

# Inbound student mobility to Viet Nam: Attracting factors for Laotian and Cambodian students and management implications for Vietnamese universities

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## ABSTRACT

In the context of globalization and the rise of Asian countries as new study abroad destinations, this research explores the factors motivating Laotian and Cambodian students to study abroad and the specific factors attracting them to choose Vietnam as their destination country. As intra-ASEAN student mobility grows, understanding the dynamics of these flows to emerging hubs like Vietnam—a nation with strategic goals to internationalize its higher education—becomes critical. Employing a multiphase mixed-methods design, this study provides a nuanced analysis by integrating quantitative and qualitative data. The research process involved exploratory interviews to inform the development of a survey instrument, followed by concurrent data collection through quantitative surveys with 67 Laotian and Cambodian students and in-depth qualitative interviews with 11 students and diplomatic representatives. The findings indicate that the primary "push" factors are not merely practical but also aspirational, including a strong desire for a transformative international student experience and the perception that foreign degrees offer higher quality and greater value, providing a competitive edge in their home job markets. The most significant "pull" factor attracting students to Vietnam is overwhelmingly the availability of comprehensive government scholarships. This is followed by a combination of other attractions: the positive and stable bilateral relations between the nations, Vietnam's impressive economic development, and the increasingly recognized quality of its higher education system. This study contributes to the limited body of literature on international student mobility to non-traditional, non-Anglophone destinations, particularly within the context of ASEAN. It offers concrete management implications for Vietnamese universities. Findings and recommendations from this study can help Vietnamese universities more effectively attract international students, particularly those from Laos and Cambodia, to enrich their academic communities, strengthen regional ties, and ultimately enhance their international standing in a competitive global landscape.

**Key words:** International students, pull factors, push factors, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, higher education, ASEAN

## INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization, international student mobility has become a prominent trend, reshaping global higher education. The number of students pursuing education in countries other than their own has significantly increased, from approximately 2 million in 2000 to over 6 million in recent years<sup>1</sup>, reflecting a growing demand for international education. The flow of international students is regarded as a "bedrock" element<sup>2</sup>, making a core contribution to the international character of universities. While international students comprise a small fraction of the global higher education population, their presence is a key factor in institutional reputation and a powerful driver for internationalization efforts at higher education institutions<sup>3</sup>. International students not only enrich cultural capital and bring economic benefits to

the host country but also promote skills transfer, enhance the capacity of sending nations, and strengthen relations between countries<sup>4,5</sup>.

In the Vietnamese context, internationalization of higher education is identified as a central measure for quality improvement. This has been consistently emphasized in key strategic documents, from the Education Strategy 2011-2020 (Decision 711/QĐ-TTg by the Prime Minister, June 13, 2012)<sup>6</sup>, which specified "expanding and enhancing international cooperation in education," to Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW (by the Politburo, November 4, 2013)<sup>7</sup>, which directed "proactive and active international integration to develop education and training." Subsequently, the Higher Education Quality Improvement Project 2019-2025 (Decision 69/QĐ-TTg by the Prime Minister, January 15, 2019)<sup>8</sup> set specific targets for inter-

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national exchange and rankings. Most recently, the Education Development Strategy to 2030, with a vision to 2045 (Decision 1705/QĐ-TTg by the Prime Minister, December 31, 2023)<sup>9</sup>, continues to set more ambitious goals for university rankings with at least 05 universities in the world's top 500, 05 universities in Asia's top 200, and enhancing the position of Vietnam's higher education system in the region.

To realize these ambitious ranking goals, alongside enhancing the research and teaching capacity of faculty, attracting international students to study in Vietnam has become a matter of urgency. The presence of international students and faculty is an important indicator in prestigious ranking systems such as QS (accounting for 5%) and THE (accounting for 2.5%). Although the weightage is not excessively large, this is one of the most challenging metrics for Vietnamese universities<sup>10</sup>. This necessitates strong investment in measures to attract and support international students, making them a strategic "asset" in the global university rankings race. The urgency of attracting international students, particularly those pursuing degree programs, is further affirmed by Decision No. 1600/QĐ-TTg (by the Prime Minister, December 19, 2024)<sup>11</sup> approving the Project on International Integration in Education and Training to 2030. This project sets a specific target to "increase the proportion of international students pursuing degree programs in Vietnamese higher education to 1.5%" by 2030.

Academically, with the rise of Asian countries as emerging destinations for global international student mobility, a series of studies has begun to explore the experiences of international students in countries and territories such as China<sup>12-15</sup>, Taiwan<sup>16-18</sup>, South Korea<sup>19-21</sup>, Malaysia and Singapore<sup>22</sup>, and Thailand<sup>23</sup>. Research interest in international students at Vietnamese universities has also recently shown diverse approaches to various aspects of international student groups, such as studies using large-scale quantitative data<sup>24</sup>, interviews with lecturers who have taught Vietnamese to international students<sup>25</sup>, or surveys at a specific higher education institution<sup>26,27</sup>. The number of studies exploring different aspects of international students' experiences in Asian higher education institutions, including Vietnam, continues to grow, indicating that this research topic is deepening and requires further contributions to diversify the picture of international education.

However, research on this phenomenon in Vietnam<sup>24-27</sup> and more broadly between member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

(ASEAN) remains nascent. This study seeks to complement this research gap by investigating factors influencing decisions to study in Vietnam of Laotian and Cambodian students as they make up the dominant majority of international students of the country. As a result, findings from the research would be a timely and critical contribution for policy development and institutional strategies, enhancing Vietnam's appeal as an international education hub

In order to do so, the article addresses two key research questions:

1. What factors motivate Laotian and Cambodian students to pursue international education?
2. What specific factors attract these students to choose Vietnam as their study destination?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Classic Push-Pull Framework

The push-pull framework offers a robust lens through which to examine international student mobility. Originating in migration studies and subsequently adapted for research on international student flows<sup>28</sup>, this model has become a cornerstone for understanding the complex interplay of factors influencing students' decisions to study abroad and their destination choices<sup>29</sup>. Historically, Western developed countries, particularly English-speaking nations like the USA, UK, Canada, and Australia, have been primary destinations, attracting a majority of international students. This dominance stems from their long-standing academic reputations, the role of English as a global language in science and commerce, historical ties, and extensive international networks. Consequently, pioneering research on factors attracting international students was largely initiated and conducted by scholars within these host nations.

The framework categorizes influential factors into "push" factors—reasons, circumstances, or pressures within the home country motivating departure—and "pull" factors—the attractive features and advantages of a specific host country. While both sets of factors can be present in both sending and receiving countries, conventionally, push factors are primarily examined from the perspective of the sending country, and pull factors are associated with the characteristics of the host country<sup>30</sup>.

Early research, such as that by McMahon<sup>31</sup>, focused significantly on economic dimensions. McMahon identified key push factors from the home country, including its economic situation, the degree of global economic integration, governmental priority for higher education, and the availability of desired

specialized or advanced training programs. For pull factors, McMahon<sup>31</sup> emphasized the role of bilateral relations between the home and host countries, specifically economic correlations, stable and amicable political relations, and the availability of scholarships and financial aid. Her research pointed to an interesting paradox: home countries with lower economic development but high international integration often generates strong push factors, while a significant economic development gap with the sending country and close economic ties are key pull factors for a destination country.

Mazzarol and Soutar<sup>30</sup> further refined the model by detailing a three-stage decision-making process for international students: 1) the initial decision to study abroad (often driven by push factors at home and an initial awareness of the benefits of international education); 2) the choice of a destination country; and 3) the selection of a specific institution. Each stage is impacted by intertwined push and pull forces. They identified push factors such as the perception that overseas education offers better quality and opportunities, a desire to escape intense domestic competition for university entry, a lack of specialized or high-quality programs at home, an aspiration to explore different cultures and lifestyles, or even long-term settlement goals post-study. Regarding pull factors, Mazzarol and Soutar<sup>30</sup> distinguished between country attractiveness—built on the overall reputation of the education system, international recognition of degrees, academic prestige, word-of-mouth recommendations, cost of living and tuition, social costs, the presence of a sizeable compatriot student community, natural environment, geographical proximity, and social connections—and host institution attractiveness. For the latter, they ranked factors in decreasing order of importance: employer recognition of qualifications, the institution's reputation for teaching and research quality, the quality and reputation of faculty, a strong and helpful alumni network, and the size and diversity of the international student body.

Altbach<sup>32</sup>, sharing similar perspectives with Mazzarol & Soutar<sup>30</sup>, also highlighted fierce competition for reputable public universities, a lack of truly world-class institutions, limitations in offering new or internationally trending disciplines, and sometimes the absence of an environment of academic freedom in some home countries serves as significant push factors. These elements drive students to seek educational opportunities in developed nations. In terms of pull factors, Altbach<sup>32</sup> pointed to the established reputation of the host country's education system,

potentially less stressful admission processes (especially for international students), and, importantly, the prospects for employment after graduation, either in the host country or on the global labor market.

Building on these foundations, de Wit<sup>33</sup> developed a more detailed and multidimensional push-pull model, categorizing factors into three main groups, namely educational, socio-political-cultural, and economic factors. While this model acknowledged the central role of economic factors, similar to McMahon<sup>31</sup>, Mazzarol & Soutar [30], and Altbach<sup>32</sup>, de Wit's<sup>33</sup> significant contribution was his emphasis on and deeper analysis of socio-political-cultural aspects. He highlighted the importance of historical-cultural ties, linguistic similarity or attraction, regional cohesion (within blocs like the EU or ASEAN), strategic partnerships between sending and receiving countries, and the growing role of direct cooperation agreements between higher education institutions internationally.

While the push-pull model has proven invaluable in identifying, categorizing, and explaining the factors influencing study abroad decisions, particularly the flow of students to Western countries, it exhibits certain limitations when applied mechanistically to the context of Asian countries and territories. Nations such as South Korea, China, Taiwan, and Vietnam are increasingly asserting themselves as emerging and attractive international education destinations. International students choosing these Asian destinations, while sharing some common motivations (like academic advancement and better career opportunities) with those studying in English-speaking countries, are often attracted or pushed by factors unique to the region and its distinct cultures. This necessitates more nuanced, context-sensitive research approaches to fully illuminate the reasons for their choices and their diverse experiences in these rising destinations.

#### **Push-Pull Framework and the Rise of Asian Destinations**

Recent research focusing on international students in Asia reveals a more complex picture of academic mobility drivers. Beyond universal motivations like educational quality or career prospects, decisions to choose Asian destinations and higher education institutions are strongly influenced by region-specific push-pull factors, reflecting shifts in global educational geopolitics.

In Taiwan, pull factors are diverse. While Lee<sup>16</sup> emphasized academic reputation, Wang and Chang<sup>18</sup> highlighted the comparable importance of scholarship opportunities, the allure of unique cultural experiences, and the chance to learn Mandarin Chinese.

This is supported by Roberts et al.<sup>17</sup>, who found that scholarship opportunities and high-quality Mandarin language programs were the most decisive factors. The economic and political rise of mainland China has made Mandarin a strategically valuable language in the global job market, positioning Taiwan, with its Mandarin-speaking environment and open, democratic society, as an attractive alternative or complement for language learning<sup>16-18</sup>. Additional factors include positive referrals from peers, the reputation of specific university language programs, and the role of Taiwanese diplomatic missions in promoting study opportunities<sup>17</sup>.

For China, a rapidly growing destination for international students, studies by Ding<sup>12</sup>, Jiani<sup>14</sup>, and Ahmad and Shah<sup>20</sup> concur that learning Mandarin is a primary, if not the most important, attraction. This linguistic appeal is tied to China's remarkable economic development, creating perceptions of numerous business and career opportunities<sup>12,14</sup>. Furthermore, policies offering attractive scholarship programs play a significant role<sup>12,14,20</sup>. Substantial investment in higher education has also significantly enhanced the reputation and international ranking of Chinese universities. Ding<sup>12</sup> found university quality to be the third most important pull factor in Shanghai, while Ahmad and Shah<sup>20</sup> considered it paramount in their sample. Jiani<sup>14</sup> suggested that a university's overall reputation and brand significantly influence institutional choice. Research by Lu et al.<sup>34</sup> in Chengdu further underscored the role of perceived educational quality, reliable recommendations from friends and family, and positive bilateral relations between the student's home country and China, especially for students from developing nations and those along the Belt and Road Initiative. Beyond academic and economic factors, the "distinctive Chinese cultural experience"—exploring an ancient civilization, tourism, language immersion, and diverse cultural exchanges—is a major draw, helping China differentiate itself from traditional Western destinations<sup>20</sup>. In South Korea, Jon et al.<sup>19</sup> identified learning and practicing the Korean language, coupled with experiencing contemporary Korean culture as the most significant attractions, followed by scholarship opportunities and prospects of employment with Korean companies or Korea-related businesses post-graduation. However, motivations differ among student groups with students from neighboring East Asian countries may choose South Korea for its relatively more affordable costs, geographical proximity, cultural similarities, and higher sense of safety, whereas students from North America and Europe

are often drawn by the desire for language immersion, firsthand experience of a unique culture known through media, and specialized research on Korean society, economy, or politics. Alemu and Cordier<sup>21</sup> also confirmed the desire to explore a novel culture, the strong appeal of Korean popular culture, and the availability of scholarships as key drivers, alongside the growing reputation of specific academic programs. For Chinese students studying Korean, Lee<sup>35</sup> pointed to more pragmatic factors such as somewhat less stringent admission standards compared to top universities in China or other countries, the influence of parental and peer advice, and, to some extent, employment prospects related to Sino-Korean economic ties.

Overall, while foundational factors identified in classic models—such as bilateral political and economic relations<sup>34</sup>, financial aid and scholarships<sup>12,14,16-21</sup>, perceived educational quality of the destination country and its universities<sup>34</sup>, influence from social networks via recommendations<sup>12,14,17</sup>, and the reputation of specific institutions or programs<sup>12,14,17</sup> remain crucial across Asian destinations, certain distinctive elements appear more prominent. These include the opportunity to learn strategically important local languages and to directly experience unique and rich indigenous cultures<sup>12,14,16-21</sup>. These factors not only meet academic needs but also satisfy students' curiosity and desire for exploration and personal development in an increasingly globalized world.

### Vietnam as a Destination for International Students

While Vietnam's role as a significant source of outbound students is well-documented, scholarly attention to its increasing appeal as a destination country, especially for Southeast Asian students, notably from Laos and Cambodia<sup>36</sup>, is relatively recent<sup>24-27</sup>. Only in recent years, with its socio-economic development and deeper international integration, has Vietnam's role as a host country received more academic discussion.

Vietnam's attractiveness as a study destination is closely tied to its diplomatic, historical, and economic relationships with sending countries. This is clearly demonstrated by the student demographics, with a large proportion coming from neighboring Laos and Cambodia, primarily through government-to-government scholarship agreements<sup>37,38</sup>. More recently, the strong and comprehensive development of the strategic partnership between Vietnam and South Korea, especially in investment, trade, and

cultural exchange, has led to a significant increase in Korean students enrolling in Vietnamese studies or short-term Vietnamese language and culture programs at Vietnamese universities<sup>25-27</sup>.

Research into specific factors influencing the decision to choose Vietnam indicates several key drivers. Pham et al.<sup>24</sup> emphasized the crucial role of scholarships, particularly government scholarships, as a primary attraction for international students enrolling in undergraduate programs at local public universities. Meanwhile, Mai and Chau<sup>26</sup> offer a more multifaceted perspective, identifying a set of main pull factors including the reputation and perceived quality of the desired academic program at a specific institution, the perception of Vietnam's dynamic economic prospects and attractive investment environment, the desire to directly experience the rich and unique local culture, the awareness of good and stable bilateral relations between Vietnam and the student's home country, and the influence of recommendations and shared experiences from friends and family members who studied or lived in Vietnam.

Beyond traditional push-pull factors, recent studies have begun to highlight the role of intrinsic motivations, or students' internal drives, in shaping the choice of Vietnam. Phan et al.<sup>25</sup> provided insightful analysis on how long-term living and working in Vietnam can spark interest and a need among middle-aged Koreans for formal study in Vietnamese studies programs offered by local universities, as a way to deepen their understanding of the environment they are part of. Similarly, the inspiring story in Mai and Chau's<sup>27</sup> research about a visually impaired student from Thailand overcoming difficulties to pursue his dream of mastering the Vietnamese language in Vietnam underscores the role of personal will, determination, and agency in making educational mobility decisions. These cases suggest that while Vietnam may not yet be a top-tier international education destination globally, it possesses a "hidden appeal" for certain student groups. This appeal lies not only in providing access to affordable education but also in the potential for unique experiences, personal development, and maturation that other traditional destinations might not offer.

### Factors Influencing Laotian and Cambodian Students' Mobilities

Both Cambodia and Laos have witnessed a steady and increasing number of students pursuing higher education abroad in recent years<sup>37</sup>. In terms of destinations, Vietnam has emerged as a top choice for Laotian

students<sup>36</sup> and is one of the most popular destination countries for Cambodian students<sup>39</sup>.

Research examining factors influencing these students' choices to study abroad, particularly those choosing China, reveals specific dynamics. For Cambodian students studying in China, Li et al.<sup>40</sup> identified key push factors including recommendations from relatives, teachers, and the community, as well as a local shortage of Mandarin-speaking professionals. The primary pull factors towards China included its favorable scholarship policies for Cambodian students, cultural attractions, China's growing economic influence, and associated employment opportunities for returnees proficient in Chinese<sup>40</sup>. For Laotian students choosing China, Wen and Hu<sup>41</sup> suggested that easier access to top Chinese universities could be a major pull factor, alongside bright job opportunities.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a multiphase mixed methods design<sup>42,43</sup>, an approach that flexibly allows for the sequential or concurrent integration of qualitative (QUAL) and quantitative (QUAN) data collection and analysis phases to achieve the overall research objective which is identifying the factors attracting Laotian and Cambodian students to study in Vietnam. The research process is structured into four main phases.

The initial phase, Phase 1: Exploratory Interviews (Sequential - QUAL), focused on qualitative data collection through in-depth interviews. The purpose was to explore the specific issues, aspects, and experiences of Laotian and Cambodian students studying in Vietnam, and to gather insights from lecturers and administrative staff experienced with this student cohort. The findings from this phase not only supplemented and refined the theoretical framework and allowed for comparison with previous studies but also provided foundational insights from the participants' perspectives, thereby laying the groundwork for developing research instruments in the subsequent phase.

Following this, Phase 2: Instrument Development (Sequential - QUAL → QUAN Tool, QUAL Tool), concentrated on constructing data collection instruments. Based on the findings from Phase 1 and a review of relevant literature, a quantitative survey questionnaire (QUAN Tool) and a semi-structured qualitative interview guide (QUAL Tool) were designed and finalized. The survey questionnaire was translated into Laotian and Khmer languages, presented bilingually (Vietnamese-Lao and Vietnamese-Khmer), to facilitate responses. This instrument was then pilot tested with one Laotian and one Cambodian student to refine language clarity and practical

usability before full deployment.

Phase 3: Data Collection (Concurrent - QUAN + QUAL), involved the parallel collection of quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data (QUAN) was gathered through the survey administered from April 2023 to December 2023 to Laotian and Cambodian students enrolled at five member universities of Viet Nam National University Ho Chi Minh, yielding 67 valid completed questionnaires. Concurrently, qualitative data (QUAL) was collected through semi-structured interviews with 09 Laotian and Cambodian students. Additionally, interviews were conducted with representatives from the Laotian and Cambodian Consulates General in Ho Chi Minh City to gain further multi-dimensional information.

The final stage, Phase 4: Data Analysis and Integration (Concurrent - QUAN + QUAL Analysis & Integration), entailed the independent analysis of quantitative and qualitative datasets, followed by their integrated interpretation. Qualitative data from interviews, which were audio-recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed (and translated if necessary), were analyzed using thematic analysis guided by Tracy's<sup>44</sup> phronetic iterative approach. This rigorous process involved an initial coding phase to identify recurring themes, or first-level codes. This was followed by the selection and refinement of relevant codes based on their contribution to addressing the research questions, which constituted the axial codes. Quantitative survey data were processed using SPSS software, with descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages employed to present the characteristics of the research sample and the factors influencing students' academic decisions. The findings from both data types were then synthesized to enhance the robustness and validity of the conclusions. Relevant secondary literature and contextual documents further enriched the interpretive process, providing a deeper understanding of the broader factors influencing international student choices.

The research design is presented in Table 1:

Regarding the specifics of data collection, semi-structured interviews involved nine Laotian and Cambodian students and two officials from diplomatic missions of Laos and Cambodia in Ho Chi Minh City selected through purposive and convenience sampling. A key criterion for student participants was their ability to communicate relatively fluently in Vietnamese. Access to participants was facilitated by university departments and the diplomatic missions of Laos and Cambodia in Ho Chi Minh City. Interviews, typically lasting 40-60 minutes, were

conducted primarily in Vietnamese, with one interview with a Cambodian Consulate General representative conducted in English. Ten of the eleven interviews were audio-recorded, while the unrecorded one was meticulously noted and content-verified, with informed consent.

The survey questionnaire targeted full-time Laotian and Cambodian students under intergovernmental agreements studying at five VNUHCM member universities hosting these groups of students. VNUHCM was selected due to its prominent position as one of Vietnam's largest university systems, comprising eight member universities and affiliated institutions with over 90,000 students across more than 200 undergraduate programs. Consequently, findings from this study at VNUHCM member universities are expected to have significant implications for higher education institutions throughout Vietnam, particularly public universities. At the time of the study, the Laotian and Cambodian full-time student population at VNUHCM numbered 81, representing approximately 0.085% of VNUHCM's total student body. This figure is slightly below the national average of approximately 0.1% for these student groups<sup>a</sup>. Given that larger proportions of Laotian and Cambodian students are typically found in the Northern part of the country, the percentage of them at VNUHCM can be considered reasonable.

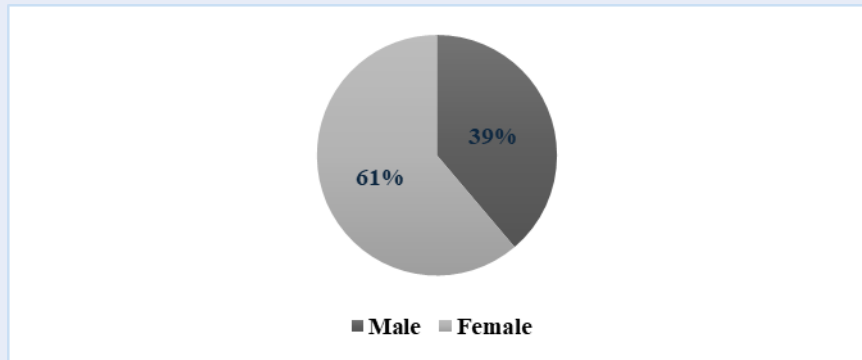
Out of the total, 67 valid responses were collected, achieving a response rate of 82.7%. The questionnaire, developed from literature reviews and exploratory interview findings, was translated and presented bilingually. It was administered with support from international student affairs offices, with one instance of email distribution due to a holiday break. Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research. All interview participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, privacy rights, and data confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained prior to interviews and recordings. Personal data was anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

According to Figure1, the majority of participants were female (over 60%), while just over a third were male. In terms of nationality, Figure2 shows that nearly four-fifths of the participants were Laotian, with the remainder being Cambodian. As for host institutions (Table 2), over 70% of participants came from University C and University D. The remaining

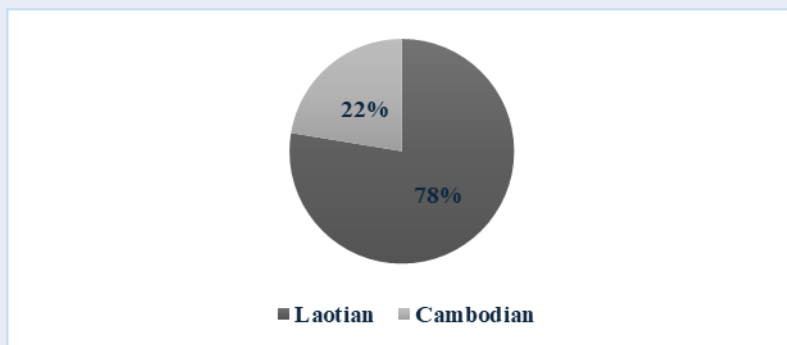
<sup>a</sup> A 2024 British Council report<sup>45</sup> indicates that Vietnam hosted 2,094 full-time students from Laos and Cambodia in academic year 2022-2023, increasing to 2,476 in 2023-2024. These figures represent 0.1% and 0.095% of Vietnam's total undergraduate enrollments, which were 2,036,689 and 2,355,711 in the respective academic years<sup>46</sup>.

**Table 1: Research design (Source: Authors)**

Phase	Phase 1: Exploratory Interview	Phase 2: Questionnaire Development	Phase 3: Concurrent Data Collection	Phase 4: Concurrent Analysis
Activity	Interview (QUAL)	Overview + Tool Development (QUAL → QUAN Tool)	Survey (QUAN) + Interview (QUAL)	QUAN + QUAL Analysis
Process Characteris- tics	Sequential	Sequential	Concurrent	Concurrent



**Figure 1: Gender ratio of participants (Source: Authors)**



**Figure 2: Nationalities of the surveyed participants (Source: Authors)**

participants were unevenly distributed among three other VNUHCM member universities. Information regarding the interviewees is detailed in Table 3.

## FINDINGS

### Push factors motivating Laotian and Cambodian students to study overseas

This section reveals key motivations driving Laotian and Cambodian students to pursue higher education abroad. Quantitative data (Figure3) indicate that the desire for an international student experience was the

most frequently cited push factor (over 70% of respondents), surpassing considerations of educational quality (47.76% citing quality of training; 44.78% citing degree value) and job prospects abroad (34.33%). Influence from relatives was a less significant factor (14.93%), while influence from friends was negligible. These quantitative findings align with qualitative interview data. The desire for a transformative experience beyond the confines of their home countries emerged as a central theme, mirroring broader trends in Asian student mobility<sup>22,47</sup>. Participant B\_ST, for example, highlights the significance of this motiva-

**Table 2: Host institutions (Source: Authors)**

Host institutions	Types of programs offered	Location	Frequency	Percentage
UniversityA	Agriculture, Business, Laws, Education	Mekong Delta	17	25.37 %
UniversityB	Engineering, Management	Ho Chi Minh City	2	2.99 %
UniversityC	Economics, Business, Laws	Ho Chi Minh City	21	31.34 %
UniversityD	Social Sciences, Humanities	Ho Chi Minh City	26	38.81 %
UniversityE	Science, Computing	Ho Chi Minh City	1	1.49 %
Total			67	100%

**Table 3: Interviewees’ Information (Source: Authors)**

STT	Interviewees	Nationality	Gender	Institutions
1	CG_01	Laotian	Male	Consulate General
2	CG_02	Cambodian	Male	Consulate General
3	A_ST_01	Cambodian	Male	University A
4	A_ST_02	Cambodian	Male	University A
5	A_ST_03	Cambodian	Male	University A
6	A_ST_04	Laotian	Male	University A
7	A_ST_05	Cambodian	Female	University A
8	A_ST_06	Cambodian	Female	University A
9	B_ST	Cambodian	Male	University B
10	D_ST	Laotian	Female	University D
11	E_ST	Laotian	Male	University E

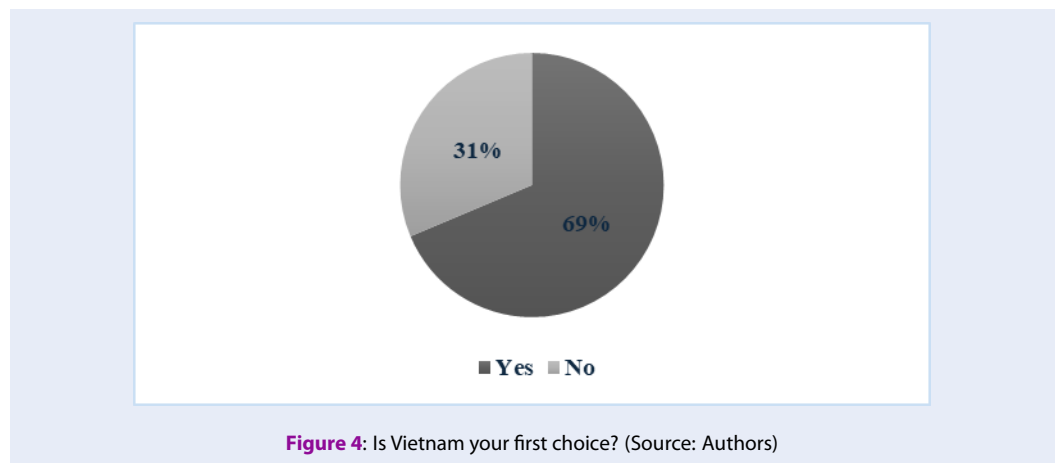
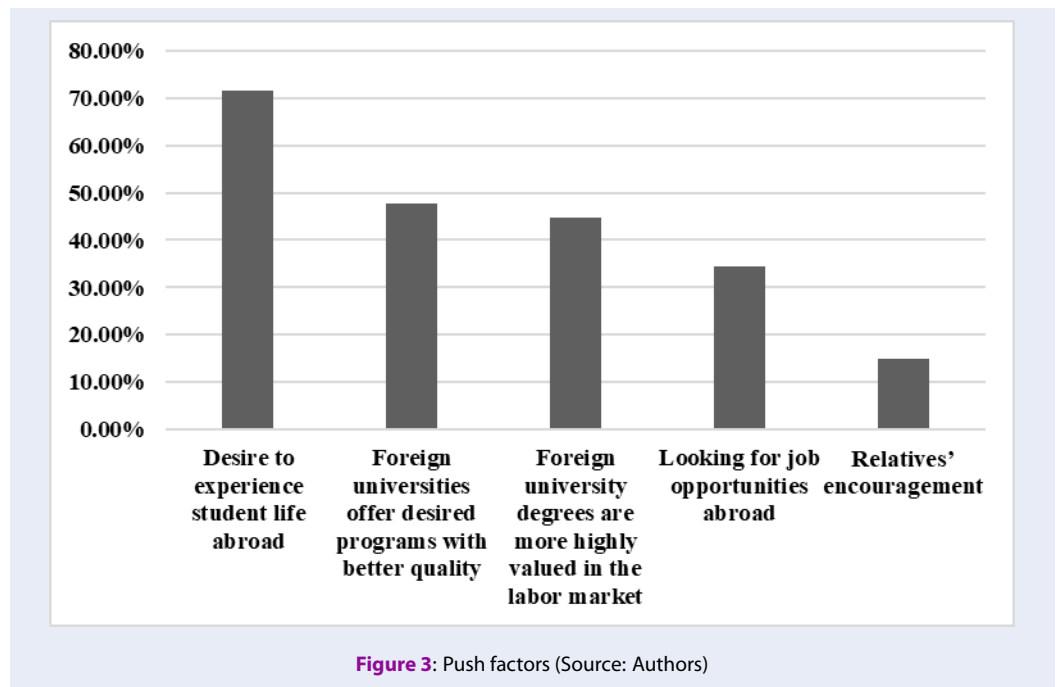
tion, as he decided to apply for a Vietnamese scholarship program without prior planning, solely driven by a desire for an international experience.

The perceived higher quality and greater value of foreign degrees also constituted significant push factors, echoing the findings of Mazzarol and Soutar [30]. Interview data show that participants repeatedly emphasized the enhanced career prospects and social prestige associated with a foreign credential, using terms like "higher," "more opportunities," and "more successful" to describe these perceived advantages (A\_ST\_01, A\_ST\_02). One respondent explicitly contrasted the ease of finding employment with a foreign degree compared to a domestic one (A\_ST\_03). This finding reflects the limitations of the higher education systems in Cambodia and Laos, particularly in science and technology fields, underscoring the perceived necessity of international study for improved employment prospects<sup>39,41</sup>.

While the survey indicated limited influence from family (14.93%), interview data reveal a more nuanced role. Parental influence, particularly from

fathers with prior international study experience (A\_ST\_04, A\_ST\_05), significantly shaped the decisions of some students. Even without personal experience abroad, parental encouragement was driven by practical considerations such as the improved earning potential associated with a foreign degree (A\_ST\_03). However, the role of family appears less pronounced compared to studies of Asian students pursuing education in English-speaking countries<sup>30</sup>.

A noteworthy finding was a third of the participants (34.33%) expressing a desire for work opportunities abroad, despite the study’s focus on full-time students who are mandated to return to their home country. This suggests that international work experience is valued for post-graduation career prospects. Respondents frequently cited internships and practical training as strategies to acquire such experience prior to their return.



**Pull factors attracting Laotian and Cambodian students to choose Vietnam as a study destination**

Among the 67 surveyed Laotian and Cambodian students, Vietnam was the primary destination of choice for a majority (68.66%) (Figure 4). However, 31.34% initially considered alternative locations, with China being the most frequently cited alternative (over 52% of those considering other destinations) (Figure 5). This preference for China likely reflects the country's increasing investment in attracting international students from developing nations, particularly Cambodia and Laos<sup>39,41,48</sup>. While developed nations such as the US, UK, and Australia were also considered,

Vietnam's dominance highlights its competitive advantage in attracting students from these countries.

Data in Figure 6 show that scholarship support emerged as the most significant pull factor, influencing 71.64% of respondents' decisions to study in Vietnam. All participants received full, four-year scholarships covering tuition and living expenses. The crucial role of scholarships is further emphasized by comparing responses regarding recommendations to others. With scholarship availability, almost all respondents (96%) indicated they would encourage others to study in Vietnam but only approximately 40% would do so without one (Figure 7 & 8).

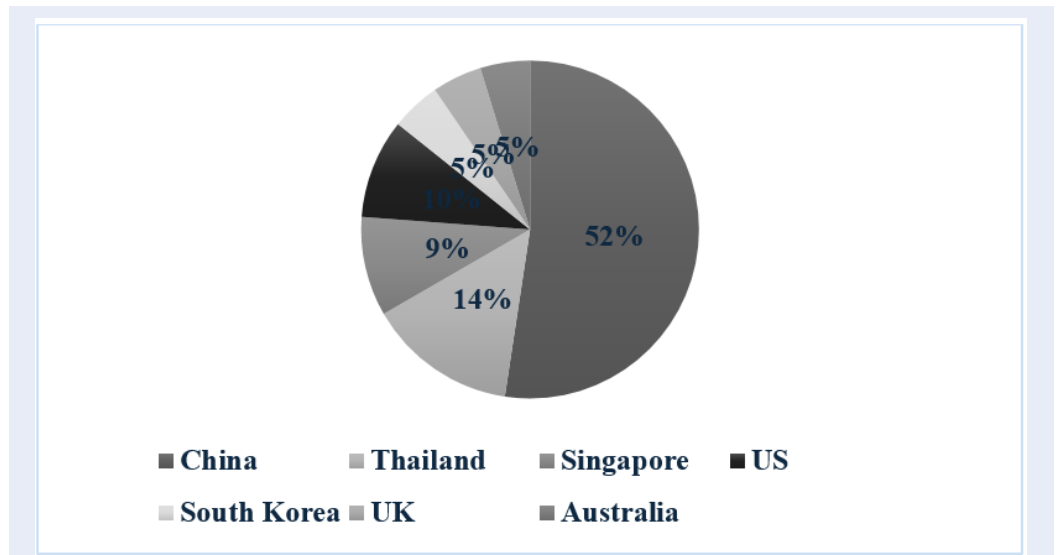


Figure 5: Other destination countries that participants considered before coming to Vietnam (Source: Authors)

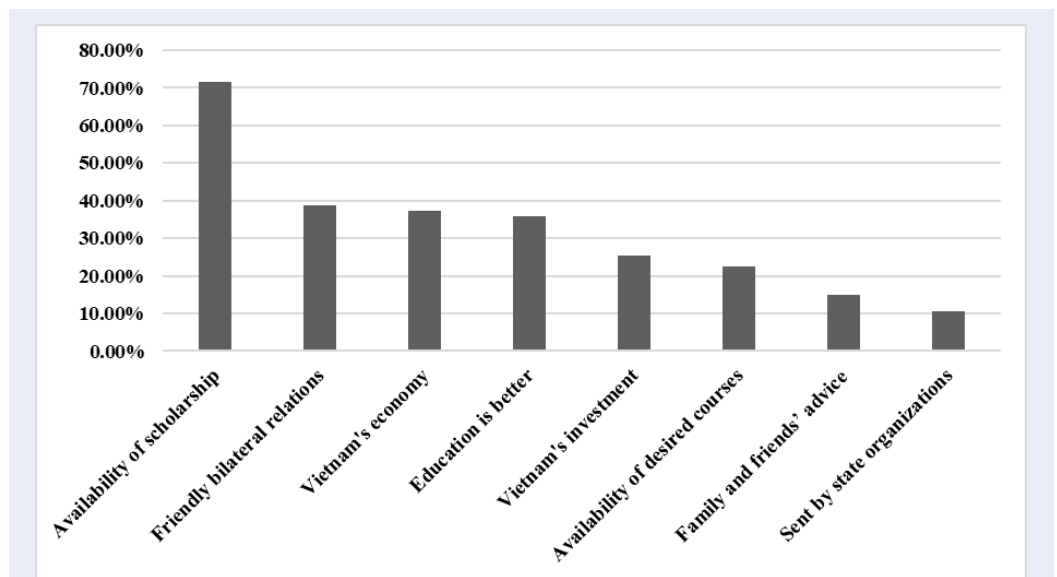


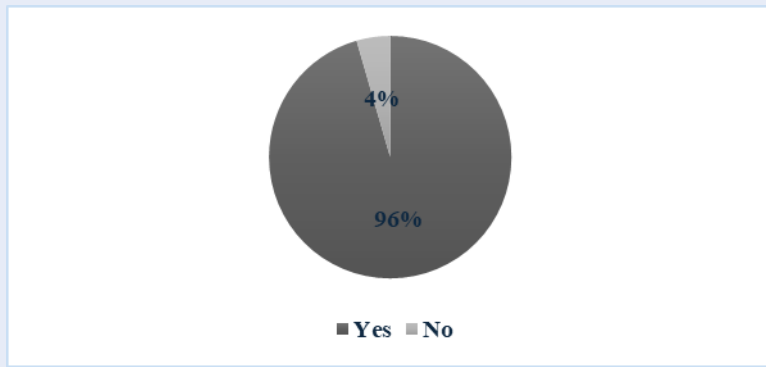
Figure 6: Factors attracting international students from Laos and Cambodia to choose Vietnam as a study destination (Source: Authors)

Other key pull factors, each attracting between 35% and 40% of respondents, included positive bilateral relations, Vietnam's economic development, and the quality of Vietnamese higher education. Less influential factors included the presence of Vietnamese businesses in their home countries and the availability of specific programs (25.37% and 22.39%, respectively); influence from relatives remained minimal (14.93%). The long-standing relationship between Vietnamese institutions and governmental agencies in Laos and

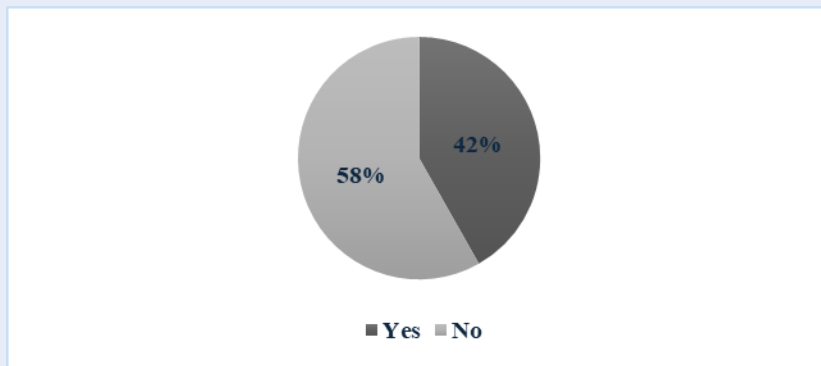
Cambodia, providing training for civil servants and professionals, was also identified by slightly over 10% of the respondents as a key influence. A detailed examination of each factor is provided below.

### Scholarship

The availability of scholarships was overwhelmingly the most significant pull factor, consistently emphasized by all interview participants. The comprehensive scholarships, covering tuition, transportation, a



**Figure 7:** Students' responses on recommending Vietnam as a study destination WITH scholarships (Source: Authors)



**Figure 8:** Students' responses on recommending Vietnam as a study destination WITHOUT scholarships (Source: Authors)

one-time stipend, and monthly living allowances. The monthly allowance has been revised recently from approximately 150 US dollars per month to almost 200 US dollars per month. Albeit modest compared to international student financial aid or scholarship in developed destinations, the tuition waiver and monthly stipend significantly reduced the financial burden for students and their families (A\_ST\_03). This is further underscored by the fact that several participants such as B\_ST actively sought scholarship opportunities, even changing academic paths, prioritizing full scholarships that covered both tuition and living expenses over partial scholarships that only covered tuition. The near-universal endorsement (96%) (Figure 7) of recommending Vietnam as a study destination among scholarship recipients highlights the profound impact of this financial support on study choices.

**Bilateral Relations**

Vietnam's strong, friendly relationships with Laos and Cambodia represent a second significant pull factor,

as highlighted by diplomatic representatives (CG\_01). The collaborative "Project Improving the quality and effectiveness of Vietnam-Laos cooperation in the field of education and human resource development for the 2021-2030 period" exemplifies the commitment to strengthening educational ties and training human resources. This positive relationship is evident not only at the governmental level but also in initiatives such as the Vientiane-Ho Chi Minh Friendship High School, funded by Ho Chi Minh City demonstrating long-term investment in education cooperation. This established trust and partnership systemically influence student choices.

**Vietnam's Economic Growth**

Vietnam's remarkable economic progress since *Đổi Mới*<sup>49</sup>, with a tenfold increase in GDP and substantial per capita income growth, surpasses that of Laos and Cambodia significantly. In 2024, in terms of economic size, Vietnam's GDP is 10 times that of Cambodia (45.14 billion USD) and 30 times that of Laos

(15.19 billion USD)<sup>50</sup>. In terms of per capita income, Vietnam is 1.76 times higher than Cambodia (2,630 USD/person/year) and 2.3 times higher than Laos (1,980 USD/person/year)<sup>50</sup>. This robust economic growth, providing a development model for Southeast Asia<sup>51</sup> and highlighting innovation in areas such as renewable energy<sup>52</sup>, presents a strong pull factor, consistent with trends in international student mobility towards economically developed nations. The fact that nearly 70% of respondents chose Vietnam as their primary choice underscores this economic appeal.

### Higher Education Quality

While not yet a top-tier global competitor, the quality of Vietnamese higher education has emerged as a significant pull factor for Laotian and Cambodian students in this study (38,82%). This perception of quality is substantiated by tangible improvements in the sector, evidenced by the increasing presence of Vietnamese universities in global rankings and the strong reputation of leading institutions<sup>53</sup> (A\_ST\_01). Crucially, the appeal of this educational quality is amplified when combined with other advantages, such as scholarships, strong bilateral relationships, and economic opportunities, creating a compelling overall value proposition for regional students.

### Other Influential Factors

Four out of eight surveyed pull factors were chosen by less than 30% of the participants. The most significant of these is the presence of Vietnamese enterprises in the home country (25.37%). The growth of these enterprises in Laos and Cambodia creates a considerable incentive by offering clear and attractive employment opportunities (A\_ST\_01). These companies have a practical need for personnel who understand the local culture and hold Vietnamese educational qualifications, opening up distinct career prospects. Furthermore, proactive recruitment activities by these companies at Vietnamese universities strengthen the tangible link between education and future careers, making this a compelling driver for students.

The availability of desired fields of study, although chosen by just over a fifth of the participants (22.39%), is a factor that demonstrates the competitive advantages of Vietnamese universities in fields with labor shortages in Laos and Cambodia, such as Agriculture (A\_ST\_02). Additionally, encouragement from social networks (14.93%), particularly from successful alumni, serves as a credible source of information that attracts potential students (A\_ST\_03, A\_ST\_01). Finally, a more specific channel is the nominating

agency (10.45%), through which students are sent by state agencies from their home country, reflecting strategic cooperation and trust in the quality of Vietnamese education.

Beyond the surveyed factors, additional elements emerging from interview data also contribute to Vietnam's appeal. These include enhanced career prospects upon return, as a Vietnamese degree and language proficiency provide a significant competitive advantage in the domestic job market (A\_ST\_01, A\_ST\_02, A\_ST\_04, B\_ST). Geographical proximity is a practical advantage, reducing travel costs and the psychological burden of being far from home (A\_ST\_01, B\_ST). Lastly, a pre-existing familiarity with the Vietnamese language, especially for students from border regions, lowers the initial language barrier and facilitates a smoother cultural and academic integration (A\_ST\_01, A\_ST\_02).

## DISCUSSIONS

This study reveals a complex interplay of push and pull factors shaping the decision-making processes of Laotian and Cambodian students pursuing higher education abroad, with Vietnam as a preferred destination. The primary push factor was the desire for a transformative international educational experience, often outweighing considerations of institutional prestige. This aligns with studies highlighting the prioritization of personal growth and global perspectives over purely academic criteria<sup>22,47</sup>. This drive is further fuelled by limitations within the Laotian and Cambodian higher education systems, notably in STEM fields<sup>54,55</sup>, and the perceived superior value of foreign credentials in the domestic job market<sup>53</sup>. This "vertical mobility" towards neighbouring countries with stronger educational systems is a significant trend within Asia<sup>56</sup>. The desire for international work experience, even under return-to-home-country mandates, underscores the broader relevance of career prospects in international student decision-making<sup>29</sup>. While family and peer influences played a role, their impact was less pronounced than in studies of students targeting English-speaking countries<sup>23,30,34,35</sup>.

The dominant pull factor was the availability of scholarships, consistent with findings across Asia and globally<sup>12,14,16,17,19-21,24</sup>. The efficacy of such scholarship programs is evident in China's experience<sup>15,57</sup>, underscoring their critical role in attracting international students. Beyond financial incentives, Vietnam's strong bilateral relationships with Laos and Cambodia, its economic growth, and the perceived

quality of its higher education system contributed significantly to its appeal. This aligns with research highlighting the influence of geopolitical ties, economic development, and educational reputation on international student flows<sup>13,33</sup>. The presence of Vietnamese businesses in Laos and Cambodia further enhances Vietnam's attractiveness by offering post-graduation employment opportunities.

In addition to overall quality, strengths in specific fields of study where Vietnam excels represent a clear competitive advantage, especially since Laos and Cambodia face shortages and high demand for human resources in these areas. The reputation of Vietnamese universities in fields such as agriculture directly meets the labor market needs of neighboring countries, creating a strong attraction for students with clear career orientations. Finally, factors such as geographical proximity and familiarity with or fondness for the Vietnamese language are distinctive local pull factors, particularly in the context of intra-Asian student mobility<sup>13,17,18,27,36,56</sup>. These factors reduce travel costs, mitigate culture shock, and create favorable conditions for students' academic and social integration. These are "soft" but important advantages that Vietnam should continue to leverage.

In summary, attracting agreement students from Laos and Cambodia is the result of a confluence of "push" factors from their home countries (educational limitations, desire for new experiences, value of foreign degrees) and specific "pull" factors from Vietnam (scholarships, friendly relations, economic development, improving education quality, job opportunities, and geographical and cultural proximity). Understanding this complex interplay is key to developing more effective strategies for attracting and supporting students in the future. Based on such understanding, management implications will be presented in the following section.

## MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS FOR VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

The Vietnamese government has signaled a strong commitment to the internationalization of its higher education sector. Decisions No. 1600/QĐ-TTg and 1705/QĐ-TTg articulate a strategic goal to increase the proportion of full-time international students to 1.5% by 2030. This target is ambitious, representing a more than sevenfold increase from the current level of approximately 0.2%. Achieving this objective will demand significant and targeted efforts from Vietnam's higher education institutions. Critically, students from Laos and Cambodia consistently comprise

nearly half of the international student cohort in Vietnam. Therefore, findings from this study can yield important insights for developing institutional strategies and national policies aimed at boosting international student enrollment.

Firstly, a primary finding of this study is that the strongest push factor for Laotian and Cambodian students is the aspiration for overseas experience. This motivation is closely linked to the perceived value and quality associated with international qualifications. Consequently, while Vietnam's higher education sector is still developing its global recruitment footprint, these findings suggest that Laos and Cambodia are key potential markets. Specifically, Vietnamese institutions with international credentials, such as those emerging in global university rankings, VNUHCM for instance, are exceptionally well-positioned. They can directly meet student demand for a reputable foreign degree, making the highlighting of their internationally recognized status a critical component of recruitment messaging in these neighboring countries. Secondly, regarding pull factors, studies elsewhere and this article have shown that scholarships are of paramount importance in attracting international students, particularly those from Laos and Cambodia. This suggests that financial aid should be a cornerstone of both national and institutional strategy. While government-funded scholarships are constrained by state regulations, autonomous Vietnamese universities possess the flexibility to create their own tailored financial aid schemes, targeting specific student groups. Funding for such support can be drawn from institutional income or contributions from the private sector. The combination of a student's desire for international education and a university's concrete financial offer is what can ultimately improve the appeal and competitiveness of Vietnamese higher education.

Last but not least, the data show that recruitment advantages extend beyond institutional offerings to encompass broader geopolitical and economic factors. Strong bilateral relationships with Laos and Cambodia offer a recruitment advantage that can be generalized, that is universities could strategically target countries with strong political and economic bonds with Vietnam. This strategy may become more effective when institutions partner with Vietnamese businesses in those countries to facilitate internships and career pathways for returning graduates. Given that international students often seek employment opportunities, Vietnam's strong economic prospects, combined with a robust Vietnamese business presence at home and abroad, has the potential to create an ideal

and highly attractive combination for prospective students.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, achieving Vietnam's ambitious internationalization goals requires a sophisticated, multi-layered strategy. The findings demonstrate that universities must first capitalize on the strong push factor of student aspiration for quality overseas experiences by clearly marketing their institutional academic standing and global rankings. This reputational pull must then be paired with compelling financial incentives, particularly flexible, university-funded scholarships that address the financial barriers for students from key markets like Laos and Cambodia. Finally, these institutional efforts can be significantly amplified by leveraging broader geopolitical and economic factors, such as partnering with Vietnamese businesses abroad to create tangible career pathways. Executing this requires orchestrated efforts at both the state and university levels to formulate comprehensive strategies that not only increase student numbers but also foster the genuine internationalization of Vietnam's university campuses.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study offers valuable insights into the factors influencing Laotian and Cambodian students' choices to study in Vietnam, its findings must be interpreted with consideration for several significant limitations. Methodologically, the generalizability of the results is constrained by the sampling strategy, which included a modest sample size (N=67), a significant overrepresentation of Laotian students (77.61%), and the use of purposive sampling. The reliance on self-reported data also introduces the potential for response bias, while the cross-sectional design, capturing data at a single point in time, prevents the establishment of causal relationships. Furthermore, the study's scope is narrow in both theme and time. Thematically, it does not conduct an in-depth analysis of key socio-cultural factors—such as cultural similarity, language, or the influence of family—that may inform student decisions. Temporally, the research focuses only on the pre-enrolment stage, omitting crucial longitudinal data on students' subsequent academic experiences, cultural integration, and post-graduation career impacts. Future research should therefore employ larger, more demographically balanced samples. Adopting a longitudinal design that also analyzes key socio-cultural variables is essential

to build upon these exploratory findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the entire international student journey.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

VNUHCM: Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Mai Thi Kim Khanh: Co-developed the article's conceptual framework, drafted the manuscript, and led the revision process in response to reviewer comments.

Chau Huy Ngoc: Co-developed the article's conceptual framework, performed data collection and processing, documented the results, contributed to the manuscript draft, and formatted the final manuscript for journal submission.

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# Chuyển dịch sinh viên quốc tế đến Việt Nam: Các yếu tố thu hút sinh viên Lào và Campuchia và hàm nghĩa quản lý cho các trường đại học Việt Nam

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## TÓM TẮT

Trong bối cảnh toàn cầu hóa và sự trỗi dậy của các quốc gia châu Á như những điểm đến du học mới, nghiên cứu này khám phá các yếu tố thúc đẩy sinh viên Lào và Campuchia đi du học và các yếu tố cụ thể thu hút họ chọn Việt Nam làm quốc gia điểm đến. Khi sự dịch chuyển sinh viên trong nội khối ASEAN ngày càng tăng, việc tìm hiểu động lực của các dòng chảy này đến các trung tâm mới nổi như Việt Nam—một quốc gia có các mục tiêu chiến lược nhằm quốc tế hóa giáo dục đại học—trở nên cực kỳ quan trọng. Sử dụng thiết kế phương pháp hỗn hợp đa giai đoạn, nghiên cứu này cung cấp một phân tích sâu sắc bằng cách tích hợp dữ liệu định lượng và định tính. Quá trình nghiên cứu bao gồm các cuộc phỏng vấn khám phá để làm cơ sở phát triển công cụ khảo sát, sau đó là thu thập dữ liệu đồng thời thông qua khảo sát định lượng với 67 sinh viên Lào và Campuchia và phỏng vấn sâu định tính với 11 sinh viên và đại diện ngoại giao. Kết quả cho thấy các yếu tố "đẩy" chính không chỉ mang tính thực tiễn mà còn mang tính khát vọng, bao gồm mong muốn mạnh mẽ về trải nghiệm sinh viên quốc tế mang tính biến đổi và nhận thức rằng bằng cấp nước ngoài có chất lượng và giá trị cao hơn, mang lại lợi thế cạnh tranh trên thị trường việc làm trong nước. Yếu tố "kéo" quan trọng nhất thu hút sinh viên đến Việt Nam là sự sẵn có của các học bổng toàn phần từ chính phủ. Theo sau đó là sự kết hợp của các yếu tố khác, bao gồm mối quan hệ song phương tích cực và ổn định giữa các quốc gia, thành tựu phát triển kinh tế ấn tượng của Việt Nam, và chất lượng ngày càng được công nhận của hệ thống giáo dục đại học. Nghiên cứu này đóng góp vào khối văn liệu còn hạn chế về sự dịch chuyển của sinh viên quốc tế đến các điểm đến phi truyền thống, không nói tiếng Anh, đặc biệt là trong bối cảnh của ASEAN. Nghiên cứu đưa ra các hàm nghĩa quản lý cụ thể cho các trường đại học Việt Nam. Các kết quả và khuyến nghị từ nghiên cứu này có thể giúp các cơ sở giáo dục đại học Việt Nam thu hút hiệu quả hơn sinh viên quốc tế, đặc biệt là sinh viên từ Lào và Campuchia, nhằm làm phong phú thêm cộng đồng học thuật, tăng cường mối quan hệ khu vực và cuối cùng là nâng cao vị thế quốc tế của mình trong bối cảnh toàn cầu đang có nhiều cạnh tranh.

**Từ khoá:** sinh viên quốc tế, yếu tố kéo, yếu tố đẩy, Lào, Campuchia, Việt Nam, giáo dục đại học, ASEAN

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