



# Narratives of ‘delayed success’: a life course perspective on understanding Vietnamese international students’ decisions to drop out of PhD programmes

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## Abstract

PhD (non-)completion rates have been considered important criteria with which to evaluate the effectiveness of doctoral programmes and of universities’ performance. To date, there has been a lack of qualitative studies on the voices and experiences of funded international students who discontinue doctoral research degrees. This paper uses qualitative methods and six themes of a life course perspective to uncover the ‘hidden’ experience of international Vietnamese students who dropped out of funded doctoral programmes in social sciences and humanities. Its findings suggest that linked/independent lives and the timing of live themes helped to understand reasons for international doctoral students to drop out, which underline their engagement with research networks, academic identity and familial responsibilities. Meanwhile, the consequences of dropout illustrate the intersections of five themes: linked/independent lives, development risk and projects, the timing of lives/interplay of human lives and historical times, and diversity in life courses. The five themes capture diverse life trajectories and forms of agency developed by PhD non-completers while negotiating social pressures and institutional politics in their home institution as well as their perceptions of well-being and life priorities. Their life trajectories and forms of agency are gendered and culturally specific, with female non-completers being more active in searching for and building back their ‘agentic orientations’ through learning new skills, entering motherhood or leaving academic institutions. These findings are useful for reflecting on the current supporting structures, especially mental health support, for international doctoral students and supervisor training.

**Keywords** PhD non-completion · International doctoral students · International Vietnamese students · Life course perspective

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## Introduction

The PhD (non-)completion rate has been considered an important criterion with which to evaluate the effectiveness of doctoral programmes and, more broadly, universities' performance. High non-completion rates waste the human resources of educational institutions and doctoral students themselves (Leijen et al., 2016). Previous studies, such as Sverdlik et al. (2018), have pointed out that there are both external factors and internal factors for doctoral dropout or persistence. Accordingly, external factors are manifested in a range of relationships and structures that involve individuals, resources and institutions outside the student, such as supervision, social lives, the department and socialisation and financial support. Conversely, internal factors emphasise inner processes (i.e. psychological/mental processes) directly associated with the academic work of students, including motivation, writing skills, self-regulatory strategies and academic identity.

Studies on doctoral dropout and persistence, however, have not separated international doctoral students (IDS) from local students. As Laufer and Gorup (2019) point out, IDS are likely to be unfamiliar with the educational system, language and culture, thus more intellectually and socially vulnerable. However, due to immigration requirements and visa-related issues (Groenvynck et al., 2013), IDS, especially those who secure full scholarships, are shown to have stronger motivations to finish their doctoral programmes.

To date, there has been a lack of qualitative studies on the voices and experiences of funded international students who discontinue doctoral research degrees. Moreover, little is known about mental health, well-being and other intersecting factors such as ethnicity, gender, culture and social expectations as potential causes of doctoral dropout. This paper uses qualitative methods and a life course perspective to uncover the 'hidden' experience of fully funded Vietnamese international students who dropped out of overseas doctoral programmes in social sciences and humanities. While this paper uses the term 'dropout' throughout, because this is the phrase most commonly used to describe the process of failing to complete a PhD, I acknowledge that this is a pejorative term and also use the more neutral 'non-completion'.

This paper asks four main questions:

1. What motivates international students to drop out of PhD programmes?
2. How do cultural and gender factors influence their decisions to drop out?
3. What are the anticipated consequences of PhD dropout and how are they linked to reasons for dropout?
4. How does a life course perspective address structural and agency aspects of international PhD non-completers' educational experience?

In the paragraphs that follow, I first provide an overview of related literature on international students (IS) and doctoral non-completion. I then explain how a life course perspective is conceptualised in analysing the education experiences of IDS. Next, I present my methodology and materials from the study. This is followed by a summary of motivations for and consequences of doctoral dropout under the key themes of a life course perspective. Finally, I discuss the structural and agency aspects of narratives of PhD non-completers.

## International students (IS) and doctoral non-completion: an overview

This study is built upon two main bodies of literature on IS and on doctoral non-completion. For one, studies on IS have largely focused on their educational experience as either passive learners who could not keep up with academic culture in the Westernised higher education systems (Lacina, 2002) or ‘active agents’ who managed to transform their personal and professional selves (Tran & Vu, 2018; Nguyen & Robertson, 2020). Proponents of the deficit view cite language and cultural barriers as the main challenges for IS in the host universities, some of which are directly linked to IS non-completion. Among a few studies on the agency of IS, however, there has been so far no discussion of the agency among fully funded IS who decided to drop out. For another, the literature on doctoral non-completion has been limited in quantity, and descriptive in quality. This body of literature started to emerge in the early 2000s as a response to concerns over the mental health and well-being of early career researchers (Schmidt & Hansson, 2018). Studies on doctoral non-completion have grounded on two interlinked conceptual frameworks: Tinto’s (1993) student integration and Said’s (1978) concept of ‘othering’. Spaulding and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2012), for example, utilise Tinto’s framework which focuses on individual’s (in) ability to ‘enculturate’ in the educational systems as predictors of student’s dropout or persistence. Meanwhile, a growing number of studies in doctoral non-completion (Campbell, 2015; Laufer & Gorup, 2019) seek to deploy the concept of ‘othering’ to highlight various structural factors in the host society that hinder IS to integrate in their scholarly and social communities. These two conceptual frameworks are crucial in justifying IDS non-completion. However, they do not consider agency as an ‘organic element’ of PhD non-completers’ identity. It is therefore insufficient to rely on these two frameworks to interrogate IDS’s life trajectories beyond the PhD or link the motivations for dropout with the projected/actual consequences of dropout.

## A life course perspective on understanding IDS non-completion

I propose to use a life course perspective to understand why and how a doctoral student decides to drop out of their studies and how they develop their life trajectories beyond the PhD. According to Elder et al. (2003), a life course perspective centres on a range of inter-linked principles including time and place, timing, linked lives, agency and lifespan development.

Based on Elder et al. (2003), Brady and Gilligan (2018) adopt a life course perspective to understand the educational experiences of care leavers. Despite their initial findings, Brady and Gilligan’s paper offers a systematic framework to analyse the dynamics of relational, temporal and developmental aspects in shaping an individual’s life experience, which I find useful for the case of IDS non-completion. This framework centres on six following themes.

First, the interplay of human lives and historical time theme connects a doctoral student’s learning and development with broader historical contexts. IDS are likely to choose topics in line with prioritised research agendas to get overseas PhD scholarships although these topics might not fit their backgrounds.

Second, the theme timing of lives is concerned with an individual’s age and the typical life transitions associated with it. Fully funded IDS from Asian countries often start

later than local students and may be married and/or have kids when they join the PhD programme. Their educational experience is intertwined with their work and family commitments.

Third, the theme linked/independent lives emphasises the interconnectedness between a doctoral student's life and those of their family members, colleagues (including supervisors) and other people over their PhD candidature, which both support and control their behaviours, perceptions and experiences.

Fourth, the theme human agency highlights the ability of an individual to actively make choices and take action based on their specific contexts (or structural factors) (Elder et al., 2003). Focusing on human agency allows us to see dropout as a life achievement independent of their academic careers. In this regard, I find Biesta and Tedder (2007)'s and Emirbayer and Mische (1998)'s discussion of agency and informal learning via individual narratives particularly insightful. Specifically, Biesta and Tedder (2007) propose that individual narratives, or stories of one's life, enable one to exert agency since the act of telling stories 'allows for the articulation and evaluation of one's agentic orientations and can provide a form for the reframing of one's (future) orientations' (p.138). The idea of individual narratives as an enabling platform for 'agentic learning' is developed from Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) three-dimension model of agency referring to 'influences from the past, orientation towards the future and engagement with the present' (ibid. p.135). Taken together, these theories of agency help to address the temporal contexts of PhD non-completion, from not only a historical and age-appropriate perspective but also a river of life approach, i.e. following life events and autobiographies. They also inform the methodological approach of this study which prioritises interviews and life histories to capture individual narratives and informal learning of PhD non-completers.

Fifth, the theme diversity in life course trajectories refers to various personal and professional pathways a doctoral student might develop during a doctoral programme. Sixth, the theme of development risk and protection introduces two contrasting scenarios. Dropout may enrich or distort their life course trajectories depending on certain 'turning points' such as writing up and defending a dissertation, extending candidature, returning to home institutions or moving out of academia. The developmental aspect of dropout, as such, is closely linked to personal circumstances and available supporting structures of PhD non-completers.

## Methods and materials

Methodologically, I relied on qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews and life histories to collect data. These qualitative research methods helped to provide longitudinal and in-depth perspectives on respondents' experiences (Creswell, 2013). In terms of the sample, I focused on the narratives of Vietnamese students who undertook or are undertaking a PhD overseas. Respondents, including both male and female PhD students, were recruited via snowball techniques. Given my challenges in recruiting PhD non-completers to interview, I included non-completers and completers self-identifying as having difficulties during their PhD studies. My sampling strategies helped to capture the similarities and differences between those who dropped out and those who persisted. This also helped to gain a better understanding of gender influences in PhD dropout decisions and consequences.

I conducted eight interviews, of which four were recorded, one was captured via note taking and three were email interviews in which respondents were requested to fill in a questionnaire of open-ended questions. The interview questionnaire included eight to twelve questions depending on the respondents (active candidates or non-completers). For active candidates, questions were framed around their expectations about the study programmes and how they unfold in reality, their challenges in taking courses, working with supervisors, managing their academic-personal lives, as well as their forms of support during PhD candidature. Meanwhile, for non-completers, more emphasis was placed on the influencers and emotions associated with crucial ‘turning points’ (i.e. when they decided to discontinue their PhD). Non-completers were also invited to reflect on their main reasons to drop out and which supporting structures would be useful for IDS who struggle during their PhD or consider dropping out.

All my respondents had worked for government institutions or NGOs and received scholarships to pursue their PhDs in social sciences or humanities overseas. Their educational experience, therefore, is unique and relevant to both host educational providers and home institutions. While far from representative, my sampling strategies are nevertheless informed by practical and methodological reasons. Their demographic characteristics are summarised and encoded in Table 1.

As this study dealt with human subjects, I obtained the necessary ethical clearances from the Research Ethics Committee before commencing my fieldwork in late 2020. I informed my potential respondents that they had full rights to refuse to be tape-recorded, to terminate interviews or withdraw from the project at any time. I also reminded them that their identities were kept anonymised in any further publications. I followed a multiple-stage approach to organise and code my collected data:

- (1) Digitalise and anonymise the data: I transcribed the recording files, typed up the notes and downloaded the completed questionnaires. I then assigned codes to each respondent and stored them in a password-secured laptop.
- (2) First round of coding: I randomly selected one transcription, one note and one questionnaire to read and manually coded. I identified recurring following the research questions (reasons to drop out, consequences and mechanisms to exert agency) and used these initial codes to work on the rest of the texts.
- (3) Second round of coding: I organised these themes into brainstorming bubbles and used arrows to illustrate the relationships between them.

**Table 1** Characteristics of respondents involved in the study

Code	Gender	Age	Marital status	Previously studied/ currently residing	Completion status
C1	Male	35–40	Married	Australia/Norway	Not completed
C2	Female	35–40	Married	Australia/Australia	Not completed
C3	Female	Over 40	Married	UK/Vietnam	Not completed
C4	Male	Under 35	Married	UK/UK	Ongoing (considering dropout)
C5	Female	35–40	Married	Germany/Germany	Not completed
C6	Female	35–40	Married	Australia/Australia	Ongoing (considering dropout)
C7	Male	35–40	Single	Singapore/Vietnam	Completed
C8	Male	35–40	Married	Singapore/Vietnam	Not completed

Adapting from Lincoln and Guba (1985)'s model, I focused on credibility, dependability and transferability to ensure the trustworthiness of my qualitative data coding. Specifically, I triangulated data from different sources including interviews, field observation and personal communications with my respondents. I also utilised 'reflexive auditing' (Stahl & King, 2020: 27) which allowed me to constantly assess my positionality *vis-à-vis* my respondents' and its impacts on my data interpretation. Last but not least, through practical recommendations to improve existing supportive structures for IS, my research could be extended to similar contexts, which ultimately helped to promote its transferability.

## Key findings

This section reports the key findings regarding PhD non-completers' motivations for dropout and actual consequences for their career development and life satisfaction. I structure this section into three sub-sections to respond to my research questions and employ the six themes of a life course perspective to justify the decisions and experiences of both PhD non-completers and completers.

### Motivations for dropout

Justifying their decision to 'break their bridge to career success' to a researcher seemed to be an ambivalent experience for PhD non-completers. While some found it upsetting, others felt a sense of release. However, all their stories showed that they had many reasons to make that crucial life decision. These were related to supervisor-related issues, level of support within their departments, family problems, academic aptitude and financial burdens. These reasons correspond to certain themes of a life course perspective, especially linked/independent lives and the timing of lives..

### Linked/independent lives

Many respondents initially attributed their dropout to personal reasons. However, a detailed analysis of their narratives showed that their decisions were not solely personal, but often influenced by their supervisors, faculties and family members. Relationships between these individualised, societal and institutional dropout factors reflect the linked lives of doctoral students and other people associated with their PhD studies.

The most common reasons for dropout related to supervision, including lack of feedback, mismatch in working styles and being neglected or abandoned by a supervisor. Tensions in work relationships and conflicts between members of their supervisory team also resulted in doctoral students feeling 'helpless', as shown below:

When I encountered difficulties in my studies, my two supervisors pointed me in divergent directions. If I listened to the primary one, then the secondary one would not be happy, and *vice versa*. I felt like I was swimming in the middle of a river and against the currents, and it drove me crazy. (C1)

In theory, at most universities, doctoral students can change supervisors if they feel they are a poor match for their supervisors. There was, however, a complicated administrative procedure involved, plus a number of immigration conditions that required supervisors to continually endorse their work progress and PhD status. Even when students

were willing to undergo the process, new supervisors were not necessarily able to support them better. One non-completer who had to change supervisors after her fieldwork told me.

When I changed my supervisor, the new one said she was not interested in the data I collected, and asked me if I could think of another approach. I then tried to shift my approach to fit her interest, but I did not think she even cared. I tried very hard. Yet it seemed that everything worked against me. (C2)

Those who had difficulties with supervisors sometimes could not get any support from their departments. As a non-completer recalled his precarious situation when he decided to drop out, it reminded me of the ‘culture of institutional neglect’ (McAlpine et al., 2012) that led to doctoral dropout elsewhere:

...In each institution, you think you should have someone to support you when you are in need, but in my case, I did not have anyone [in my department] willing to be my witness so I could lodge a complaint [regarding supervisors]. And it did not go anywhere... All of these things coming together made me decide to just stop... (C1)

Lacking a sense of belonging to the department/institutions, especially when they already had a difficult relationship with their supervisor, was strong motivation for dropout. It was also reported that feelings of isolation and loneliness had a lingering effect on students’ well-being. One female non-completer shared her feelings after she was unfairly treated by her supervisor on several occasions:

...You really didn’t have support, you felt terribly lonely. It’s not because you did not know anyone. You felt lonely because you could not talk to anyone about academic issues [and your research topic] ... My supervisor was quite proactive in organising social activities and reaching out to audiences via small workshops, but I was not even informed. I felt as if I was invisible in my supervisor’s perspective, and it hurt... (C2)

Apart from supervisor and socialisation issues, many respondents were convinced that their independent lives, or their realisation that they lacked the aptitude to complete a PhD, was the main reason for their dropout. This could be seen in terms of language proficiency, discipline-based knowledge or their ability to cope with different ways of learning at overseas educational institutions. Many respondents in my sample were awarded the most prestigious government scholarships thanks to their timely research topics and scholarly achievements which made them the brightest candidates in their cohorts. Lack of academic aptitude as a reason to drop out, therefore, was conditioned by other factors developed along the PhD journey. A female non-completer shared how anxious she felt about quitting her PhD and why she decided to do so, saying, ‘[t]he reason why I quit was mostly personal, as I did not try my best [to finish my PhD]. If I had worked harder, I could have done it’ (C3). Another male non-completer gave a similar reason:

I had a break in my career [dropping out of the PhD] because I was indeed not capable [of doing a PhD]. I did not prepare well for it, my own capacity was not enough, and I was also ignorant of certain procedures. (C1)

While both respondents mentioned the role of academic aptitude in their dropout, the former struggled with low motivation to finish her PhD, and the latter had a difficult time with his supervisors. Lacking individual academic aptitude, as argued earlier, was not the only reason for dropping out in these cases.

## The timing of lives

Most of my respondents shared similar demographic profiles in terms of age and marital status. Specifically, they joined the PhD programmes during their late 20 s and early 30 s, when they were already married or married with kids (except one). It was not unusual for them, especially for male PhD students, to leave their spouses and kids in their home countries while pursuing a PhD overseas. This does not mean they could ‘walk away’ from social/emotional expectations demanded of them as a spouse or parent. Being unable to balance their aspirations to study overseas with the responsibilities towards their families in the country of origin, therefore, could be detrimental to doctoral outcomes. For example, a first-year doctoral student admitted his dropout intention due to family issues:

Before coming to the UK, I asked my wife if she wanted to accompany me, but she did not want to. So now, I am planning to quit my current PhD (after finishing my MSc) to go back to Vietnam. I am also applying for a project with another Professor which allows me to work half of the time in the UK and half of the time in Vietnam. I would then stay in Vietnam longer instead of being away from my family for too long...(C4)

Aside from social/emotional expectations, financial responsibilities were also perceived differently by PhD students who were married and used to earning a full-time salary rather than a PhD stipend. A number of respondents brought up the issue of financial burden, which was caused by the specific institutional financial arrangements for doctoral students seeking an extension, and by their own perceptions of quality of life. Depending on the educational system, doctoral students receive funding for a limited period, ranging from three years (UK/EU systems) to four and a half years (Singapore), after which they must pay a fee to maintain their PhD status. A male PhD non-completer said, ‘I could not pay my fees to extend my candidacy anymore. So I still applied for an extension, but eventually quit and did not receive my degree’ (C8). Another female student, who had a well-paid consulting job before undertaking her PhD in Australia, admitted that ‘financial pressure is another problem; even though I have [a] scholarship, it’s not enough to have a ‘life’ outside PhD’ (C6). The modest scholarship, in this case, did not help to maintain a certain quality of life, which fuelled her dropout decision.

Overall, even though most of my respondents discussed a wide range of reasons to drop out, which connected the timing of lives and linked/independent lives themes, they eventually questioned their ability to complete a doctoral training programme in an additional language. There, however, seem to be various layers within their intellectual struggles as IDS, in this case, IDS in social sciences and humanities, since language and theoretical foundations are key to articulating their research ideas and potential contributions to their disciplines.

## Consequences of dropout

The consequences of dropping out were perceived differently depending on whether PhD non-completers returned to their home institutions in Vietnam. In other words, the turning points of PhD non-completers were going home or staying in the host society.



## Developmental risk and protection vs linked/independent lives

For those who decided to return, the consequences of failing to finish a PhD degree seemed to be destructive to their personal and professional lives. These could include having to repay scholarship debt, suffering from mental health issues, having to negotiate a weakened position within office politics or having promotions delayed. One male non-completer spelled out the potential ‘scarring effects’ for his career as a consequence of his dropout:

When I first returned to Vietnam, I thought everyone deserved a second chance. I thought if I put in a lot of effort, I would be able to prove yourself intellectually... But in fact, it was really hard. The opportunity to do another PhD after quitting the first one, for me, was super difficult. (C1)

Another male non-completer shared the adverse impacts of non-completion on both his career prospects and well-being:

[I feel] upset about it [not getting a PhD degree]. It affects my opportunities for career progression, as I am not allowed to lead big projects. First it delays my chance for promotion, then it puts pressures on me, and affects my mental health. (C8)

The responses of respondents showed that feeling upset, shamed and regretful were common among non-completers. Returning to work in the same institution was challenging for Vietnamese graduates due to ‘reverse cultural shock’ (Le & LaCost, 2017: 458), which refers to unanticipated culture shock experienced upon reintegrating to academic environments in Vietnam. A female non-completer described trying to fit into her institution again after 10 years overseas, returning without a doctorate:

My regret for not finishing the PhD programme lasted for two years, during which time I was still working for the government [upon returning to Vietnam]. Because I was still socialising with people in the system including friends who had finished their PhDs and worked for other government institutions... After careful consideration, I realised that I’d rather resign and pay back my scholarship debt to release the pressure on me. (C3)

The pressure of trying to fit back into institutions that they used to work for was far greater than anticipated. At the time of the interviews, three non-completers had either resigned from their previous institutions or secured another PhD post to temporarily distance themselves from their colleagues. The consequences of dropping out, in this case, were more visible when these non-completers had to engage with former colleagues and institutions whose linked lives could exert considerable control over their independent lives.

However, my respondents, especially women, also reported that they felt much better after dropping out, as they could move on with their life without a PhD. Well-being and mental health seemed to be their priority and, in many cases, these triumphed over their fear of career failure or financial ties. The consequences of dropout, as such, can be seen from a constructive perspective. Asked how she had been since deciding to drop out, one female non-completer said:

so far I feel better mentally. It took me a couple of months to find a job in the middle of the pandemic which did create some pressure and self-doubt. But once I got my job, I felt much better. [Prior to that] I was extremely miserable and there were both mental and physical implications from the PhD stress. (C6)

Another female respondent explained the positive changes in both her mental well-being and job satisfaction since she decided that academia was not her career for life:

After I resigned, I found my first job as a Creative Manager for a packaging company, then I moved to a couple of big companies working on system management and digital transformation. I feel that my job requires me to be a quick learner. However, my current company is quite proactive in investing in human resources and I can utilise what I learnt from my PhD research, so I am pretty excited and happy with my choice. (C3)

Leaving behind a non-completed PhD opened opportunities for women to focus on other priorities in their life, such as having a baby, enjoying a stress-free life and exploring alternative careers. There was, of course, a mixture of anxiety and excitement when they decided to drop out. However, it was by no means a spontaneous decision, but based on a thorough process of weighing up the pursuit of a career and well-being, as narrated by a female non-completer:

I myself felt lost after quitting my PhD, although mentally, I felt great... As I thought about applying for jobs in the long run, I was a bit worried, because I had not completed my PhD. Yet I wanted to be a mother, so I decided to get pregnant and have a baby first. When I made my decision [to drop out], I only thought about my priorities. I asked myself if I wanted to protect my health and well-being or save my career. In fact, I thought I felt extremely different after just one or two weeks [of dropout]. This [the experience of dropout] has taught me to appreciate certain things and certain people in my life. (C2)

Neither of the women who reported feeling better after dropping out moved back to Vietnam or struggled with 'reverse cultural shock' in their previous workplace. In other words, they did not have to endure the same amount of social pressure and (self-)shame imposed on other non-completers who decided to return. This again showed that the linked/independent lives factor could play a crucial role in differentiating non-completers' experiences.

### **The timing of lives/interplay of human lives and historical times vs diversity in life courses**

The way my respondents anticipated and subsequently faced the consequences of dropping out were diverse yet relative to the timing of their lives. Those who decided to go back justified this based on their personal situations, future plans in academia and level of resilience (against social pressure in their home countries). As a male respondent explained:

I decided to go back to my previous institution because I thought that's where I left to study overseas and I would want to re-start everything from there. Moreover, when I went back, I was so confident that I would get another PhD scholarship after two years. But then the global economic situations changed, and the funding opportunities were suddenly shrunk. (C1)

For him, as he planned to continue working in academia and wanted to find another PhD, he decided to go back right after dropping out of his first PhD. Moreover, at that time, he had no kids, so the pressure of returning to work and providing for his family was not

immediate. In the end, it took him 4 years to get a second PhD offer due to the effects of funding cuts.

Meanwhile, a female student who also returned to the same institution to work took a completely different turn. She resigned from her institution and tried out different careers at the age of 40. Her reason was ‘I quit my PhD so I would not want to work in academia’ (C3). Noticeably, she managed to make this transition partly thanks to her personal situations. According to her, her husband subsequently secured a good job at a local university, and her kids were relatively independent when her family moved back from the UK. By then, she finally felt that she could lift her caring responsibilities off her shoulders and pursue what she really wanted in life.

These divergent responses and actions reflect the diversity in life courses of non-completers which is shaped by the timing of their lives and the interplay between their own lives and historical times such as socio-economic conditions. More importantly, they inform us of broader gender norms and respondents’ gendered notions of well-being and mechanisms through which to achieve well-being, which will be further explored in the next sub-section.

## Gender and cultural aspects of doctoral dropout

The narratives of Vietnamese PhD non-completers illustrate the strong influences of gender and culture in their struggles before and after dropout. Rather than neatly fitting into separate themes of a life course perspective, the gendered and culturally sensitive narratives cut across various themes including linked/independent lives, human agency and developmental risk and protection.

These are manifested in how male and female respondents perceived and disclosed their PhD dropout decisions in their social circle. Specifically, male respondents tried to avoid talking about their dropout with their parents, as it would be an embarrassment to them. The culture of saving face and the role of education in East Asian and Vietnamese culture, which values internationally recognised degrees and uses educational attainments to measure one’s success in life, play a central role in this. According to Nguyen (2013), ‘face’ (*thể diện* in Vietnamese) refers to a socially approved image that represents the expectations and evaluations of others (family members, neighbours or colleagues). For non-completers, being unable to finish a PhD means failing to achieve a scholarly goal. Although my respondents accepted it, they still felt the need to ‘save face’ for their parents, as explained by a male non-completer:

It was a proud moment for my parents when I got the scholarship to study in Australia, so my dad told me that he would wait until I brought back my PhD degree from Australia, because he studied overseas too [in Russia]. Having to hide my PhD dropout from my parents bothers me. For an [East] Asian family, I still feel that I had to lie [about this failure]. I can’t imagine how they would be if I told them I quit my PhD in Australia. It’s just very sad. (C1)

‘Face’ is especially important for men, as masculine norms see them as symbols of academic success and career progression in their families. Most male respondents returned to their home country after they dropped out, and were more vulnerable to the social pressures of ‘saving face’. Moreover, norms of masculinity in Vietnam that frame men as ‘the pillar of the family’ made it difficult for male respondents to seek help in their host institutions or rely on support from their family back home. One male respondent pointed out

that, as a man having mental health issues during his PhD studies, he found the support from the mental well-being team in his university ineffective because of the cultural differences between his counsellors and himself. As he explained in detail,

I have tried the mental health support schemes, and it did not help with my actual problems. For example, a Caucasian female social worker would not be able to support an Asian man like me. Aside from gender differences, I am not convinced that she could understand my problems being a man [in my family] in [East] Asian contexts, or masculinity norms in my society, or what kind of social expectations I have to shoulder. I am concerned that I was judged by them, because they did not understand my culture, and they could think that I was too patriarchal. (C4)

Will these masculine norms lead to more cases of mental breakdown among male doctoral students, as they might have fewer outlets to seek mental support? In the narratives of male respondents, there were fewer references to ‘well-being’ and ‘happiness’ beyond the PhD than in those of female respondents. Instead, they were often filled with notions of ‘responsibilities’, ‘pressure’ and ‘shame’. This, again, shows a strong influence of gender norms in Vietnamese society, in which men are expected to be more career-centred and mentally resilient.

Another aspect of gender differences is how male and female students associated themselves with ‘host’ and ‘home’ institutions. The female students seemed to be more able than the men to exert their ‘agency’ through their departure from academia in both host and home institutions. One female non-completer stayed in Australia and subsequently got permanent residence there; another returned to Vietnam with her family but decided to pay back her scholarship debt so she could start a new career in the industry. Their stories illustrate how female students managed to craft selves (Kondo, 1990) by challenging the social stigmas of PhD non-completers as intellectually incompetent and pursuing a career beyond academia. The male students, meanwhile, returned to where they used to work, despite the negative effects of their career breakdown.

## Discussion

In this discussion, I reflect on the structural and agency aspects of PhD non-completion, taking Vietnamese IDS as a case study. The structure-agency division is based on a review of related literature on IS and doctoral non-completion as well as the dynamics among six themes of a life course perspective. It allows me to situate the findings within the existing literature, and demonstrate the theoretical and practical contributions of this study.

### **Structures that bind: relational, temporal and developmental aspects of PhD dropout**

Using five themes of a life course perspective helps to capture various structural aspects that shape the educational experience of international Vietnamese doctoral students. These include relational aspects (linked/independent lives), temporal aspects (the interplay of human lives and historical times, the timing of lives) and developmental aspects (diversity in life courses, developmental risk and protection). Underpinning these factors are the social identities of PhD non-completers, i.e. their nationality, gender and culture, which

play an important role in differentiating their perceptions and actions during and beyond their PhD.

Relational aspects are visible in all aspects and stages of PhD lives, as PhD students are single nodes in a complex network of academic and personal relationships. Their decisions to drop out, to stay in or leave academia should not be seen as personal responsibilities. As shown earlier, many were either abandoned by their supervisors or suffered from social isolation and family breakdown during their PhD studies, which equally contributed to their decision to discontinue their PhD programmes. This observation resonates well with Tinto's (1993) framework, which posits that students tend to drop out when they struggle with academic and social integration. What remains unexplored in the main literature is the impacts of other influential networks and relationships in their home institutions on IDS experience before and after dropout. Laufer and Gorup (2019) studies, for example, emphasise foreign, academic, financial and social others as potential motivations for international doctoral dropout, all of which are imposed upon IDS by the host environments rather than those in the home countries. As this study suggests, broader socio-cultural dynamics around the workplace (through office politics) and with the state (through scholarship debt) may obstruct the re-integration into the academia of Vietnamese PhD non-completers. Acknowledging the 'power' of relational aspects in PhD non-completers' perceptions and actions in the host universities and home countries, therefore, helps to prevent double dropouts (from the PhD and from academia) and brain drain in the IDS's countries of origin.

Relational aspects go hand-in-hand with temporal aspects. My respondents were believed to enjoy more financial advantages due to their funding status. However, they also entered their PhD study with certain gendered responsibilities and socio-cultural expectations. As such, the role of funding in PhD outcomes was often complicated by the timing of lives as well as the interplay of human lives and historical times. Previous studies show that access to funding corresponds with lower rates of dropout (Leijen et al., 2016), which suggests that fully funded doctoral students are less likely to drop out. This study points out the causal relationships between funding conditions, IDS's economic role in their family and non-completion, which has not been properly discussed in the literature on doctoral non-completion. Specifically, PhD fundings were often based on an estimated completion times between three and four-and-a-half years for both IDS and home students. This timeline was sometimes problematic for IDS since they had to read and write in a second language. Extending their doctoral candidacy, meanwhile, was costly for them. For those who were also breadwinners, the dilemma between paying for a PhD extension or dropout due to their family's financial needs often resulted in students taking the latter option. Moreover, historical events such as the global economic downturn also determined whether they could get another PhD scholarship offer or find a non-academic job after dropout. This signals the linkage between the human lives and historical times through financial status, which might negatively influence PhD non-completers' life trajectories.

Both relational and temporal aspects are closely related to developmental aspects of PhD non-completion. Studies of IDS non-completion (Sakurai et al., 2012) have so far focused on reasons for dropout and possible interventions, thus, overlooking the developmental process of non-completers after dropout. This study, by uncovering a lesser-known chapter of doctoral non-completers, informs us of individual transitions and self-transformations that occurred in the students' life trajectories. Returning respondents realised the destructive impact of PhD dropout on their career, especially for those who remained in academia and government institutions. However, the constructive impact was also felt on their well-being, sense of self-worth and non-career aspects. The destructive or constructive impacts

of dropout, furthermore, are linked to specific contexts of Vietnam. This corresponds with existing literature on the emerging importance of gender and culture in shaping the experiences of IDS particularly Vietnamese IDS (Robertson & Nguyen, 2021). Specifically, my study illustrates how masculine norms and social expectations of being academically successful contributed to exacerbating the implications of dropout for male non-completers.

### **Sharing is healing: narratives and agency of PhD non-completers**

While this study focuses on illustrating a range of structural factors encountered by PhD non-completers, it also uncovers their own ways of exercising human agency. For non-completers, the agency is not about having it, but about living it, and sharing how to live it. Previous studies have discussed ‘agency in mobility’ (Tran & Vu, 2018) but the main focus has been the agency of PhD completers or local PhD students, rather than that of international PhD non-completers.

This study instead centres on the agency of PhD non-completers which is manifested in two interlinked stages. The first happened before they decided to drop out. All of them put in extra efforts to take back control when they first experienced difficulties in their PhD studies. These include asking for a supervisor transfer, lodging a complaint about supervision issues with their department, applying for extensions, or seeking support from university counsellors. The second started when they failed to find support and decided to drop out. For them, the agency is about choosing when to quit by weighing up the pros and cons of keeping their place on a doctoral programme, and about choosing how to narrate the life lessons they learnt and foster their well-being beyond the PhD. In other words, the agency is constructed through learning from the past, engaging with the present and preparing for the future. To learn from the past, they began by sharing their experience of why they failed to complete their PhD with a researcher like me. While talking through their reasons for dropout, they also carefully integrated what they learnt, such as finding a more supportive supervisor, prioritising their well-being rather than pleasing others, or looking for jobs in private sectors to utilise their skills. Between learning from the past and orienting towards the future, they actively engaged with their everyday activities, whether another PhD programme, job-hunting after maternity leave or new projects in their company. All of these directly help to rekindle and nurture their sense of fulfillment. The two interlinked stages of exercising agency of PhD non-completers, as such, reflect three types of agency in Nguyen and Robertson (2020)’s studies including needs-response agency, agency as struggle and resistance and agency for becoming. However, its focus on individual narratives of coping with failures, learning from and living beyond failures and promoting a new form of well-being, which I term as an agency of resilience and well-being, makes this case study unique.

### **Theoretical contributions and policy implications**

This paper offers new theoretical insights and policy implications for doctoral education studies. Theoretically, it takes the debates of doctoral dropout away from a binary approach (internal vs external factors of doctoral dropout). Instead, it argues for a more holistic and life course-based approach that recognises the impacts of international students’ agency, characteristics and broader societal norms and contexts in both the host environments and their home countries on motivations for and consequences of doctoral dropout. It helps to increase the representation of non-completers in the literature on IDS and advocates for

an alternative form of agency, an agency of resilience and well-being. In a way, it critically challenges the deficit view of IS and IDS by highlighting the ability of international doctoral non-completers to overcome their supposedly 'failures' and regain their sense of well-being. Practically, it provides a base from which to reflect on the current supporting structures for IDS, which were considered tactical and ineffective—not least for their lack of understanding of the social and cultural contexts of international students and the different types of pressures that they negotiate. Drawing on the narratives of both completers and non-completers, this study suggests that more effort should be invested in informing IDS about the academic and pastoral support available to them. For those who experience difficulties in working with their supervisors, support from the host institutions in tracking supervisors' engagement with their supervisees, facilitating supervisor change and endorsing their PhD status for visa purposes are of special concern.

## Conclusion

This study documents the educational experiences of Vietnamese IDS who dropped out of overseas doctoral training programmes in social sciences and humanities. It conceptualises their reasons for dropout and the impacts of these decisions on their career, well-being and other personal goals from a life-course perspective. The findings of this study suggest that relational, temporal and developmental aspects play a role in shaping PhD non-completers' educational experiences during and after dropout. Specifically, the linked/independent lives and the timing of lives themes help to understand reasons for IDS to drop out, which underline their engagement with research networks, academic identity and familial responsibilities. Meanwhile, the consequences of dropout illustrate the intersections of five themes: linked/independent lives, development risk and projects, the timing of lives/interplay of human lives and historical times and diversity in life courses. Taken together, the five themes capture diverse life trajectories and forms of agency developed by PhD non-completers while negotiating social pressures and institutional politics in their home institution as well as their perceptions of well-being and life priorities. Their life trajectories and forms of agency are highly gendered and culturally specific. Noticeably, female non-completers were more active in searching for and building back their 'agentic orientations' through learning new skills, entering motherhood or leaving academic institutions. Male non-completers tended to be more constrained by various masculine norms and career commitments, which motivated them to return to their home institutions and stay in academia. As a seed-corn project, this study could not avoid certain limitations in sample size and data collection due to the effects of the global pandemic. Future studies focusing on students from different cultural backgrounds and at different stages of their PhD candidature therefore would facilitate a more comprehensive picture of how social identities and structural aspects contribute to doctoral dropout.

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## Declarations

**Ethics approval** This study received full ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee, Institute of Education, University College London (Reference Number REC1417, Data Protection Registration Number Z6364106/2020/11/55).

**Consent to participate** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Consent for publication** Not applicable.

**Competing interests** The author declares no competing interests.

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