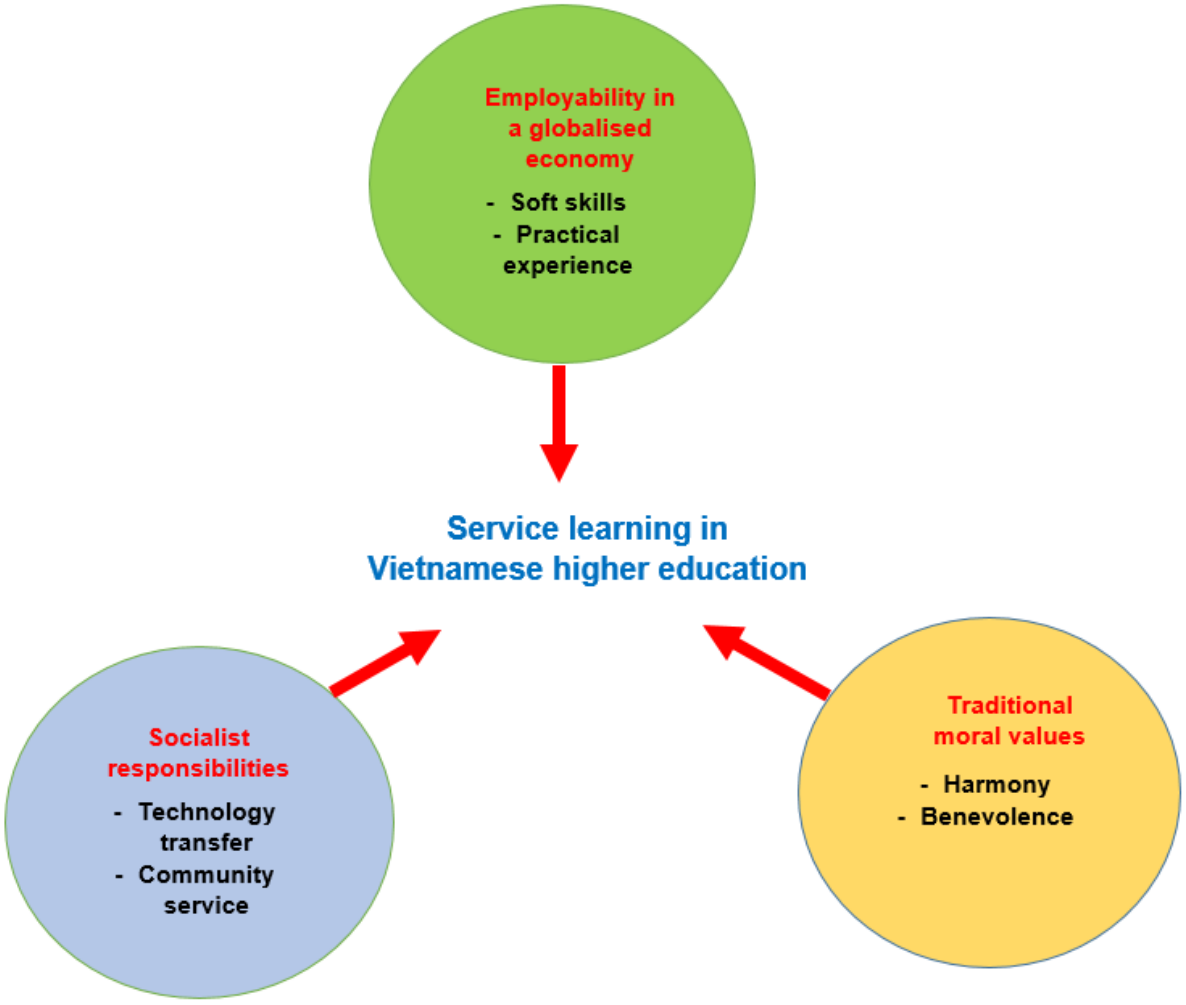


Figure 10.1: The ideologies driving service learning in Vietnamese higher education

As a developing country where economic development is a key focus, one of the main drivers for Vietnamese service learning has been the government's and the people's expectation that higher education will produce a more effective workforce. My findings confirmed that employability is the primary purpose of higher education in Viet Nam and that this purpose is shared by most Vietnamese students, parents, and the wider society. This aligns with the objectives of Vietnamese higher education, as specified in the *Higher Education Law*, "to serve the socio-economic development . . .; to show creativity, professional responsibility, and adaptability to the working condition" (Law 08/2012/QH13, 2012; Law 34/2018/QH14, 2018), and Ngai et al.'s (2016) remark that Asian higher education has conventionally been regarded as a foundation for a better and higher-income job. As discussed in Chapter 2, under the backdrop of HERA, all of the university actors have been working towards achieving the common goals of developing the economy, and service learning teachers are no exception. The findings presented in Chapter 7 showed that service learning has appeared as a promise to bring about more opportunities for authentic learning experiences, soft skills awareness and training, and practical assessment structures that aim at better employability for university graduates. Although more research is needed to support this study's finding on the employability effects of service learning, various participants' statements about the deepening opportunities for employment seem to address the concern raised in the literature (Tran, 2012, 2015; World Bank, 2011) about the lack of opportunities for soft skills training in the curriculum that led to the high unemployment rate among graduates. Chen's (2010) concept of geo-colonial historical materialism helps us recognise here how crucial it is to acknowledge the specificity of the local context and to see that service learning in Viet Nam is not merely a borrowed copy from the West, at least in its primary motivation. Rather, in Viet Nam, employability appears to be the main (but not only) driver for the appearance of service learning. This differs from the ideology at the heart of service learning in the West, which has building democratic capacity for undergraduate students as its primary aim (Annette, 2005; Saltmarsh, 2005) and employability as a more secondary goal.

To effectively progress the mission of economic development in Viet Nam, a second motivation for service learning is to address the critique (Huyền, 2018; Pham, 2017; Pham, 2019; World Bank, 2008) of higher education's negligence towards its *social* responsibilities to community. The service learning cases in my study showed that universities could help strengthen community through knowledge/technology transfer and community service.

Moreover, the findings demonstrated that these activities were brought about by credit-based and disciplinary courses with structured reflection, confirming their higher academic commitment to civic engagement. Beyond serving community, my teacher participants also considered service learning as a valuable opportunity for students to learn from community knowledge, especially Vietnamese folk cultures and creative arts. Such reciprocal learning helps address Nguyen's (2012) concern that HERA could de-emphasise indigenous worldviews. Moreover, this finding aligns with other Asian contexts and studies in which civic engagement, especially service learning, has been increasingly used as a tool to treasure indigenous knowledge (Ma & Tandon, 2014; Nandy, 1996; Xing & Ma, 2010). These mutual relationships, as discussed above, helped not only enhance the relationship between universities and communities but also preserve and disseminate traditional community insights, paving the way for social development. Critical syncretism (Chen, 2010) can enrich our understanding of this two-way connection. Through this lens, we can see that service learning practices in my study helped transform the universities from being perceived as ignorant about social issues to responsible partners who academically engaged with the communities' problems. Applying this new reference frame further may also help universities throughout Viet Nam spot out the neglected subjectivities in community, take their positions and viewpoints with reflexive consciousness, and form powerful alliances to overcome common concerns and structural constraints. As Chen (2010) notes, knowing each other's issues is the foundation for more useful knowledge generation.

A third ideology that underpins Vietnamese service learning, and distinguishes it from Western versions of similar practices, lies in the potential for service learning to help relieve the perceived concerns about the declining moral qualities among graduates, as expressed in the studies of Lê (2012), Lê (2017), T. K. Nguyễn (2015), and S.H. (2014). As the tertiary level of the education system, universities in Viet Nam are held accountable for the ethics of the future workforce and citizens, and in this sense, they need to rely upon and promote teaching that resonates with Vietnamese traditions, not simply impose concepts borrowed from elsewhere. Drawing from Chen's (2010) concept of geo-colonial historical materialism, we can see how service learning in Viet Nam has developed upon long and rich traditions rooted in Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist philosophies. In particular, my study has shown that service learning in some Vietnamese universities appears to be deeply embedded in the principles of benevolence, harmony, and causality law. These principles serve to develop other qualities such as social responsibilities, social justice, and respect for diversity, as

emphasised by the popular and important Vietnamese conception of '*Học để thành nhân trước khi thành danh'* (Learning to be before learning to know). They also resonate with the study of H. T. Nguyen (2016), discussed in the literature, which showed that service learning was aimed at educating the heart as the foundation for individual empowerment and social action. In many higher education institutions, Confucian heritage cultures provide the foundation for civic engagement endeavours: "education is not about *having*; it is about *being*" (Ma & Tandon, 2014, p. 198), as discussed in Chapter 2. Recently, as evidenced by the teachers in my study, there has been a revisiting of Confucian teachings to improve students' learning and engagement with others and with the community, as suggested by Marginson et al. (2014) in the literature review. This is a positive move, because as Chen (2010) argues, the decolonising process can only happen when we shift the object of identification from the 'other' towards the 'self.' In this context, I consider the 'self' as the significance of traditional culture with the values that Vietnamese people treasure. In this sense, inter-referencing also helps us recognise that my participants did not have to borrow the ideologies embedded in a foreign model, but took the very traditional values as their philosophy for practising service learning. The qualities of benevolence, harmony, and causality law have been maintained and handed over many generations and now become more apparent as distinguishing drivers of service learning in Vietnamese universities. It can be said that this foundation is not only a potential approach for service learning but also a new way to decolonise its practice in the Vietnamese context.

10.1.3 'East meets West' Strategies that might Sustain Service Learning

To realise the abovementioned ideologies, the service learning participants in my study have resorted to various unconventional approaches and strategies blended from Western and local beliefs in order to maintain and sustain their service learning initiatives. These include the hybrid pedagogies, the approaches to revive teacher agency, and the navigations of various power relations.

As seen from my study, service learning in Viet Nam appears to be a unique combination of Western and Vietnamese teaching pedagogies. The practical and experiential aspects that service learning has added to the contemporary curriculum derive not only from Western concepts and practices such as experiential learning and learner autonomy, but are also deeply underpinned by Confucian and Vietnamese educational philosophies and

pedagogies. T. T. Tran (2015) has argued that traditional teaching methodologies that produced workers to follow orders, listen, and obey are no longer appropriate in an increasingly integrated labour market that requires employees to develop creativity and take initiative. Unlike previous studies discussing the supposedly passive learning style of Vietnamese people (T. T. Tran, 2013a, 2013b, 2015), my study shows that experiential learning is arguably more well-developed in Vietnamese pedagogy than previous thought, through Confucian teachings and various sayings about learning in Vietnamese traditional teaching as discussed in Chapter 2 (Trinh & Kolb, 2011). This may explain why most of the teacher participants in my study seemed to treat experiential learning as an inherent part of traditional pedagogy, although some of them mentioned that they got the name from a Western source. Therefore, it can be argued that the experiential approach to learning appears to exist in both East and West conceptions of effective learning. The findings additionally showed that Vietnamese students could actively manipulate and enjoy their learning if the Western conception of learner autonomy was applied properly in the Vietnamese context.

Through the accounts constructed by the teacher and student participants across the four cases, readers can witness the negotiation between traditional and Western pedagogies: lectures versus students' presentations and discussions, teachers introducing communities versus students deciding the project content, teacher's assessment versus student, peer, and community assessment, and summative assessment versus combination of formative and summative assessment. These flexible combinations, resonating with the teaching practices of many foreign-trained lecturers in Viet Nam (Tran, Tran, Nguyen, & Ngo, 2020), indicated that Vietnamese learners could adapt and work well if an active learning environment is created by teachers. Learner autonomy in my service learning cases appeared to assist students in exploring their own strengths. Moreover, this aspect of the findings agreed with Tran's (2012) explanation that if the teaching was approached from different angles, the learning would result in more diverse strategies: "it is more because of situation-specific factors of teaching methodologies, learning requirements, learning habits and language proficiency rather than cultural factors" (p. 57). This adaptation is critical syncretism (Chen, 2010) in action, where the service learning practitioners in my study have added the Western knowledge into their own heritage practices and built on both teacher and learner autonomy with their adaptations. Furthermore, my findings showing that service learning required knowledge from a wide range of disciplines also reflect the other effects of learner autonomy

at which education in the West and East are both aiming: it encourages curiosity, promotes lifelong learning, and aims at liberating education.

As analysed in Chapter 7, the findings of my study highlighted the combination of strategies that service learning teachers used to revive their role as agents of change. As discussed in the literature, the conception of teacher agency is imported from the West (H. Tran, 2019) but Confucian cultures have always considered master teachers to be at the heart of education (Nguyen et al., 2006). The service learning teachers in my study have combined Western strategies (such as conferencing, skill training, and coordinating) with Vietnamese caring roles (such as paying for students' expenses out of their pocket, or providing pastoral care and mentoring beyond what a teacher might be expected to give in a Western context), which seems to be less common in Western universities, to address the pressures of higher education reforms and at the same time reclaim their agency. The various roles the teachers had to take to implement and maintain their service learning projects reflect the logistical barriers (such as time, workload, and students' safety) found in Euro-American contexts (Eby, 1998; Jones et al., 2013; Schelbe et al., 2014). However, a significant difference from Western contexts was that the teachers in my study had to overcome these challenges in the critical conditions of low salaries, changing teaching methods, outdated technology, inadequate support, high student-teacher ratios, and especially low autonomy (Dao, 2015; Le & Hayden, 2017; Nguyen, 2014; T. T. Tran, 2013b). Overcoming these multiple challenges with 'East meets West' strategies suggests that the service learning teachers' keen insights, combined with their will and effort to exercise their agency, ultimately indicates that empowering the service learning teachers is an important element for the success of service learning in Vietnamese higher education reforms.

The findings of my study have also uncovered the participants' 'East meets West' strategies for navigating the power relationships involved in service learning courses. The hierarchical and high-context nature of Vietnamese culture (Hall & Hall, 1990; Hofstede, 2001) required my participants to deal with many axes of power relations to keep the service learning ideas going forward. The respect for higher powers and appreciation of relationships also reflected Vietnamese specific perception of democracy, like many Asian cultures (Lee, 2004). Between the teachers and administrators, the teachers experienced constraints on their agency because of hierarchical power relations. Similarly, between the initiators of the service learning practices and their faculty colleagues, the initiators experienced significant pressure

from micro-political horizontal challenges. Moreover, between teachers and students, power relations sometimes meant that the students' hopes for autonomy were not always met. Meanwhile, the relationship between universities and communities was also being re-charted through the service learning practice. The strategies used by my participants were found to include not only Western traditions (such as professional development activities to equip teachers with knowledge and skills to be more practice-focused and student-centred, autonomy, individual initiatives, and explicit communications) but also what appear to be distinctly Vietnamese strategies, including silence and endurance, implied expectation, face saving, relationship maintenance, and respect for authority (Q. T. N. Nguyen, 2016; Phan, 2008; Tran, Admiraal, & Saab, 2020; Tran, Tran, Nguyen, & Ngo, 2020). Although there were concerns about power relationships relating to students viewing themselves as *above* the community partners in both Western (Eby, 1998) and Asian (Nishimura & Yokote, 2020) contexts, these studies tended to focus more on the potentially uneven power balance between students and communities than on internal relationships within the university. My study went a little further to uncover even more problematic power issues and considerations of institutional relationships. Arguably, this aspect of navigating power relationships appeared to be a distinguishing characteristic of service learning in Vietnamese higher education that has not yet been found to exist in the literature on service learning.

This section has highlighted the significant features of service learning in Vietnamese higher education derived from my study's findings and Chen's (2010) *Asia as Method* constructs. Service learning indicates a combination of the localised perceptions of civic engagement, the unique drivers informed by Vietnamese civic ideologies, and the distinctive 'East meets West' strategies. It is also from this 'East meets West' approach that Vietnamese service learning appears to be implemented under a contextualised model. Based on existing service learning frameworks from other international contexts, the next section discusses the advantages and disadvantages of these frameworks for a Vietnamese context. The purpose is to work towards a model that is expected to be suitable to the perceptions, motivations, and approaches of Vietnamese people.

10.2 Critiquing Existing Frameworks for Service Learning

10.2.1 The Cogency of the Existing Models for Embedding and Sustaining Service Learning

This section examines the cogency of three existing models for embedding and sustaining service learning. It considers the compatibilities and mismatches between the practice of Vietnamese service learning and the frameworks of various Western service learning proponents discussed in the literature review: the Silo, intersecting, or infusion models for community engagement (Figure 2.1) (Bender, 2008b); the conceptual scheme for curricular community engagement in a South African context (Figure 3.1) (Bender, 2008a); and a series of tactics for bottom-up initiatives to embed service learning in an Australian context (Bennett et al., 2016) (see Section 3.1.2).

I have chosen to pay attention to these particular frameworks for two reasons. First, as outlined in the literature review, many models in Asia are replications from Euro-American contexts (Kusujiarti, 2011), which runs counter to Chen's (2010) ideas of inter-referencing and critical syncretism, and risks not representing the specificity of Vietnamese service learning. Second, while these frameworks are not from Asian countries, they can share similar constraints. For example, Bender's (2008b) models were built in the context of South Africa as, arguably, a developing country (United Nations, 2020) where resources may be constrained as they are in Viet Nam. Similarly, in the context of Bennett et al. (2016), the service learning practice was small and at an early stage, like mine, and there may be useful lessons to learn from an Australian project with indigenous communities. Keeping Chen's (2010) concept of inter-referencing in mind, I want service learning practitioners in Viet Nam to look for examples from similar contexts, and, in so doing, overcome their anxiety over the West so that critical and productive works can be created.

My findings suggest that the future of service learning in Viet Nam shares characteristics with the three frameworks, but not one of the frameworks is sufficient to fully represent the Vietnamese context. I discuss each of the frameworks, below, and consider their usefulness for informing a potential model for service learning in Viet Nam.

As noted in Chapter 2, Bender (2008b) suggested that none of the three models (Silo, intersecting, or infusion) for community engagement were ideal, but that higher education institutions could adopt any model that was suitable to their vision, mission, objectives,

values, paradigms for community engagement, and context. These three options have been helpful for me in figuring out the position of service learning in the operating structure and policies of higher education institutions in Viet Nam. The findings of my study revealed that the current status of Vietnamese higher education institutions appears to be in transition between the Silo model and the intersecting model. For example, some universities indicated that community engagement was considered as one of their functions but had not yet been lifted to a comparative role with teaching and research. In these universities, community engagement was seen as a kind of volunteerism and not carrying academic effects compared to teaching and research. Meanwhile, some other universities recognised the scholarly values of community engagement under the forms of service learning or community-based research. These universities witnessed some service learning courses explicitly integrating academic content with community service, and several research studies being carried out by students under the co-author or data-collector roles. Therefore, according to what Bender (2008b) suggested on the flexibility of an institution moving between the models depending on their conditions, I anticipate that the conception and recognition of Vietnamese higher education towards community engagement is departing from the Silo model and heading for the intersecting model.

Another model of Bender's (2008a) – the two-level curriculum model – places a version of the intersecting model near the top of two levels (institutional/faculty and programme/module) and shows that all levels within an institution have to be factored in when deciding how to make a service learning initiative sustainable. While this model from a developing country is similar to the Vietnamese context in that the three missions (teaching and learning, research, and community engagement) have appeared recently on the higher education map and are starting to be placed at the centre of decisions about curricula, the situation in Vietnamese universities is still more bottom-up than infused and will require more work across all levels within universities for service learning to become embedded. My findings show that the third mission of civic engagement in the Vietnamese context remains unclear because institutionalised policies relating to engagement are mainly linked to extra-curricular volunteering programmes and curricular political education, which are mostly unrelated to disciplinary content. With the evidence that individual faculties had to initiate their service learning course from the bottom-up, the intersections between the first two missions and civic engagement appeared to not yet be institutionally recognised. More importantly, the intersection among the three missions has not yet been clarified and its

values have not been explored to bring significance to the role of higher education in Viet Nam.

In short, the two models of Bender (2008a, 2008b) do not fully reflect the traditional and interrelated relationship between Vietnamese universities and communities, nor can they depict the relationships and organising system of different departments/ faculties/ offices within a typical Vietnamese higher education institution. These models could not be strictly replicated in a Vietnamese context, but require some adaptation and supplementation. Moreover, an understanding of the inner structure of a university is extremely important when proposing a suitable framework.

The tactics suggested by Bennett et al. (2016) (expanded and adapted from Young et al., 2007) are a helpful way for thinking about the inner structures within universities and the actors that play a part in helping to embed and sustain a service learning initiative. Bennett et al. (2016) propose that five tactics are needed to make service learning stick: a champion or zealot in the faculty or institution; a groundswell from interested parties; a grant opportunity; student zealots or champions; and institutional commitment. In the following section, I will consider these tactics in light of my findings and point out some similarities and differences with Bennett et al.'s (2016).

Bennett et al.'s (2016) tactics resonate with many issues facing service learning practitioners in the Vietnamese universities in my study. For example, my study showed clear evidence of active champions on the teaching staff often working unassisted, leading small teams, managing within and outside formal funding, and taking on increased workloads to ensure the success of their service learning initiatives. There was a clear groundswell in my participants' institutions that not only served as the "trigger for service-learning initiatives" but also "something that emerged over time and which demand[ed] both proactive and reactive actions throughout and beyond the lifespan of individual projects" (Bennett et al., 2016, p. 152). For example, these elements could be the previous service learning projects; an award for service learning work (Olympia University); the intention and interest of some faculty members; some articles, presentations, or workshops on service learning (Evergreen University); or a chance meeting, a referral, or a targeted approach to a known expert (Resina University, Universal University). Grant money (the third tactic) was important in starting up one service learning project (at Olympia University), but other initiatives were not born as the result of a grant opportunity. Instead, it was mostly teachers/initiators creating opportunities

for someone to support their projects (Evergreen, Resina, and Universal Universities). In terms of student zealots or champions, my study's participants largely took service learning courses on a compulsory basis, and, as in Bennett et al.'s (2016) study, were identified as receivers rather than initiators. However, their keenness for learning about and engaging with their subject matters was an important element that will contribute to sustaining and promoting the service learning projects. Finally, Bennett et al.'s fifth tactic of organisational commitment is the one that resonates most strongly with my findings. The relatively small nature of the initiatives and the fact that few initiatives are institution-wide or program-wide means that institutional commitment is a significant challenge, particularly in terms of structure, processes, policies, and funding. Participants in my study, just as in Bennett et al.'s (2016), had to work "'creatively' with or despite existing protocols" (p. 154). The current lack of deeply embedded institutional commitment indicates that my participants had to look for alliances, such as finding like-minded peers, joining or creating a new groundswell of interest (Universal University), seeking more resources and learning from each other's experiences (Olympia University, Resina University), and alleviating their workload with support from administrative departments and offices (Evergreen University).

Despite these similarities, the findings of my study also revealed many differences due to the local, structural, and cultural particularities of the Vietnamese context. First, while Bennett et al.'s (2016) study had three forms of champions – the authority champion, the active champion, and the community champion – my findings uncovered only one, the active champion: the service learning teachers. Moreover, my teacher participants had to endure different constraints from Bennett et al.'s (2016) study such as poor working conditions, various pressures of the higher education reforms, and constrained agency. Concerning the power relations between faculty deans and institutional administrators, the teachers in my study did not have the financial and managerial powers, which made it more difficult for them to maintain the service learning initiatives on a larger scale compared to Bennett et al.'s (2016). Second, although my study revealed many groundswell factors in and outside an institution, most of them could only be transferred to service learning action through a teacher's or faculty administrator's initiation, and I did not see any evidence of this happening from institutional administrators, students, community agents, or Youth Union representatives. The reasons, as discussed in Chapter 8, could be due to the complex power relationships within an institution, which is typical in Vietnamese culture. Third, grant opportunities are obviously a desirable tactic for getting service learning projects going, but

my findings indicated that these grants were not sufficient (Olympia and Universal Universities) and practitioners had to try other ways to sustain their projects, including attracting public donations and using their personal budgets (Evergreen and Resina Universities). My teacher participants implied that institutional support through timely and appropriate rewards such as salary commitment as well as workload allowances would encourage them to work more effectively than one-off grants. Fourth, my study showed that there was an actor that could become an active champion that does not exist in non-socialist communist countries: 'Youth Union involvement.' As discussed several times throughout this thesis, the contemporary functions of Youth Unions could become treasured experiences if they were more directly involved in credit-based service learning. Indeed, my study participants talked about a wide range of influences of Youth Unions in mobilising students and training them according to the demands of their programmes, connecting various social forces, and attracting donations and sponsorship. These findings suggest that their involvement would strengthen not only the service learning practice but also the overall civic engagement of the institutions. Finally, although my participants recognised the need for deeper institutional commitment, the form that commitment comes in is much more *spiritual* (vice-rectors providing emotional and heartfelt support, for example) than it is *practical* at present. Therefore, while Bennett et al.'s (2016) tactics offer excellent fodder for contemplating how to embed and sustain service learning, they are not sufficient for the Vietnamese context. Some of the challenges facing Vietnamese society and higher education are very different from an Australasian country such as funding, organising structure, and the dynamics of practitioners. Furthermore, Vietnamese service learning needs to take into consideration the ideologies of a socialist country, the philosophies embedded in the education system, and the power relations among the various service learning practitioners.

Although service learning has sometimes been considered a Western imported conception, the 'outward looking' spirit should be accompanied by 'inward looking' strategies, as suggested by Chen (2010) and Nguyen and Tran (2017). The next section will continue this critique with the reasons for taking more prudential strategies in borrowing existing models for the institutionalisation of service learning in Vietnamese context.

10.2.2. The Challenges of Borrowing Existing Models for the Institutional Support of Service Learning in Vietnamese Context

Through the experiences of the selected institutions, it is clear that service learning in Viet Nam needs to add elements of a top-down approach, localised for its context, to accompany the positive outcomes achieved through the bottom-up initiations. Many of the initiatives in my study have progressed to a mature stage, where the practitioners are now aiming at more stable development. As can be seen from the findings, although most cases practised service learning in spontaneous conditions, there was evidence that the teachers managed to adapt current course syllabuses and teaching methodologies and the faculty administrators could restructure their curriculum to involve service learning. However, there still exist a lot of difficulties due to the lack of institutional support. Many participants expressed a desire for further academic legitimacy and hoped that they would gain official support from administrators and other stakeholders. Raising awareness and attracting recognition at this stage are thus very important strategies for the sustainability of service learning in the context of Vietnamese higher education. Yet it will not serve Vietnamese universities well to merely adopt a Western model for implementing and sustaining service learning. Policy borrowing is not a panacea to the myriad problems of Vietnamese higher education, as discussed in the literature review of this study. As Chen (2010) cautions, careful consideration needs to be taken in terms of the practicability of any borrowed models as well as awareness of local identity and values.

As the findings indicated, the initial practices of service learning have revealed interwoven characteristics of imported and local values and conceptions, so it is crucial that the adaptation of a framework of institutional legitimation takes the policy 'translating' work into greater consideration. The story Chen (2010) told about how the term 'minjían' cannot be exactly translated into 'civil society' (p. 237) provides a good example of the distinctiveness of local cultures. Applying Chen's (2010) geo-colonial historical materialism lens to service learning in Viet Nam enables me to consider not just the outer drivers and influences from elsewhere, but also the inner motivations and local conditions for the service learning practice. Geo-colonial historical materialism also informed my interpretations of how my participants perceived and practised service learning, and how their desires and expectations for change were influenced by various structural constraints. It called my attention to the importance of maintaining power relationships in Vietnamese culture and

how this perception of democracy drove my participants' actions. The findings of my study showed that a distinct version of Vietnamese service learning will inevitably include local methodologies and teaching approaches suitable to Vietnamese students, recognition of the traditional power relations of a high-context culture together with the strategies of the actors towards those relations, and room for socialist ideologies influenced by the country's three main religions (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism). A blended framework is needed for Viet Nam that not only draws on the philosophies, principles, and practices of well-established and proven models from the West, but also observes the 'localisation process' (discussed in Sections 3.1.2 and 3.2.3) and serves local culture, context, and beliefs.

While a service learning model from elsewhere will never be a perfect match to duplicate nor should such models be rejected simply because they have not emerged locally. First, Chen (2010) encourages borrowing and adaptation through his inter-referencing concept, and this aspect of *Asia as Method* helped me find out how my participants combined the Western characteristics of service learning with their Eastern adaptations to achieve the ideologies of Vietnamese people in doing good work and bringing authenticity to their projects, as explained in Section 10.1.3. Second, this construct helped me look at the frameworks of Bender (2008a, 2008b) and Bennett et al. (2016) to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of Vietnamese service learning practice. From my participants' lessons and based on these existing models, this study will find out the agents and connecting points to build an 'East meets West' institutional support framework for Vietnamese service learning that adapts Western traditions and suits the local context, pedagogy, education philosophy, outcomes, and benefits of Vietnamese people. Specifically, Chen's (2010) view also highlights the need to discuss the distinctions and compatibilities of the potential models compared to Vietnamese context so that the frames of reference can be not only multiple and objective but also appropriate to local subjectivity and worldview. With the awareness that each country or institution may develop a different model based on their conditions, an 'East meets West' referential model is expected to work at least at this stage, and could become a foundation for Vietnamese practitioners to build their own models in the future.

10.3 Ideas for Sustaining Service Learning Initiatives in Vietnamese Higher Education

This last section proposes a way of conceptualising the implementation of future service learning initiatives in Vietnamese higher education through both a conceptual

framework and an operating model that incorporate the practical considerations of contextualisation of service learning and the local implications underlying these practices. In other words, the conceptual framework is built on the current ideologies of Vietnamese higher education towards civic engagement and the rising importance of the role of community. From this conceptual framework, an operating model is then offered based on the common organising structure of a Vietnamese institution in which existing faculties and offices will take on service learning roles that are relevant to their functions.

10.3.1 A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Service Learning in Viet Nam

The conceptual framework presented in this section (Figure 10.2) is informed by Chen's (2010) constructs in *Asia as Method*, and was developed from my study's findings (Figure 9.1) and the civic ideologies embedded in Vietnamese service learning (Figure 10.1). The framework provides perspectives that bear on the emergence of service learning, the ideologies at the heart of the practice, and the characteristics of service learning initiatives in Vietnamese higher education.

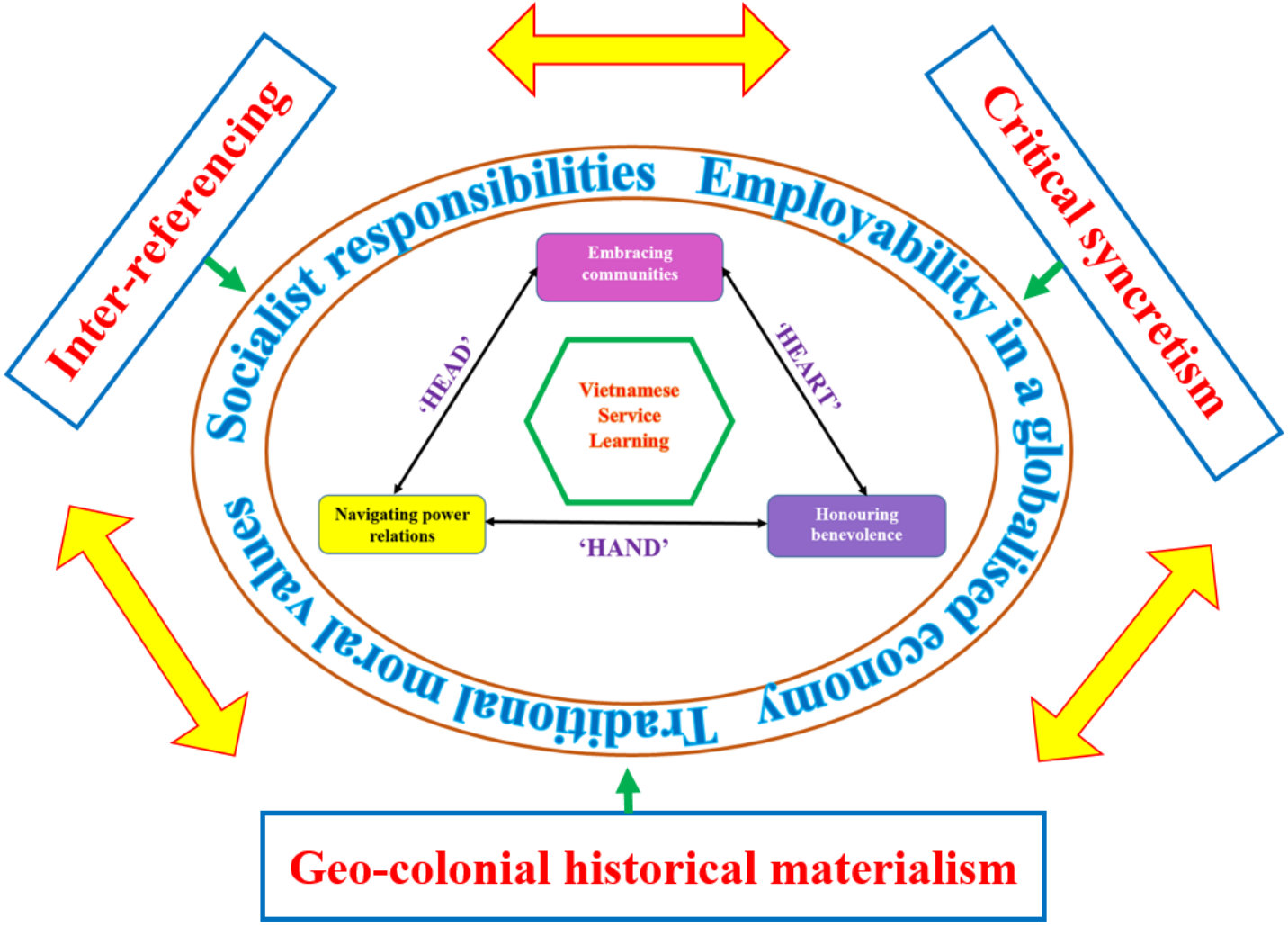


Figure 10.2: A conceptual framework for the implementation of Vietnamese service learning

This framework is composed of three layers. The first layer provides perspectives to help view, interpret, understand, and approach Western-imported conceptions of service learning in a Vietnamese context. The localisation process of a borrowed educational conception requires a thorough understanding of the philosophies, ideologies, histories, cultures, and beliefs of both the source and target contexts (Boland & McIlrath, 2007; Chen, 2010). Such understanding enables practitioners to appropriately apply critical analyses of the compatibilities and mismatches between the two contexts, to actively integrate and highlight the target characteristics into their practice, and to incessantly conduct conscious reflections on how the conception works in the new context. The perspectives of geo-colonial historical materialism, critical syncretism, and inter-referencing (Chen, 2010) will further help Vietnamese practitioners avoid the drawbacks of uncritically adopting or totally rejecting a Western conception. A geo-colonial historical materialism lens recognises that service learning practices in Viet Nam are influenced not only by Western conceptions of civic engagement but also by the traditional beliefs, the colonial history, and the socialist ideologies of Viet Nam. Similarly, a critical syncretism strategy encourages seeking out alternative reference frames rather than strictly following Western conceptions, and the inter-referencing perspective proposed not to totally negate the Western nature of service learning. Practitioners could instead continue looking outside to the existing Western frameworks, acknowledging them as a part of the formation of Vietnamese service learning, and building on them with a critical and reflexive consciousness. More importantly, to practise critical syncretism and inter-referencing is to navigate their attention to the models similar to Vietnamese context from Asian, socialist, and/or developing countries to search for solutions for similar problems and to establish powerful alliances across different structures, concerns, and priorities, paving the way for critical work and meaningful knowledge production.

The second layer of the framework aims at bringing forward how Vietnamese people define service learning in their specific context. The literature review chapters have presented various Western notions of service learning together with the increasing growth of this practice in Asian contexts. This framework now presents the service learning perceptions of Vietnamese practitioners. This layer, as was discussed in Section 10.1.2, consists of three fundamental ideologies driving service learning practice in Vietnamese higher education – the pressing needs to increase graduates' employability in a globalised economy, to fulfil the socialist responsibilities, and to enhance the traditional values. From my study's findings, these elements emerged as driving forces for my participants to start doing service learning

and to employ various strategies to maintain it. These three ideologies convey the expectations of not only my participants but also parents, government, and the whole Vietnamese society towards a sturdy economic nation united by well-developed communities and contributed to by ethical citizens.

This layer of ideologies specific to the Vietnamese context is useful for international and Vietnamese scholars and practitioners to recognise the identity of Vietnamese service learning and differentiate Vietnamese service learning from other contexts. As mentioned, the ideologies are strongly tied to each other in a causal relationship that is typical of Vietnamese society: a strong nation starts from well self-cultivated individuals, which resonates with the values of many other Asian traditions (Fukuyama, 1995; Lee, 2004). Beyond this common Asian perception, Vietnamese service learning stands out because of the dynamics of a socialist and developing nation that deeply values benevolence and harmony. I believe that the ideologies comprised in this layer will serve as strong reference points for other studies, practices, and reflections on service learning in Vietnamese context.

The third layer of this conceptual framework highlights the reasonable, practical, and emotional considerations that participants in my study proposed to practise service learning in the best ways possible. As was discussed in Section 9.4, my study's key findings represent the three essential characteristics of service learning in Vietnamese higher education: embracing communities as partners for educational change, navigating power relationships, and honouring benevolence. These characteristics are inter-related to each other in the 'head-hand-heart' sense: enhancing the quality of university graduates by partnering with communities serves as the motivation (the 'head') to start doing service learning; navigating power relations represents the practical strategies (the 'hand') needed to sustain service learning; and honouring benevolence appeares as the emotional incentive (the 'heart') to do good work and to nurture inspiration to continue fulfilling the responsibilities of higher education reform. A map with all the sub-findings related to these three characteristics was developed to zoom in on the 'head-hand-heart' particularities of Vietnamese service learning (see Figure 9.1).

This third layer of the framework functions as the more practical realities of the Vietnamese ideologies for service learning in the second layer. The requirements for a competent workforce and the socialist responsibilities motivated the participants of my study to initiate their service learning ideas and think of various strategies to sustain these ideas.

Their own moral principles, informed by the traditional values of benevolence and harmony, then invoked my participants' actions and emotions. This third, practical layer of the framework provides particularities from the Vietnamese context for other scholars to compare, adopt, adapt, criticise, and/or reflect upon should they wish to replicate service learning in similar contexts.

The whole framework crystallises the conceptions that my findings have suggested underpinning service learning practice in Vietnamese higher education. It is hoped that this conceptual framework will provide future practitioners and other scholars a necessary and sufficient picture of the philosophies and practical concerns embedded in Vietnamese service learning. It also serves as the foundation for a potential organising model for actually getting service learning underway – and keeping it going – in a Vietnamese higher education institution.

10.3.2 A Potential Operating Model for Embedding Service Learning in Vietnamese Higher Education

Given the discussed considerations, it may be too soon to think of a service learning model for the whole system, but it should be the right time to propose a tentative model that is suitable for the Vietnamese context to maintain the sustainability of service learning initiatives. Accordingly, based on my understanding of the common structure of Vietnamese higher education institutions, the ideas synthesised from the curricular models and practices of Asian service learning, the existing frameworks discussed above, and most importantly from my participants' suggestions, I will now sketch out an operating model of institutional legitimation for Vietnamese service learning. This scenario does not require rapid top-down changes with too much investment in facilities or financial commitment at one time from an institution's stakeholders but allows these physical changes to be gradually built up from the bottom, based on an institution's existing resources and human capacity. Hence, this operating model is expected to be totally feasible and achievable, and will play an important role in pushing the efforts of the current service learning actors towards gaining further institutional recognition and commitment in the future. By proposing this operating model, this thesis has stepped out from the 'comfort zone' of interpretivist studies which normally aim at understanding an issue. It now attempts to enter a more 'challenging zone' embedded

by the radical perspectives of *Asia as Method* by imagining how service learning might be viewed and practised differently in the Vietnamese context.

This model was built from an adaptation of Bender's (2008b) Silo, intersecting, and infusion models of community engagement along with evidence from my findings that Vietnamese service learning has come to the threshold of the intersecting model. In an intersecting model, a university recognises the intersections between its three roles: teaching and learning, research, and community engagement. More importantly, as Bender (2008b) suggested, this model does not require an institution to *change* its existing missions. Rather, it requires an incorporation of civic engagement into existing teaching and learning and research activities. This model (presented in Figure 10.3) is divided into three dimensions: the role of an engaged university that recognises the intersection of teaching and learning, research, and civic engagement; the position of service learning in relation to other activities and programmes offered by the university; and the interrelated functions of a service learning faculty/ discipline/ field of study and other centres for engagement activity in a higher education institution. I am going to describe each level in turn, discuss the reasons for such organisation, and help readers understand the model in the context of Viet Nam from the constructs of Chen's (2010) *Asia as Method.*

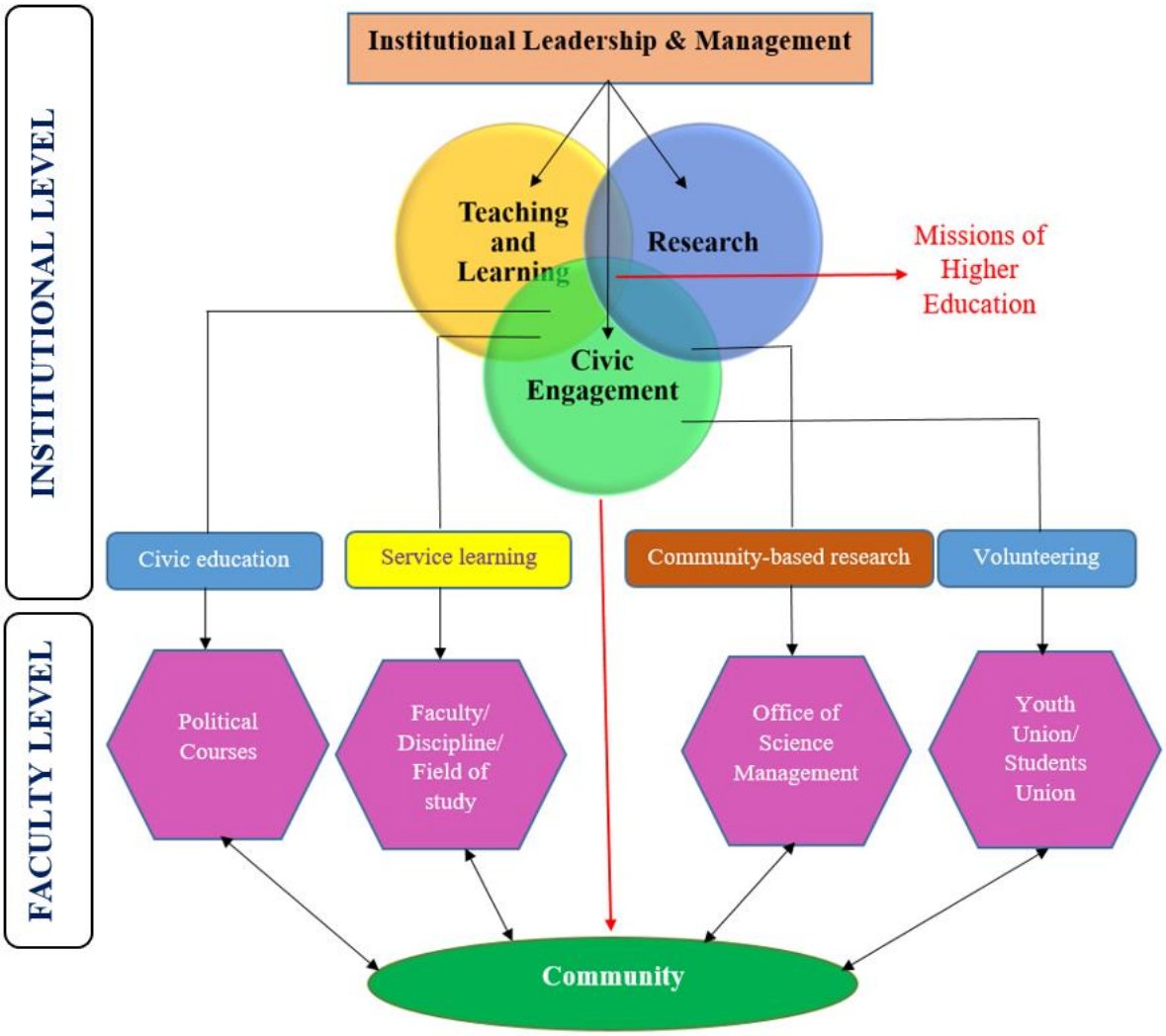


Figure 10.3: An organising model for embedding service learning in Vietnamese higher education

The first dimension of the model represents the institutional level and incorporates the recognition that universities in Viet Nam now have three inter-related missions: teaching and learning, research, and civic engagement. As discussed in Chapter 2, Vietnamese higher education shapes the nations' civic ideologies for its student citizens through the political courses and Youth Union's community engagement (hence I use the term 'civic engagement' to refer to this role rather than 'community engagement' like some authors). While the civic education courses are responsible for nurturing the political ideologies (through the five courses: Marxist-Leninist Philosophy, Marxist Political Economics, Scientific Socialism, Ho Chi Minh Thought, and History of the Vietnamese Communist Party) and civic rights and responsibilities (through such courses as Introduction to Laws), there are also optional community volunteering activities aimed at developing civic knowledge and skills alongside

strengthening the communities. My model proposes that alongside the existing civic education courses and volunteering activities, universities might also now consider including service learning as a means for strengthening both their civic engagement *and* teaching, learning, and research functions.

This first dimension witnesses the appearance of service learning and community-based research as the two *new* forms of civic engagement given the intersecting functions of the three roles of higher education. Located at the intersection between the teaching and learning role and the civic engagement role is the area of service learning. Likewise, where the research role intersects with the civic engagement role, there is the area of community-based research. It should be emphasised that although either or both of these new forms have existed in some universities before this study, this dimension for the first time points out that they could be grouped among the forms of engagement. It is also important to note that a university's recognition of these intersecting functions is extremely important to pave the way for various forms of engagement to come more to the fore, as Bender (2008b) acknowledges: "universities are *always* and *already* engaging with communities in various ways" (p. 88).

This first dimension of the model has been deeply informed by Chen's (2010) concept of geo-colonial historical materialism. I adapted Bender's (2008b) framework not from a Western view that insists on social justice and democratic citizenship, but from the recognition that Viet Nam is a nation that experienced nearly one and a half centuries of foreign domination, and therefore has very sensible reasons to press the importance of maintaining national sovereignty and collective community, especially through higher education. Before this study, I was, like the critiques of Doan's (2005) study, frustrated with the considerable number of political credits in the higher education curriculum. My frustration extended to the fact that short courses of political education are compulsory every academic year for all the public institutions' employees, including administrators, teachers, and staff. Now, a geo-colonial historical materialism lens helps me see that these political courses have always played an important role in the curriculum. They represent the socialist orientation and communist ideologies that saved the country's independence and freedom, and the many volunteering and community programmes are in the extra-curriculum because it was the communities that supported the fights for such gains. Through this lens, then, service learning should not *replace* the civic education and volunteering community programmes, as

some critiques suggest (see Section 2.3.2.1). Instead, service learning and community-based research can be added to provide a variety of forms of civic engagement and to point out that the other roles of teaching and learning and research are relevant and could contribute to and benefit from this third role.

The second dimension of the model shows how existing bodies within Vietnamese higher institutions can easily accommodate the operation of service learning without the need to establish an office specified for service learning. The bodies named in this dimension (Office of Science Management, Youth Union, etc.) are typical within Vietnamese university structures; therefore, this dimension is expected to work in most universities. Despite a lot of the literature (Bender, 2007; Furco & Holland, 2004; Meijs et al., 2019) – and some of my participants (for example, Dr. Cang, dean, Evergreen University) – suggesting that a service learning office is very desirable, if not actually essential, it is necessary to be aware that in Vietnamese context such an office would require stable funding for its operation, which was one of the constraints of any institution to support small-scale service learning initiatives, according to some other participants (for example, Dr. Thai, Resina University). As discussed, the civic education function traditionally resides in the Political Science Courses or the likes, and the volunteering community engagement is a function of the Communist Youth Union and Student Union. As service learning is more discipline-based, my findings suggested that the related Faculty/ Discipline/ Field of study should handle the academic contents. Concerning the community-based research function, the Office of Science Management or the likes that usually exists in any higher education institution could provide assistance for research issues such as giving information about grant opportunities or connecting community research needs to teachers and students. On this level, the mutual assistance between the service learning Faculty/ Discipline/ Field of study and other bodies is also recommended based on their functions. The Office of Science Management or the likes could serve a coordinating role, connecting scholarships and grant opportunities with the service learning Faculty/ Discipline/ Field of study so that teachers and students could conduct more disciplined-based research. The Communist Youth Union and Student Union could provide liaisons between communities and the service learning Faculty/ Discipline/ Field of study, and community-related skills training for students while they could recruit the discipline-based volunteers to diversify their programmes. The Political Science Courses or the likes could be responsible for consulting on related civic skills and knowledge at the request of the service learning Faculty/ Discipline/ Field of study. Among these suggested

relationships, the connection between the Political Science Courses and the service learning Faculty/ Discipline/ Field of study is the least possible at this stage because of the preconceptions that service learning does not relate to civic learning and that the Political Sciences Courses only provide political teaching. However, as service learning develops in the future, this is a potential relationship that could improve the quality of not only service learning itself but also political and civic teaching and learning in the curriculum.

This second dimension is also constructed with service learning (and the other engagement activities) right in the middle of the model, in part to show that such programmes require not just bottom-up initiatives to get going but also top-down policies in order to sustain them. My participants are exemplars: they are proactive, engaged, energetic individuals who saw opportunities and made new programmes happen. It is very important that these kinds of individuals are supported and encouraged to develop new initiatives, and that ongoing and sustained support extends all the way through the institution into university-wide visions and supporting policies. The model emphasises that institutional leaders and managers need to create policies that recognise stakeholders' agency and help them navigate their power relationships to enhance the development of service learning.

This model, which recognises the need for both top-down policy and leadership and bottom-up innovation and energy, also derives from an inter-referencing (Chen, 2010) approach, by drawing upon existing service learning models and adapting them to the local Vietnamese context. The service learning practitioners in my study recognised the power inside themselves and/or proactively drew on resources from other bodies within their universities. Rather than waiting for a well-established or well-supported organising curriculum or service learning course or model to appear, they sought out resources and opportunities from elsewhere (both within and beyond Viet Nam and Asia). It is useful for practitioners from a different context to know that in many cases, the situational constraints have invoked the inner ability, the creativity, and the resilience of Vietnamese people, as in the saying *'cái khó ló cái khôn'* (Adversity is the mother of wisdom). This practical example of an inter-referencing approach is reminiscent of the creativity of Vietnamese people through the ages (Nguyen, 2021; Q. T. N. Nguyen, 2016) and now in the implementation of service learning. I hope other practitioners, like myself, acknowledge and learn from the way my participants used the internal facilities and resources to untie themselves from the systemic challenges by looking for 'outside-the-box' solutions. Ultimately, this can be

considered as an ‘East meets West’ agent of decolonisation: using a borrowed model but with reference and adaptations to the local context to create their own model.

The third dimension of the model focuses on the relationships with community as the partner for and foundation of the civic engagement role of higher education. As one of the drivers to the HERA of Vietnamese universities was the ‘socialisation/privatisation of education’ – involving all the social sectors in the development of universities (see Section 2.3.2.3) – the conception of community, as proposed by some of my participants, should not be confined to disadvantaged subjects but also to a wider range of sectors including service providers, business organisations, and other social entities. In this model, the community is placed at the base of the figure, not at the side like the framework of Bender (2008a), with the implication that its position should be considered as the counterbalance to higher education and as the ground-up foundation for the development of higher education. I understand that this position is not widespread at this moment because the distance between community and some universities remains wider than others due to the traditional preconception that higher education holds a higher status than community. This preconception arises from the presumption that there exists a distance between the intellectual class and the working class in the society, as in the *‘Sĩ, Nông, Công, Thương’* (Scholars – Peasant Farmers – Artisans and Craftsmen – Merchants and Traders) order of occupation in many Confucian heritage cultures. However, based on global and regional trends towards seeking community involvement in and partnership with universities for knowledge development and transfer, I believe that a recognition of communities as crucial partners will become necessary for the future of Vietnamese universities. Official community-university partnerships provide not only more sustainable and significant projects but also opportunities to a wider population, both within the communities and within the institutions. However, the relationship should be multi-tiered rather than favouring the universities as the most important partner. In this dimension of the model, community connects with university via various channels brought about by different forms of engagement (as evidenced by my participants), including, but not limited to, service learning, community engagement, civic engagement, volunteering, and technology transfer. Such a multi-tiered approach would enable universities to engage with communities in various ways and by various means, resulting in more comprehensive effects. More significantly, this approach would allow higher education to fulfill the government’s objectives to mobilise all the social resources possible for its operation and development.

10.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter has highlighted the possibilities and challenges of the study's findings in relation to the research literature on international, regional, and local service learning, discussed the mismatches between existing institutional supporting models for service learning and Vietnamese context from the lens of Chen's *Asia as Method*, and proposed a framework for embedding service learning that embraces practical considerations of the participants and the local implications underlying it. With the significance of mobilising existing resources and enhancing the ever strong position of community in Vietnamese society, it is hoped that this framework will provide practitioners with practical dimensions for implementing service learning in their courses, programmes, and institutional agendas. As an extension to this framework, the next chapter will recommend a set of strategies for practitioners so that they can sustain their service learning initiatives in Vietnamese higher education context. In addition, Chapter 11 will feature the contributions and limitations of this study, as well as suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 11: CONCLUSION

This chapter starts with a summary of the significant arguments from the previous chapters and presents the study's responses to the three research questions. The contributions and limitations of the study are then highlighted to provide context and directions for future research, and recommendations for policy development and strategies for practitioners to implement service learning in the context of Viet Nam are presented. The chapter continues with suggestions for future studies, especially topics related to the qualitative and quantitative effects, the 'East meets West' pedagogy, and the potentials of curricular and extra-curricular integration of service learning. The final section closes this chapter with my concluding thoughts on this research journey.

Across the previous ten chapters, this thesis has explored service learning as an approach to civic engagement within Vietnamese higher education. While public media have recorded an increased interest in service learning in universities across Viet Nam, academic research and publications on the subject are more limited, which can be a challenge to recognising and promoting effective practice and organisational structures. This study aimed to bridge this research gap, and to pursue my motivation to make higher education curricula more practical and meaningful to community development.

Service learning in Viet Nam is part of a wider global context in which civic engagement has become a prominent mission of higher education internationally. HERA has provided an ideological and economic impetus for the increasing recognition of civic engagement within Vietnamese higher education. Civic engagement has gained expression, for example, in volunteering programmes, disciplinary practices, and legislative change. An over-emphasis on narrower forms of civic education, such as traditional political science courses, and a lack of community engagement as part of academic programmes appear to be reasons for the appearance of service learning in Vietnamese higher education curricula. However, although Vietnamese higher education institutions have taken steps towards embedding service learning practices, governmental and institutional recognition of its potential contribution to economic and social reform remains unclear.

An interpretivist lens enabled me to explore the human subjective experience of service learning in four Vietnamese universities and the meanings constructed from

interactions between individuals and groups connected to service learning courses. *Asia as method* provided an additional outlook that drew my attention to the historical, geographic, and cultural specificity of service learning in Viet Nam, and to the importance of critiquing Western hegemonic assumptions and influences. The constructs and perspectives that are central to Chen's (2010) *Asia as Method* supported me to develop a conceptual framework for service learning that represents the ideologies of Vietnamese people and the useful characteristics of this practice from Western traditions.

The four cases in this study highlight the common and different experiences of, and approaches to, and perceptions of service learning practice in Vietnamese context. Three key findings have been presented in this thesis. First, on the shoulders of communities, service learning was found to hold potential as a means for higher education reform, as an instrument for enhancing moral values in students, and as an approach to revive teachers' agency and desire for change. Second, power relationships (between administrators-teachers, teachers-students, universities-communities, and initiators-faculty members) were significant to the implementation and sustainability of service learning initiatives as they provided the participants' experiences towards the institutional and interpersonal constraints. Third, benevolence was honoured as an embedded belief for doing service learning. With practices representing *tâm*, a harmonious spirit in the face of challenges, and faith in causality law, my participants emphasised that traditional values could provide the inner strength to contextualise a Western-imported conception of service learning. The three cross-case findings chapters also suggested an inseparable 'head-hand-heart' connection among the social motivations, practical strategies and actions, and inner incentives that constituted Vietnamese service learning.

The study's findings crystallised the unique characteristics of service learning in Viet Nam. Chen's (2010) outlook focused my attention on the ideologies and 'East meets West' pedagogical strategies driving the implementation of service learning, and enabled me to consider and critique existing Western models for service learning. Based on this reflection, my study assembled a conceptual framework for considering the future implementation of service learning. The framework suggests that viewing Vietnamese service learning from the perspectives of Chen's (2010) constructs could significantly support the contextualisation of this approach, alongside acknowledging Vietnamese philosophies and ideologies embedded in service learning, and considering the practicalities of 'head-hand-heart' practices.

Additionally, I have contended that existing resources could sustain service learning in Viet Nam at this stage of development, and have proposed an operating model that considers possible institutional arrangements and supports.

11.1 Responses to Research Questions

In this section, I discuss how the findings of the study address the three research questions.

11.1.1 The Emergence, Conceptualisation, and Practice of Service Learning in Vietnamese Universities

Like any new trend or approach, service learning has appeared in Vietnamese society in general, and in higher education specifically, for a range of reasons. At least three have been identified by this study. First, service learning has been a response to the desire for higher education reform. To address the critiques that higher education curricula is too theory, content, and exam oriented (Nguyen et al., 2015; Pham & Bui, 2019; T. T. Tran, 2013a, 2013b; T. T. T. Tran, 2019), service learning has added a practical dimension though incorporating soft skills, authentic learning experiences, and new approaches to assessment practice. For example, service learning pedagogies are now more student-centred and, although examinations remain an important part of course results, other assessment forms have been introduced, including community feedback. My participants perceived that the practicability of service learning holds the potential to meet the requirements of the country's development, that is, to produce graduates with greater practical skills and knowledge and with a higher chance for employability to serve the economy and global integration.

Second, service learning in Viet Nam appears to contribute to higher education's civic responsibilities. My findings indicate that service learning in partnership with communities has provided opportunities for students to be aware of and learn from diverse communities' needs and knowledge. These opportunities have enhanced the important role of higher education in strengthening community through university's knowledge production and transfer processes. The service learning projects have also increased recognition of the increasingly important role of communities towards the development of universities and society through the appreciation for practical experience, indigenous knowledge, and acute

evaluation. Communities are becoming equal partners with universities considering their learning resources. This reciprocal relationship is helping universities recognise the potential of community involvement and to form powerful relationships to overcome structural constraints and social problems.

Third, service learning has proved to be a potentially powerful instrument for addressing the perceived decline in students' moral qualities. The participants of my studied cases suggested that their service learning projects have built such qualities as social responsibility, a commitment to social justice, and respect for Vietnamese beliefs and values. By integrating these moral traditions, service learning has also emphasised the importance of learning *to be* alongside learning *to know* represented not only in Vietnamese traditions and Asian cultures but also in international ideologies of education. This also signifies that Vietnamese service learning has been developed with the intention to revive traditional values, distinguishing it from Western expectations of primarily enhancing democracy.

While the question is still open as to the extent to which service learning is a traditional or borrowed conception in Viet Nam, my findings have shown that in the four universities studied, service learning has largely been practised using 'East meets West' pedagogical and implementation strategies. This is an understandable response given that the education system has been influenced by traditional values, modern socialist ideologies, and global economic forces. Teachers have, for example, maintained the traditional authority to decide course content, delivery, and assessment, and have given students greater autonomy to choose the community they want to contribute to, determine the nature of their service, and learn from each other. This approach has given the teachers the flexibility to teach a practical course and allowed students to develop their creativity, responsibility, and work effectiveness.

'East meets West' approaches have also invigorated teacher agency. The service learning teachers in my study combined Western strategies such as conferencing and skill training with Vietnamese caring roles (such as funding students' projects with their personal budgets and providing psychological counselling), not only to make changes to the quality of teaching and learning but also to recover the sense of being agents for change. Like their Western counterparts, they encountered various challenges, but the conditions were more disadvantageous with low salaries, changing teaching methods, outdated technology, inadequate support, high student-teacher ratios, and insufficient autonomy. This suggests a

need for strengthening teacher agency and institutional support to enable the success of service learning in Vietnamese higher education.

The participants of my study have also reported an 'East meets West' approach to navigating their power relationships. The hierarchical and high-context characteristics of Vietnamese culture required the practitioners to find various strategies to maintain the relationships surrounding a service learning course. The constraints between administrators-teachers, teachers-students, universities-communities, and initiators-faculty members were addressed by my participants with not only Western democratic procedures (such as meetings, conversations, and opportunities for professional development) but also with implicit Vietnamese conventions (such as silence, implication, face-saving, and respect for authority). The navigation of power relationships is a unique characteristic of Vietnamese culture that future service learning practitioners need to take into consideration.

11.1.2 The Constraints to and Opportunities for Service Learning in Vietnamese Higher Education

This study has identified three important constraints to service learning: complicated power relations, uncritical borrowing Western practices, and institutional support. The root of complicated power relations can be traced back to the Confucian concept of hierarchy that deeply influenced many aspects of Vietnamese society, and service learning was no exception. As mentioned, many of the problems of organisation and pedagogy originated from the complex relationships among the actors of a service learning course. Similar to other cultures, there have always existed misunderstandings between people at different levels of power. However, in the Vietnamese situation, misunderstandings could be mitigated by face-saving, respect, and high-context features. In order to achieve their plans, the actors had to adopt different strategies to avoid relationship transgressions and it appeared to take them more time and effort not to go straight to the point to solve their problems. As discussed previously, the constraints in power relationships not only challenged the development of service learning in higher education, but also happen in any workplace, which affects the effectiveness of Vietnamese workforce in the globalised economy.

The next concern was that there remained some incompatible application of Western approaches and pedagogies into Vietnamese service learning practice. One grassroots obstacle was that Vietnamese people tend to possess a deep respect for higher authority,

harmony, and face-saving, while some service learning pedagogies require a democratic approach as in Western traditions. For example, the freedom given to students and community agents sometimes priortised relationships over the quality of the service or product. Moreover, as these approaches were adapted on a trial and error basis, changes in course planning and procedure could cause confusion for students or mistrust from community partners. This could also affect the long-term effectiveness of service learning, stable partnerships with community, and the promotion of this approach to other contexts and potential communities.

Another difficulty was the lack of institutional support. This was possibly due to the administrators of the studied institutions not being fully aware of the importance of service learning and/or because institutional constraints did not allow them to extensively support the initiatives. As a result, there was often no support staff, not enough training and resources for teachers and students, no funding, no successors, no institutional quality assurance, and no overarching strategy for curriculum development. These problems were serious in that they could affect the sustainability of service learning, especially in this initial phase. Although teachers managed to maintain and develop their courses by their own means, the lack of support limited the effectiveness and development of the service learning practice in that teachers and students found it difficult to disseminate their ideas and connect with other disciplines, faculties, or related parties for wider and more significant projects.

Despite the various constraints experienced in attempting to contextualise service learning for Viet Nam, this new approach has brought about opportunities for the higher education system in this socialist, developing country by improving teaching and learning quality, building relationships between university and community, and providing opportunities to revive traditional values.

First, service learning appears from my findings to produce students who can meet the requirements of education reform. Graduates who can solve technical problems in the workplace and employ their soft skills to balance relationships and emotions are seen to be more employable in the future. Moreover, these characteristics meet the '*Vừa hồng, vừa chuyên'* socialist ideology (Both socialist-minded and professionally competent) in Ho Chi Minh's will. To a wider extent, these qualities may make it easier for Vietnamese graduates to integrate into the regional and international workforce. Although more research needs to be done to draw concrete evidence of the effectiveness of service learning, the potential of this

approach is worth consideration from other universities and from Vietnamese higher education in general.

Second, service learning, as experienced by participants in my four case study universities, has brought a new dimension to the relationship between universities and their local communities. Building on the existing relationships through the volunteering community engagement, the service learning practitioners in my study have enhanced opportunities for universities and communities to share knowledge and contribute to each other's development. This dimension is distinctive and significant in that the university's engagement is knowledge-based, and the community can also bring the traditional knowledge into the academic environment. Moreover, communities can become a learning resource for university knowledge production, and on their part, universities can attract more social attention and support for the community's operation and function. These mutual benefits lay the foundation for social improvement by empowering individuals to work together to strengthen not only their community but also other groups or societies in which universities play a leading and important role.

Third, service learning can become an instrument for the revival and development of traditional values, according to my participants. The Vietnamese spirit of serving the community, which has long been the motivation for volunteering programmes, has been an incentive for those who are interested in discipline-based service learning. In other words, service learning was able to incorporate academic content into the community engagement activities. Moreover, the benevolence tradition of Vietnamese cultures has become a key rationale for service learning application. Deeper than the requirements for higher education reform were the teachers' inner expectations to integrate moral education through the disciplined-based services for vulnerable communities, bringing back the belief that learning *to be* is as important as learning *to know*. Upon a foundation of benevolence, service learning can potentially improve the ethical awareness of young graduates, thus becoming an effective tool for character building and citizenship education.

11.1.3 The Future Contextualisation and Development of Service Learning for Vietnamese Higher Education

My study's responses to the first two research questions have provided certain implications for service learning to be further contextualised for Vietnamese higher education.

In light of my research findings, I have proposed two frameworks that might help service learning to be further developed in the context of Viet Nam. The first framework enables Vietnamese and international scholars and practitioners to understand the conceptualisation of service learning in Vietnamese higher education. It is essential to view the conception of service learning from Chen's (2010) constructs to perceive the contextual particularities (that is, Viet Nam as an Asian, Confucian influenced, developing, and socialist communist country), the importance of inner potentials along with outer influences, and the need to conscientiously reflect upon similar models for adaptation and development. This conceptual framework has also centred the ideologies driving Vietnamese service learning and considered the practical reflections of the participants for future studies and implementation. The second framework provides a model for the operation of service learning in a higher education institution. This model, developed from my participants' suggestions and the understanding of the typical structure of a Vietnamese university, proposes that institutional support for service learning does not need considerable change but can rely on existing resources. With this operating model, an institution can gradually support the bottom-up practice of service learning with top-down policy and leadership before any physical changes are made for further commitment.

11.2 The Potential Contributions of the Study

This is the first study to include the voices of a wide range of stakeholders involved in service learning practice in Vietnamese universities and it provides insights for the implementation of service learning in similar settings such as in Asian regions, Confucian heritage cultures, developing territories, and/or socialist communist countries. Providing that service learning has been presumably Western originated but practised under Western philosophies in many of these contexts, my study reflects how Vietnamese ideologies and specificity could bring the vital breath and significant depth to this practice for Vietnamese people. The study makes four important contributions to understanding service learning in Vietnamese higher education and the application of this practice in comparable contexts.

First and foremost, this thesis provides a more comprehensive picture of service learning in Viet Nam than is currently available in the research literature and contributes to international scholarship about this practice in non-Western settings, especially through the conceptual framework. From this framework, it is necessary to approach the service learning

conception from the view of geo-colonial historical materialism, critical syncretism, and inter-referencing which highlight the specificity of local settings, the dynamics of inner strengths, and reference to similar contexts. Accordingly, this study confirms that the ideologies of Vietnamese service learning are different from Western traditions. Besides the practical incentives of preparing a workforce for a globalised economy, the implementation of service learning conveys socialist responsibilities and traditional values. This contribution further implies that universities in comparable settings can draw on 'inner' ideologies to develop their service learning programmes, which would not only help the social development of their territories but also promote greater diversity and advancement of this practice internationally.

Second, this study shows that service learning can be practised from bottom-up initiatives and developed on the basis of an institution's existing resources before further institutional support. The operating model proposed from the participants' contributions suggests the possibility of using the current offices and departments to support service learning. This contribution makes it possible for institutional management to allow service learning to develop from the bottom and to have time to prepare for top-down changes if necessary.

Third, the study contributes implementation considerations to those directly (including teachers, students, and community agents) and indirectly (including Youth Union secretaries, faculty leaders, and university administrators) involved in service learning, in order to practise and sustain initiatives. My participants called attention to the potential of communities as partners for higher education reform, the hands-on experience of navigating power relationships, and embedding benevolence in the practice of service learning. This 'head-hand-heart' practice is expected to become a useful referential model for the implementation of service learning in similar contexts.

Last but not least, this study proposes avenues for policy development. It is expected to raise awareness among policy makers, especially the MoET, governmental leaders, and institutional administrators about the potential of service learning in education reform and long-term social development. The findings of this study offer valuable information on the possibilities of service learning as a form of disciplined-based civic engagement. The fact that service learning can be flexibly applied in terms of course organisation and pedagogical application can be one of the advantages in making its way into curricular and educational

policies. The conceptual framework and the operating model can provide policy makers with a foundation for further consideration and strategic planning in a post-HERA phase, in which service learning could become a potential instrument for Vietnamese higher education to fulfil its 'engaged' responsibilities.

11.3 The Limitations of the Study

Despite its significance to the local, regional, and international literature, this study inevitably encounters certain limitations. First, this study includes a limited number of universities, disciplines, and service learning projects. The selected cases were also geographically limited to universities in the Middle and the South of Viet Nam because there was little public information about service learning courses in Northern universities. Moreover, as service learning is a relatively new conception in Viet Nam and has not been applied to all fields of study, the service learning disciplines of the chosen cases were restricted to natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. A wider range of cases, including from the North and across more disciplines, would enhance the authenticity and trustworthiness of the findings and enable the study to speak to a wider audience. However, the specificity of each case, together with the common systemic constraints and opportunities, holds potential to provide Vietnamese and international scholars with insights that may prove resourceful for their research.

Second, the theoretical frameworks offered in this thesis are arguably subjective. As discussed, from the critique about the subjective nature of the interpretivist approach, I was concerned that the findings and interpretations can be distorted by my subjectivity. However, if other scholars are interested in this line of research, they could consider including more researchers and case styles, as well as conducting the study at different times so as to engender greater confidence in this interpretive research.

As Chen (2010)'s *Asia as method* has been challenged for its over-generalising effects (Diara, 2011; Ng, 2013), I recognised that, to some readers, my study might seem over-influenced by the issue of decolonisation. It appears that Viet Nam is more concerned with post-war recovery and developing the country to catch up globally rather than with theorising the effects of colonisation. Nevertheless, as informed by Chen's outlook, I consider it a crucial step forward to acknowledge the vestiges of past colonisation and imperialism, and neo-colonial influences, on Vietnamese people and society. Avoiding the total negation or the

uncritical replication of the West is a way to decolonise the practice of service learning in Viet Nam. This approach will open possibilities for more significant civic engagement: strengthening the individuals, the communities, and the nation state as stated in the ideologies of Vietnamese people.

11.4 Recommendations for Policy Development

The findings of this thesis provide implications for policy development at both governmental and institutional levels. In a globalised world, it is increasingly important for the government to recognise the strengths of communities not only in national defence and social development, but also in diminishing the impacts of globalisation because a strong nation should be built not only from well-cultivated individuals but also from well-constructed communities. Concerning the potential of communities as a learning resource, a treasure of folk experiences, and a strength for social development, it is crucial for the MoET to have more robust policies on the civic engagement role of higher education. Communities in Vietnamese society have historically played an extremely important role in and are crucial to the future development of higher education – and the relationship between universities and communities can contribute to the social and economic well-being of the country in general. Whether it is in relation to service learning or any form of community engagement, in my view the government and higher education policy makers could reconsider the community's role. Policies could focus attention on heightening community knowledge and expertise, bringing fairer partnerships, appreciating community members' contributions, and providing more space for them to raise their voice, as stated '*Lấy dân làm gốc*" (Taking people as the root) in a popular ideology of Ho Chi Minh – the country's great leader.

In my view, this civic role should be stated explicitly in policies and have as a high status as teaching and learning and research. While political education and volunteering community programmes have been supported with official policies, discipline-based civic engagement activities such as service learning and community-based research need to be given a legislatively compatible position in higher education curricula. Government policy directives can also raise social awareness about the importance of community in higher education and social development. Accordingly, more social resources, both public and private, could be attracted to invest in strengthening the potential of communities.

At the institutional level, as seen from the operating framework, it is not necessary for an institution to make major changes to its structure. However, in order for existing resources to effectively support service learning practice and other discipline-based civic engagement activities, there should be institutional policies to connect functions among faculties, offices, and departments. These policies could assign duties (such as course design, paperwork, accounting, coordination, quality assurance, facilities supply, etc.) to relevant faculties, offices, and departments so that service learning teachers can focus on their teaching duties. It is also recommended that there are detailed regulations for how service learning can be practised from bottom-up with top-down support to relieve the power relationship constraints between administrators-teachers, teachers-students, universities-communities, and initiators-faculty members. Furthermore, as the Youth Union units are present in most of the social organisations, their potential in connecting universities, communities, and other organisations is immense and potentially significant to the service learning practice. If they were assigned with a liaison duty among these bodies to support the service learning practice, it would not only save resources and people for an institution but also be beneficial and reciprocal to their existing role of organising volunteering programmes because one community may become a partner in both volunteering and service learning projects.

11.5 Recommendations for Practitioners

This section suggests a set of tactics for practitioners, built on Bennett et al.'s (2016) study but with adaptations based on the local context and the tactics used by my participants. They are formulated mainly for teachers who initiated most of the service learning ideas in Vietnamese higher education. However, they could be employed by any initiators who are interested in starting up their first service learning project. To avoid the possible critique that these tactics could produce more work for teachers, the tactics are intended to be used flexibly by initiators who could base their service learning plans on the availability of resources. It is also important to bear in mind that the tactics are temporary and supposed to be applied in the context of insufficient institutional recognition. So, these tactics do not replace institutional strategies to recognise and support service learning as one of the mainstream approaches to civic engagement.

One way to enhance students' capacity is to encourage them to take responsibility for fund-raising activities prior to a service learning course. They could, for example, promote

their service learning practice to other stakeholders (students, teachers, administrators, and community agents) through official and personal channels, or be allowed to sign up as volunteer teaching assistants for the service learning courses. It is also necessary to empower their autonomy and improve the course quality by providing opportunities for them to contribute ideas or express concerns relating to the organisation of the service learning course through an official channel such as feedback forms or meetings.

Funding, especially the 'soft money' outside institutional budgets, can be pursued through research grants (national, regional, institutional, and business research and development) and/or non-refundable donations (from international and regional donors, local business, and social organisations). Besides the financial support, these sources are potential channels to disseminate service learning research and scholarship. Moreover, it is worth noting that commercialisation of service learning products and/or services can not only create funds for future projects but also transfer higher education's knowledge/technology to wider society.

Attracting the attention of the people within an institution and public awareness is also a good strategy to build champions. At the faculty level, service learning initiators can consult with faculty administrators and members about their ideas to obtain approval, build alliance, and welcome input. At an institutional level, practitioners could arouse whole-of-university interest about their practices (including students, faculties, offices, and departments) through regular reports, newsletters, and celebrations so that their ideas can be disseminated and replicated. In wider society, initiators and teachers could attend service learning seminars, workshops, and conferences, and take these opportunities to promote their practice and share experience. They could also attract public attention through institutional websites, social media, and press releases. These activities could sow the seeds of service learning to other places, and at the same time captivate the notice of scholars, sponsors, and supporters from other universities and social sectors.

Community capacity can be explored by involving community representatives in the planning and preparation stages of a service learning course, creating opportunities for them to share their experience and insights with teachers and students, and encouraging them to contribute their opinions, concerns, and recommendations. Moreover, based on their experience and connections, they can recommend sources for funding as well as introduce the service learning practice to other communities.

In order to facilitate institutional support, the service learning group could introduce relevant organisations to their administrators and encourage them to build partnerships with these organisations. In particular, the international and regional networks such as the Taillories Network or the Service Learning Asia Network (SLAN) are popular organisations that offer support for their member universities. Moreover, for a diversity of partnerships, the private sector and social organisations could also be invited to be involved. The abovementioned tactic of promoting service learning practices to the faculty, institution, and society will help practitioners find alliances for this strategy.

Obviously, there are certain tactics that might be inappropriate for specific cases and they require the practitioners to be flexible. However, these tactics offer useful lessons to those Vietnamese practitioners who wish to start integrating service learning into their course/s. Furthermore, these bottom-up tactics are also strategies that might accelerate top-down policy changes for embedding service learning.

11.6 Suggestions for Further Research

For future research, I make suggestions about several aspects of service learning in Viet Nam that other scholars may wish to pursue. I also continue to be very interested in these issues and will make my best efforts to continue researching in the following areas.

First, as the findings of this study report the perceived outcomes of service learning courses, there should be more quantitative and qualitative research on the effects of service learning on higher education and social development to demonstrate that this practice is worth the public and administrators' considerations. Moreover, this direction can be extended to as wide a variety of stakeholders as possible, especially the community partners, because these different voices not only contribute to the balanced development of service learning but also confirm its essential characteristic in the socialist democratic education system of Viet Nam.

Second, it is useful to delve into the 'East meets West' pedagogical applications made by Vietnamese teachers in service learning practice. As service learning becomes more popular and Vietnamese higher education is approaching regional and international integration, it is important to find out the combined strategies suitable to the learning styles and characteristics of Vietnamese students, highlighting the traditional values together with

modern principles for success. On one hand, these findings can bring more effectiveness to the teaching and learning of service learning in Vietnamese context. On the other hand, they help distinguish the Vietnamese labour force in the local, regional, and international employment markets.

Third, as the topic of civic engagement is often considered extra-curricular and thus absent from academic exploration, future research on the possibilities of civic engagement, especially service learning, in credit-based curricula can help fill this gap. Moreover, research on the combination of volunteering and academic service learning, interdisciplinary service learning, and project-based service learning should be encouraged so as to vary the forms of civic engagement and tailor different interests and intelligences of students. These studies will help strengthen the current community engagement which is more inclined to volunteering, upgrade the partnership between university and community with more significant works, and bring service learning to the mainstream pedagogy.

11.7 Concluding Thoughts

Coming to this point in my research journey, I realise that it is just the beginning of a researcher career. This study has been an amazing journey for me in exploring knowledge and my own self. I have learned a lot about research methodology, research paradigms, and how to achieve initial plans with determination, resilience, and high standards. All the insights I acquired from this study will certainly be of great use for my future research, teaching, and leadership roles. This study has also provided a precious opportunity to express my researcher positionality, my experiences and aspirations, and most importantly my voice to the world. Liberating myself is the most meaningful asset that this doctoral journey has brought to me throughout the four years of hard work.

Though this study is small-scale, it has contributed important insights into how service learning has been practised and sustained at four selected Vietnamese universities. The findings indicated that this practice not only transferred the regional and international values of service learning and community engagement but also highlighted the uniqueness of Vietnamese culture, history, and society. Moreover, the application of the theoretical frameworks and research methodology played a significant role in drawing out these essential findings. The study will hopefully provide valuable information to other Vietnamese, regional, and international universities where community engagement, especially service

learning, is projected to become part of the institutional mission. In order to reach this intention, it is necessary to start recognising service learning and considering strategies for institutional embedment. Such actions will greatly support the initiatives and efforts that current practitioners have taken to advance and sustain service learning in the future.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Referral

HCM City National University
University of Social Sciences & Humanities

Socialist Republic of Vietnam
Independence - Freedom - Happiness

REFERRAL

Dear: …… (your agency)

The University of Social Sciences and Humanities, VNU-HCM introduces

Ms. Nguyen Thi Ngoc Dung, date of birth: March 22, 1979, place of birth: Ho Chi Minh City.

She is a lecturer in the Faculty of English Linguistics and Literature, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City National University, and is currently doing Ph.D. in Education at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Her project title is "Contextualising Service Learning for Vietnamese Higher Education."

Request: to come to your institution to collect research data and interview with the Principal (or authorised person), Dean (or authorised person), Lecturer, Student, Head of Community Organisation and Secretary of the Youth Union who are related to service learning

We hope you will create conditions for Ms. Nguyen Thi Ngoc Dung to carry out the data collection.

Best regards.

Ho Chi Minh City, date …… month …… year 2018

On behalf of the rector

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE

Appendix B: Letter to the rector

LETTER TO THE RECTOR

Ref: *Asking for permission to conduct the research*

Project Title: "Contextualising Service Learning for Vietnamese Higher Education"

Dear Professor Doctor_____,

I am Nguyen Thi Ngoc Dung, a Ph.D. student in the Faculty of Education, Victoria University of Wellington – New Zealand, and a lecturer at Ho Chi Minh National University – Viet Nam. As part of my doctoral study, I am conducting research to examine the practice of service learning at four HE institutions in Viet Nam.

The purpose of the study is to obtain in-depth understanding of the practice of service learning at course level in order to gain insights into the challenges of and opportunities for integrating service learning into curriculum, thus suggesting a conceptual model for the sustainable development of this approach in the Vietnamese tertiary context.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct research at your institution from _____ to _____.

The research process will be undertaken in the following manner:

1. Visiting the university: Initially, I will visit your university to have a meeting with you and your administrative staff to discuss the research.
2. Selecting participants: I will invite 10-17 people from your university to participate in the research. My research will involve two groups of participants: one group that has direct connections to a service learning course, including 1 lecturer, 5-7 students, and 1 community partner, and one group that has indirect connections with the service learning course, including 1 university administrator, 1 faculty administrator, and 1 Youth Union secretary. Prior to selection, all potential participants will be provided with information about the research for their consideration and required to sign a "Consent Form" to formalise their willingness to participate. Participation will be voluntary and participants may withdraw from the research at any time without any disadvantages.
3. Collecting data:
   a. Documents: I will review documents relating to the implementation of service learning including university strategic plans, policy documents/decisions (establishment of service learning centre, approval of service learning courses/projects, building partnership with community agents, etc.), implementation

guides, course syllabuses, and announcements (recruitment of students, assessment scheme, service learning plans, etc.)

b. Interviews: I will conduct individual interviews with 1 university administrator, 1 faculty administrator, 1 Youth Union secretary, 1 lecturer, and 1 community partner, and a focus group interview with 5-7 students. With the exception of the students, I will use a purposive sampling technique to identify and recruit the abovementioned stakeholders. I will invite all the students within the service learning course to participate in the study and, where there are more than seven volunteers, I will randomly pick the students. Each interview session will take up to one hour. The interviews will be audio recorded for the purposes of maintaining an accurate record of the participants' responses.
c. Archival records: I will also analyse and employ the public information related to the service learning course available from university websites such as statistical data (number of students, lecturers, courses, etc.), service records (visions, missions, awards, etc.), organisation records (budget, personnel records, etc.), and survey data produced by others about the case

This research has been assessed and approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee, No. 0000025688. I will make every effort to ensure that the participants' identities will remain confidential through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of any identifying details of the institutions and participants. The audio recordings will be kept secure and will be destroyed after the completion of the research. No information in the study will be discussed with anyone except me, my supervisors and the participants. All research data will be securely stored in password protected files and/or in locked cupboards and will be destroyed using a paper shredder and/or electronically wiped upon the completion of the research. If you have questions about the way the research is being conducted you may contact the Chair of the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee, Associate Professor Susan Corbett at susan.corbett@vuw.ac.nz.

When completed, the doctoral thesis will be submitted to the Faculty of Education, and deposited in the university library, and will be available online. The research data will also be used for conference papers and/or publications in scholarly journals.

If you have any questions or would like to receive further information about the project, please feel free to contact me at dung.nguyen@vuw.ac.nz. You can also contact my supervisors, Dr. Andrea Milligan at andrea.milligan@vuw.ac.nz, and/or Dr. Kathryn Sutherland at kathryn.sutherland@vuw.ac.nz.

Your permission to conduct this research at your university is highly appreciated. I will call your assistant to organise a time to meet to discuss the research and consent form, which is attached to this letter.

Thank you very much for your support.

Yours sincerely,

Nguyen Thi Ngoc Dung

Appendix C: Information sheet

Project Title:
"Contextualising Service Learning for Vietnamese Higher Education"

INFORMATION SHEET
For _____

You are invited to take part in this research. Please read this information before deciding whether or not to take part. If you decide to participate, thank you. If you decide not to participate, thank you for considering this request.

Who am I?
My name is Nguyen Thi Ngoc Dung and I am a Doctoral student in Education at Victoria University of Wellington. This research project is work towards my dissertation.

What is the aim of the project?
This study investigates how service learning, a subset of civic engagement, is being practised in Viet Nam as this topic is under-researched in literature. Specifically, it will contribute to the Asian regional literature where service learning practices are influenced by a range of Western and non-Western ideologies. This study aims to investigate these and other influences on the nature of service learning in Viet Nam, and to consider how service learning could be further conceptualised by Vietnamese context. This research has been approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee, reference number 0000025688.

How can you help?
You are invited to participate because you have experience to offer insight into this topic. If you agree to take part, I will interview you at your office or a reserved room in the university campus. I will ask you questions about the conception and practices of service learning, the relationship between service learning and youth programmes in your university, and its opportunities and challenges. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes. I will audio record the interview with your permission and write it up later. You can choose to not answer any question or stop the interview at any time, without giving a reason. In addition, with your permission, I will review documentation related to service learning that involves the Youth Union and university faculties. You can withdraw from the study by contacting me at any time before July 1, 2018. If you withdraw, the information you provided will be destroyed or returned to you.

What will happen to the information you give?
This research is confidential. This means that I will be aware of your identity, but the research data will be combined and your identity will not be revealed in any reports, presentations, or public documentation. However, you should be aware that in small projects

your identity might be obvious to others in your community. Only my supervisors and I will read the notes or transcript of the interview. The interview transcripts, summaries, and any recordings will be kept securely and destroyed on March 1, 2023.

What will the project produce?
The information from my research will be used in my Ph.D. dissertation and/or academic publications and conferences.

If you accept this invitation, what are your rights as a research participant?
You do not have to accept this invitation if you don't want to. If you do decide to participate, you have the right to:

1. choose not to answer any question;
2. ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview;
3. withdraw from the study before July 1, 2018;
4. ask any questions about the study at any time;
5. read over and comment on a written summary of your interview*;*
6. be able to read any reports of this research by emailing me to request a copy.

If you have any questions or problems, who can you contact?

If you have any questions, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact me:

Name: **Nguyen Thi Ngoc Dung**
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand
Email address: dung.nguyen@vuw.ac.nz

Supervisors:

Name: **Dr. Andrea Milligan**
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand
Role: Senior Lecturer, School of Education
Email: andrea.milligan@vuw.ac.nz
Phone: +64-04-4639614

Name: **Dr. Kathryn Sutherland**
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand
Role: Senior Lecturer, Centre for Academic Development
Email: kathryn.sutherland@vuw.ac.nz
Phone: +64-04-4635795

Human Ethics Committee information
If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research, you may contact the Victoria University HEC Convenor: Associate Professor Susan Corbett. Email susan.corbett@vuw.ac.nz or telephone +64-4-463 5480.

Appendix D: Consent form

CONSENT FORM

(This form will be valid for 5 years)

Project Title: **"Contextualising Service Learning for Vietnamese Higher Education"**

Ph.D. Student: Nguyen Thi Ngoc Dung, Education Faculty, Victoria University of Wellington.

- I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research project. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can ask further questions whenever I need to.
- I agree to participate in an audio recorded interview.

I understand that

- I may withdraw myself (or any information I have provided) from this project at any time before 01/07/2018, and all the information I have provided will be returned and destroyed.
- All the information I have provided will be returned and destroyed on 01/03/2023.
- All the information I have provided will be confidentially protected by the Ph.D. student and supervisors.
- Research results will be used for the Doctoral thesis submitted to the Victoria University of Wellington and/or published in scholarly journals and/or conference papers

	Yes	No
• I consent to allow the information and opinion provided by me to be used in any report related to this research and I have authority to such use on behalf of my organisation.	☐	☐
• I would like to receive a summary of the interview	☐	☐
• I would like to receive a final summary of the results of this research and I will provide my email address at the bottom.	☐	☐

Participant's signature: _____

Participant's full name: _____

Date: _____

Contact: _____

Appendix E: Interview protocol

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Project Title: **"Contextualising Service Learning for Vietnamese Higher Education"**

Greetings,
Thank you for agreeing to participate in the interview. Before we begin, let me repeat some of the following principles. Please keep confidential the shared information, your attendance and participation in the interview. The interview will be recorded so I hope it will not affect the emotions and content that you will share.

Background information

1. How long have you been in this position?/ *(For students)* What year are you in?
2. What has been significantly changed in your institution/organisation in the past year?

Research issues

❖ Part 1-The emergence of service learning
Prompts:

- How has service learning emerged?
- Where did this conception come from?
- Who raised the idea? And from what source of influences?
- Why did your institution decide to adapt this approach?
- *(For students)* How did you know about this course?
- *(For community agents)* How did you know about this programme/ partnership?
- *(For Youth Union representatives)* Were you aware of the apprearance of service learning as a community programme but was discipline rather than volunteering based? How did you know about that?

❖ Part 2-The practice of service learning-Its philosophy & theoretical assumption
Prompts:

- What philosophy & theoretical assumption has underpinned the practice of service learning in your institution?
- What made service learning in your institution similar to and different from others?
- What made it distinctively Vietnamese?
- *(For students)* Why did you choose to participate in this course?
- *(For community agents)* Why did you choose to involve in this programme/ partnership?
- *(For Youth Union representatives)* What are the differences in the philosophy & theoretical assumption between the volunteering and service learning practice?

❖ Part 3-The challenges and opportunities of service learning practice

Prompts:

- What were the challenges of your institution in integrating service learning in teaching activities (in terms of policy, funding, organisation and/or administration, people, facilities, etc.)?
- What were the opportunities for your institution in integrating service learning in teaching activities (in terms of policy, funding, organisation and/or administration, people, facilities, etc.)?
- *(For students)* What were the negative and positive aspects of this course?
- *(For community agents)* What were the challenges and opportunities of this programme/ partnership?
- *(For Youth Union representatives)* What were the challenges and opportunities of service learning compared to the programmes of the Youth Union?

❖ Part 4-Changes for improvement

Prompts:

- What would you want to remain unchanged about service learning in your institution (in terms of philosophy and theoretical assumption, policy, funding, organisation and/or administration, people, facilities, etc.)?
- What would you want to do differently in order to improve the situation of service learning in your institution (in terms of philosophy and theoretical assumption, policy, funding, organisation and/or administration, people, facilities, etc.)?
- *(For students)* What do you think could be promoted or improved in terms of course organisation, teaching pedagogies, and communications?
- (*For community agents)* What do you think could be promoted or improved in terms of course organisation, community roles, and communications?
- *(For Youth Union representatives)* What should service learning practitioners be aware of about students' engagement with communities? What could be promoted or improved for the development of service learning?

Ending questions:

1. Is there anyone else you think I should meet to better understand the service learning status in your institution and in Viet Nam?
2. Is there anything else you think I should know to understand your service learning practice better?

Appendix F: Human ethics approval of Victoria University of Wellington

TE WHARE WĀNANGA O TE ŪPOKO O TE IKA A MĀUI
VICTORIA
UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON

Phone 0-4-463 5480
Email susan.corbett@vuw.ac.nz

MEMORANDUM

TO	Dung Nguyen
COPY TO	Andrea Milligan
FROM	AProf Susan Corbett, Convener, Human Ethics Committee
DATE	26 February 2018
PAGES	1
SUBJECT	**Ethics Approval: 25688** Contextualising Service-Learning for Vietnamese Higher Education

Thank you for your application for ethical approval, which has now been considered by the Standing Committee of the Human Ethics Committee.

Your application has been approved from the above date and this approval continues until 26 February 2021. If your data collection is not completed by this date you should apply to the Human Ethics Committee for an extension to this approval.

Best wishes with the research.

Kind regards

Susan Corbett

Convener, Victoria University Human Ethics Committee