

# UNDERSTANDING POSTGRADUATE STUDY INTENTIONS IN VIETNAM: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF CONTEXTUAL AND MOTIVATIONAL DRIVERS

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**Abstract:** *This study explores the contextual factors and motivational dimensions influencing Vietnamese students' intentions to study postgraduate. Addressing gaps in quantitative literature, the research adopts a qualitative approach which consists of integrated motivation framework, self-determination theory, social cognitive theory, ecological systems theory, and sociocultural theory to investigate how motivation is formed and shaped by contextual factors. In-depth interviews with 36 participants found that students' intentions are driven by three distinct motivational types outcome-based, process-based, and identity-based and it is shaped by five key contextual factors: perceived subjective norms, perceived financial well-being, perceived wellness, job satisfaction, and educational service satisfaction. The findings suggest that motivation is not a fixed internal trait but a socially embedded construct. This study offers recommendations for universities and policymakers to align postgraduate program design and enrollment strategies such as adapting communication to motivational types, enhancing student support services.*

• Keywords: *motivation to study, higher education, postgraduate intention, Vietnam.*

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## 1. Theoretical framework

Motivation denotes the psychological processes that activate, direct and sustain goal-directed action (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Reeve, 2018). In psychological terms, it indicates both the justification for engaging in a certain action and the drives that determines its intensity and duration. Motivation is essential in consumer research for explaining the reasons behind consumers behaviors (Gnoth, 1997). Diverse types of motivation affect specific decision-making processes and behavioral outcomes. Three principal sources of motivation that generally influence consumer behavior, as identified in interdisciplinary study, are outcome-based, process-based, and identity-based motivations.

Outcome-based motivation aligns with the instrumental perspective of behavior, in which individuals are initially driven by the desire to attain a specific end state or external reward (Heath et al., 1999; Kivetz et al., 2006). Research indicates that outcome-based goals are often influenced by extrinsic motivation, suggesting that the action is performed not for its intrinsic value, but for its consequential benefits (Förster et al., 1998). This corresponds with extrinsic motivation in self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 2000), where the behavior is a means to an end. In contrast, process-based motivation emphasizes the

intrinsic value and emotional satisfaction derived from the task itself. This perspective encourages individuals to engage in specific action driven by fun, curiosity or satisfaction, irrespective of the ultimate result (Shah and Kruglanski, 2000; Laran and Janiszewski, 2011). Related concepts, such as flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan, 1985), stated that the pursuit of goals is self-reinforcing. This might be understood as individuals who find fulfillment in the processes of exploration, learning or contextual immersion. The activity is esteemed for fulfilling internal psychological requirements such as curiosity, competence, or autonomy, rather than for specific external benefit (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Identity-based motivation states that individuals are driven to behave in manners that validate or strengthen their self-concept (Oyserman, 2009). Individuals pursue goals that correspond with their aspirational identity, social affiliations, or ethical principles, even in the absence of concrete or emotional incentives. This type of motivation often operates indirectly, shaping decisions that correspond with an individual's self-identity or ambitions. Prospective students may seek a master's degree to satisfy a self-image of professional ambition or academic aptitude theories of symbolic self-completion (Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1982) connect

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with identity-based motivation, emphasizing the effect of social identity and group affiliation on behavior. This is especially evident in collectivist cultures where self-concept is constructed by community and social norms (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

The integrated model of motivation offers a thorough comprehension of behavior by recognizing that extrinsic rewards (outcome), intrinsic fulfillment (process), and self-concept congruence (identity) may serve as the motivating factors for goal-oriented action. This model serves as the theoretical framework to examine and classify the fundamental motivations for enrolling in higher education.

## 2. Method

The qualitative phase aimed to investigate the intricate aspects of motivation and the environmental elements influencing it. Due to the exploratory nature of this phase, the purposive sampling method was chosen to ensure that the sample size is dictated by theoretical saturation. Specifically, the data review and analysis conducted in conjunction with data collection, when the sample size reached 36, subsequent data ceased to contribute further to interview's aims. The respondents were intentionally selected to encompass a diverse array of gender, age, educational level and professional experience, reflecting different motivation to study master degree. Participants for the in-depth interviews were recruited using snowball sampling, initially reaching out to students known to the researcher who met the qualifications for the interviews. Table 1 presents details of the sampling criteria and structure for the in-depth interview.

**Table 1. In-depth interview sampling structure**

Characteristics	Frequency
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	22
Male	18
<b>Age</b>	
18-25	27
26-35	10
36-49	3
<b>Years of graduate</b>	
Undergraduate	13
From 1 to less than 3 years	10
3 years and above	13

Source: Created by author

Prior to the interview, we sent invitations to all participants and clearly stated the purpose of the face-to-face interview to obtain their consent in advance. Each interview lasted for about 30 minutes. Given the permission of the respondents, all qualitative data collected were handwritten. Following the definition of motivation (Deci and Ryan, 1992) and motivation orientation (Boshier, 1977) and the social cognitive theory, key motivational dimensions and the contextual factors were identified through two questions including

(1) the motivation to study Master degree (2) factors affecting motivation to study Master degree. To ensure the accuracy of qualitative data and hence, reduce administrative bias, each participant's responses were noted by two interviewers. Consensual qualitative research methodology was used in the design and analysis of the data (Hill et al., 2005). Accordingly, the final data set was examined by two coders to identify relevant themes and core concepts. In line with this, the categories' frequency of occurrence was also recorded. We only record and apply categories that were mentioned at least twice for the construction of hypotheses, as recommended by Hill et al. (2005). The core ideas were used to conceptualize motivational dimension and contextual factors.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Three sources of motivation to pursue higher education

Findings from the qualitative phase reveal three motivational dimensions including outcome-based, process-based, and self-identity based motivations. (See Table 2).

**Table 2. Findings about motivational dimensions from the in-depth interview phase**

Themes/ constructs	Core ideas	Frequency		
		Undergraduate	Graduated 1 years	Graduated 3 years and above
Outcome-based motivation	Secure professional advancement (need to upgrade knowledge)	1	11	13
	Acquire higher status in job (for higher position's requirement)	7	8	11
	Comply with employer's policy (a job requires degree as fundamental requirement)	8	9	12
	Help me earn a degree, diploma or certificate (higher educational level is a proxy of qualified employee)	9	7	12
	Seek knowledge for its own sake (lack of knowledge or do not have ability to accomplish requirement at work; need to expand knowledge of new area)	6	8	11
Process-based motivation	Break a routine of work (get tired of overtime)	3	6	7
	Fulfill a need for personal associations and friendship (Have more valuable relationship)	1	6	9
	Learn for just the joy of learning (good at learning, enjoy learning new knowledge)	8	5	4
Self-identity based motivation	Keep up with others (friends, colleagues)	8	7	12
	People with status and prestige attend Master class			12
	Maintain and improve social position		3	

Source: Created by author

A considerable amount of participants-particularly those with one or more years of work experience-expressed a clear outcome-based motivation for pursuing a master's degree. Respondents frequently expressed the desire to gain promotions, fulfil employer requirements, improve their job status, and obtain qualifications perceived as necessary for professional

success. This orientation is consistent with expectancy-value theory, which emphasizes that individuals make decisions based on the perceived usefulness and expected value of an outcome (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002). Correspondingly, it conforms to goal-gradient theory (Kivetz et al., 2006), which posits that individual has higher motivation as they perceive themselves to be closer to achieving a desired goal. These motives also reflect extrinsic regulation in self-determination theory (SDT), whereby the learner's engagement is driven primarily by external rewards or social contingencies (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000). Hence, the organisational policies and requirements, job market competitiveness, and perceived employability emphasizes that many individuals view postgraduate education as a mean to achieve instrumental outcomes rather than an intrinsically rewarding activity.

In contrast, several respondents, particularly undergraduates and 1 year graduates, expressed process-based motivation, focusing on intrinsic satisfaction, curiosity, and enjoyment emerged from learning. Participants indicated they were motivated by the pleasure of acquiring new knowledge and the inherent value of educational engagement. This joins with theories of intrinsic motivation and flow as the activity of learning is self-rewarding and pursued for its own sake (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Following the SDT framework, motivation reflects autonomous regulation, which consists of continuing engagement, well-being, and deeper learning outcomes (Deci and Ryan, 2000). These findings are in the same vein with previous research in higher education which identifies intellectual curiosity and personal development as critical drivers of postgraduate enrolment intentions (Laran and Janiszewski, 2011; Reeve, 2018). Although less frequently mentioned than extrinsic motives, the process-based motivation highlights a meaningful segment of learners who pursuit further study is rooted in self-oriented learning goals and intrinsic psychological needs.

The third motivational source (i.e identity-based motivation) is also emerged themes relating to social comparison, normative expectations, and aspirational self-concept. Respondents were influenced by the actions and achievements of peers, colleagues, and importance individuals in their social circles. Statements such as "keeping up with friends" and "people with status and prestige attend Master class" demonstrate a motive to affirm or enhance one's identity in relation to others. According to identity-based motivation theory, individuals are motivated to engage in behaviors that are congruent with their self-concept or desired identity (Oyserman, 2009). Moreover, such motives conform with symbolic self-

completion theory (Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1982), suggesting that educational qualification is perceived as symbols of competence and social prestige. In collectivist contexts, these motives may be especially notable as individuals internalize group norms and seek to fulfil social acceptance roles (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Hence, extrinsic motivations (i.e complying with family or peer suggestion) may reflect internalized identity standards, in which merging external influence with deeply rooted self-concept.

The findings provide empirical support for the applicability of the integrated motivation framework in the domain of postgraduate education. While outcome-based motivations dominate among those with work experience and career-oriented goals, a subset of participants also articulated process-oriented and identity-driven motives. This multiplicity reinforces the view that educational decisions are not solely rational or utilitarian but are influenced by affective, cognitive, and social identity processes (Gnoth, 1997; Wong and Wang, 2021).

### 3.2. Contextual factors influencing motivations to pursue higher education

Details of contextual factors affecting motivation were explored from the qualitative study are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3. Findings about contextual factors from the in-depth interview**

Theme/relevant constructs	Core ideas	Frequency		
		Undergrad	Grad 1 year	Grad 3 years
Perceived subjective norms	Popularity of Master degree/peer comparison	7	2	5
	Others accept/value a Master degree	7	5	8
	High competence from labor market	7	1	6
Perceived financial well being	Financial stress (anxiety about expenses)		2	10
	Desire to sustain and anticipate desired living standards and financial freedom	6	7	8
Perceived wellness	Optimistic belief in positive outcome of studying Master degree (better position, work-life balance)	10	5	10
	Secure self-identity and positive sense of self-regard	7	8	8
	Experience fear of failure/unacceptance	7	4	10
Job satisfaction	Opportunities for advancement		5	13
	Working overtime		5	7
Educational service satisfaction	Interpersonal bonds with faculty, peers, alumni	2	7	3
	Miss student time		7	3

Source: Created by author

The qualitative findings of this study suggest that the intention to pursue a master's degree is significantly formed by a range of contextual factors. Drawing on theories of motivation including social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985), ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), these findings reinforce the argument that academic motivation is a contextually embedded



construct. In details, five important contextual factors urging students' motivational orientations are discovered: perceived subjective norms, perceived financial well-being, perceived wellness, job satisfaction, and educational service satisfaction.

*First*, perceived subjective norms posited as a significant contextual impact. A substantial of participants indicated popularity of Master degree, "high competence from labor market" and "others accept/value a master degree" as main motivations for pursuing postgraduate education. This illustrates the impact of social influence on educational choices. According to social cognitive theory, individuals cultivate self-efficacy and result expectations via social modeling and verbal persuasion (Bandura, 1986). Particularly in collectivist cultural environments, where social responsibilities and interpersonal obligations are central, the motivation to fulfill others' expectations may not be solely extrinsic. According to sociocultural theory, these social influences are frequently internalized and assimilated into an individual's identity (Vygotsky, 1978; Markus and Kitayama, 1991). Consequently, the motivation to seek advanced education is partly influenced by perceived social responsibilities and aspiration to conform to culturally endorsed academic pathways. Perceived social norms may influence self-identity based motivations in which pursuing higher education may help build an identity that fit to both the learners and their reference group's expectations.

*Second*, perceived financial well-being refers to instrumental value of postgraduate education as a means to improve future economic conditions. Emerging themes such as "financial stress (anxiety about expenses)" and "desire to sustain and anticipate desired living standards and financial freedom" imply that students' motivation is driven by financial outcomes. Following the ecological systems framework, these perceptions reflect macrosystem-level influences, where broader socioeconomic structures condition how individuals perceive the utility of education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Moreover, from an expectancy-value perspective, students who feel financially constrained or insecure may be more extrinsically driven, perceiving higher education as a strategic investment rather than a self-fulfilling effort (Eccles and Wigfield, 2002). Consequently, financial well-being is considered as a dynamic contextual factor that shapes the perceived cost-benefit ratio of educational engagement.

*Third*, perceived wellness is evident in environmental factors related to personal renewal and emotional satisfaction. Numerous respondents expressed a need to "secure self-identity and positive sense of self-regard" or "optimistic belief in positive outcome of

studying master degree" or "experience fear of failure/unacceptance" as components of psychological and emotional wellness. This aligns with self-determination theory's notion that optimal motivation arises when basic psychological needs—such as competence, autonomy, and relatedness—are met (Deci and Ryan, 2000). In this case, perceived wellness acts as both a prerequisite and outcome of intrinsic motivation. Individuals who feel psychologically and emotionally well are more likely to seek behavior supporting their well-being, such as viewing higher education as meaningful goal and focusing on long-term educational commitment. In contrast, low perceived wellness (e.g., dissatisfaction with current situation or emotional recession) may push individuals toward postgraduate study as a means of personal revised.

*Fourth*, the role of job satisfaction emerged in participants' references to "opportunities for advancement" and avoid "working overtime". Participants who dissatisfaction with their jobs often considered higher education as an attractive pathway to new challenges, advancement or to escape from stress at work. According to social cognitive theory, dissatisfaction may lower perceived self-efficacy in one's current setting, leading to a transition toward environments (e.g studying master degree) where self-efficacy can be restored or enhanced (Bandura, 1986). Similarly, from the perspective of self-determination theory, individuals seek contexts that support their psychological needs (Deci and Ryan, 2000). When the workplace lacks sufficient autonomy or growth chances, the academic setting may act as an alternative space to restore self-determined drive.

Finally, educational service satisfaction, while more relevant for current undergraduates, also influenced participants' motivation. Students who perceived engagement and support in their undergraduate programs were more inclined to pursue advanced education. This result strongly corresponds with ecological systems theory, which addresses that microsystem-level interactions such as individuals with teachers, curricula, and institutional support can either promote or hinder long-term motivation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). When educational institutions establish an autonomy-supportive environment, they fulfill students' immediate psychological demands while fostering intellectual aspirations. This finding further corroborates self-determination theory, which associates happiness in current educational experiences with ongoing academic involvement (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

#### 4. Practical implications

This qualitative study presents several practical implications for higher education institutions, policymakers, and academic support services aiming

to enhance postgraduate enrolment and strengthen student motivation in Vietnam. First, the identification of outcome-based, process-based, and identity-based motivations emphasizes the need for differentiated communication strategies. Universities should adapt their promotional message to align with these distinct motivational orientations. Second, the role of educational service satisfaction in shaping motivational pathways highlights the importance of enhancing the undergraduate experience. Hence, institutions should invest in integrated academic pathways and promote supportive services. Third, the strong influence of perceived subjective norms (i.e. peer and family expectations) suggests that universities can benefit from leveraging social modelling and interpersonal networks in recruitment efforts. Peer recommendation, community-based information events and shared platforms may all contribute to strengthening identity-based motivations. Fourth, financial wellness remain a significant barrier for many students and are closely linked to outcome-based motivation. Institutions and policymakers should proactively address concerns related to financial well-being by improving transparency around tuition fees, scholarship opportunities, and long-term returns on educational investment. Finally, findings related to job satisfaction particularly among working professionals suggest that postgraduate education is viewed as a potential career pathway, increased autonomy, and escape from job dissatisfaction. Universities should design a program that target to mid-career learners seeking personal and professional transformation.

### 5. Conclusions and future research directions

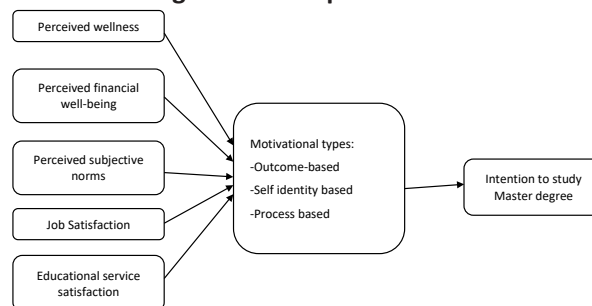
This qualitative study offers an integrated understanding of how contextual factors shape motivational orientations and, in turn, influence students' intentions to pursue postgraduate education. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000), social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), we propose the following conceptual model:

#### Contextual factors

This model hypothesizes that contextual factors directly shape three types of motivation, which in turn influence the intention to pursue a master's degree. The model also allows for potential moderation or mediation analysis to examine how certain contextual factors (e.g., subjective norms or wellness) might strengthen or weaken specific motivational pathways. Future research should operationalize this model using quantitative methodologies, particularly Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), to assess the strength,

direction, and mediation pathways among contextual variables, motivational types, and intention. Validated measurement scales from SDT, expectancy-value theory, and TPB should be adapted to measure constructs such as motivation type, perceived financial well-being, and intention.

Figure 1. Conceptual model



Source: Created by author

While this study suggests motivation as a mediator between contextual factors and intention, alternative models could explore moderation effects. Moderated mediation analysis could thus uncover conditional effects across subgroups. Motivational orientation may evolve as students transition from undergraduate to postgraduate stages. A longitudinal design could track changes in context, motivation, and intention over time, providing a dynamic perspective on the decision-making process. Future studies may implement and evaluate policy interventions targeting key contextual influences. These could complement the motivational lens by adding narrative and developmental dimensions to the understanding of educational choices.

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