

**Tasting Australia:  
Vietnamese student parents' experience  
of living in limbo  
- A Janus head analysis**

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**Kieu Nga Nguyen**  
**BA (Educ), MSocWk, MA**  
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**Primary Supervisor: Dr Helen McLaren**  
**Associate Supervisor: Associate Professor Lorna Hallahan**

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***Dedication***

*To my Grandfather whom I miss,*

*This quotation that you taught me in French means so much:*

*There exists only one race – a race of mankind,*

*There is only one religion – the religion of love,*

*There is only one language – the language of the heart.*

## *Declaration*

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed

Date: 4 March 2020

## *Abstract*

For centuries people have migrated from one place to another due to famine or poverty, fleeing war or oppressive political regimes, employment or educational opportunities in want of a better life. Migration can be forced, chosen, permanent or transitional. This thesis reports specifically on the experiences of Vietnamese parents as transitory migrants (international post-graduate students), in particular the uncertainties associated with living across two cultures.

In-depth interviews were conducted with twenty women and six men on how they experienced and negotiated transitions in their lives. Interpretive phenomenology gave insights into the participants' lived experiences, changes in their relationships and parenting in Australia. Applying an additional analytical overlay, the Janus Head concept, provided a lens for deeper interpretation of the data, including insights into pasts, present contexts and imagined futures. This included both hopes and uncertainties expressed in their spoken words and also silences.

The Janus Head lens offered phenomenological understanding of participants' uncertainties related to returning to Vietnam's patriarchal Confucian-influenced families and society. By engaging in the Janus head action of *looking back* alongside with *looking forward*, many participants were found to be living in a state of limbo. Findings showcased women who were determined to achieve greater gender balance in life, while simultaneously navigating the patriarchy they brought with them to Australia. These women used spoken words to indicate feelings of success in Australia related to gender performance of in relationships, parenting more equitably in the family space. Likewise, the men perceived shifts in themselves and they

felt proud of the changes to their own mindsets related to gender performativity and gender equity in parenting, relationships and family life generally.

Woven through this thesis are the Vietnamese student parents' stories of changes in their adult relationships, parenting practices and care for their children associated with transitory life in Australia. Temporary living in Australia enabled parents who participated in this study to enjoy family life at levels they had not experienced before. In doing so, they had the opportunity to *taste* Australia and to decide whether they liked it or not. Whether they perceived a negative or positive reception, whether they intended to stay or return, the parents interviewed expressed how they learned, grew and had something special to take away from the transitory experience.

Both the women and men interviewed carried worries about their own and children's futures. This included uncertainty on whether some of the liberties from life in Australia could be maintained, whether their children could cope with the structured Vietnamese family and educational systems, and the pressures of society to perform gender. Due to the mix of uncertainties in going back to Vietnam, for nearly all, participants expressed commitment to blend what they liked from the Australian lifestyles with Vietnamese traditions and norms dear to them. Nevertheless, this remained heavily fuelled with hope, doubt and uncertainty, and was experienced as limbo - always.

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# *Definitions and terminologies*

## *Inbetweenness*

According to sociologists and philosophers, inbetweenness represents the extraordinary space in between, often multiple, opposites (Alexander et al., 2010; Ortega, 2008; Wang, 2014). In this space, the ambivalence and inbetweenness is fundamental to understanding that reality in the world does not cleanly fit into neat binaries and that there is no way to achieve absolute clarity about the construction of identity and cultures, and one's existence when experiencing inbetweenness.

## *Interpretive phenomenology*

Phenomenology is concerned with the meaning of human lived experience, with how people feel and see their lived experience and understanding of themselves (Smith and Osborn, 2007). While it is difficult to study hard and fast facts about complex human condition, interpretive phenomenology offers a way for participants to talk about their lived experiences, and for researchers to add appropriate meaning and understanding through theorising.

## *Janus Head philosophy*

Janus Head is a Greek mythological figure with two faces, one looking back and one looking forward. Used as a concept to complement interpretive phenomenology, it assists in making

sense of subjective experiences. Janus Head philosophy acknowledges the interaction of one's history and perceived future in the present human experience.

### ***Limbo***

Originally from Christian theology, limbo has been used to describe the place where spirits of the unbaptised and evil dead are believed to go as opposed to going to Heaven. Limbo is a place of suffering, anguish, gloom, torture or Hell. In the context of life on earth, authors describe limbo as something experienced that is intermediate or indeterminate, from which individuals never become completely free (Capps and Carlin, 2010). Limbo can be experienced when in physical, mental or emotional good or poor health, and can make individuals feel disoriented, confused, adrift or even useless. Limbo has its focus on the experience of being in-between, in a state of confinement, and not moving physically, psychologically or emotionally in one direction or the other.

### ***Skilled independent visa – subclass 189***

Australia uses a point system to select skilled migrants for permanent residency based on a series of characteristics according to applicants' age, English language skills, skilled employment experience, educational qualifications, specialist education qualification, Australian study requirement, professional year in Australia, credentialed community language, study in regional Australia and partner skills (Department of Home Affairs, 2019a).

### ***Student guardian visa – subclass 590***

The student guardian visa – subclass 590, is for temporary entry of one parent or adult relative who is the custodian of school aged children who is the holder of an Australian student visa. They student guardian must remain living with the child at all times, provide care and support, provide accommodation, welfare and healthcare, medical insurance, and all expenses at their own cost (Department of Home Affairs, 2019c). They cannot work, study or draw on Australian government benefit and must be in Australia at all times with the children, and cannot exit Australia without them.

### ***Student visa subclass 500: partner and child dependents***

The Australian Student Visa Subclass 500 allows most students to bring their immediate family members to Australia. Immediate family members are called dependents and may include students' spouse (or de facto partner) and children under the age of 18. There are requirements on health and finance including living costs for the duration of the student and their family's intended stay in Australia, school costs for all school-age dependents, travel costs and health insurance for all family members (Department of Home Affairs 2019).

### ***Transnational students***

In this thesis, transnationalism is used with reference to students. Transnational students are those who move across borders for the purpose of study. The frequency of temporary migratory experiences often enables the forging and maintaining of interpersonal, cultural and political ties across both their origin and their host countries (Schiller et al., 1995).

# ***Introduction***

*... in which I become entwined into this thesis. In this chapter I locate myself as an insider researcher subsumed by history and cultural traditions. Exposing these are important so the reader can understand my interpretations of the data, metaphorical framing and my heartfelt thinking alongside. I reflect on my Vietnamese childhood, family, relationships, history, culture and, indeed, my journey to Australia accompanied by my two daughters...*

When I started this study, I wanted to explore the parenting experiences of Vietnamese parents in a new land, namely Australia. A specific migration visa allows them to accompany their school-aged children. This visa is known as the Student Guardian Visa. This visa restricts entry to Australia to only one parent, who is not allowed to draw benefit, to work or study. The student guardian parent is expected to leave their adult partner behind, accompany their school aged child or children, and to simply care for and parent them. In consideration that families are being torn apart while wanting to educate their children overseas, this stimulated my want to explore the decisions, actions and motivations behind bringing their children to Australia. This phenomenon mirrored my own experience as a student guardian parent accompanying my children so that they could study in Australia, and leaving my husband, extended family and support networks behind.



As it transpired, visa guardian parents were difficult to recruit. I can only hypothesise that, due to the many Australian visa restrictions upon them, there were fears related to potential participation in my research. For example, work, study restrictions and their limited engagement in Australian society most likely limited the ability to understand that research participation was for exploratory purposes and not scrutiny of their migration purpose. This, too, could have aroused suspicion about the voluntariness and confidentiality of research seeing to ask about their experiences in the context of such a restrictive visa. As a result, my PhD supervisor encouraged me to shift the focus of my research.

This thesis explores the experiences of Vietnamese parents who are also international students in Australia, particularly their experiences as parents and how they parented in a new land. With my interview questions, I set out to ask student parents about the parenting, family and intimate relationship challenges in Australia upon coming from Vietnam – initially through the lens of psychodynamic theory to unearth the power of past experiences on the unconscious mind. This was pertinent when considering that Vietnam, like many other Asian countries, had come from a place where authoritarian parenting styles were accepted as normative (Rindermann et al., 2013; Chao and Tseng, 2002; Ang and Goh, 2006; Rosenthal, 1996; Nguyen et al., 2016b; Nguyen, 2016; Kim, 2014), compared to their transitional experiences in Australia where parenting was more commonly thought to range from *laissez faire* and permissive, to authoritative. This earlier analytic intention was to assist understanding of the psychological impact on emotion and experience.

In speaking to research participants, however, my study focus was again forced to change. While I commenced with the use of psychodynamic theory in mind to analyse my data, this did not help me; instead, it stumped me. What I had thought was important to study was not what the participants decided was important to tell me, or what was important in their lives. When I started *really* listening, they led me to understand what was critical for them in their transnational journey experiences and they triggered my search for a new lens in which to understand their experiences. A new PhD supervision team and a new analytical framework emerged, which enabled sincerity to my research participants' voices. This was important for a phenomenological study that seeks to understand the perceived lived experiences of others, how they make meaning in their lives and, being a social worker, to ensure the research is both anti-oppressive and emancipatory.

It was liberating when I heard the stories, the feelings and meanings when tuning into these Vietnamese student parents. I learned that parenting was not a discrete phenomenon worthy to explore, but that there were much deeper feelings and lived experiences going on for people situated between two worlds, between past and future, and between disappointment and fulfilment. These parents shared some of their most intimate feelings with me. Their rich experiences have since driven the direction of this thesis into new places that were never expected, through a process in which participants enlightened me with the complexity of their lives in transition. They enabled my interpretation of their stories of inbetweenness phenomenologically.

## Research question

*How do Vietnamese parents, who are international students in Australia, experience living in limbo amidst the inbetweenness of time, place, culture, relationships and parenting?*

In responding to this question, this thesis explored a range of contexts and outcomes surrounding the phenomena of *living in limbo* experienced by Vietnamese international students. It involved understanding the sense making of changes to their lives, their family relationships and parenting practices and meanings – often concomitant with feeling *stuck* between conflicting contexts, cultures, while balancing disappointment and fulfilment. The decisions that led their journeys to Australia with their children are teased out, together with their expressed life experiences in Australia and their feelings about going home. Inherent in this phenomenon of *living in limbo* are the memories of past lives, experiences in their current lives and uncertainty about imagined futures of heading home. Drawing on the Janus Head concept, explained later in this thesis, the experiences of being transnational student parents are elucidated. Indeed, to respect participants' confidentiality, the names provided in this study are pseudonyms.

In fact, I am a Vietnamese woman studying in Australia. I was previously the holder of a guardian parent visa and now on a student visa of my own. My children have since grown and are adults, living my transnational life alongside me and the three of us are currently studying in Australia. My husband, parents and my extended family are living Vietnam, far away geographically. Despite the distance, I behold an unbreakable oneness in my heart with family

and my Vietnam which has impacted my shift in research focus, approach to this thesis and development of the analytical framework. Since I am an insider researcher, it is important to locate myself in order for the reader to understand my heartfelt thinking and subjective influences in the interpretations of the data.

### **My journey to Australia as an insider researcher**

Family background has enhanced and influenced my entire life, my reasoning and attitude towards people. My multi-generational family possesses its own unique cultural values that are reflected in our country's history, politics, society and traditions. We have stayed strong together despite enduring war, hardship, hunger and illness during the long post-war rebuild. Putting these hardships aside, we have created educational opportunities and we have had prosperous careers. My family members and I have travelled the length and breadth of Vietnam and to other countries around the world. Speaking for myself, this has broadened my views and knowledge, facilitated the opportunity for me to demonstrate cultural competence, critical thinking and professional skills, to be a mother, parent, and lover, have a wonderful life and now to also finish off my PhD. I'll briefly explain the living journey that got me to where I am now, and which has many connections and intersections with the lived experiences of my research participants. This includes atrocities in our lives that may even pre-date us, but as a collective society the trauma that is historical is passed on intergenerationally, mixes with our own lived experiences, hopes and dreams, and it is enduring.

## *The war*

In the year I was born, the Vietnam War was raging fiercely and intensely, even though it was near its final stages. My parents passed on the stories. They told me that, at this time, the US Air Force had conducted several violent airstrikes. They said that the largest ever bombing campaign by the B-52 aircraft took place in the region where we lived. At least twenty thousand tonnes of explosives were dropped on North Vietnam. My city, Hanoi, was turned into a fiery furnace. Amidst the roar of aircraft engines and the fearful sound of sirens, my mother was being transported from the hospital where I was to be born to a bomb shelter. She was having a difficult labour and her life was hanging on the thinnest of threads. For me to be born, the transportation was stopped, and my mother had to endure a roadside surgery.

According to my family members' reflections, my father was working at the radio station as a sound engineer – as usual. While he was at work, his radio station was bombed and completely destroyed by the explosions. My mother was returned to the hospital for treatment and, when my father did not return home, I was left in the care of my paternal grandparents. They have told me many times that they vainly waited for some information. It was seven days later, as they said, a miracle happened. My father returned after having been buried in the ruins of the radio station. As the story that has been passed onto me goes, his mud-covered body shivered with cold and extreme pain. His face was skeleton-like and expressionless. His hands were bloody and raw. He had patiently used his fingers to dig through the rubble for an excruciatingly long period of time. Strewn around him was nothing but debris and the bodies of the people he had worked with. Quite possibly, my father was the sole survivor of his employment that day. My father was one of a few lucky people in Hanoi who, despite being injured for life, reunited

with his family. He suffered permanent hearing loss from the bomb attack. It was a tragic loss for an incredible radio sound engineer like him, who relied on the precision of his hearing for his employment success, identity and self-pride.

My mother was also an engineer – a wireless engineer at the national television station. However, during the procedure of giving birth to me, she haemorrhaged and lost forty percent of her physical capacity to work. She later became a science-book editor at a publication house. My father later found work at a university as a lecturer. Despite the tragedies, my parents were some of the lucky ones as they were educated and could forge new pathways in life. There were nearly two million people who never came home during the twenty treacherous years of that disastrous and futile war, and many families who never recovered their careers and livelihoods.

### ***Thời bao cấp***

The Vietnam War ended, and the country's economy collapsed. As with many other intellectuals, my parents had to contribute two thirds of their time to the country's post-war rebuild; working in muddy rice fields, instead of practising their professional skills. I went to the fields with them almost every day and I enjoyed playing with the other children. We did not notice how horrible and harsh life was for our parents, at that time, because we had no memory of our families' former prosperous lives. Many of our parents had graduated from universities overseas and worked as professionals; now, they had to cultivate crops without payment.

Everyone in Vietnam was suffering from starvation. As a child, I remember sweet potatoes being our staple diet – well, in fact, sweet potatoes were our only diet. My parents tried to make

meals interesting by making sweet potato cookies for breakfast, steamed sweet potatoes for lunch and fried sweet potatoes for dinner. All we ever had to eat was the monotony of sweet potatoes, more sweet potatoes and still more sweet potatoes. Despite it, we survived.

People from my generation cannot forget the so-called, *Thời bao cấp*. This was a phrase used to describe a subsidy period in Vietnam from 1975 until late 1986. This was the period in which the centrally planned economy controlled everything, from petrol to clothes, to bicycle spare parts and to even food. There were no items allowed to be traded in the market. Everything was distributed through the exchange of paper coupons. Each coupon was noted with a fixed amount of goods that holders could receive. Losing or tearing the coupon meant having nothing to eat - except, potentially, sweet potatoes if we could find them for the next month.

### ***'Fire, fire'***

I remember the feeling of hunger as a child as normal. I was continually starving and passing out due to the lack of nutrition, as were all the other children in my life. Many of us, had no houses during the period following the Vietnam War. We lived in huts made from bamboo trees. In fact, about twenty families lived collectively in one hut. I can still recall that during the rainy season we wore raincoats inside the hut as the roofs made from dry leaves were not enough to keep the rain out.

However, the worst horror was not the rain. One night, I was suddenly awakened by the blood curdling scream of our neighbours, '*Fire, fire!*' Hugging me securely, my parents rushed out of the hut. The huge fire illuminated the dark and starless sky. All the people were safe, but twenty-

one bamboo huts and everyone's belongings were engulfed by the flames. Everything we all owned was destroyed in a flash and the hut community was decimated.

My family then went to live in my maternal grandparents' house, with our extended family of uncles, aunts and cousins. We had nine people living in a one-room house, but at least it was made from bricks, kept the rain out and was less likely to be ravaged by fire. While space and food were limited, every dinner we shared was full of cheers and laughter. My grandmother had eight children of her own, four had tragically died during the war, and she adopted many children and grandchildren who had been orphaned. While not living with us, every day they would come over for food. The sense of community instilled in Vietnamese culture, compelled my grandmother to care for and teach the orphans lots of practical and necessary skills that included cooking, sewing, knitting, child-rearing and organising the family.

Later in my adolescent life, I was also taught these skills by my grandmother. They were considered to be vital and valued skills for Vietnamese women to know. I began to notice how people in each stage of their lifetime had different attitudes towards each other. There were many interesting and fascinating stories of their lives, and their challenges and strengths that informed the way that they thought, socialised and live. I slowly discovered these cultural nuances through my own cultural conditioning, one by one.

### ***Our life is made of destiny, in which ...***

My maternal grandparents were two of the most admirable people I have ever known. My grandfather worked for the French government in Vietnam and he kept his French-like lifestyle



until the last day of his life. Every time he ventured outside the house, he dressed most elegantly. In winter, he wore a dark blue or chestnut brown suit with a tie. In summer, he wore well ironed black pants and a white shirt. I often had the pleasure of accompanying him to visit his smartly dressed friends at an ancient house not too far away. They sat there and I listened to them speak the strange, but beautiful, sounds to my ears: the French language.

In my grandfather's philosophy, there were no bad people in the world if they lived in the right environment. He perceived '*bad*' as external to the person and, for this reason, he always treated people around him equally and with respect. My grandfather believed that our life was made by destiny, which was fashioned by the world around each of us. I also learned to appreciate everything in life, whether big or small – everything in life had its purpose.

One important principle I learned from my grandfather was that food was made to enjoy, not to waste. As it happened, my grandmother was a talented chef and, as professional cook, she prepared both Western and Asian foods. Grandmother had endured a harsh life before becoming a chef at a five-star French hotel in the nineteen fifties. She made each and every meal absolutely enjoyable. She repeatedly told me that we should appreciate everything that happens in our life, as did my grandfather, whether good or bad, as challenges turn to strengths as we overcome them. All these skills and philosophies that my maternal grandparents endowed me have significantly affected the way I respect others in the world and how I value social justice and the diversity of life.

## *School life*

At six years of age, I started primary school. I soon became the entertainer of the school. I danced, sang and told stories using many different voices. I was chosen, together with some other students, to perform for and entertain children with disabilities each month at a local institution. We helped the children learn music and art and spent many enjoyable hours after school together. We organised a musical to be played at a national competition and the team won first place. We were extremely happy and felt that we were bringing hope, joy and skills to these children. To this day I keep in contact with some of them.

I have always had a passion for the arts. Luckily, my parents allowed me to study what I wanted. This was entirely different to traditional Vietnamese and other Asian education trends in which parents heavily influenced their children's career aspirations (Nguyen-Akbar, 2014; Patel et al., 2008; Shen et al., 2014). Many of the parents I knew always wanted their children to study science and maths and forced their children to become doctors, scientists or lawyers. At school, students learnt by heart what they were taught in class and they read all the same textbooks, as provided by the Department of Education. However, my parents encouraged me to read a variety of books. They encouraged me to develop the skills to respect humanity, embrace diversity, gain knowledge, learn different lifestyles and let my critical thinking flourish. They even taught me how to deal with the passive way of studying at school while still having time to learn other things from books. '*You cannot choose the time in which you are born, but you can choose yourself in this time*' – that was what they told me. Like the participants I studied for this thesis, I have come to understand that they have chosen themselves in this time,

travelled and confronted new ways of seeing the world, questioned where they have come from and developed new insights for their own futures.

Around the time I finished primary school, the Netherlands Government helped Vietnam to establish and build a standard school for gifted children. There were seven classes in each year level of 10, 11 and 12, which trained students to either become lawyers, scientists, biologists, doctors, politicians, teachers or writer-reporters. I was chosen to study in the class for future writer-reporters. We learnt communication skills, literature, history, society, politics, and art.

I finished my schooling, then my first degree at the University of Teachers of Foreign Languages. I learnt Russian because, back in those days, all students were required to study Russian in order to maintain the communist alliance. I also studied French because I was inspired by the memories of my grandfather speaking French when I was younger.

### ***The life of a radio presenter***

With my educational background, I became a reporter and presenter on national radio. My interest in people's life stories, hardships, endurance and survival, and desperation to seek new lives filled with opportunity, augmented during these times. On looking back, I feel that talking about life helped me make sense of my own life sequences and outcomes, and to appreciate everything as my forebears that taught me. This very job also gave me the opportunities to travel from big cities to remote areas in Vietnam. During this time, I observed many unfortunate souls suffer from poverty and every year of natural catastrophes. There were generations of people who suffered from the deadly Agent Orange and unexploded bombs left by the military.

My job gave me the opportunity to appreciate the historical and contemporary suffering of these people who were struggling to survive, and working long hours for little money, looking after family and helping each other as best they could. All this, they did while maintaining the cultural traditions and rituals. I shared many of these hardships, but unlike many others I had the opportunity to study, to work and to advance my career. As a woman, I achieved many things while caring for family and maintaining my cultural practices and dedication to Vietnamese cultural traditions.

During my adult working life, I received a scholarship to upgrade my qualification from radio presenter to journalism. I left, as a newlywed woman, to study in Belgium. This opportunity exposed me to a whole different world in terms of race, culture, religion, belief and so much more. I continued to benefit from further educational and employment experiences abroad. The next few trips overseas hosted many formal and informal educational and employment experiences in which I explored decorative art in Western Europe, ancient architecture of Eastern Europe, the finest educational methods on offer in the world in Finland, Norway and Sweden, and the strict but unique cultural norms in Japan. In contrast, I travelled to many Asian countries suffering from the effects of natural disasters, wars, poverty and lack of education. All these experiences had provided me with a picture of a world so beautiful, yet still with so many issues and problems to both confront and address.

### ***‘You must keep your name’***

Coming back to reflect on my grandparents, particularly from my father’s side. Grandfather was a French–Vietnamese interpreter in the army. If he started something, he always finished

it on time and with high expectations of himself. He would call me by my name, instead of saying ‘*child*’ like most other grandparents in Vietnam. Living about one thousand kilometres from where I lived, he wrote me letters almost every month with his neatly laid out handwriting.

In one of his last letters before he passed away at the age of one hundred, he wrote,

*My dearest Nga, this is our proverb:*

*A day lived, a day travelled, a sea of knowledge earned. But wherever you go, whoever you are with, you must keep your name and our family’s value carefully. If you can’t protect and respect your name as well as the value and culture of our family and community, no one will respect you.*

My grandmother, on the other hand, did not share the high level of education of my grandfather. Nonetheless, she was a treasure-trove full of traditional Vietnamese fairy tales, fables, songs and poems. She told the story of our traditions and values, our culture and folklore, and she kept the culture of our family strong. It is this proverb that is pertinent to my reflective engagement in this thesis because, like so many other Vietnamese student parents, we are born into a social context in which we are inculcated with expectations to protect and respect our family values, culture and community.

While I embrace my family values and I love the culture of my community, living in another completely different culture as a student, traveller, visa guardian parent and then an international student, exposed me to new values and new ways in which to perform as a parent, family member and Vietnamese person. I continue on with my journey to Australia, next.

## *Australia, the land of new opportunities*

I came to Australia twelve years ago. It was a multicultural country that, to some extent, summarised everything I had so far learnt from around the world. I discovered a part of my country's history through people who had fled by boats from Vietnam to Australia after the war. Many suffered traumatic experiences in detention camps in South-East Asian countries of first asylum. Many went through numerous hardships of resettlement and assimilation in Australia. These people struggled to find their place in a completely alien culture due to language barriers, loss of socio-economic status, problems of cross-cultural marriage and transnational family relationships. Despite this, they had slowly adapted and became successful Vietnamese Australians. Moreover, I recognised several social issues in Australia that, perhaps one day, Vietnam may also to come face to face with.

Upon changing from a guardian parent visa to student visa, I studied a Master of Social Work. My previous journalist job inspiring me to pursue social justice. My philosophy of social work has always been grounded in the set of values including respect for persons, equality for all and professional integrity. Studying social work helped me to consider and address social issues systematically, thoroughly and with necessary skills. The words that I obtained from the lectures echoed in my head, meanings confirmed what was in my heart, and they have supported me in my journey towards seeking social justice. Next, was my Research Masters in which I focused my study on the social phenomenon of marriage migration in Australia; and, now the PhD journey examining phenomena associated with parenting in a new land. With all the opportunities ahead, a new chapter of my life opened. This has not been without the lingering

challenges of my past and the uncertainty of my imagined futures, as with the lived experiences of the Vietnamese participants of my current study.

### ***Motivation for my next generation***

I started the journey to Australia in seeking a better education and future for my two daughters with a Guardian Student Visa. As with all other Guardian visa parents, I must meet several strict financial, health and character requirements. This also meant that my daughters and I were not allowed to have access to government funded social security, health care or other benefits. I was required to be residing in Australia whenever my children were in-country on their student visa; not permitted to leave Australia without them. I could not work, study for more than 3 months each year and I could not bring other family members to Australia.

Coming to Australia under strict visa conditions saw an end to my beloved job as a journalist and my socio-economic position. My daughters and I said goodbye to our social connections, friends and extended family. I put the physical relationship with my husband on hold and took up a long-distance relationship. My daughters, likewise, left behind their father and his physical contact, parental love and daily guidance. We sought a better education and future for our daughters, never imagining the isolation, discrimination, shame and cultural shock we would face.

There were conflicting relationships with my daughters as a result of the acculturation gaps. While I strived to hold on to the norms and values of my culture because I was isolated, my children tended to quickly assimilate, adjust and adapt to Australian society. As a non-English

speaker, I faced the challenge of language barriers and, with limited opportunity to work or study, there was little opportunity for me to acquire English. This inhibited building of bonds between me, as a parent, and my children's school. It affected their academic results and my parental self-esteem and efficacy. Language barriers diminished my confidence in communicating with the school about my children's well-being, their academic achievements and it limited my involvement with my children's educational activities. With little English language skills, I had limited access to services that advocated for the parental rights in a new society. I was isolated.

Although the Guardian Visa conditions disallowed me from obtaining a paid job or engaging in formal education, I engaged in volunteer work and undertook short-term vocational studies. I signed up for some local government volunteer work in a support program for the elderly. I helped in the kitchen of the community centre and was a photographer for local government events. I did all of this without payment, but in return, I learnt a lot about the Australian people, history, and politics. Many older people from the programs used to be lawyers, teachers, medical doctors or engineers. They helped me to learn English and improve it, introduced me to the Australian culture, education and systems, and they showed me how to communicate with people from different backgrounds.

From there, I realised that I wanted more. I wanted to learn properly, for myself and for my daughters. Yes, I then realised that by getting an education in Australia for myself could I gain language skills, broaden my knowledge about Australia and the Western lifestyle and help my children. An Australian education would help me expand my networks and fully live in this



country. Key to my decisions was for better communication with my daughters, which could play a part in me assisting them with their studies. What motivated me to study in Australia, however, was primarily connected to my goal of providing a better education and a better life for my children.

I went back to Vietnam, changed my visa to a Student visa and commenced my master's degree in social work. Interestingly, the more I studied, the more I realised that my previous journalist job was connected to my social justice mission. At the same time, I was reminded of all my memories during the Guardian Visa period. With the weapon of education that I gained, I became determined to do a project about Guardian Visa parents, a study about their journey, and a research about their experiences. It was important to study and expose the isolating and limiting experiences under this visa condition. In recruiting for my PhD thesis, I did not expect the gravity of shame, the fear of being discovered and traumas that prevented Vietnamese Guardian Visa parents from participating. I believe that many who saw my recruitment material remained in silence and others withdrew from my project, all due to the shame, fear and trauma. I will explain more about this in later chapters. With a shift in participant focus to Student visa parents, I came to know that many shared similar transitory migration and transnational student experiences with me. Likewise, they were on a studying journey and they had their children with them in Australia. Some were with their adult partners and some were alone, like me.

One day during data collection I spoke with my supervisors about the uncertainty of my potential research participants. Many people responded to my call for participation via the telephone, aired their feelings, but then did not want to formally participate. I got the sense that

they were, sort of stuck in-between where they had come from and where they wanted to be. One of my supervisors said, '*That sounds like the asylum seekers in refugee camps that are living in limbo.*' The golden thread in this thesis became conceptualised as the phenomenon of living in limbo. This was demonstrated through my own lived experience, existing literature and participant's stories to come. I wanted to expose what this phenomenon of limbo really looks like through my research on the lived experiences of Vietnamese transnationals – whether Student Guardian Visa parents, International Students who were parents, or otherwise.

The stories of people who contributed to my research are enriched by the literature I read on limbo. The notion of limbo seemed to complete the phenomenological interpretation of this life we were living. Amongst the people who were engaged in meaning-making, it was my job as an interpretive researcher to understand the experiences that generated their meanings about life, particularly the associations between their student travels, parenting and their intimate partner relationships.

While I was researching, some lovely things emerged on the changed relationships of my research participants with their children, and changes in how they understood themselves, gender roles and how parenting partnerships were conducted. Many participants appeared to be liberated by the changes they experienced in family life but were uncertain about whether it could be maintained upon returning to Vietnam. However, their experiences of uncertainty and lives in limbo are not a pathology. These are the actual consequences of a set of the decisions that they make; for example, moving from one country to another and bringing their children and partners with them in their studying journey overseas. For many parents, moving is

overwhelmingly a good thing. It is worth it, because they can see the changes in their children's lives in ways that make the parents feel happy. But, as I said, that also leads to great uncertainty with going back. Most want to go back to the home country, but they are different people going back and they don't know how that would affect relationships with partners, friends, social networks and other family members.

I was doing my research on Vietnamese students in Australia with dual roles of being both students and parents. The moment I did this with my daughters beside me, I also became an insider researcher. My story is not enough to base my research on. The literature I explored, philosophical and epistemological approaches, produced all sorts of questions that I wanted to explore. To accommodate me in this thesis and my reflective thoughts along the way, I have made little boxes throughout this thesis where I expose my thinking, feelings and meaning making. Many times, I struggled emotionally with making meaning of my data as I too was living in limbo, experiencing and managing the uncertainty of my own inbetweenness in my transnational journey, parental and family relationships, and my love for both Australian life and Vietnam's rich culture. Lives in limbo are impacted by the cultural traditions embedded in the Vietnamese psyche, and which are often difficult to escape.

### ***Legacies of cultural traditions***

There are some things in Vietnamese cultural traditions that, as an insider researcher, add value to discussion of findings at the end. When leaving Vietnam, one cannot shrug the life protocols and conformity that has been learned since birth for women and men – but, incidentally, there

are more for women. Humbly, this section is largely from my own lived experiences and observations of Vietnamese cultural life.

There is an expression in Vietnam: ‘Roll your tongue in your mouth seven times before speaking’ (Wadler, 2011). Women and men have been taught this since our early childhood, and it is inculcated into the fabric of cultural, interpersonal protocols. In the family and at school, we were monitored and trained to do this properly. The idea behind this saying is to ensure that individuals think though carefully what is about to be said in order to use the right words, to say things correctly and beautifully, and especially to not hurt other people.

Living in a hierarchical society and family environment, in which Confucian influences family order, this practice is extremely important as it would tell many things about a given individual. Women are expected to hold more closely to the ‘Roll your tongue’ cultural practice, since it is one of the four virtues expected of women explained later. Immediate people can discern how wise, educated someone is and how caring they are for others. Many times, after curling one’s tongue seven times, the speaker has time to consider their words and may not want to say the things they initially planned to say. Not only the practice of considering one’s words is critical, but also conformity to gendered life.

Women live amidst the pressure of traditions maintained by society and held strong by the man’s extended family, especially mother-in-law and aunts. The expectations of domestic servitude upon women and their allegiance to cultural and community protocols are enormous,

e.g. Tet <sup>1</sup> and other cultural rituals, weddings, funerals, frequent paying respect to ancestors and more. The original ideas behind these many practices could be good and enjoyable as it is about family gathering, sharing meals, remembering our descendants, ensuring longevity of relationships, good health and always planning for something, such as New Year. Filial duties are set in Vietnamese society and strong by international living, and especially reinforced the older generations who hold the younger generations accountable to sustain the status quo. Younger generations tend to conform due to the social and filial pressures.

For many men, before marriage they are cared for by their mothers, sisters and aunts. When they marry, they continue to be cared for and are additionally cared for by their wives. Traditionally, men are not required to live with their in-laws and considered guests, so when men visit they are doted on, fed and treated well. Women, however, do not benefit in the same way from marriage. Where men are treated nicely by in-laws; conversely, Vietnamese women live with the man's extended family and they assume additional burdens of responsibility. In being considered blood relative, the women cares for and is responsible for cultural practices in the man's family without relinquishing the burdens of their own.

When it comes to the daughter-in-law's filial duties and responsibilities, which can be harshly judged by her husband's family, the added burden of cultural work associated with traditional rituals can be torturous. Over time women's burdens have been acknowledged in Vietnam.

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<sup>1</sup> "In Vietnam, the New Year is celebrated according to the lunar calendar and may fall any time between mid-January and early March – the spring season. It is called Tet in Vietnamese, deriving from the word 'tiết' (season)" (Dinh and Sharifian, 2017: 151). The celebration begins on the twenty-third day of the last lunar month. This very important event with many rituals is when the kitchen gods are sent to see the Jade Emperor in heaven to report on the family's affairs during the year. Throughout this almost-one-month period, numerous traditional meals and rituals take place among families and friends. Tet then formally ends on the fifteenth day of first lunar month of the New Year, which is the important first full moon (McAllister, 2012).

Subsequent to the *Thời bao cấp*, mentioned earlier, a new era in Vietnam emerged involving economic reform and open door policies with the outside world (Knodel et al., 2005), known as Đổi Mới. Gender equity looked beautiful in reform policies since the Đổi Mới, but this is not necessarily played out in the burdensome lives of Vietnamese women across all facets of gendered life. Drawing on the work of Caroline Moser (2012) on the triple burden of productive, reproductive and community work, I locate the cultural rituals as community work that is an additional burden forcibly endured by women irrespective of their productive and reproductive lives.

In my more recent experiences, my PhD supervisor asked me about my job as a young journalist before and after marriage, and having children, including the impact that having a career made to my reproductive and community life. As I was a journalist and reporter for the Vietnam National Radio for about 10 years following completion of my university studies, I had many opportunities to travel and work with people around Vietnam and the world. I could explore how others found balance in their lives and I reflected on my own life. Every evening in the studio, with my colleagues, I spoke on air about the range of social and family issues, celebrations and burdens. Later at night-time, I hosted talk-back radio where I was listening to the audiences' life stories, their private questions about intimate relationships, family and intergenerational pressures. I answered them as if I were talking to my close friends, as the issues they raised were intimate, most often related to the reproductive, productive and, community burdens that were also reflected in my own life as a Vietnamese person.

In my own life, having and looking after children, caring for my partner and engaging in community rituals were all difficult alongside my productive work. I felt guilty about leaving my children home while I travelled all over Vietnam to observe events and interview people. Then I spent late nights in the studio, talking with my listeners while my children were sleeping in my parents' house. Sometimes I was away from my family for months for my mission and I was awakened during the night by my parents' phone calls when my children were unwell. I was torn between being a good mother and a devoted radio reporter, and guilt stricken when unable to balance the productive and reproductive labour, and not being there to engage in the family rituals, as expected of Vietnamese Women. To alleviate societal pressures and my own guilt for not conforming, I found a new job with a print-newspaper that allowed me to have more flexible time and also work from home. This enabled me to live and endure the burdens involved in combining productive, reproductive and community life.

While the theories of Caroline Moser (2012) are not used in this thesis as the main lens for interpretation of research findings, the notion of her triple burden is appreciated. This is because it adds understanding to my own and others' uncertainty arising from exposure to comparative freedoms of women in Australia and some other countries when compared to life in Vietnam. Authors frequently discuss how the triple burden in which women invest long hours in paid work (productive labour), domestic work (reproductive labour) and community work (ceremonies) is due to deep rooted patriarchy in societies maintaining strict cultural practices (Nawaz and McLaren, 2016; Choiryah et al., 2020; Meo-Sewabu, 2016; Reeves, 2014; Murphy, 2015). When women marry and live with in-laws, and experience the harshness of traditional life maintained by this multigenerational habitation, not only are the traditions forced upon

them, but they become difficult to resist or speak about. In both the men's and the women's conformity they, coincidentally, perpetuate their own gender inequities. Women's curling of the tongue and subsequent silence is likewise discursive. These considerations are critical to the discussion of the current research findings at the end of this thesis. An overview of my thesis structure, chapter by chapter, is provided next.

## **Thesis overview**

The structure and composition of this thesis is provided, chapter by chapter. This provides the reader a scaffold in which to understand the significance, context, methods, findings and implications related to the experiences of Vietnamese students who study transnationally with children in tow.

In this introduction, I already explained my initial research aim in the preceding soliloquy, the shift in my study's focus and the reason behind such change. I then introduce my research question, contexts and outcomes surrounding the phenomena of living in limbo experienced by Vietnamese international students. I also located myself as an insider researcher and lived experience in practicing Vietnamese cultural traditions, so the reader can understand my interpretations of the data, metaphorical framing and my heartfelt thinking alongside.

***Chapter 1: International student families*** ... in which I introduce the study context, including literature related to the acculturation experiences of international students accompanied by their families while studying abroad. This chapter is divided into sub-sections. The first one explored the body of knowledge about acculturation issues of migrant families



generally, then the second part focuses in on Vietnamese migrant families, followed by consideration of International students' experiences and the push-pull factors compelling their transnational contexts. This includes consideration of the return-stay binary in international students' decision-making process after completing their study abroad.

***Chapter 2: Lived experiences of international students*** ... in which the uncertainty of international students becomes apparent from the existing body of knowledge. Here, I introduce the phenomena of *living in limbo*, also known in the research literature as *inbetweenness* or being *neither here nor there*. The uncertainty of international students, as represented in literature reviewed, draws on key concepts before overviewing the research findings of others. This assists in understanding the findings of the current study reported later and it complements the thesis discussion. The final part of this chapter specifically focuses on research literature examining the limbo of transnational students, including Vietnamese students.

***Chapter 3: Methodologies in migration studies*** ... in which I equip myself with analytical lenses from my research methodology forebears in migration studies. By examining the application of phenomenology and Janus Head philosophy by other researchers, the evolution of a methodological framework for the current study emerged. My methodology presented here is interpretive, phenomenological, and philosophical.

***Chapter 4: Research methods*** ... in which I explain the research methods as tools in which to analyse the research data and to theorise my findings. After presenting research aim

and question, I explained the methods used for participant recruitment, data collection, analytical techniques, ethical considerations and limitations of the study. This includes questions and aims, participant demographics, recruitment and data collection approaches, analytical techniques, ethical considerations and research limitations.

***Chapter 5: Experiencing Australia in limbo*** ... in which I present elements in a new phase of my research participants' family life upon moving to Australia for their studies. This includes the way that they negotiate changes to family roles and their intimate relationships, and the changes experienced in the division of reproductive labour from life in Vietnam to Australia. I explore the fertile land of Australia, where Vietnamese students and their family endure a unique journey full of hope, joy, excitement, and their expressed sense of freedom, as well as many levels of uncertainty, fear and concern of being required to return.

***Chapter 6: Hosting hopes for their children*** ... in which I describe Vietnamese student parents' life amidst the inbetweenness of time, place, culture, relationships and parenting. Presented are the ways that the student parents carry out their roles as parents while being influenced by matrices of social and cultural binaries, norms and the two education systems. This chapter also includes the exploration of participants' hopes for their children's futures. Participants' experience of living in limbo and their experiences of inbetweenness are considered in the light of attempts to reconcile their identities when international students, as parents, mothers or fathers.

***Chapter 7: Discussion of the findings*** ... in which I discuss key findings resulting from analysis of data in the two preceding chapters. The primary intention here is to respond to the thesis research question and provide critical discussion of how Vietnamese parents, who are international students in Australia experience the multiplicity of contexts related to their experiences of living in limbo. Considered are the influences of time, place, culture, relationships and some parenting practices that they consciously changed to in attempt to resolve their inbetweenness. Discussion centres around two broad areas: the experience of multiple forms of family relationships experienced while living in limbo; and, the Janus-faced character of Vietnamese student parents.

***Conclusions*** ... in which the final comments contributing to this thesis are made, including a final consideration of Janus Head in understanding the experiences of transnational student parents. I offer a final reflective epilogue in which I revisit my subjective thinking during the term of undertaking this thesis. Areas of need for further research are also identified.

### ***Reading note***

Occasionally located in this thesis are my reflections to enable understanding of the Vietnamese context, especially when literature may not be available to explain. Some reflections are woven through the text, following chapter summaries and others are located in my final epilogue. Some reflective commentaries provide insights that contribute interpretive sense making and interact my own lived experience and research journey in this thesis. My reflections display shifts in thinking and method along the way and share my own life histories and feelings of limbo with these Vietnamese student parents. In some places this is important as it exposes *me* when

seeking to understand and interpret the meaning of the other, in so far as possible. However, in other places my reflections add depth and meaning. Since I cannot remove everything of myself, as an interpretive researcher, my reflections enable legitimisation of the interactions between me and the researched. Further, the Vietnamese way of thinking and expressing sometimes appears in this thesis. It involves the use of metaphors and other symbolic scripts in the explanation of concepts. This adds validity using my own occasional and particular subjectivity.

# ***Chapter 1: International student families***

*... in which the contexts of parents' decisions to migrate are understood from the existing body of knowledge, their experiences of developing a desire to taste Australia, living in their two worlds, and experiencing a sense of limbo...*

This chapter commences the organisation of relevant bodies of knowledge from research literature and theory. The intention is to assist the understanding of the current study context and the original contribution this thesis makes. Generated as a result of a series of systematic searches of relevant academic journal databases and Google search engine, the purpose of reviewing and documenting literature on related research and theorising assisted in grounding the current research in context. Literature relating to the contexts and experiences of international student parents who are accompanied by their families while studying abroad is provided in this chapter. In doing so, the dual roles of being a student and being a parent in their temporary migration journey is introduced. This foregrounds Chapter 2 in which I continue to present literature more specifically related to phenomena associated with students' transitory migration experiences; this being concepts relating to feelings and emotions experienced by international students (also identified in the systematic searching). The iterative process of systematic searching of literature, as this study evolved, is described in Chapter 4: research methods.

In being divided into a series of subsections, the first part of this chapter explores research on acculturation issues of migrant families. The challenges in the relationship between migrant parents and children are briefly presented. The chapter continues to provide a holistic picture of international student parents and how they are understood as temporary migrants living abroad with their children and/without their families. The challenges that researchers suggest that these two groups face are explored, which includes international students and student parents. Literature examining the pull – push factors that lead to international students seeking education in the West are explored, and the return-stay binary in international students' decision-making process after completing their study abroad. The final part of this chapter explores literature concerned with the experiences of international students living amid uncertainty.

By weaving, defining and explaining the terms and concepts used across the body of relevant knowledge into digestible parts, this helps to organise the interacting concepts necessary to later understand the complexity in my research participants lives. Figure 1 provides a visual representation that locates the current study in the key concepts already explored in the literature.

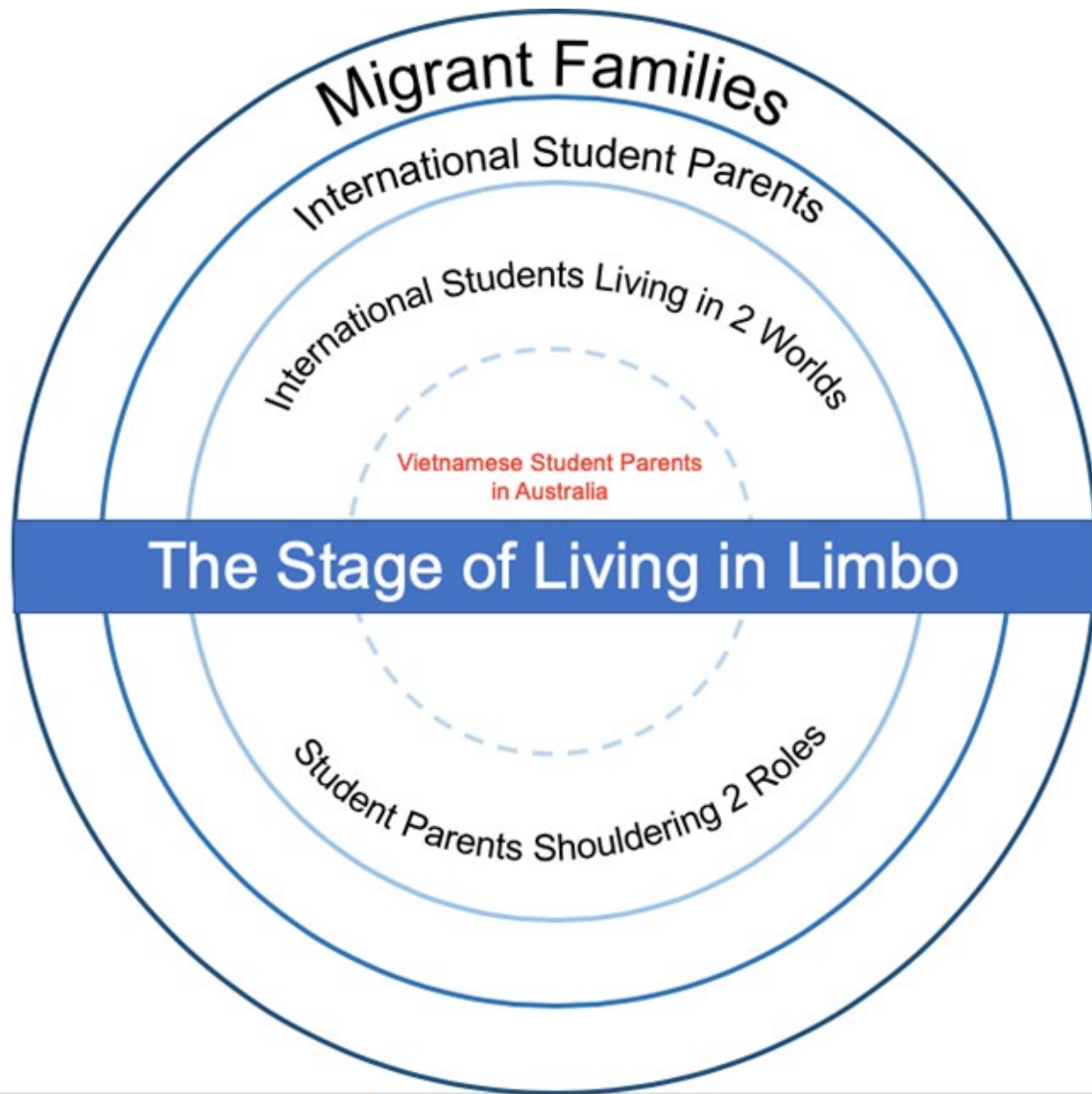


Figure 1: Body of knowledge surrounding the current study

## **Migrant families' acculturation experiences**

*... and the effects on family and parent-children relationships ...*

According to Londhe (2015), migrant families usually use one of four acculturation strategies, including assimilation, separation, marginalisation and integration. Studies consistently agree

that integration is particularly regarded as the most successful strategy because immigrant families create a balance between immersing into the new, dominant culture, while maintaining their own culture (Londhe, 2015; Berry, 2005; Capps et al., 2010). These authors argue that assimilation is the unbalanced process where the family strives to integrate into the new culture without retaining their own. They then describe separation as when immigrant families stay attached to their own cultural identity and reject or withdraw from the culture of the host country. The least successful picture is marginalisation, which manifests when families do not retain their own culture while also lacking interest with integrating into the host culture. There are some common challenges that affect the way in which migrant families acculturate in the new environment. This involves the family dynamic, as well as the relationship between parents and children.

Research highlights the most inevitable struggles that immigrant families face, relating to the loss of support from the extended family (Lewig et al., 2010; Osman et al., 2016; Leidy et al., 2012). Extended families can provide care, support and maintenance of the cultural identity (Lewig et al., 2010; Desouza, 2014; Ashbourne et al., 2012; Pauwels, 2005). The support of extended family members brings about less stress on the parents, thus reducing family conflicts and creating a more positive environment (Brody et al., 2005; Su and Hynie, 2011). Migrant families often do not have the usual support of other family members such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. As a result, less family time is spent with children, who then get left to care for themselves. This is because parents do not have other family members to help share the parenting load, often forcing the roles of mothers and fathers to change (Ashbourne et al., 2012; Desouza, 2014) or multiply.



Researchers suggest that these difficulties can be exacerbated by the long distant relationships of the parents (Dyson et al., 2013; Johnsdotter, 2015; Estrada-Martínez et al., 2011; Quinlan and Quinlan, 2007). They write that the disruption of family ties caused by the migration process can result in aloof relationships or even separation of the parental couples. Family bonds may be significantly challenged, and the wellbeing of children may be jeopardised. Other researchers have documented the outcomes for parents who spend minimal time with their children due to the lengthy and hard-working time devoted to financial obligations, such that they may miss out on familial time and communication, resulting in impaired parental functioning (Roer-Strier et al., 2005). Moreover, studies show that immigrant families are more likely to fall below the poverty line. Economic hardship may accordingly produce poor relationships and conflict between parents and children (Desouza, 2014; Au et al., 2008; Capps et al., 2010). These changes and hardships for are often linked by researchers with the negative assimilation outcomes of immigrant families, including perceived racism and discrimination they experience in the host country (Juang and Alvarez, 2010; Renzaho et al., 2011). These are some of the external effects on the relationship between parents and their children in migrant families, while internal reasons lie on the way migrants practice their parenting in the strange culture. To gain understanding of the parents' potential confusion and struggles, and the effects on the relationship with their children, it is worth to briefly identify and explain how parenting across cultures is represented in the literature.

Culture is documented as having a significant effect on parenting. It guides and remains at the core of childrearing practices, as parents base their parenting style and lifestyle on cultural values and norms (Selin, 2014; Zahran, 2011; Parra Cardona et al., 2012). Studies tend to divide

parenting styles between Western (Europe, North America and Australia) and non-Western; usually clumping together each the West and the rest (Lim et al., 2008; Park et al., 2010; Lewig et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2013; Su and Hynie, 2011; Ochocka and Janzen, 2008; Lim and Lim, 2004; Zahran, 2011; Watabe and Hibbard, 2014). Western authoritative parents, who are European and North American, are often represented as employing an authoritative approach to parenting that has a social and cultural emphasis on independence, individualism and familial warmth (Park et al., 2010; Ho, 2014). Western families are typically in the form of a nuclear family with parents and children (Zahran, 2011), but not extended families. In these families, children's self-esteem, open emotional expressions and personal growth are highly valued, promoted and supported by parents (Kim et al., 2013; Su and Hynie, 2011; Driscoll et al., 2007). Research indicates that this authoritative style of parenting has benefited European and North American children in terms of positive academic achievements (Watabe and Hibbard, 2014; Ochocka and Janzen, 2008; Su and Hynie, 2011). Asian parenting is represented in literature in contrast.

Asian families are most often generalised as favouring the authoritarian style of parenting involving parental control, restrictiveness, demands and emotional restraint (Ho, 2014; Lim et al., 2008; Park et al., 2010; Pong et al., 2009). Such studies focused on Asian families who base their life scripts on traditions respecting hierarchy, such as with Confucianism Chinese families. They make synergies across Chinese, Japanese, Korean and some South East Asian societies that emphasise hierarchy, filial piety, inter-dependence and collectivism (Ho, 2014; Park et al., 2010; Yeh and Bedford, 2003; Kwan, 2000). Children's attitudes and behaviours in authoritarian contexts are shaped and controlled by their parents. In being born into a social

contract, the required to be hardworking and obedient, meet the parents' demands and respect their parents, elders and ancestors often goes unquestioned (Bertram, 2004). These values are taught to children at a young age and they follow people throughout generations (Lim and Lim, 2004; Su and Hynie, 2011; Laporte and Guttman, 2007). Together with this value of filial piety, there is another documented obligation of children that is repeatedly enforced by Asian parents, which is to strive for academic excellence (Kim et al., 2013; Pong et al., 2009). The term *training* that is widely used in Chinese parenting (authoritarian style) refers to high parental control and strong sense and value in educational success (Su and Hynie, 2011; Ochocka and Janzen, 2008). Moreover, according to Dyson et al. (2013) families in Asian cultures are understood as maintaining a strong harmony, highly interdependent relationships and family hierarchy.

In many Asian families, it is expected that parents will rely on their children for support in their old age; concomitantly, older children need to take the responsibility for younger siblings (Pyke, 2000; Nguyen and Cheung, 2009). Similarly, respectfulness, collectivism and parental control is found in studies of Latino and African families (Roche et al., 2015; De Haan, 2012; Zahran, 2011; Renzaho et al., 2011; Capps et al., 2010; Driscoll et al., 2007). One of the traditional norms highly regarded by Asian, Latino and African families is the involvement of the extended family.

The benefit of having an extended family consists of reduced parenting difficulties and struggles, because family members become additional carers, provide family support and physical resources, and positively affect the outcomes of the children (Londhe, 2015; Lewig et

al., 2010; Renzaho et al., 2011; Estrada-Martínez et al., 2011; Johnsdotter, 2015; Leidy et al., 2012; Osman et al., 2016; Capps et al., 2010). In a non-Western context, the concept of family includes not only parents and children, but also extended family members such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. In this sense, the child's close family includes the whole extended family (Zahran, 2011; Johnsdotter, 2015; Renzaho et al., 2011). All of this coincides with the famous African adage about the importance of cooperation between the parents, the extended family and the community in childrearing, 'it takes a village to raise a child' (Clinton, 2006: 5). However, there are two studies demonstrating the changes in parenting styles occurring in Japan and of non-Western families in Australia.

Researchers in Japan and Australia have aligned parenting changes with major changes in non-Western families over the last few decades (Watabe and Hibbard, 2014; Lewig et al., 2010). With respect to Japanese society, changes are associated with a decrease in birth rates, diminished family size, and growing trends in divorce and urbanization (Bassani, 2003; Hamamura, 2012, cited in Watabe and Hibbard, 2014). Parenting practice in this Confucianism influenced country has shifted dramatically. The Japanese public have moved from the acceptance of the traditional parenting style of demanding obedience from children to the expectation of supporting children in developing their autonomy, independence and self-esteem (Watabe and Hibbard, 2014). Similarly, using a mix of methods, Lewig et al. (2010) studied 130 recently arrived refugees in South Australia about the challenges faced in their families. It was found that the younger populations, and second-generation families, have shifted their credit of authoritarian parenting in adaptation to a less authoritarian style. Ironically, the new

concept of the Tiger Mother has lately challenged Asian traditional parental roles (Chua, 2011; Kim et al., 2013) and the powers of mothers in family decisions has increased.

Asian families have traditionally been built upon Confucian philosophy, social order and family hierarchy, characterised by the common adage of *strict father, kind mother* (Chao and Tseng, 2002; Capps et al., 2010). The father, who sets the rules for the whole family, is the master and authority of the household (Rhee et al., 2012). This idea is known to be shared by many Latino and African families, where fathers are described as macho/aggressive and patriarchal (in Mexican society) or disciplinarian and the head of the household (in the African context) (Renzaho et al., 2011). Mothers in this familial picture are usually portrayed as quiet, devoted, caring and providing endless-love toward the family and children (Dyson et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2013; Hoang and Yeoh, 2011; Lim and Lim, 2004; Capps et al., 2010). However, these scholars suggest that the roles of fathers and mothers change when they reside in non-Asian countries, such that women have increased both their parenting and family authority.

The notion of Tiger Mothers was introduced to the American public when the New York Times bestseller *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011) became widely popular, and was commonly used to refer to female parents who were associated with control over children's behaviours, family obligations and pressure for high academic achievement (Kim et al., 2013; Lui and Rollock, 2013; Chua, 2011). The Chinese American Tiger mother (Amy Chua) who wrote this book, expressed herself as a harsh Asian mother influenced by Confucian values in disciplining her two daughters. She emphasised the honour brought to the family by the children's academic success and family duties, and this honour guided her methods of raising her children (Chua,

2011; Kim et al., 2013). Tiger parents are suggested to believe that children's high academic achievements is the measure for parenting success (Nguyen et al., 2014; Nguyen, 2012). Parenting styles, self-esteem and success have crucial impact on the way migrant families settle down into their new countries, and how they adapt to new ways, resist change or swap roles between mother and father. The parenting styles, cultural background and migrant families' acculturation strategies can impact on the character and outcomes of their assimilation, separation, marginalisation and integration.

Aiming to employ the most successful strategy of integration can be complex, painful, inescapable, and can create significant tension for parents who have parented their children in a manner that conflicts with that of the host society. Studies demonstrate that there are many challenges immigrant parents face in trying to maintain their cultural norms and beliefs, parenting attitudes and values when pressured to also adopt and adjust to the accepted norms of the receiving countries (Ho, 2014; Kwak and Berry, 2001; Londhe, 2015; Lim et al., 2008; Choi et al., 2008). Studying the difficulties of parenting in a new culture, Lewig et al. (2010) pointed out that traditional parent-child relationship and the collective style of migrant parents can be rigorously confronted by the individualistic parenting of the Australian culture.

Latino and African parents in numerous studies have verbalised the threats of individualism of the host culture to their values of family cohesion and child well-being (Osman et al., 2016; Miranda et al., 2000; Driscoll et al., 2007). Furthermore, immigrant parents' confusion about parenting styles is often reflected in literature as a paradox in which authoritarian parenting is perceived beneficial for non-Western (especially Asian) children's academic achievement but

not for European American peers (Pong et al., 2009; Su and Hynie, 2011; Ochocka and Janzen, 2008). Park et al. (2010) found that, unlike the marginalised families, a conflict is created in integrated, separated and assimilated families when parents employ authoritarian parenting. Because of the nature of the marginalisation strategy, children may have no interest in both the receiving and origin cultures, so they rely on the directions and control of their parents. In order to gain a sense of belonging, Park et al. (2010) found that non-Western children often tolerate the strictness of their parents. However, research identifies an acculturation gap between immigrant parents and their children that is considered next.

One of the most challenging factors that is documented as severely damaging the structure of migrant families is the acculturation gap, noted as having the potential to significantly harm the relationships between parents and their children (Ho, 2014; Birman, 2006; Lau et al., 2005; Brody et al., 2005). Scholars agree on a common trend; parents strive to hold on to the norms and values of their ethnic culture potentially because they feel isolated, whereas children tend to quickly assimilate, engage, adjust and adapt to the receiving culture (Lim et al., 2008; Lewig et al., 2010; Ochocka and Janzen, 2008; Pyke, 2000). This acculturation discrepancy and ‘mutual cultural misunderstanding’ (Earner, 2007: 78) often lead to parent-child conflicts as well as to parental feelings of powerlessness, loss of authority and control over children (Osman et al., 2016; Johnsdotter, 2015). On the other hand, acculturation discrepancies may result in children’s lower academic achievement and thus deteriorate the psychological well-being of migrant children (Nguyen et al., 2011; Han and Osterling, 2012; Lewig et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2015). Language deficiency among migrant parents also contribute to acculturation

discrepancies and are known to compound negative impact on the relationship with their children.

Migrant parents' facing the challenges of language can impede building of bonds between the family and school, resulting in lower academic results of children and cyclically impacting parental self-esteem or efficacy (Ashbourne et al., 2012; Renzaho et al., 2011; Nieuwboer and van't Rood, 2016; Pauwels, 2005; Birman et al., 2002). Language barriers limit the involvement of immigrant parents with their children's educational activities and decrease their confidence to communicate with school teachers and staff about the child's well-being (Estrada-Martínez et al., 2011; Capps et al., 2010). Leidy et al. (2012) conducted a mixed-method study of 282 Latino parents and 282 children in the USA to explore how language barriers can limit how parents communicate with their child's teachers. It was found that limited English proficiency prevented parents from helping their children with homework and inhibited opportunity to better understand the host culture and society (Leidy et al., 2012). Two studies, proposed the involvement of the child as language brokers to buffer the language limitations of migrant parents can potentially promote stronger bonds in parent-child relationships (Roche et al., 2015; Corona et al., 2012). Because children tend to learn new languages quicker than their parents (Kim et al., 2015), they help their parents translate household bills, medical forms, school notes, restaurant and bank communication (Corona et al., 2012). Roche et al. (2015) suggested that this results in the children's feeling proud in undertaking responsibilities in the family context, which in turn strengthens their connection with their parents and preserves family unity.



Low language proficiency of migrant parents may contribute to feelings of loneliness and isolation in the new environment and result in family stress (Costigan and Koryzma, 2011). Parenting stress, in particular, is documented as a common risk factor in child development problems including behavioural problems, poor education and poor health (Au et al., 2008; Osman et al., 2016). Language deficiencies can lead to migrant parents' reluctance to socialise, lack of knowledge about the host country's laws or the welfare system and parents' misunderstanding of their rights to access advocacy and other supports in the new society (Osman et al., 2016). As a result, researchers explain how migrant parents may engage in parenting activities deemed unlawful in the host country, such as physical discipline, which might have been deemed normal and acceptable in their culture of origin (Nieuwboer and van't Rood, 2016; Han and Osterling, 2012). Among them, Vietnamese migrant parents are documented as suffering from such migration hardships, compounded by the discursive demands for high academic achievements of their children, in a social system they may not sufficiently understand (Wong et al., 2011; Tran, 2013; Phan, 2004). Critical to understanding these experiences of Vietnamese families are the influence of Confucianism on family ties and expectations.

### ***Vietnamese migrant families***

Despite Buddhism being the most practiced religion in Vietnam, China's introduced Confucianism has the greatest influence over all sorts of social and family activities regarding parenting (Hunt, 2005; Mestechkina et al., 2014; Shin and Nhan, 2009). Vietnam was dominated by China for approximately 1000 years (Hoang and Yeoh, 2012). As a result, the traditional Vietnamese family system was heavily influenced by the philosophical values of

Chinese Confucianism that underlines family unity, obligations, hierarchal relations and filial piety (Gao, 2003; Hoang and Yeoh, 2012; Ha, 2014). Confucian ideology about family emphasises the patriarchal role of the father and his unchallenged parental authority.

Under Confucianism philosophy, children are expected to be unconditionally obedient, are not allowed to confront parents, and must demonstrate respect to parents and all elders. At the same time, older children have the obligation and responsibility to take care of and educate their younger siblings (Pyke, 2000; Rhee et al., 2012; Graham and Jordan, 2011; Phan, 2004). While literature cited earlier suggests that children's achievements reflect good parenting, there are also obligations of children to study hard in their display of respect for their parents. This is similar across many collectivist East Asian cultures. For example, grounded in Vietnamese family values is the obligation of honouring the family through high educational achievements of children (Chua, 2011; Rindermann et al., 2013). Nguyen-Vo (2009) advised that being a role model for their children was likewise a discursive expectation informing parenthood in Vietnam.

Overall, Confucian philosophy and values toward intellectual prowess and academic achievement are regarded as crucial factors for social mobility by Vietnamese parents, who accordingly show great respect for education and consider this the main priority for their families (Pyke, 2000; Nguyen, 2014). Education is highly valued, associated with prestigious careers and elicits social respect in Vietnamese culture (Phan, 2004; Brody et al., 2005; Pyke, 2000; Ngo and Lee, 2007). There is the belief that financial stability and happiness comes with education excellence (Nguyen et al., 2014; Pyke, 2000). However, Nguyen (2011) warned that

in Vietnamese social standards, the value of education is regarded much higher than material accomplishments.

In order to achieve and reinforce values of *harder work, higher education, better future*, Vietnamese parents are prone to enact the authoritarian parenting style that emphasises parental control, overprotection and expectation for children to prioritize the family's face and honour over individual interests (Park et al., 2010; Tran, 2013; Nguyen, 2008). According to Ha's (2014) and Tingvold et al. (2012), the main characteristics of the Vietnamese parenting style are the maintenance of traditional norms and values, the high parental expectations, and strict control over the attitudes of their children. Among Vietnamese migrant families, studies have noted that the authoritarian parenting style can become stronger (Pyke, 2000; Phan, 2004). This is compounded when migrating to a new society where Vietnamese parental motivation is undergirded by the original reason for migration – that is, to provide a better life for their children.

Studies show that this goal of a better life for their children is regarded the primary and most common motivation for migration, worldwide (Roer-Strier et al., 2005; Johnsdotter, 2015; Ochocka and Janzen, 2008; Pyke, 2000; Nguyen et al., 2014). Determined to improve their children's life chances, Vietnamese parents accordingly push their children to perform well at school, and offer respect to individuals who have a strong desire for a successful education and love for learning (Nguyen et al., 2011; Ngo and Lee, 2007; Liebkind et al., 2004). This is reflected in the sacrifices to their own wellbeing that migrating Vietnamese parents make for their children.

In Phan's (2004) study, many Vietnamese migrant parents expressed their pleased eagerness for their children to study until gaining a PhD in whatever field, for as long as they were both keen and fruitful to do so. These parents demanded their children to work hard in order to reach the highest level of the education possible in the educational system of the receiving country – holding the position that there was 'no excuse for not pursuing an education' (Phan, 2004: 58). Other studies show that Vietnamese migrant parents have much higher expectations and are more demanding of their children's academic achievements than parents from European Australian and European American backgrounds (Vu, 2006; Cheung and Nguyen, 2007; Nguyen et al., 2014). However, the high expectations and standards that Vietnamese parents set for their children's academic performance often place enormous pressure on children (Mestechkina et al., 2014). A number of studies demonstrate that under this pressure, Vietnamese children sometimes need to give up personal aspirations in order to follow the careers chosen and dictated by their parents to maintain the family status (Nguyen, 2011; Vu, 2006; Wong et al., 2011). While the educational success of children bring honour and pride to parents and family, academic failures can severely disappoint parents as they are hard for them to accept (Vu, 2006; Mestechkina et al., 2014; Nguyen et al., 2014; Chao and Tseng, 2002). To avoid such failures, Vietnamese migrant parents demonstrate endless parental support to their children especially in a migration context.

Research suggests that Vietnamese migrant parents are committed to do anything and everything in order to support their children's education. For example, Phan (2004) described this unconditional and endless parenting as encouraging and demanding hard work. With intense focus on children's academic related activities, parents are cautious to keep their

children at home after school to do homework instead of non-school activities such as chores, sports or simply going out (Phan, 2004; Tran, 2013; Chao and Tseng, 2002). Parents in Phan's (2004) study took care of all domestic works, tried to finish the chores before children got home from school, and made sure all meals and snacks were always ready for their children to commence homework without delay.

Similar to research on immigrant parents from other countries (Ashbourne et al., 2012; Birman et al., 2002; Nieuwboer and van't Rood, 2016; Pauwels, 2005; Renzaho et al., 2011), Vietnamese immigrant parents may not have adequate local language to help their children with homework. Yet, they find ways to help their children maintain traditional values and set goals for their future life by telling stories, legends and inspired examples every day (Phan, 2004). In aspiring to become role models for their children, many Vietnamese parents work hard to improve their occupational practices and try to avoid habits such as drinking, smoking or taking drugs (Phan, 2004). They are known to hire tutors for their children at any price to help their studies, whenever required, and engage these parental practices in a demonstration of deep love, affection and care for their children (Phinney et al., 2001; Phan, 2004).

The term *love* in Vietnamese culture usually denotes *help* and *support*. In the parent-child relationship context, Vietnamese people show *love* for their children through investment and involvement in children's education as well as through every day practices such as doing chores and preparation of food (Pyke, 2000). Liebkind et al. (2004) found that Vietnamese adolescents recognised the value of parental support in their education, including that unconditional support promoted their school adjustment and enhanced their adaptation. According to Rindermann

(2013), children and young people accordingly try to return their parents' investment and support by performing extremely well at school and meeting the expected level of achievement. Parental control and children's obedience in achievement of academic outcomes extends to other facets of life, including choice of friendships and intimate couple relationships.

Vietnamese migrant parents' monitoring of their children's friendships is apparent in numerous studies (Vu, 2006; Phan, 2004; Rindermann et al., 2013). Parents tend to make sure that their children's friends are brought up in a good and caring family environment, have the same motivation in education, and a strong desire for learning. Furthermore, aiming to maintain strong traditional values in a new society, Vietnamese parents expect their children to have friends and, later on, partners from their culture of origin, including appropriate behaviours and attitudes (Phan, 2004). Adolescents in Vu's (2006) study stated that their parents preferred to talk to them about academic performance and family obligations rather than about love, friendships and hobbies. The same adolescents reported parental control over their freedom in choosing their careers and friends.

Literature consistently addresses the issues of Vietnamese refugee families with the complexities of parent-children relationships. Frequently documented are their histories leading them to seek a new life in a new land, their distinctive experience of post-war trauma, their perilous journeys on boats as well as their problems of resettlement and assimilation (Bowles, 2001; Skran and Daughtry, 2007; Thomas, 1999). There are considerable differences between parents who voluntarily migrate to developed countries and refugee parents fleeing adversity – analysis of these differences are beyond the scope of this literature review and thesis.

The issues faced by migrant families in general, and Vietnamese migrant parents in particular, appear to have some consistency in findings of research focused on temporary migrants who identify as international student parents.

### **International student parents' experiences**

The term *international student parents*, itself, is obviously made up of two concepts: *international students*; and, *student parents*. These are explored in the context of previous literature and research below.

In general, student parents are considered as non-traditional students because of their binary opposition between tasks of care and academia (Polakow et al., 2014; Moreau and Kerner, 2015; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). They are also referred to in literature as student-mothers or student-fathers, to delineate the gender differences in identity, cultural shifts and performativity (Brooks, 2015). Within these terminologies, international student parents are identified as international students with dependent children, and more precisely constructed as students who 'moved across national borders for an undergraduate or postgraduate degree, but who were also parents – and had taken their children with them' (Brooks, 2015: 197). For many international student parents, they relocate the whole family including children and spouses to a foreign country for the period of their study (Pinter, 2013). During this very temporary sojourn, international student parents face significant challenges and pressures that all international students endure including adjusting themselves to different ways learning; for example, attending regular lectures and participating in tutoring/seminar discussions, and writing academic papers in a new language (Pinter, 2013; Vaez et al., 2015). Additional

experiences are broad and include: culture shock; adjustment stressors, related to significant acculturative stress; feelings of isolation and loneliness due to being away from family and friends; and, financial strain (Vaez et al., 2015; Myers-Walls et al., 2011; Naeeni et al., 2015). But international student parents also face additional hardships associated with their dual roles of being a student and a parent at the same time.

Time constraints represent a major concern for international student parents (Brooks, 2013; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). As they frequently juggle study and parenting practice, international student parents feel the struggle between time required for their studies and the time this takes from caring for family and children (Moreau and Kerner, 2015). This time conflict and the associated stressors this creates for international student parents is a key finding across many studies in this field (Vaez et al., 2015; Myers-Walls et al., 2011; Moreau, 2016; Sallee, 2015). While student-mothers often spoke of their guilt, specifically for not being around their children, student-fathers expressed the feeling of guilt of spending little time with their family and partners (Brooks, 2015). Sallee (2015) found that some international student parents prioritised parent roles over student roles, choosing to spend time with their children over study, or attending children's events over their classes. This was despite valuing their own identities as students.

For most international student parents, authors advise that in order to meet the demands of their dual roles and multiple tasks they needed to efficiently negotiate time and space for study within their family relationships (Brooks, 2013; Moreau and Kerner, 2015; Sallee, 2015). Moreau and Kerner (2015) found that students used strategies to cut down their own private time in order



to fulfil their tasks of care and academia. This is consistent with findings by Marandet & Wainwright's findings (2010) in which student parents were reducing time in social and leisure activities, as well as reducing the amount of time they slept. Time-related tensions interact with financial issues, presented next.

Financial challenges are known to interact negatively on the wellbeing of international student parents, their families and relationships. Since they need to spend most of their time for family and study, they have limited availability for extra paid jobs that could improve their financial situation and satisfy their family needs (Moreau and Kerner, 2012; Loveridge et al., 2018). Having children with them while studying overseas also means that many carry the burden of childcare costs when they do not have extended family's support. Some students who choose not to use childcare services to save money then need to spend more time to look after their children and try to study; consequently, competing for time (Myers-Walls et al., 2011; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). In addition to the cost of childcare, medical concerns and the cost of health cover add pressure on international student parents' financial hardship and responsibilities (Myers-Walls et al., 2011; Moreau, 2016; Loveridge et al., 2018).

International student parents, on the whole, experience financial and time-related issues. They have variations of familial issues, marital stress, worry about their non-student spouse, and power imbalance in the couple relationship (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Student parents, however, have some positive feelings about improving the future of themselves and their family (Loveridge et al., 2018). The UK national report on international student parents pointed out that students with children are passionate learners who are motivated by the desire to improve

their own and their children's future (National Union of Students (NUS), 2009). Marandet (2010) found that re-entry into university was linked to a desire to build a financially sound future, provide a better quality of life for their children and empower experience for both parent and child. They also described themselves as a positive model for their children as their achievement of being a good student and also a good parent, so that the children can learn how to become better parents (Brooks, 2013; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). Studies have reported that children were proud and inspired by their parents for their study and organisational skills. Using these skills, parents were able to fulfil both tasks of parenting and studying. (Brooks, 2013; Moreau and Kerner, 2015; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). Therefore, both international student parents and their children felt a sense of empowerment and pride about their personal developments and achievements (Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). Despite such benefits of being international student parents, research indicates that these parents experience much ambivalence.

In studying international students with dependent children in the USA, Myers-Walls et al.(2011) found that many were concerned about raising their children in a culture different from their own. They expressed a desire for their children to preserve and maintain their original culture while also wanting them to benefit from growing up in the American environment. This ambivalence was identified in parents' concerns about their children's ability to readjust to the home culture, if and when they return home (Myers-Walls et al., 2011). Similar feelings of ambivalence have been documented in the literature about Vietnamese students studying overseas, discussed in the next section. Ambivalence is reflected in their motivation to seek

education in another country and on the return-stay binary in their decision-making process at the end of their studies.

### ***Push - Pull factors of Vietnamese students seeking education abroad***

Push-pull factors are an important consideration for understanding Vietnam's outbound student mobility. According to literature and newsprint, the education system in Vietnam is considered only second to police in terms of corruption (Trines, 2017; Waite and Allen, 2003; Quah and Gregory, 2016). In being conflicted by corruption, as well as by constant reforms, academic literature and some newsprint scoped in this section offer insights into the impact.

According to Trines (2017) internet news article, Vietnam is currently one of the most dynamic outbound student markets worldwide. 'Between 1999 and 2016, the number of outbound Vietnamese degree students exploded by 680 percent, from 8,169 to 63,703 students across the world' (Trines, 2017). While the exact quantities of Vietnamese students studying abroad is inconsistent across reports; the IECF Monitor suggested that from 2012 to 2017, Vietnamese students pursuing international education abroad increased by 22.5% from approximately 106,000 to more than 130,000 (IECF Monitor, 2017). Using the push-pull factors concept to understand this trend, numerous studies have examined the reasons that motivate students to seek higher education abroad (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Eder et al., 2010; Nguyen, 2013; Le, 2014; Nghia, 2019; Maringe and Carter, 2007). Push factors are defined by Nghia (2015) as factors that operate within the home country and influence a student's decision to undertake study abroad. These factors included the unavailability of a desired study program, lack of access to universities, poor educational systems, social discrimination, limited entry-level job

opportunities, and a variety of political and economic issues (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Le, 2014; Nghia, 2015). Pull factors are referred to by Nghia (2015) as incentives and characteristics of the destinations, or the host countries, that attract international students. This includes scholarship availabilities, the quality of the education system, political ties, culture understanding, living standards, socioeconomic status of the host country, improved career prospects, lucrative incomes, and immigration opportunities after graduation (Nghia, 2019; Nguyen, 2013; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). Examining the push factors in Vietnam, Chi Hong Nguyen (2013), Trines (2017) and Nghia (2019) consistently found that academic corruption and poor education quality resulted in the loss of confidence in the country's education as the main reasons behind Vietnamese parents' decisions to seek education abroad for themselves or their children.

According to literature, the education sector in Vietnam has one of the highest rates of corruption, second only to police corruption (Trines, 2017; Waite and Allen, 2003; Quah and Gregory, 2016). While research is limited, news media occasionally report on plagiarism in higher education as common, and so is the fraudulent acquisition of academic degrees, manipulated budget estimates and the 'leakage' of funds from public procurement projects. For example, Trang, Tam and Anh (2018) recently reported on a series of exam cheating scandals in the VNEXPRESS news that shocked the nation. This media article reported on the results of at least 114 candidates who illegally increased scores in individual subjects by as much as 90 percent, effecting cumulative scores by more than 17 percent. Preliminary investigations found that over 330 test sheets on eight subjects had been heavily altered. In general, the education system is characterised by constant reforms resulting in international isolation, a lack of high-

quality universities, bureaucratic obstacles, and inadequate curricula to prepare students for entry into the labour force, particularly it leads to the lack of a highly skilled workforce (Ho et al., 2018; Nguyen, 2013). Because of such events, this literature indicates that people may have lost their confidence in Vietnam's education, contributing to the gravity of push factors and to Vietnam's increased outbound student mobility. Push factors are also about the changes in Vietnamese parents' perspectives on their children's academic achievements and futures. However, observations in internet news media (Nguyen, 2018a; Huy and Huynh, 2018) also indicate how parental concerns for their children, coupled with growing up in what these journalists call 'a degree mindset society', compel enormous investments in their children's education abroad.

As discussed earlier, education in Vietnam is highly valued, and associated with potential, prestigious careers and social respect (Phan, 2004; Brody et al., 2005; Pyke, 2000; Ngo and Lee, 2007). Setting high expectations and standards for their children's academic accomplishments, Vietnamese parents usually place enormous pressure onto them (Mestechkina et al., 2014). This is frequently to maintain or increase the family status (Nguyen, 2011; Vu, 2006; Wong et al., 2011). Success is celebrated; however, these authors note the devastation of academic failure bringing about significant shame to families.

Many authors studying the history, traditions and educational practices in Vietnam write about the impact of academic failure on parents, such that children's failure can severely disappoint parents and be difficult for them to accept (Mestechkina et al., 2014; Nguyen et al., 2014; Chao and Tseng, 2002). With the pressure upon children to achieve academically, many parents

expect their children to undertake additional tutoring. This has compelled increasing debates in academic literature on the social and parental pressure upon Vietnamese children to achieve educationally and associations with children's mental wellbeing (Nguyen et al., 2016a; Khang, 2016; Ha and Harpham, 2005; Le et al., 2011; Huy, 2012). Recent news media express how many Vietnamese parents are starting to realise that intensive curriculum and high expectations are robbing teenagers of their youth, and sometimes their lives (Nguyen, 2018a; Huy and Huynh, 2018). Western education systems and parenting styles are expressed as providing some hope.

For many Vietnamese families experiencing the pressures of society expectations, a Western higher education degree may be viewed as the Holy Grail for a successful life. Consequently, news media speculates on the money spent on outbound education increasing, non-stop, annually. For example, Huy and Huynh (2018) reported on the address of the Education and Training Minister (Phung Xuan Nha) to the National Assembly in June 2018 advising that Vietnamese students collectively were spending US\$3-4 billion every year on studying at secondary schools and institutions abroad. Likewise, Hoang (2019) reported that annually Vietnamese parents spend more than \$1 billion overall on sending their children to schools and colleges abroad. On social media and in local forums parents discuss reasons behind their decision of spending a significant amount of money on their children's education. As contemporary push factors, they reflect international and Vietnamese news media observations (Thanh and Ha, 2019; Trines, 2017; UNICEF, 2019) of parental pressures upon children to achieve. However, there are also perceptions about the disciplinary practices and abuse by parents towards their school aged children in Vietnam.

A recent UNICEF' report (2019) exposed the widespread existence of violent discipline of children, with 68.4 per cent of children aged 1-14 having reported experiencing some form of violence in the home by their parents or caregivers. In many families, violence is used to maintain male hierarchies and reinforce masculinity (Vu, 2016; Rydstrom, 2006; Rasanathan and Bhushan, 2011). Such behaviour may be influenced by parents' financial security, level of education and issues such as alcohol or drug abuse (Vu, 2016). With violent discipline still a socially accepted norm, corporal punishment in schools is a common experience for children in Vietnam to both witness and be victims of (Pells and Morrow, 2018). UNICEF (2019) advised that children remain especially vulnerable when they have limited understanding of their rights to speak out and seek help when violence occurs. Parents may likewise find it difficult to speak out about the physical, and even sexual punishment, of their children in schools when violence towards children is not addressed.

Sexual abuse toward women and girls is an ongoing and serious issue confronting Vietnam (Harany, 2019; Thanh and Ha, 2019; Loan, 2019). Newspapers, Asia Times (2019) and France 24 (2019), recently reported on the outrage in Vietnam over an elevator sexual assault and quoted that 'sexual assault is not a criminal offence in Vietnam but is considered an administrative violation falling under the category of "indecent speech and behaviour". The maximum fine for sexual assault is \$13, which is not enough to stop such so-called *administrative violation* in public places. Conducting a survey of 2,000 Vietnamese women in 2014, the NGO ActionAid Vietnam (2014) showed that 87 percent of women and girls experienced sexual harassment in a public place. This report has been quoted in many Vietnamese public media since then.

Specific to adolescent girls, unwanted sex may be constructed in Vietnam as a temporary affair as opposed to rape (Nguyen and Liamputtong, 2007), leaving these girls and their families no avenue to report these crimes against them. Academic authors (Decker et al., 2007; Hoang and Yeoh, 2011) have documented how sexual violence towards girls is an additional influence in parents' migration and offshore education decisions. There is also the shame associated with unwanted, or socially undesired, pregnancies arising out of rape or sex outside marriage. As I write this section, I reflect on one of the most worrying issues that, anecdotally, compel many Vietnamese parents to bring their children to Australia and which contributes to the intention to remain upon completion of their study. This is the sex education issue and sexual abuse in Vietnam that leads to high rates of abortion among teenagers. With 300,000 abortions being carried out for women between 15 and 19 years old, Vietnam topped the list of countries' abortion rates worldwide (Lan, 2013). Abortion is prevalent in Vietnam and the broken hearts of young women aborting their pregnancies has brought about a trend of online cemeteries.

In contemporary Vietnam, Heathcote (2015) researched and highlighted how the 700 online tombs with 22,000 online candles lit in the largest online memorial for foetuses represent exponential increases in abortions among unmarried women, especially teenage mothers, and the emotional hurt associated with this. Without the family's recognition and acceptance, young teenage mothers have quietly set up graves for their aborted foetuses in this online cemetery. They decorate the online graves with virtual burning incenses, digital flowers, food and toys to make picture offerings and mourn or beseech their unborn babies. These young mothers seek the forgiveness of their unborn, aborted foetuses. They express their feeling of guilt and seek



redemption every day after they finish class at school. On many graves, Heathcote (2015: 137) observed and translated epitaphs such as,

Forgive your mother, child! These past ten years I have not been able to forget. I cannot forgive myself that I made such a decision at a young age. This mistake cannot be accepted... I will always love you!

I am so sorry I have taken away the right of the child. I cannot justify my actions. I was not brave enough to give birth at the time. Please forgive your senseless and cruel mother. I apologise a thousand times because I did not keep you inside of me.

A few other authors have written about the Vietnamese online memorials for foetuses, including Hong Nguyen et al. (2012) who exposed the high rate of gender based violence associated with abortion and Lupton (2013) who studied the Vietnamese relationship with the unborn. In both cases, they found intense heartbreak among girls and women who are forced to abort due to societal expectations compelling mothers to be married, parents to have children with no disability, and so forth.

I have seen in my own networks how this new phenomenon has been a hot topic for Vietnamese parents and teachers over the last few years when debating sex education for teenagers. It appears increasingly difficult for the young Vietnamese mothers of the unborn to withstand their own limbo in a place requiring cultural conformity to the collective traditions while simultaneously exposed to liberal ideals they participate in when part of the global internet world. (Nilan, 1999; Xin, 2019). While it appears that literature does not make links with migration intentions and protecting Vietnamese girls from rape and unmarried sex, these are

constantly discussed in the media and in our society. Teen sex and having children without being married is still seen as a significant shame for many families (Nguyễn, 2018; Yu, 2010). This is just one of the experiences of Vietnamese people that may drive them to migrate, including with their children, to escape rape, abuse and the discursive pressures of Vietnamese life – moving away to study is one such way to alleviate the risk of harm and shame.

### ***Increasing exiting via student mobility***

In the context of Vietnamese students seeking education abroad, some Vietnamese scholars gave great insights in the history of Vietnamese international student mobility from the French colonization period (since 1858) to the present (Ho et al., 2018; Nguyen, 2013). Although it might be going back a little bit far in relations to my study, it is worth it to briefly summarise from these authors the Vietnamese transnational student and educational trends historically. At first, with the purpose of gaining knowledge in technology and military, Phan Boi Chau led 200 patriotic young people to Japan to study. Phan Boi Chau was a patriotic nationalist who called for an end to the monarchy and its replacement with a democratic republic in Vietnam in 1905. Then, up until 1925, in preparing for the foundation of Vietnam's Communist Party, Ho Chi Minh sent young people to China and Russia to study military and Marxism. Around the same era, significant numbers of Vietnamese students who were not driven by political purposes went to France to learn philosophy, law, music, art and creative writing. They later on became well-known and respected intellectual figures of Vietnam. After 1945, the Vietnamese government in the North carefully screened students' political and family background. Those who shared the government's political views, consistent across their three immediate generations, were sent to study at universities in the brother socialist nations (mostly Eastern European countries).

This was a strategic measure to maintain consolidation between communist countries. The destinations and study purposes of Vietnamese students have significantly changed since then, in favour of more immediate and personal pull factors as opposed to government level ones.

There appears to be a trend among Vietnamese families nowadays, where children are increasingly sent overseas to study (Trines, 2017). Parents aim for their next generations to have a different future, culturally and environmentally, to what they perceive of the social and education system in Vietnam. Furthermore, there may be perceived opportunities in the host countries for improved career prospects, nutritious food and available medication, physical and sexual safety, and gender equality. These are considered pull factors attracting international students in general, and Vietnamese students and their families in particular (Nghia, 2015; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Ho et al., 2018). In being drawn to different countries to study, children and young people take various paths. This includes whole-of-family immigration, studying with their guardian visa parents (children as the primary student visa holders), or studying and living with their student parents in another countries (children as dependent student visa holders). Their destinations are most often developed countries; UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand, France, Canada, Japan, Singapore and also China (Nguyen, 2013; Nghia, 2019). Australia is considered one of the most attractive and flavourous choices.

Similar to many countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), ‘Australia has experimented with the education–migration nexus.’ (Robertson and Runganaikaloo, 2014: 208). For example, the opportunity for international students to gain the status as skilled migrants has been created by policy frameworks (Robertson and

Runganaikaloo, 2014). As a result, Australia's export education sector immediately benefitted from this policy shift in favour of the student migration industry. According to an Australian media source (SBS, 2019), by 2017 Australia hosted more than half a million international student enrolments in first of half of 2017, enrolled in higher education, vocational education and training schools, English language intensive courses, and non-award short courses. Vietnam was named as the fourth largest source country for international students to Australia. The latest data available reported a total number of 19,708 Vietnamese students in Australia in 2017 (UNESCO, 2018).

From 2005 to 2008, the student migration industry grew 48 percent (Hawthorne, 2018). Australian data indicates that national income from international student education in Australia grew by \$3.8 billion from 2017 to 2018, reaching an annual total of \$31.9 billion for the financial year ending in June 2018 (Australian Universities, 2019; Norton and Cherastidham, 2018). The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2018) reported Vietnam as the fifth biggest source of international students in Australia during the first half of 2017, totalling 23,270 students. There have been 5,800 Vietnamese alumni of Australian universities that were hosted by the Australian Government on development aid scholarships, dating back to the 1970s (Australian Embassy Vietnam, 2017).

## **Chapter summary**

This chapter introduced the context of the study by drawing on literature related to the migration and acculturation experiences of international students, particularly those accompanied by their families while studying abroad. Here identified in literature were the ways in which migrants

acculturate, usually depicted as one of four types; assimilation, separation, marginalisation and integration. Researchers suggested that integration, being a balance between adopting some of the new culture while keeping some of their own, is usually associated with migrant family wellbeing. At the other end of the spectrum, migrants experience marginalisation when they disconnect from their old culture while simultaneously lacking interest in the new.

The literature reported on challenges with acculturation and family wellbeing due to the loss of extended family support, cultural conflict in parenting styles or in the context of parents enduring long distant relationships. When there is no extended family, many migrant parents reportedly spent less time caring for themselves or spending time with their children. This was reported as forcing parents to divvy the parenting load differently, gender roles of mothers and fathers changed and, for parents living apart, child caring work often multiplied – potentially resulting in impaired parental functioning, adult relationship frictions and jeopardising of child wellbeing.

Language was an additional challenge identified in the literature, particularly when it limited contact with children's school activities, impeded bonds between family and school, prevented parent capacity to support their children's schooling and, then, iteratively harmed parent self-esteem and efficacy. Research highlighted how parents from collective societies practicing authoritarian parenting found the transition to dominant non-Western styles of parenting confronting, especially when having lived most their lives in societies in which parents demand high academic achievements from their children. For Vietnamese families, internal challenges exacerbated the philosophical values of Chinese Confucianism in Vietnamese society that are underpinned by family unity, obligations, hierarchal relations and filial piety – alongside

Confucian values compelling intellectual prowess, academic achievement and the upward social mobility that children's superior education will bring. The pressure in the lives of Vietnamese migrants and their children is, therefore, intense. Acculturation is challenging.

The latter part of this chapter identified that temporary migrants identifying as international student parents shared similar challenges when compared to non-student migrants. Vietnamese migrant parents, in particular, carried the Confucian ideals, gender power imbalance in the family, hardships associated with the duality of being a student and parent, time constraints, financial issues, marital stress, and more. Push-pull factors were explored from the literature in consideration of Vietnam's outbound student mobility – push factors including educational standards, social discrimination, job opportunities, political and economic issues, and violence towards or sexual abuse of children and child sexual abuse; and, pull factors being the incentives and characteristics of the destinations, such as scholarship availabilities, living standards, career prospects, lucrative incomes, socioeconomic status of the host country, and immigration opportunities after graduation. The same push-pull factors feature when international students, including Vietnamese student parents, make decisions about returning home. This is often described in literature as creating ambivalence and uncertainty for migrants, student migrant parents, and their families. The next chapter presents literature related to the phenomena, that being one of living in limbo and the sense of the uncertainty experienced by international students.

## ***Chapter 2: Lived experiences of international students***

*...in which I explore the stage of living in uncertainty of international students, often referred to in refugee literature as limbo. The bitter-sweet taste in the mouths of Vietnamese transnational student parents is characteristic of the multiplicity of feelings they experience at once; a feeling of inbetweenness when in amidst the phenomena of limbo...*

This chapter focuses on the stage of living in limbo that international students experienced. While the phenomena of living in limbo was not initially the focus of this thesis, it emerged during reflective conversations with my supervisors. One said, in relation to international students, ‘*Oh, they’re living in limbo.*’ The language to understand the phenomena being experienced by parents who were also international students and their lived experiences became clear – that being, they were living amidst the context of limbo.

This chapter includes the list of key concepts before bringing in the broad literature involving research on limbo. In order to grasp the concept of living in limbo, it is worth examining some understandings presented throughout the literature. This will assist understanding the findings of the current study, later in this thesis, in which Vietnamese transnational students express

their experience of uncertainty and inbetweenness. The final part of this section specifically focuses on the limbo of transnational students, including Vietnamese students.

### **Initial understandings about limbo and relevant terms**

The International Theological Commission of the Roman Catholic Church 2007 named *The hope of Salvation for infants who die without being Baptised*. This phrase was motivated from the belief that infants who died before they could be baptized would end up in *limbo* and not go to Heaven. This idea was distressing to Catholic parents (Sharkey and Weinandy, 2009). According to Capps and Carlin (2010), this idea of limbo came into being in the Middle Ages, roughly around the same time as Purgatory. This was the place in which Roman Catholics believed that the spirits of dead people go to and suffer for the evil acts that they did while they were living, and before they were able to go to heaven. The original place of limbo did not exist in the land of the living.

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri (1954: 30) placed limbo in Hell and described limbo as a place ‘where sorrow lies in un-tormented gloom; its lamentations are not the shrieks of pain, but hopeless sighs’. According to Martin (2019) limbo comes from the Latin word, *limbus*, which means *edge* or *border*. Capps and Carlin (2010) presented a more holistic understanding about limbo, expressing it as a place or condition of confinement, neglect or oblivion. According to the authors, being in limbo is when we experience some aspects of our life as intermediate or indeterminate. The sense of limbo, they continued, is a sort of chronic condition from which we are never completely free.



The range of human difficulties that invoke the phenomenon of limbo can be temporary, intermittent or at times in our lives when our sense of being in limbo is especially acute. According to Capps and Carlin (2010) acute limbo can occur in infancy, childhood and adolescent years, when dating, marriage, committed in a relationship, pregnant, in our occupation, profession, vocation and in life generally. It can be experienced when in physically, mentally or emotionally good or poor health. The benefits of living in limbo can include the luxury of not being committed at a time or place in one's life, hence it affords one with flexibility, mobility; the sense that one's future is open to various, even many possibilities. Limbo gives opportunity to think and reflect on who you are and what is becoming of you. On the other hand, there are liabilities associated with living in limbo, which Capps and Carlin (2010) suggest can be disorienting, causing us to feel confused, adrift and even useless. The liabilities of limbo can be confining, such as in Alighieri's (1954: 30) limbo being like living in Hell. This confinement can limit the freedom to make decisions, to be purposeful, or to achieve desired goals. When comparing this notion of living in limbo with that of being in a state of transition, it seems that limbo represents the more archaic phenomena of the two. Many researchers write about the international student experience being a time of transition (Hellstén, 2002; Prescott and Hellstén, 2005; Rhoden and Boin, 2004) and they focus on the passing from one condition to another. This is in comparison to limbo that has its focus on the experience of being in-between, in a state of confinement, and not moving in life in one direction or the other.

Relating to the stage of living in limbo, this compelled me to explore related concepts including, living in uncertainty, tasting a new environment, transformative learning, the concept of

inbetweenness, falling in-between, and transnationalism. At first, I came across the phrase ‘a taste’ of the USA that Das (1969: 149) introduced in his study about the causes associated with international students’ migration intention. As one of the earliest papers about this topic, Das (1969) examined *alien* students who had spent many months or years in the United States and subsequently developed a taste for its material affluence, morality and democratic traditions. These students were understood as feeling less satisfied with the slow pace of economic growth and social progress in their home countries. This study primarily examined the effect of international students’ non-return on their country of origin’s loss of expertise and professional skill (Das, 1969).

Using three theoretical approaches including push and pull factors, Das (1969) examined the differential factor and theory about individual’s aspirations, attitudes and motives. Das (1969) analysed the volume of data he collected and found that foreign students eventually changed their initial decision of returning home to decisions about planning to stay in the USA. Students then faced the dilemma involving moral obligations for their learning to become of benefit to their home country, or to give the benefit of their learning to the country that educated them.

In this study, older students were more likely to stay in the USA than their younger peers. Das (1969) hypothesised this trend due to older students having higher levels of training, professional skills and adaptation socially, politically and economically. He expressed that migration intention somewhat depended on the student’s country of origin, as most students from the less developed countries were found to maladapt, resist transformation to the new culture, and after a period of limbo they were more likely to return home after their studies.

In considering the ways in which international students adapt to their new environment and change, Erichsen (2009) applied the lens of transformative learning<sup>2</sup> to examine the whole-of-person change. By focusing on the lived experience of seven female international graduate students, Erichsen (2009) conducted a qualitative study to examine how they made sense of their international student experiences, how transformative learning influenced personal change during their time in the USA, and how they created and recreated their own personal meanings. Erichsen took the theoretical orientation and methodological approach of an interpretive interactionist and drew from in-depth interviews to construct a narrative collage of the students' transformative learning. This was represented through initial learning themes of getting lost, liminality, and redefinition; then, a set of a better fitting context, discovering new selves, losing old and hoped-for selves, and dreaming new selves. Erichsen (2009) argued that the experience of studying abroad was transformative, and that the processes and outcomes greatly impacted identity development. The transformation results from the reconciliation of one-self and one's identity between the past and present contexts. The study proposes that when living in a new environment, people eventually develop an ability to make sense of their lives by stepping back and reflecting on the experiences and feelings associated with those experiences, then reconstructing them into personal narratives.

The prefix of *trans-* appears quite frequently in literature on international students and migrants expressing processes of change, crossing over, or connections across two places or contexts.

The most commonly used terminology is transnationalism. Basch, Glick Schiller and Blanc-

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<sup>2</sup> The term of *transformative learning* is usually used on education contexts and defined as 'becoming more self-aware of implications of past experience for the present, and for a changed future'. This process involves the whole person's engagement in transformative learning (Pfahl & Wiessner 2007, 10).

Szanton (1995) explained transnationalism as a process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their society of origin and society of settlement. Portes (1997) studied migration and observed how individuals establish their social existence across geographical, cultural, and political borders in both the home and host countries. However, studies more recently have found that migrants no longer simply cross borders to live elsewhere, but many have turned to the circular crossing of borders for educational, employment or economic reasons into a lifestyle. For many transnational migrants, that state of limbo amidst the contexts of the liquidity of migration versus incomplete migration has been positioned by some authors (Engbersen, 2018; Bygnes and Erdal, 2017; Górný, 2017) to have become a normalised form of limbo in an increasingly global community.

Nevertheless, research on transnationals engaging in migration is mostly infused with the ideas of 'settling', or ironically 'not settling'. For example, Baas (2013) argued that living a transnational lifestyle entailed having developed long lasting ties between locations in both country of origin and destination, sometimes even incorporating third or other locations – often in countries with a considerable migrant population of the same country of origin – and then regularly travelling up and down between these various locations. Such a life is popularly characterised as being neither here nor there and frequently associated with ideas of uprootedness and disconnectedness. Yet it seems that such lives are also clearly rooted in and connected by many different locations that become bounded by transnational, social space. In their study about the phenomena of globally mobile childhood, which belongs to the research concentration on third culture kids who follow their professional nomadic parents around the world, Brooks and Waters (2012) examined the transnational nature of relationships between

students' home and host societies and found a disconnect with either society. This notion of *neither here nor there* as a place of ambiguity is what some authors name as a feeling of inbetweenness (Roman, 2018; Judge, 2017), including reference to migrants (Zavella, 2011).

Regarding to the concept of inbetweenness, Baas (2013) explored the experiences of young, middle class Indians, as both students and migrants at the same time. The author analysed the way they experienced migration processes by using the concept of inbetweenness, or falling in-between. This notion of falling in-between in the literature on migration and transnationalism was understood as an accidental state of being. However, Baas (2013) moved beyond this understanding of accidental to show that that these students very actively seek out this particular state of being as an end goal in itself. Baas (2013) explained that some students found it desirable to be transnationally mobile, spoke of this phenomenon as a transnational habitus, and identified its strong presence among the Indian middle classes in Australia. In order to investigate this in a detailed way, Baas (2013) connected these student-migrants' migration memories, as well as imaginations of their future visions associated with being in Australia. He found, in the Indian case, the (de)coupling of the local and global, both theoretically and in migration practice. Baas (2013) argued against hegemonic ideas on integration, which still lean heavily on push-pull models, in favour of understanding migration. He wrote that it was important to recognise, here, that in order to understand current day migration we need to be open to suggestions that many migrants do not care to integrate themselves in the local, but instead much more into the global. This is a definite shift away from earlier forms of migration and migration analyses. He argued that Indian students in Australia, too, are in-between; they are neither here nor yet there. Their quest for mobility is an ongoing one that urges us to look

beyond the borders that have framed the way migration and transnationalism has been understood. Baas (2013) concluded that contemporary migrants seek individual fulfilment along the way, already having crossed the border. And this then, finally, shows the ambivalence of the (dis)connection between here and there; one can leave to stay, and stay to one day leave; something that makes the local relative to the global, leading, finally, to an integration in the latter instead of the former.

When comparing the ambivalence of individuals' migration with group or family migration, family divide can constitute the phenomena of neither here nor there. In Ho's study (2002), the migration pattern from Hong Kong in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a termed astronaut migration had drawn considerable attention by both researchers and policy-makers, not just in Hong Kong, but also in destination countries including New Zealand. In this type of migration, one or more family members of an immigrant family return to their country of origin to work, while the rest of the family remains in the country of destination. The returnees are popularly known as astronauts, while the children left with one or no parent in the country of destination are known as parachute kids (Pe-Pua et al., 1996; Yeoh et al., 2005; Zhou, 1998; Tsong and Liu, 2009; Lee, 2006; Hom, 2002; Sun, 2014). Additional layers of uncertainty and ambivalence exist here, in that members of the same family are living across borders geographically and emotionally.

The feelings of uncertainty or lack of control over their destiny, as experienced by migrants and migrant families, can be compounded by additional pressures, decisions about staying or returning home, family considerations and worries about their adaptation of family life. Family

pressures were evident in the research literature on the experiences of international students, including Vietnamese transnationals, in their inbetweenness of place, culture, relationships and parenting. The literature more closely related to my thesis, being on the phenomena of living in limbo of Vietnamese parents who are international students, is reviewed next.

### **Vietnamese international students' living in limbo**

*... A 'return-stay' binary in international students' decision-making processes*

While push-pull factors from sending and receiving countries play critical roles in students' intention to seek education overseas, the burning question of return or stay makes international students torn apart during their study time. Research papers show that there are a number of factors that could drive or have significant impacts on students' decision to go back to their home country or to migrate to the host country. These factors include gender-based expectations, professional development and academic field of study, concerns regarding the insecure political situation as well as economic and environmental problems in their home countries, the search for home, the length of time spent in the host countries, and immigration policies in the main destination countries.

### ***Gendered responses to the question of return or stay***

Studies reveal that as graduation looms ahead and international students need to finalise their inner turmoil of migratory decision-making processes, gendered expectations play a role in men's and women's migration intentions (Lu et al., 2009; Cho, 2013). Cho (2013) suggested that there were different reactions and intentions between male and female Asian students when

it came to their decision whether to stay in the host countries or return to their native countries following graduating. In interviewing 21 students from China, Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea who were doing their studies in the USA, Cho (2013) found that both men and women expressed inclinations to remain in the host country to gain advancement in their academic and professional careers. However, the length of time intent on staying was influenced by ‘the traditional gendered expectations of masculinity and femininity’ (Cho, 2013: 5). According to the author, men expected more often to be successful in the workplace and more financially responsible in the families, which resulted in male students tending to stay longer. Women, however, adhered to the stereotype of being more financially and emotionally dependent on family and more concerned with marriage. Women were more likely to return earlier to their home countries.

Research on Chinese students in Canada found some similar and some alternative results. Lu et al. (2009), likewise, learned that male students were more influenced by career-related factors, while female students considered emotional and family-related factors (Lu et al., 2009). They also found that males and females shared the same influences in their intentions to migrate. This included age, academic achievement, their parents’ marital status and their own marital status. However, their study revealed that female and male students were different from each other in the level of their migration intention in relation to family financial backgrounds. Female students from wealthy families had stronger intentions to stay than female students from adequate families. Male students from adequate family backgrounds were more likely to pursue independence and build their careers in the host country. The authors suggested that male students were more likely to be concerned about factors that potentially affected their future



development and social networks. Females, on the other hand, had a strong intention to stay when their experiences in the host county gave them the sense of belonging, and when their decisions to stay were perceived to be supported by their families.

It is 5:00 pm on Wednesday 15 June 2019 and in wrapping up my work on this thesis, for the day, I stumbled across Le's PhD thesis (2014). I tucked myself in the corner of my little do-it-yourself walk-in wardrobe (my favourite reading spot, don't know why) and read my way through her compelling 200-page thesis. Using a qualitative method, Le (2014)'s study explored experiences of seven Vietnamese international students who returned to Vietnam after graduating from an American higher education institution and their transitional period. Le (2014: 462) found,

Vietnamese graduates changed their worldviews and personalities drastically because of their experiences in the US. All considered these personality changes the best things they have gained from the study abroad experiences. However, these changes seemed to generate a mixed bag of reactions from the participants' loved ones, friends and professional networks when they returned home.

While Le (2014) did not explore the imagined futures of Vietnamese international students, her thesis begins to speak to the experiences of limbo by acknowledging the 'mixed bag of emotions' of returning home. She also considered gender differences in attitudes towards the intimate relationship of the participants. Le (2014) found that all three males interviewed were happy with their romantic relationships; three females divorced on returning to Vietnam and were stigmatised for being single mothers; and only one female was happy after having returned to the USA to marry a non-Vietnamese man. I imagine that many of the experiences of

participants in Le's (2014) study were precipitated by feelings of limbo and uncertainty. While limbo was not the focus of her study, my thesis fills this gap by seeking to understand this phenomenon in its original contribution to knowledge.

In relation to Vietnamese international students studied by Le (2014), she adopted a gender lens and argued that females were influenced by gender constructions shaming them in their country of origin. For example, the women students were married to or dating non-Vietnamese men, single mothers or spinsters. With marital status being important to the worth of an individual in Vietnam, these women avoided returning. Hazen and Alberts (2006), too, found that gender was an influential factor in whether to remain or stay. They focused on professional, societal and personal factors having crucial impacts on female international students' migration motivations. Women, in particular, experienced freedoms to pursue their careers in their host countries. For reason of not having to be the homemaker, they were reported as often choosing to stay.

Lastly, in relation to gender-based factors that influence international students' migration decisions, marital status was of focus in the existing research. With the purpose of examining how international graduate students' intentions to remain in the USA after graduation differed by marital status, Kim (2014) noted that the married students had stronger intentions to stay than those who were single. This author explained that the motivations to leave or remain were strongly affected by the interests of married students' nuclear families. For example, international students who had the support and encouragement of their spouses, whether they were with them in the host country or not, strengthened these students' intention to stay abroad.

Alternatively, Le (2014) studied international students who decided to return and found that, after settling back in Vietnam, male Vietnamese overseas graduates were happy with their romantic relationships. On the other hand, almost all female students were found to have divorced their partners shortly after returning to Vietnam; many endured rough times of being stigmatised as single mothers.

### ***Professional development and academic field of study***

Decisions about studying overseas were influenced by professional factors. With respect to decisions about permanent migration to their host countries, some researchers found that these decisions were rooted in individual's desire for professional development and career success (Han et al., 2015; Bratsberg, 1995).

Han et al. (2015) undertook a mixed-method study, which looked at the experiences permanency or transiency of international students studying Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics in the USA through the Institute of International Education's national surveys, and 166 self-conducted surveys of international graduate students from 32 different countries and 12 follow-up interviews. They themed professional factors from their findings into three main categories; professional, i.e., job opportunities, quality of advisor/mentorship, and quality of professional network; personal, i.e., perception of treatment by colleagues in their home country; and, social/cultural factors, i.e., adjustment to the host country's educational culture. The authors examined how these factors interacted with one another during the students' decision-making process, finding that a student's career plans for after graduation provided the strongest prediction for whether a student would eventually stay in the USA. Students who

intend to pursue a career outside of academia and research, in particular, were deemed to have a 90 percent probability of pursuing a career path in the USA upon graduation.

In contrast, Han, et al (2015) documented that students who planned to remain in academic research, and who believed that they would be treated much better by colleagues back in their countries of origin, had an 86% probability of leaving the USA following graduation. In a similar study of Doctoral students, however, Soon (2012) found disciplinary differences. Health sciences doctoral students' commitment to remain in the host country far outweighed others. In focusing on the students who returned home, both these studies reported findings on the difficulties encountered due to significant cultural and institutional issues impacting their careers. In regards to cultural issues, Cannon (2000) identified international students to be experiencing reverse culture shock upon feeling like strangers in their own country. This was exacerbated when discriminated against by their employers for having been away for overseas study.

For students who decided to stay, despite their academic and professional achievements, Hazen and Alberts (2006) advised that they will face numerous challenges that include financial, emotional hardships as well as immigration restrictions. This would then lead them to the uncertain state of deciding, and 'uncertainties about obtaining green cards following graduation were listed as a deterrent for choosing to study in the USA and attempting to stay following graduation' (Han et al., 2015: 15). Immigration processes, therefore, can last long, be difficult and stressful. Pand and Appleton (2004) found that many international students change their

major or take several degrees in order to increase their chance of finding a job that would then enable them to stay.

In their study exploring foreign students' experiences at the University of Minnesota, Alberts and Hazen (2005) identified three categories of factors that influence students' migration motivations including professional, societal and personal factors. They found that the professional factor (which concerns wages, work conditions and facilities, and opportunities for professional advancement) lead to international students becoming permanent immigrants. This factor, in other words, typically act as strong 'incentives to stay' in the US (Alberts and Hazen, 2005: 141). The two other factors including societal and personal factors seem to draw students back to their home countries. As defined by these authors, societal factors emphasise on how comfortable the student feel in a particular social, political, and cultural environment; and personal factors relate to the personal circumstances of an individual, exemplified by family structure and friendship networks; the study's findings show some contradictions with other papers' results about the concerns in political and economic issues that make students choose to live overseas. Hence, authors considered wide variations existed among individuals who have endured difficult political circumstances.

### ***Concerns regarding the insecure political situation***

*... as well as economic and environmental problems in their home countries*

It is suggested in a OECD's paper (2011: 34) that not all students decide to stay in their country of study 'for work reasons; some will remain because of humanitarian reasons'. Political instability is the significant factor that explains the widespread non-return among overseas

Chinese students which can be found in a range of studies (Wu and Wilkes, 2017; Bratsberg, 1995; Pang and Appleton, 2004). Economic wise, Dustmann and Weiss (2007) indicated that one simple way to model a return migration is to assume that migrants have a preference for consumption in their home country. One reason that induces a re-migration is a higher purchasing power of the host country currency in the home country. Migration, they argued, is temporary because it allows the migrant to take advantage of high wages abroad and low prices at home; for example, students working in Australia can save and send money back home. A further reason for a return relies solely on human capital considerations. If the return on human capital acquired in the host country is higher at home, then this alone may trigger a return migration.

One situation where this return motive is important is student migrations. Family economic background also has an important impact on international students' decision of whether to return or stay in the host country. Lu et al. (2009) suggested that female students from wealthy families and male students from adequate families have a strong intention to migrate to the host countries; they also found that for both men and women, 'a relatively disadvantaged family background actually drives them to pursue a change through immigration'. On the other hand, in her research on different graduate student nationalities in the USA, Szelenyi (2006) suggests that the less developed a country is internationally, the more elites of such a country choose to move internationally in their educations and careers. It is a home with political safety and security, and economic stabilities that international students have been looking for. The concept of home is therefore explored below.

## *The search for home*

In attempting to understand students' post-graduation migration decisions in Canada, Wu and Wilkes (2017) proposed an aspirational concept of *home* as a main factor that is considered as the cause beyond international students' return-stay decision. They found that the mix of home perceptions and mobility experiences significantly affects international students' future migratory intentions. These authors then identified this decision-making process as a home-searching process, in which home 'offers a means to synthesize migrants' life aspirations and experiences by shaping their migration directions' (Wu and Wilkes, 2017: 125). There are four types of home in their model of post-graduate migration plans including ancestral home (*where I am from*), host home (*where I am studying now*), cosmopolitan home (*multiple places*), and nebulous home (*home is nowhere*) (Wu and Wilkes, 2017). These conceptualised homes are linked to students' specific migration plans including returning, staying and open choice. It is then indicated that they 'are more likely to consider the host society home if they can form a family, make friends or establish community networks' (Wu and Wilkes, 2017: 130). The open option, which is linked to the nebulous home in this study shares the same idea with a recent debatable conversation in media in Vietnam about meritocratic policies or brain drain vs the era of global citizens. The newspaper title reads, *Overseas students: return home or not?* (Viet, 2016). The author proposed that,

... everyone has their own desires that motivate them to grasp opportunities. If you find somewhere you feel you belong, where you can find a plum job, where your children can access good education, your life will be more meaningful.... Some overseas students returning to Vietnam will contribute to the country' development while others who choose to stay in foreign countries will contribute

to global development. If each person always moves forward, return or not, it does not really matter.

The notion of such home-searching processes cannot be an overnight course. As mentioned above, for international students seeking options to stay in the host countries, it can be a difficult, stressful and a long running process.

### ***Students' migration decision has changed***

*... and it depends on the length of time spent in the host countries*

Hazen and Alberts (2006) found in their study of students' migration decisions that very few who arrive in the US have the early intention of immigrating permanently. However, in an ongoing decision-making process of these students, a wide variety of professional, societal and personal factors have crucial impacts on their migration consideration. Eventually, many students change their minds at some point during the course of their stay. The initial decision of going overseas to purely seek education, and the decision of whether or not to return on completion of the degree, are fundamentally different. The reason mainly lies in that most students have little first-hand experience of the US when they arrive (Hazen and Alberts, 2006). Similarly, in their study about Chinese students in Canada, Lu, Zong and Schissel (Lu et al., 2009: 302) found that although the majority of students had no intention to stay in Canada before they moved abroad to study, 'applying for permanent residency definitely becomes an important option for them while completing their study in Canada'. On the other hand, in her study about international students' experience of studying in New Zealand universities, Soon (2012) found that a longer duration of stay in a host country increases the probability of



remaining there. This is because it enables the students to become accustomed to the host country, assimilate and to make a more informed decision. This was confirmed in the study by Nghia (2019) that immigration intentions might grow when international students have arrived in and adapted to life in the host country. Robertson (2013) indicated that after a taste of independence in a foreign country, many students didn't want to return to living with parents, to working in their family business, to being involved in arranged marriages or pressures to marry and have children. Furthermore, the longer international students stayed in the host country, the more they gained in understanding about immigration policies. When immigration policies were more clearly understood and perceived as easy to navigate, this had a major impact on their return-stay decision.

### ***Immigration policies in the main destination countries***

In many cases, countries with higher rates have immigration policies that encourage the temporary or permanent immigration of international students. Immigration policies in the main destination countries of students have been amended in the recent years in a way that provides skilled workers an easier access to residence permits. Within this trend, most destination countries have designed specific schemes to favour former students in the selection process of prospective immigrants, most often by providing them a step-by-step path toward permanent residence.

As mentioned above, Australia has experimented with 'the education–migration nexus' which is the policy framework that creates pathways for international students to become skilled migrants. In their study, Robertson and Runganaikaloo (2014) examined some key aspects of

migrant experience within this education–migration nexus including extended periods of temporary status and the frequent need to adapt life and education goals around migration policy changes. Thirty-five student-migrants were interviewed in this study and explained how such regulation impacts on their lives, the way they negotiated their precarious status in order to achieve positive migration and life outcomes for themselves and their families. The study’s researchers found that the uncertainty and precariousness inherent in the student-to-migrant process create significant tensions in the daily lives of most student-migrants, who represent a middling experience of migration (another language to describe inbetweenness), as well as members of transnational families (Robertson and Runganaikaloo, 2014). They also looked at student-migrants’ precariousness and uncertainty as living in limbo, which has significant impacts on students’ relationships with their families. Living in limbo was defined in this research as the student-migrants’ experience of using their time with temporary status to earn the right to stay permanently. Living in limbo is when student-migrants are trying to settle into the host country and establish a life, and actually, they have investigated financially and timely, and have been residing in the country for a number of years of their studying journey. They ‘put down roots’ (Robertson and Runganaikaloo, 2014: 214) without knowing if their stay will be permanent or temporary.

The precariousness of immigration processes and international students’ associated experiences of living in limbo were further examined by Wright (2016). In their study, they found that temporary student-skilled migrants waiting for their applications for permanent residency to be processed were held up by bureaucratic procedures and frequent policy changes. This, reportedly, created uncertainty and diminished their social, economic, and psychological

capacity to deal with challenges that included travelling abroad to see relatives, making financial commitments, and establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships.

This sense of insecurity was indicated by Robertson and Runganaikaloo (2014) in consideration of extended periods of temporary status. They described this period of temporary status as contributing to student migrant's social insecurity because they did not have certainty about their future and, in a sense they do not, for extended periods, have access to the social support provided by the state to permanent residents and citizens. These students were understood as legally insecure because they were deportable. Unlike traditional settler migrants, many spent significant periods of time in a state of uncertainty in which minor breaches of state policy could render them deportable. The inability to conform to state requirements of migrant desirability (which could shift anytime without warning) rendered families and individuals unable to move on to the 'next step' of their migration journey and therefore unable to stay legally in Australia (Robertson and Runganaikaloo, 2014: 212). While living in limbo, international students seeking migration were unable to commit to friendships, relationships, homes and careers because of the uncertainty of their status. They often experienced shock, anger, anxiety and fear due to the policy changes, particularly the frequent changes of the points test and of the list of qualifications and occupations<sup>3</sup> (Robertson and Runganaikaloo, 2014).

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<sup>3</sup> To summarise Australia's point system for migration, the easiest explanation appears in media and online web resources. Sumption (2019) reported that Australia's point system for migration allows Australia to select skilled migrants for permanent residency based on a series of characteristics, such as qualifications, language, work experience, age, and more. Hoang (2019) added that applicants are given points based on these characteristics, and if their points add up above the pass mark, they are allowed to migrate.

These authors indicated that, for those who have spouse and children with them while studying, experiences of stress related to their uncertainty around residency increased.

Robertson and Runganaikaloo (2014), explained how migration agents often marketed certain study in Australia as residency pathways. Many student migrants were noted as making choices to study particular courses to increase success with gaining permanent residency and not necessarily what they wanted to study. However, frequent changes to the list of priority occupations and the migration points test were reported to summon fear, frustration and anxiety. Agents and parents reportedly told children to be practical and to study majors that were on the long-term immigration list. Even when studies were chosen with migration in mind, families were constantly worried. Every July, these parents and their children nervously checked for any changes in the occupation list, with their hearts are in their throats, wondering in their state of limbo whether their chosen degrees were still there.

### ***International students' dealing with the status of living in limbo***

Living in limbo exists in many ways. For international student-migrants it can represent the feelings of being torn between decisions to return home or to remain in the host country, or feelings of not knowing if they can choose to stay or be forced back by their visa conditions. Some international students employ strategies to cope with these uncertainties, which come up from time-to-time in research. In the meantime, this may include changing tactics to better enable migration, living as a split transitional family in their struggle during limbo, and keeping up with policy changes to harness the moment that migration policies might change in direction.

Robertson and Runganaikaloo (2014) found that in order to keep up with migration policies' changes, student-migrants exercised constant adaptations of their pathways and choices in their study courses. International students in this study were often strategic in the type of course they chose. When the government's priority occupation lists changed<sup>4</sup>, they were also willing to change courses in response. This phenomenon was similarly observed with migrant families. For example, Robertson (2013: 167) noted how migrants used several temporary visas as 'stepping stones' towards and in hope of achieving potential permanent status in the host country.

A different phenomenon has been observed of international students who may be seeking migration. An alternative path-way to residency of student-migrants, as indicated in Robertson and Runganaikaloo in their research (2014), was to apply for partner visas. This was perceived a viable option for international students who had found partners or spouses already with permanent residency, or partners with greater potential than them to gain it. In abusing the convenience of this type of visa, some students participating in the research had considered using fraudulent marriages in order to achieve their desired migration outcomes.

Along with the issue of policy changes that can disrupt migration plans, the split in transnational families is noted in research as one of the most challenging experiences that international students face. The immigration for education process often involved the creation of split

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<sup>4</sup> As part of the Australian points test to obtain Permanent Residency, applicants also need to nominate an occupation on the Skilled Occupation List and be assessed to have the needed skills for this occupation (Hoang, 2019). This is designed to attract highly skilled individuals in occupational areas that are of needs. There is a limit placed by the Australian government on how many people can nominate one occupation to avoid a small number of occupations dominating the route (The Migration Observatory and University of Oxford).

transnational families that contributed to the notion of living limbo, for example Robertson (2013) observed student-migrants as struggling to juggle the back and forth between home, their host and beyond their imagined future. They had left their parents, spouses, siblings and even children behind in the home country, which exacerbated the situations involving uncertainty and triggering distress.

In the picture of astronaut families from Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China, Brooks et al. (2012) demonstrated a trend of how households immigrate together, but then one parent (usually the father) returns to Asia for work. Alternatively, families who have satellite or parachute children send them abroad to study by themselves. Their parents need to stay behind to work and financially support these children (Pe-Pua et al., 1996; Zhou, 1998). Korean transnational families, on the other hand, are split across different countries for the purpose of their children becoming fluent English speakers (Lee, 2006). These children are known in Korean as *kirogi*, or wild geese. Researchers frequently note their concerns about the impact of this separation on marriages and on parent/child relationships and have observed the members of split families to deal with government, society and policy differently to intact families (Lee, 2006; Yeoh et al., 2005).

Robertson (2013: 7) described the disrupted lives of student-migrants when writing,

... everyday life were embedded within a constant sense of back and forth between their two homes: the bleating of their mobile phones at two o'clock in the morning as text messages from loved ones in different time zones came through; the switching rapidly from their mother tongues to English as they conversed with their housemates in Melbourne and then with their parents on

Skype. There were constant and sometimes competing pulls of desires, plans and obligations that stretched their lives, past, present and future, across more than one place” (Robertson, 2013).

According to this study, many times the student migrants felt pain and guilt of not being in their homeland to support unwell parents, or to support siblings and other family members who were in charge of the care work. This was found to put significant pressure on extended families afar.

The stage of being here and there explored in Robertson’s study (2013) about transnational-students’ experiences is also about ‘the negotiation of multiple belongings’ (Robertson, 2013: 135) and the acceptance of their precariousness, and the limbo of being torn from within concurrent with being in-between the multiplicity.

What’s more, the lengthy waiting period for the migration process produced uncertainty in student migrants’ lives, which in turn forced them to develop strategies to deal with it. The research cited here pointed to migrants’ acquiescence to this lengthy waiting time, followed by acceptance as it also created opportunities to gain work and life experience (Robertson and Runganaikaloo, 2014). Within this context of living in limbo, student-migrants repositioned themselves. Instead of being solely focused on their initial goals of residency, they worked at transforming the period of being in limbo into something valuable (Robertson, 2013); sadly, many remained in limbo despite their efforts. The high adaptability of student migrants to changing conditions was demonstrated by Robertson and Runganaikaloo (2014), including how periods of limbo could be perceived negatively and also positively. Their strength in dealing with negative impacts of precariousness from being in limbo could be recognised through perceiving themselves as having the resources and options to make their experiences better.

## **Chapter summary**

This chapter presented literature related to the stage of living in limbo and the sense of uncertainty experienced by international students. Understanding the key concepts around living in limbo was examined in the first part of the chapter. Limbo originated in the religious belief that infants who died before they could be baptised would be, forever, in an indeterminate state and not go to Heaven. In the Middle Ages, there was an explanation about the place called limbo for the spirits of dead people to go to and suffer for the evil acts that they did while they were living. Later, some authors described limbo as an intermediate sort of chronic condition from which we are never completely free.

The literature reported the range of human difficulties that invoke the phenomenon of acute limbo. Acute limbo can occur in infancy, childhood and adolescent years, when dating, marriage, committed in a relationship, pregnant, in our occupation, profession, vocation and in life generally. There are benefits of living in limbo including the sense of flexibility as well as liabilities associated with living in limbo, which can be disorienting, causing us to feel confused, adrift and even useless.

Relating to the stage of living in limbo, researchers explored international students' experience of being in transition, being in-between, and in a state of confinement. There were some concepts reported including living in uncertainty, tasting a new environment, transformative learning, the concept of inbetweenness, falling in-between, and transnationalism. While explaining the experience of students studying abroad was transformative, researchers also indicated that transformation results from the reconciliation of one-self and one's identity between the past and present contexts. There was the process of change, crossing over, or



connections across two places or cultures. There was the stage of being neither here nor there and there was the feeling of inbetweenness or falling in-between.

The final part of this chapter specifically focused on the limbo of Vietnamese transnational students. Living in limbo many times resulted from Vietnamese international students who were being torn by the burning question of 'return or stay'. Studies show that there are a number of factors that could drive or have significant impacts on international students' decision to go back to their home country or to migrate to the host country. Amongst them, gendered expectations play an influential role. Culturally, Asian men are more often expected to be successful in the workplace and more financially responsible in the families, which resulted in male students tending to stay longer in the host countries. Whereas, women adhered to the stereotype of being more financially and emotionally dependent on family and more concerned with marriage. Female international students were found to be more likely to return earlier to their home countries. There were, however, differences between men and women in the level of their migration intention in relation to family financial backgrounds. Research showed that female students from wealthy families had stronger intentions to stay than female students from adequate families. Male students from adequate family backgrounds were more likely to pursue independence and build their careers in the host country. Also, it was found that married students had stronger intentions to stay than those who were single as international students' partners' support and encouragement strengthened these students' intention to stay abroad. Scholars also suggested that professional development and academic field of study; concerns regarding the insecure political situation as well as economic and environmental problems in their home countries; the length of time spent in the host countries; and immigration policies in

the main destination countries have crucial impacts on international students' migration intention.

Dealing with the stage of living in limbo, international students were described in literature to employ strategies to cope with these uncertainties and the precariousness of immigration processes; and to keep up with policy changes of the host countries. Many times, international students' strength in dealing with negative impacts of precariousness from being in limbo could be recognised through perceiving themselves as having the resources and options to make their experiences better. Research therefore demonstrates the high adaptability of student migrants to changing their limbo conditions positively.

The next chapter presents the conceptual framework of the study. This includes interpretive phenomenological theories and complemented with the Janus Head concept used from the philosophy discipline.

# ***Chapter 3: Methodologies in migration studies***

*...in which I equip myself with analytical approaches from my research methodology forebears in migration studies examining the phenomena of limbo, following realisation that my earlier tools were inadequate. Just like needing a sharp knife and oven to fillet and cook snapper, I required conceptual tools to carve data and serve up my findings...*

In this chapter I present the research conceptual framework that guided my research question and design and analytical approach. It expounds the theoretically informed analytic lens that allowed me, as a researcher, to reform the initial research question, make sense of interviews that did not produce what I initially expected, and adopt an alternative lens appropriate to the data in front of me. Rather than only detailed descriptions of research paradigms, methodology and theory, this chapter introduces the interpretive epistemology, then moves on to elucidate the research applications of other authors variably examining the phenomena under current study in this thesis. My methodology is interpretive, phenomenological, and complemented with the Janus Head concept used by scholars from the philosophy discipline.

## **Epistemological perspective**

Two dispositions characterising research paradigms include ontology and epistemology (Edirisingha, 2012; Scotland, 2012). Ontology refers to the nature of existence of a phenomenon, with knowledge about this nature being external to the researcher (Crotty, 1998; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Epistemology delves more in-depth and appreciates the relationship between reality and the researcher (Carson et al., 2001; Guba and Lincon, 1994). These two epistemological dispositions include positivist and interpretive epistemology (Edirisingha, 2012), where positivism concerns objectivism in regard to any research phenomenon without taking into consideration the researcher's perspective.

The current research does not aim to prove causality and it is not intended to be generalised to other populations or places. This research is interpretive, it seeks to generate an active understanding that is revealing of human behaviour and which is contextually bound (Carson et al., 2001; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Interpretivism allows for flexible research structures and enables a rich understanding of human experience and deep knowledge of reality to emerge (Creswell, 2009; Neuman, 2000). Moreover, interpretivism allows me as the researcher some legitimacy to engage in the research via my prior contexts, own lived experiences and my professional social work education, yet remain open to new knowledge due to multiple complexities of what is perceived as reality by the researched (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). Thus, collaboration between researcher and participant allow me as the researcher to continually develop knowledge (Neuman, 2000) as I become one with my data.

It is vital for an interpretivist researcher to understand reason and meaning behind human experiences, and how they may be bound by time, location and context. So, I have applied a qualitative empirical data collection approach based on an interpretive phenomenological epistemology. This involved consideration into how I performed the interpretation, elucidated patterns identified in the data, used theory and applied my social constructions to assist adding meaning to findings, while also respecting these parents' own perceptions and interpretations.

Suitably, this appreciates that knowledge gained is socially constructed rather than objectively perceived and measured (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Creswell, 2012). Locating myself at the beginning of this thesis enabled the social constructions that confine me and my thinking to be exposed, and then to be used gainfully in the analysis where appropriate. These are important processes for a researcher tasked with interpreting phenomena involving the lived experiences, feelings and meanings of others.

### **Interpretative phenomenology**

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach, initially founded by Edmund Husserl and followed by Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty (Creswell, 2012; Husserl, 1999). Phenomenology is concerned with the meaning of human lived experience, with how people feel and see their lived experience and understanding of themselves (Smith and Osborn, 2007). While it is difficult to study hard and fast facts about complex human condition, interpretive phenomenology offers a way for participants to talk about their lived experiences, and for researchers to add appropriate meaning and understanding through theorising.

Interpretative phenomenology has been increasingly recognised as an important aspect of qualitative inquiry (Berger, 2015; Smith et al., 2009). It has been used across diverse topics, including health, sex and sexuality, psychological distress, migration and life transitions, and identity (Smith et al., 2009). The current research applies interpretive phenomenology to find meaning in the lived experiences of Vietnamese international students, their family relationships and transition experiences when studying in Australia.

According to Smith, Flowers et al. (2009), researchers applying interpretative phenomenology are interested in the lived experiences of people and in how they make meaning of particular situations, especially in conjunction with important events, significant decisions, or major life transitions. Here, one can immediately conceive the relevance of interpretive phenomenology to the study of parents in their decisions to travel abroad to study, to take family with them, consideration of new opportunities for themselves and their children, as well as the lived experiences associated with enacting their decisions and life at the other end of their travels.

Regardless of whether these experiences are positive or negative, unexpected or carefully planned, Flowers et al. (2009) explain that people experiencing such phenomena try to make sense of what is happening to them through an interplay of reflections, feelings and emotions. The interpretative phenomenological analysis, therefore, explores these human experiences with a great focus on the detailed examination. They interpret what participants tell them and attempt to understand the meaning of participants' experience in political, social, interpersonal, time-based and subjective ways. To understand the participants' feeling, self-understanding, and the sense of self in the relationship to the rest of the world around them (Smith et al., 2009;

Tuohy et al., 2013), the researcher's subjective self must also be acknowledged, understood and managed, and also valued.

Rather than to expand further on text-book explanations of interpretive phenomenology, the next subsection continues to consider the methodological application of interpretive phenomenology by a selection of other researchers who have focused on international student migration. Relative to this thesis, this includes research focused major life decisions involving study and travel, and the context of living in limbo, and the binary of return home or stay decisions that may hold international student parents in limbo. Following the methodological application of others assisted in my emersion in their collective methodological mentality. This culminates in my discussion of the limitations of discretely using interpretive phenomenology to examine limbo to justify the overlay of the Janus Head concept for completing the phenomenological analysis.

### ***Drawing from phenomenological methodologies of four studies***

An early study on the intentions of international students relating to migration is the PhD thesis by Das (1969). This research used three theoretical concepts to explore the students' migration aspirations, attitudes and motivations, one of those involving the examination of *push* and *pull* factors. The study was primarily quantitative and explanatory, and involved mapping the demographics of international students and included discussion of influences in the decision making of international students.

Das (1969) surveyed 1,500 international students studying in 20 USA universities, following an initial pilot study. They found that international students studying in the USA for more than two years were more likely to remain in the USA following their studies. Regarding Asian students, they found much higher rates of these students from less developed countries wanting to return home than Asian students from developed countries; likelihood of return compared with developmental state of country of origin was significant. They found no difference between student cohorts with cohabitating partners, however students with both cohabitating partner and children were more likely to want to return home. Despite this, students with cohabitating partners and children were more likely to remain in the USA than students whose partners and children were living in their countries of origin.

While the study by Das (1969) did not use the language of phenomenology to explain his research framework, this study starts to speak to the *push-pull* phenomena interacting with lived experiences of international students in their decisions to stay or return home. It offers methodological contribution to my own research framework in so far that it touches on the internalised feelings (e.g. altering decisions) of international students and how this may influence their decisions; and, as perplexed by external variables that are contextual. As in the study by Das (1969), and as understood from the literature reviewed earlier, context can include subjective wellbeing (e.g., physical, social, economic, spiritual), want for different futures for their children, ideological perspectives, political crises or persecution, war and more.

In the second study, Cho (2013) examined, qualitatively, the migratory options and intentions of undergraduate international students. This study was completed in satisfaction of an honours



thesis and the quality is limited. While the research intentions were to examine factors contributing to decisions on whether to stay or go home, the author failed to articulate her methodological frame. The analytical technique was limited to coding and theming of patterns in the data; from reading the thesis, some critical feminism and interpretive phenomenological considerations could be deduced, despite not being explicitly stated.

In this study, the student researcher (Cho, 2013) interviewed 15 female and six male international undergraduate students, from East Asia, studying in the USA. The interview questions had some level of phenomenological mindset, in that they asked about participants' feelings to do with living in the USA in association with memorable experiences influenced their migratory decisions. Cho (2013) found little difference between the women and men interviewed on wanting to remain in the USA following graduation. Regarding their intended length of stay in the USA (e.g., short- or long-term, or permanently) the majority were reported as being ambivalent about their plans and reported various pressures from family at home to return and resume their gendered roles.

What is relevant from this study for building into the methodological framework for my thesis, are the phenomena related to emotional, existential and cultural pressures from family on international students. These pressures were found by Cho (2013) to rouse feelings of guilt among international students when they ignored familial and social expectations, including when they did not intend to return home. While my thesis does not centralise a feminist analysis, the acknowledgement of gender performativity and gender discourse in understanding the

phenomena under study (e.g., limbo) is necessary. Some discussion of gender, therefore, appears amidst my findings and discussion.

Next, Erichsen (2009) interpreted the personal narratives of seven female international students for her doctoral thesis. She conducted a qualitative study to examine how the students made sense of their shared experiences. Her phenomenological approach was framed within interpretive interactionism, and it drew upon transformative learning theory to understand how interculturality interacted with the participants' collective identity formation.

Through the construction of a *narrative collage*, the findings from the analysis of in-depth interviews in this study (Erichsen, 2009) revealed how the learning by international students involved getting lost, liminality, and redefinition before participants then engaged new identity formation more fitting of their context. This involved discovering new selves, losing the old and deciding on hoped for identities, as well as dreaming-up new selves. Erichsen (2009) located her eclectic methodology alongside a postmodern perspective that was appreciative of the transformative nature of lived experience being 'in flux, continually changing and always becoming' (p. 16). The contribution of this study's phenomenological approach to my methodological frame rests in its appreciation of feelings and meaning being a moment in time in which lived experience is located somewhere between the present context and past experiences. With the understanding that phenomenology is contextually bound, then the experiences of international students living in a new land can be observed through the way in which they make sense of their contexts, their lives and their feelings in transition. It is also

acknowledged that people's experiences of phenomena must be examined and interpreted in context, which very much includes the immediate social context.

Finally, Robertson and Runganaikaloo (2014) undertook a qualitative study of the lived experiences of 45 student migrants, mostly from Asia and South America, who were seeking permanent residency in Australia after completing university or trade qualifications. A key feature of this study was the examination of human experiences in the context of waiting to migrate during a period of policy flux from 2006 to 2010. While also not naming interpretive phenomenology as the methodological research paradigm, this study specifically focused on the emotional experiences associated with living with a given phenomenon. Associated lived experience involved the loss of hope in the perceived promises of migration, failed migration intentions, feeling anxious and uncertain about their futures and, most of all, the sense of limbo.

The researchers (Robertson and Runganaikaloo, 2014) highlighted, through their thematic analysis and phenomenological interpretation, the uncertainty, precariousness and tensions experienced in the daily lives of most students seeking migration. They named the phenomena as limbo, which is a key feature of the methodological framing of phenomenology in this thesis.

In summing up what can be gleaned from each of these four studies in terms of the developing an interpretive phenomenological frame for the current study, is appreciation of phenomenological research as the study of internalised feelings associated with lived experience in context (Das, 1969), and the emotions associated with lived experiences of a given phenomenon that can be internal, socially defined and culturally influenced (Cho, 2013). Phenomenology can be mixed with other methods and theories to appreciate the transformative

nature of lived experience, influenced by historical and present states in context (Erichsen, 2009). Lived experiences of a phenomena can be amassed with uncertainty and, in itself, this uncertainty or limbo can be studied phenomenologically (Robertson and Runganaikaloo, 2014).

Phenomenology, therefore, is important for this study in consideration of research theorists articulating its potential to generates knowledge and understanding of how individuals experience something; a phenomenon (Liamputtong, 2009; Creswell, 2012). Hence, the experiences of the Vietnamese student parents that the current research explores phenomenologically are able to be examined, with consideration, the depth of their lived experiences, contextually and historically.

Zayed (2008: 556) wrote that ‘human beings have an intentional relationship with their world and consciously and meaningfully interrelate with it’, hence they can be observed as *objects* of study, how they interpret their worlds and how lived experiences are embedded in what is meaningful to them. In considering interpretive phenomenology as the ‘champion of human experience’, Zayed (2008: 556) articulated that the primary goal was to grasp the subjective meanings of people as they see and experience life in their worlds. While I agree, phenomenon cannot be understood in research without also exploring the phenomenon and the people’s world as well; and, their world view, interaction of histories with their lived experiences and, potentially, their imagined futures.

In the interpretive space, this study brings in another layer to analysis. The Janus Head concept has been used by philosophers and researchers to add meaning to the phenomenological study of contexts involving migration, changing family and relationship dynamics, uncertainty and

inbetweenness. Janus Head philosophy helps phenomenological researchers to make sense of the subjective experiences of the other and make interpretations that add collective depth in examining data sets. Mixing in the Janus Head philosophy is important to the methodological framework of the current thesis. It acknowledges the interaction history and future, in association with lived experiences of a given phenomenon. It provides the tools to interpret human experience of a phenomenon, in context, in greater depth. An understanding of the Janus Head concept, therefore, is offered next.

### **Conceptual understanding of the Janus Head**

In ancient Roman mythology, Janus is the God of beginnings, gates, transitions and duality. ‘He is usually depicted as having one head with two faces back to back looking in opposite directions: to the past and to the future. *Janus-like* implies having two contrasting and opposing aspects or characteristics’ (Epstein et al., 2004: 2826). Janus is symbolic of the duality of conflict, the beginning and being at war at a given point in time (and poised forward looking for peace) (Renard, 1953).

According to Barbetti and Robbins (1998) the two-faced Janus Head is contextually located in space and in time. It represents human opportunity to imagine new beginnings, new ways of understanding and new means in which to make meaning. Philosophers propose that the Janus Head opens concealing and alternative discourses, recognises the value of interdisciplinary dialogue and respects various manifestations (Barbetti and Robbins, 1998) in the ways that people know the truths about their own existences.

In revisiting Alighieri's (1954) depiction of limbo being akin to living Hell, where sorrow, torment, gloom pain and hopeless lies, the Janus Head concept contributes meaning to this human experience and forward looking in search for peace. The Janus Head highlights individuals at war with oneself in the context of transitory migration experiences and experiential truths of their own existence in limbo. This may be situated between the histories they seek to escape concomitant with the futures they desire perceived as a place that may be closer to peace.

The reason for me to use the concept of Janus Head lies in the rationale for the looking back and looking forward (the stay-return binary), which is found in the negotiation of my research participants' lived experiences where the *now*, is located somewhere in-between the *then* and *there* and which is neither *here* nor *there*. Looking back invokes levels of uncertainty about what their futures behold, their hopes or imagined futures. The Janus Head locates the phenomena of living in limbo in the context of what was experienced before. However, before applying the Janus concept to my interpretive phenomenology, I introduce here the ways in which other authors have applied the Janus Head concept to their own research. This offers a pathway to understanding how the Janus Head concept is considered to contribute strength to the phenomenological analysis applied in my research.

### ***Overview of the application of Janus Head concept research***

There are two medical journals and one interdisciplinary journal carried Janus name. Around 1846, a journal on the history of medicine was published in Germany with the name of *Janus*, *Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Literatur der Medicin* (Edelstein, 1947). Later on, the medical

history journal *Janus* was founded in the Netherland in 1896 and published in French *Janus: archives internationales pour l'histoire de la médecine et pour la géographie médicale* (Theunissen, 2019). Its first editors indicated that the journal aimed to contribute internationally to ‘the progress of medicine and to the promotion of welfare, peace and the concord of peoples’ (Kamminga and Somsen, 2016: 194). They explained the two-faced Janus head ‘emblem from which the journal derived its name as an illustration of their conviction, that in order to ensure progress in the present and the future one had to keep a constant eye on the past’.

There were, for instance, important methodological lessons to be learnt from how scientists had conducted their research in the past. To guarantee the steady growth of knowledge, these authors proposed that every scientist should not only be aware of the discoveries made by his forerunners, but also of their errors. Science was a rational, progressive and cumulative activity, and its history constituted the foundation on which to build its future. According to Kamminga and Somsen (2016: 194-195), this was why *Janus* looked forward and backward simultaneously.

The Janus Head concept has also been used broadly in various fields, including technology, education and politics (Ng and Nyland, 2016; Arnold, 2003; James, 2008; Anderson, 1965; Zaidi, 2008). There is even a Janus-faced approach proposed by Lauer, McLeod and Blythe (2013) to survey design. It is an approach that encourages researchers to consider how they can design and implement surveys more effectively using the latest web and database tools. Specifically, this approach encourages researchers to look two ways at once; attending to both the survey interface (client side; what users see) and the database design (server side; what

researchers collect) so that researchers can pursue the most dynamic and layered data collection possible while ensuring greater participation and completion rates from respondents. Authors illustrate the potentials of a Janus-faced approach using a successfully designed and implemented nationwide survey on the writing lives of professional writing alumni.

Lastly, *Janus Head* is the title of a journal of interdisciplinary studies in literature, continental philosophy, phenomenological psychology, and the arts (Barbetti and Robbins, 1998). Maintaining an attitude of respect and openness to the truth in human experience, it strives to foster understanding through meditative thinking, narrative structure, and poetic imagination. Like the Janus head reliefs found over the doorways of old Roman homes, this journal, is situated at a threshold. In my current research scope, I introduce how this concept is used in the migration context to likewise examine people's lives at the edge of new beginnings.

### ***Application of Janus concept in research on migration***

In attempting to discern the application of Janus-like philosophy in literature on migration, I have paid attention to 32 articles and book chapters exploring this topic in negotiation of my methodological framework. While I commence by describing some studies in greater depth to begin with, the majority are consolidated to capture the key methodological application. Most of these works use language, such as Janus-faced or Janus-like or Janus nature, in similar ways to describe the duality of experiences of a phenomenon associated with looking in both directions at once to weigh up one's life. I refer to all these terms inclusively through my consistent use of the concept, *Janus Head*, but also note the specific words used by different



authors to philosophise the multiplicity of human existence when positioned between one's history and future.

For example, Kilkey and Palenga-Möllenbeck (2016) used the phrase, 'the Janus-faced nature of migration' in their edited book named *Family life in an age of migration and mobility: global perspectives through the life course*. They concluded from the chapter contributions that the interests of researchers has often overlooked the lives of migrant families in favour of 'the jet-setting brief-case-carrying businessmen forging deals in fancy hotels' that populate its 'front stage' (Kilkey and Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2016: 339). Contributing authors, Shmulyar Gréen and Melander (2016) used these concepts to examine post-accession migrants in Sweden, in particular the families' negotiation of migration decisions in consideration of ongoing family obligations that extended across European borders. They explored the limitations of a single theory (transnationalism) to understand migrants with family. Using the Janus Head to add meaning to the nature of migration enabled Shmulyar Gréen and Melander (2016) to discern how social inequality, location and the effects of migration on families lives.

Kraler et al (2011) applied the Janus Head concept in in research on civic stratification, gender and family migration in Europe. The Janus Head lens assisted interpretation of the experiences of 'aliens' in the context of powers of the modern nation state's policing of migration, detention and deportation. They were able to discern the ways in which migrants' forward-looking hopes intertwined with their current experiences of migrant categorisation, rights inequity according to categorisation, differences in access to welfare, exclusions, denials and uncertainty for the duration of seeking permanent residence. Likewise, Bonizzoni (2014) applied the Janus Head

to research on European migration and policies to show how complex political systems regulated families' intimate lives, family formation patterns, labour market participation. They found that the application of migration policies was highly uneven; their Janus Head analysis highlighted the impact of these irregularities on both families' experiences and future looking hopes for residence and eventual citizenship. Barber (2010) also used the Janus Head to convey understanding of migrants' synchronised ogling of contemporary migration processes concomitant with their anticipated journeys, hope, desire for adventure and fears of potential migration disappointments. Hence the Janus Head concept is applied in former studies without concrete methodology and it offers a looking glass in which to make sense and add depth of the interaction of migratory, political or contextual circumstances within the inbetweenness of *then* and *there*.

When studying migration policy in the context of Greek labour migration in Germany, King, Christou and Ahrens (2011) applied Janus Head to understand the effect on migrants' children. They defined migration experiences at temporary and considered the limbo in the context of Germany's Janus-faced migration policy. They focused on two life-stages of *return*, this being: how the German born children of Greek labour migrants engaged with their homelands, as children taken back to Greece on holidays or sent back for longer periods; and, as young adults exercising an independent *return* to Greece migration. The authors argued that, despite the reality of family settlement and the birth in Germany, that Germany's Federal Government insisted it was not an immigration country and that the children were not German. This contradiction posed by immigration uncertainty resulted in enormous challenges for migrants and also to policy, in which Germany had to somehow reconcile two opposing forces (two faces

of policy). On one side of politics stood the official desire to preserve an increasingly fictional notion of temporary migration insisting a return to the country of parents' origin. On the other, there was a pressing need to accommodate the now-settled migrant population and educate their German-born children. To resolve this, Germany introduced the '1.5 generation' to migration policy, brought in under family reunion measures to enable the bringing in of children who had been left behind in Greece or sent back there to be cared for by relatives (King et al., 2011: 487). Janus Head phenomenology assisted in elucidating the issues of to-and-fro policy, and the uncertainty for the lives located in-between. With some consistency, Nawyn (2019) applied Janus Head philosophy to inform analysis of US and Mexican migration policy debates.

Literature in the areas of child welfare has also applied the Janus Head concept to assist understanding of phenomena in the context of migration. Vassenden and Vedøy (2019) in their article on Norwegian Child Welfare Services highlighted strained relations between child welfare providers and various migrant groups. The application of Janus Head was used to interpret migrants' fears of the child welfare system experienced in a context of inbetweenness – e.g., mixed feelings when receiving support simultaneous with control and discipline, in a context of inbetweenness where migration outcomes were perceived to rest upon pleasing or displeasing authorities. Leurs (2016: 15) similarly used the Janus Head concept to observe the experiences and mixed feelings of young connected diaspora youth in comparison with European families during the recent so-called 'European refugee crisis' – in between the fleeing of conflict and the seeking of safety.

While most authors applying the Janus Head to interpret individual, families or political experiences of phenomena in a given context, as I mentioned already, they do not tend to explain the methods of application of Janus Head philosophy to their analysis. For example, Percival (2013: 119) explained the ‘Janus-like duality’ of British immigrants in Australia and their ceaseless contemplation of returning to the Homeland in later life. McThomas (2016: 7) described the ‘Janus nature of citizenship’ when presenting voice and recognition for undocumented migrants in the US, inferring limbo as the phenomena encapsulating hope for citizenship in forward looking in the context of what they left behind. Others have used the language, ‘Janus-faced’ to describe migrant integration patterns (Freitas et al., 2015; McAreavey, 2017), or where cultural assimilation and integration is conflicted and held back by neo-liberal migration control and governing of migrants (Schinkel and Van Houdt, 2010). Bedford and Rai (2010: 12) considered migration reflection and its role in, potentiality, unsettling past and future, naming the reflection as ‘Janus-faced moments.’ In each of these studies, the authors use Janus Head to represent the phenomena of limbo for migrants as they put their lives behind them and simultaneously their futures are held at ransom of political systems.

This use of Janus Head, in which the concept of limbo is applied to understand existential uncertainty inherent in people’s lives and compound by surveillance at the whim of political systems, appears as a consistent methodological application across many other studies (Johnson et al., 2018; Faist, 2009; Kraler et al., 2011; Halperin and Slomowitz, 1988; Nading, 2013). However, Nading (2013) not only applied the Janus Head to understand the two facing directions of individuals and their families in negotiating bi-cultures, but also multi-directional

forces of family, community and state rendering individuals to cope amidst the collision-point of conflicts raised by the matrix of these competing interests.

When focusing on the micro-level contexts associated with migration, researchers and philosophers have applied Janus Head to analyse the experiences of migrants in the context of cross-cultural processes and family. The application has enabled understanding of the intense feelings and emotions associated with parents and families living in-between to emerge. For example, both Sevinç (2020) and Piller and Gerber (2018) studied international students from non-English dominated societies and applied the Janus head to unearth the duality of language mindsets, where bilingualism was associated with good parenting, poor English in English-dominated countries as bad. In these studies, Janus Head thinking located the English learners as struggling with anxiety and uncertainties about parental engagement in their children's social and school lives. Here, they were somewhere in-between being unable to engage and the want to. This is, perhaps, one of the closest conceptualisations of the phenomena of limbo under study in the current thesis by virtue of understanding the impact of living in limbo on parenting and family life.

When Shmulyar Gréen and Melander (2016) applied the Janus Head, to look at family obligations of migrants in Sweden, they identified significant side effects of migration contexts impacting family life, including care drain, physical, social and emotional hardships on migrant parents. This brings forth the work of Chopra (2009: 96) in her application of Janus Head in the examination of the position of women in the global migration context, specifically with respect to women marriage outside their cultural group to secure a 'househusband' to alleviate

pressures and uncertainties associated with their limbo. This application of Janus Head has been likewise applied by others for interpretive analysis of women's dual identities related to changes in gender performativity, productive and reproductive work in the context of microfinance (Nawaz and McLaren, 2016), and including changes to parenting role redistribution across cultural binaries in the context of migration (Hallett, 2004).

Finally, Mathews (2011: 337) poses questions on whether it is even possible for people to look in both directions at once, but then resolves this in saying that while 'Janus always sees only the present, whether he faces the past or the future', that the present is a representation of the emotional oscillation between 'the boredom of knowing and the fascination of losing.' He poses that while Janus head offers two faces, in which each cannot see the other, it is perceptible to draw lines between the two. Hence, researchers can draw interpretations of how participants' perceptions of a present phenomenon are influenced by the past, and how the obscurity of the future can interrupt the way in which current perceptions become altered by fascinations in achieving future change or losing projected hopes and desires. This includes how future images may be 'embraced, understood, re-directed, and nullified' (Mathews, 2011: 337). As such, the application of Janus Head with interpretive phenomenography in the interpretation of data in this thesis is provided textually and diagrammatically in the next chapter.

## **Chapter summary**

This chapter presented the conceptual framework of the current study. It expounded the theoretically informed analytic lens to reform the initial research question and adopted an alternative lens appropriate to the data gathered. Instead of describing research paradigms,

methodology and theory, this chapter introduced the interpretive epistemology, then moved on to elucidate the research applications of other authors variably examining the phenomena under current study in this thesis. In sum, this study's methodology is interpretive, phenomenological, and complemented with the Janus Head concept used by scholars from the philosophy discipline.

Within the two epistemological dispositions, include positivist and interpretive epistemology, this current research seeks to generate an active understanding that is revealing of human behaviour and which is contextually bound. Therefore, interpretive epistemology was the foundation for this qualitative study. Interpreting phenomena involving Vietnamese international student parents' lived experiences and feelings, their family relationships as well as their transition experiences when studying in Australia is the task I took while conducting this research. Looking at phenomenological approach, interpretive phenomenology offered a way for participants to talk about their lived experiences, and for researchers to add meaning and understanding through theorising.

The main part of this theoretical chapter focused on methodological use by other researchers looking at similar issues and contexts to this thesis. There were phenomenological methodologies of four studies that were examined (Das, 1969; Cho, 2013; Erichsen, 2009; Robertson and Runganaikaloo, 2014). These were chosen because they play a role in developing an interpretive phenomenological frame for the current research. In sum, phenomenology together with other methods and theories, are useful to explore the internalised feelings and emotions associated with lived experiences. Due to the uncertain nature of some lived experiences, this stage of uncertainty or limbo can be studied phenomenologically.

The last part of this chapter discussed the need for an additional interpretive layer in which to guide analysis. The conceptual understanding of the Janus Head and its application in research on migration was introduced. It was then followed by a brief explanation of why the concept of Janus Head was used in this study.

The methods used in this study are discussed in the next chapter.



## ***Chapter 4: Research methods***

*... in which I explain the research methods as tools in which to analyse the research data and to theorise my findings. This chapter commences by explaining the original research study and the evolving focus thereon. One could say that I commenced with a research idea and went away to collect data, as if I was carrying a basket to collect berries and I came back with a huge fresh snapper needing different tools to carve and make sense of it...*

In this chapter, I present the research question and aims, the methods used for participant recruitment, data collection, analytical techniques, ethical considerations and limitations of the study. While methods are often stated in research thesis after the research theories informing analytical interpretation, some reordering was required and that is achieved here. This is because I collected the data and was compelled to change my theory and analysis with respect to my research participants expressed experiences.

My research initially aimed to explore the experience of Vietnamese students who lived with their children and, in many cases, with their partner in Australia under the student visa immigration stream. I wanted to understand the factors affecting their parenting and partnering from a psychodynamic perspective focused on parenting styles. I thought this would offer new knowledge on the effects of the relationship between the Student Visa context, parents and their children and offer understanding of the effects of the Visa context on the parental couple

relationship on parenting. However, there was limited new knowledge to be found in applying a psychodynamic theory and well-known descriptions of parenting styles. What participants told me ran much deeper, hence the research questions and aims were compelled to evolve. These are stated next.

## **Research question and aims**

During the course of the current research, I came to understand that many international students experience a range of uncertainties on a daily basis and in my respect as a social worker towards social justice, their stories and feelings needed to be heard, recorded and understood. Their uncertainties were not necessarily because of the Student Visa situation, but because there were many unknowns that resulted from living in-between place, culture, evolving relationships and changes to parenting. Accordingly, my research question is:

*How do Vietnamese parents, who are international students in Australia, experience living in limbo amidst the inbetweenness of time, place, culture, relationships and parenting?*

In order to respond to this question, this research aims are:

- To document the contexts informing Vietnamese parents in their decisions to undertake study abroad, as discerned from the wider body of existing knowledge

- To elucidate phenomena associated with the lived experience of Vietnamese international student parents in Australia, in particular their experiences and feelings related to changes in their daily life, relationships and parenting
- To interpret phenomenologically, the lived experiences of a sample of Vietnamese international student parents in Australia.

Methodologists of qualitative research support the in-depth nature of inquiry (Creswell, 2012; Babbie, 2013), which is necessary to develop understanding of phenomenon that can then be tested in subsequent research. Qualitative research, therefore, is not expected to be representative of the whole population but, instead, indicative of issues worthy of exploration. Working with small samples seeks to understand depth and details of meaning (Alston and Bowles, 2019; Payne & Payne 2004, cited in McLaughlin, 2011: 35). From these meanings, it is possible for new theories to emerge. To get to this point, the recruitment of and description of my study's participants, data collection and analytical applications must be provided first.

## **Recruitment**

Support to disseminate recruitment material was provided by a panel member of the Flinders University WHIP<sup>5</sup> Postgraduate Association, who was also the chair panel of a University cross-sectors conference body. Vietnamese Student Associations in Australian universities also provided assistance. As third-party recruiters, they distributed announcements about my

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<sup>5</sup> Work–Honestly–In Progress (WHIP) is a postgraduate research student association at Flinders University (South Australia) established to provide peer support and reporting of results.

research (Appendix 6) and my contact details to the Vietnamese student parents who were connected to their associations and communities.

Recruitment was via self-nomination. This involved Vietnamese student parents who knew about my research, and who were interested in participating, contacting me via my email address given. Upon initial contact, I sent them a Letter of Introduction (Appendix 5) with the Information sheet (Appendix 3) attached. If the potential participants decided to continue, it was up to them to contact me to arrange a suitable time and forum for the research interview. Consent was arranged and returned to me either personally or via email (Appendix 4) prior to interviews. Individual interviews were arranged once consent to participate was received. Communications were by telephone, email or face-to-face. The snow-balling technique (Bryman, 2015) was also adopted, meaning that some of the participants passed on my study information to people they knew met the participant criteria. Self-nomination, information, consents and participation likewise was arranged.

According to research literature, purposive sampling is expected to provide insight into the particular study area or population (Babbie, 2013; Bryman, 2015). This study targeted adults who met the participant criteria, described next.

## **Participants**

Twenty-six Vietnamese student parents, who were 18 years of age or older, living in Australia and the holders of Australian Student Visa, participated in data collection interviews. In accordance with participant criteria, each of them had been living in Australia for at least 6

months at the time of interviewing. Six participants were completing a PhD and twenty a master's degree, twenty-two were receiving a scholarship and four were self-funded. Four of the participants were in the process of divorce, or had intentions to divorce (table not shown).

Seventeen of the student parents had their partners and children living with them, while studying in Australia. Seven student who participated were living apart from their partners or divorced; seven partners were in Vietnam and one in another country. Two students had their children living in Vietnam, either with their partner or with grandparents, with one being returned to Vietnamese after some time in Australia, and the other coming to Australia only during school breaks (Table 1).

*Table 1: Participant demographics and living status*

| <b>Pseudonym</b> | <b>Student, partner and child/ren together in Australia</b> | <b>Student and child/ren in Australia, partner living elsewhere or divorced</b> | <b>Student single or with partner in Australia, child/ren with grandparents in Vietnam</b> |
|------------------|---|---|--|
| An               |   | X   |  |
| Thu              | X   |   |  |
| Chinh            |   | X   |  |
| Quyên            |   | X   |  |
| Minh (male)      | X   |   |  |
| Hinh (male)      |   | X   |  |
| Kim              | X   |   |  |
| Khanh            | X   |   |  |
| Lien             | X   |   |  |
| Thuong           | X   |   |  |
| Dung             |   | X   |  |
| Oanh             |   |   | X  |

|              |   |   |   |
|--------------|---|---|---|
| Quynh        | X |   |   |
| Phuc (male)  | X |   |   |
| Trung (male) | X |   |   |
| Duong (male) | X |   |   |
| Chi          |   | X |   |
| Ha           | X |   |   |
| Xuan         | X |   |   |
| Thi (male)   | X |   |   |
| Dao          | X |   |   |
| Thoa         |   |   | X |
| Nhan         | X |   |   |
| Chau Anh     | X |   |   |
| Ngoc         | X |   |   |
| Diep         |   | X |   |

Upon making enquiries with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, it was found that the population pool of student parents in Australia, from Vietnam, could not be established. Should the cell size from which the sample was drawn be small, it was decided that further demographic breakdown of participants would not be reported to reduce risks to anonymity.

### **Data collection method**

In order to collect qualitative data for this research, an open-ended questionnaire was used to guide the in-depth interviews with the student parents. I conducted one in-depth interviews with each participant, of approximately one to two hours in duration. The questionnaire was generated from the understanding of issues for migrants noted from the literature review, my

personal insights as a student parent and with consideration of the requirements of Australian immigration policies, in particular Australian Student Visa subclass 500: requirements on partner and child dependents<sup>6</sup>. The questions guiding were:

- Can you please tell me how you felt and prepared yourself, your children and your family before coming to Australia?
- How would you describe your family life in Australia?
- Please tell me how you would balance your dual roles of being parents and student at the same time. Were there any challenges and how did you overcome them?
- Please describe the relationship between you and your children while living here? What were your parenting experiences in Vietnam and in Australia?
- Are you satisfied with your life in Australia? And how do you feel now?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

Often the participants took control of the interview and answered these questions in directions that were sometimes unexpected by me. As a social worker who is respectful of anti-oppressive and emancipatory research, the semi-structured nature of interviews allowed for deviation in focus at the whim of participants. An emancipatory ethic is known to allow the researched to have some control over the direction of discussion within a broader set of questions (Rose and Glass, 2008; Strier, 2007), or to redirect focus according to what they feel is important about context or phenomena being researched .

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<sup>6</sup> In summary, the Australian Student Visa Subclass 500 allows most students to bring their immediate family members to Australia. Immediate family members are called dependents and may include students' spouse (or de facto partner) and children under the age of 18. There are requirements on health and finance including living costs for the duration of the student and their family's intended stay in Australia, school costs for all school-age dependents, travel costs and health insurance for all family members (Department of Home Affairs 2019).

The interviews were audio-recorded through a digital voice recorder so I was able to pay full attention on the conversation without trying to write down necessary information and could re-listen again and again to understand their experiences and feelings. All the interview recordings and transcripts were kept safely in a Flinders University computer with a secure password, with the password only known by the researcher. I also developed backup copies of computer files, also password protected. All participants' real names used in the writing were pseudonyms. Consent forms were stored separately to data to prevent cross matching and re-identification.

### **Researcher subjectivity**

As a Vietnamese mother holding a Student Visa in Australia, I understand that my personal experiences can affect my interpretation of the data. This includes my personal interests, curiosities, bias and epistemological assumptions that may have influence on my conceptual frameworks (Ravitch and Riggan, 2012). However, the nature of a phenomenological study is that it attempts to set aside biases and preconceived assumptions about human experiences and feelings (Giorgi, 2012; Hycner, 1985; Starks and Trinidad, 2007) in order for me as the researcher to understand how the phenomenon of being both a parent and student in Australia may appear to participants, instead of how it is perceived by me as the researcher. Despite this, I cannot deny my status as an insider researcher studying the student parent perspectives on their migration journey, their intimate relationships and their parenting. I argue that as a critical, as a reflective researcher, that my subjective being adds value to the interpretation of phenomena and the meanings that the participants ascribe to their experiences. This is particularly important for the discussion of findings, since there are many Vietnamese cultural traditions that influence live in both lands.



I need to make myself clear when it comes to this part, that my race, social class, gender, education, experience and nationality can profoundly influence the design of my research, my interpretation and observation; even the interview design incorporated reflection of my own lived experience and feelings. Ravitch and Riggan (2012: 10) indicated that, as the researcher, 'your position to the research setting is a critical consideration.' Obviously, my personal interests drove me to do this research in the first place and it motivated me to conduct a research study that was also meaningful to me. Hence I reject the processes of some phenomenological researchers that demand researchers to bracket and set aside their selves (Measor, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). Instead I used reflection, as well as triangulation, to increase the credibility, trustworthiness and confirmability of my study, in accordance with the methods of triangulation described in qualitative research literature (Northcote, 2012; Lietz and Zayas, 2010; Tracy, 2010; Bryman, 2015). This sought to value the insider knowledge and mixing of my subjective self.

In my recruitment of participants, I sought those who have had the lived experiences associated with being a student parent, experiences associated with living in a new land, changes to the lived family processes, relationships, parenting and associated uncertainty about life in Australia or going back home after their studies. This called for the conduct in-depth individual interviews (Polkinghorne, 1989; Creswell, 2012) to collect detailed information and explore the unique and private feelings and experiences of the participants phenomenologically and through my interpretive frames (Johnson 2002, cited in Liamputtong, 2009; Creswell, 2012). The interaction between an interviewee and interviewer, enabled the creation of meanings,

knowledge and understandings (Babbie, 2013; Bryman, 2015) more deeply than participants could or were confident to express alone.

Here my own lived experiences played a significant role. They enabled my phenomenological analysis to find patterns cross the data to both emerge from the other and to also be found through my pre-understandings of the phenomena under study. My data analysis processes were undertaken manually and involved crucial steps that helped me to provide a great understanding of what it would be like to experience the journey of being parents and having family life in Australia of Vietnamese students. Once interviews were fully transcribed and translated, transcripts were thematically coded and subsequently thematically analysed. The phenomenological and Janus Head lens helped me to organise the themes in a way that reflected the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Phenomenology and Janus Head lenses were also subsequently applied to reinterpret the themed data and add additional richness to them meanings of participants. The results of the data analysis were the themes, which then informed discussion chapter of this study.

Steps in the thematic analysis were consistent with the process described by the Centre for Innovation in Research and Teaching (Center for Innovation in Research and Teaching, 2018) quoted next:

- (1) Significant statements are taken from transcripts to describe elements of experiencing the phenomenon.
- (2) Significant statements are sentences/quotes that describe how the participants experienced the phenomenon.

- (3) Similar significant statements are placed into clusters of meanings, which are different themes of the participants' experience with the phenomena.
- (4) Significant statements or clusters are used to write a textual description, which is a description of what the participants experienced; significant statements are also used to write the structural description, also known as imaginative variation, which is the description of the context and setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon. Then the textual/structural description are used to write the essence of the phenomenon, also known as the essential, invariant structure.

Actually, I started seeing some major themes after conducting the first seven interviews. These themes were then continuously reinforced by the following interviews, which also produced some new themes. Analytical process of theming (Braun et al., 2019) is what I employed to manage the volume of data that I gathered. I translated and transcribed the data at the same time, then read and re-read them again and again in order to find representative quotes, order these quotes according to identified themes, and make sense of them interpretively. I will explain more about this process in the next sub-section.

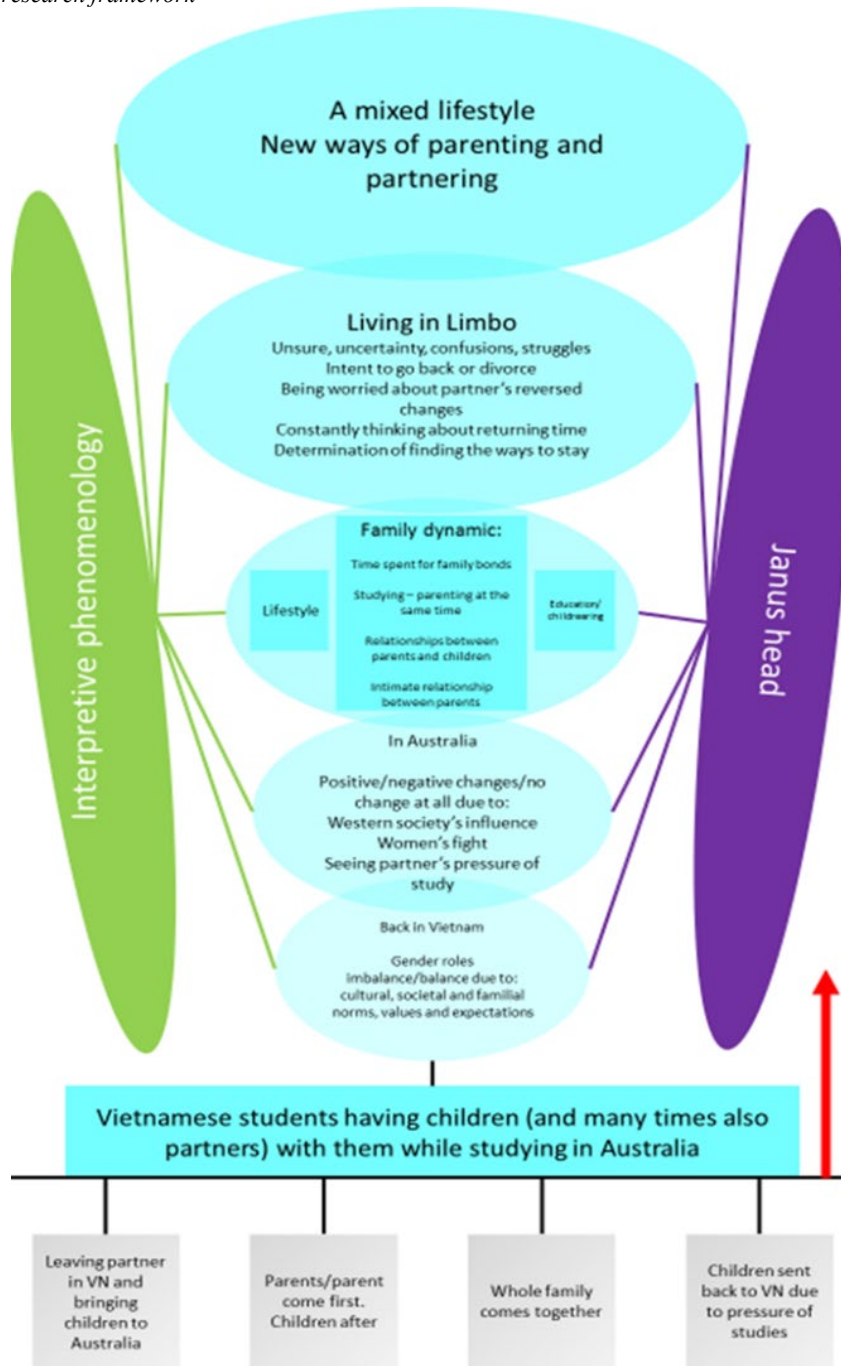
### ***Iterative data analysis***

The analytical process was three-fold, and iterative. It involved immersion in findings, narrating themes and identifying representative examples of patterns from the data. I teased findings out through a haphazard iterative process, relating my observations to the previous knowledge which has been explored in this area. I kept reflective notes so that I could later check and minimise my own subjective interpretations, in attempt to prioritise the interpretations being informed by the Janus Head phenomenology.

The first set of findings is presented in the next chapter and interprets my research participants' experiences through the lens of interpretive phenomenology, then adds the second layer of analysis by adding the Janus Head. The second findings chapter scaffolds upon the first and, offering meanings in relation to the complexity of meanings as they intertwine with the self, family members and future hopes in making sense of experience in relation to the past, present and future. Adding the analytical layer to further explore participants' phenomena via the lens of Janus Head in each of the findings' chapters enabled a depth of understanding that interpretive phenomenology could not do alone. The findings from the next two chapters are

brought together in the discussion chapter and considered alongside the body of knowledge presented in previous studies. The research framework is represented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Conceptual research framework



The development of my own conceptual framework has assisted with guiding a methodological framework that integrates a rationale for the research theory and methods, which is clarified in this and the former chapters. As an inductive piece of research, information is generated in this thesis primarily from participants' experiences of living in limbo in the contexts of change, family and relationship dynamics and divergence of Vietnamese and Australian cultures (Figure 2). The phenomena of limbo and these contexts are subjected to interpretive phenomenology, on the one side, and Janus Head philosophy, on the other. At the bottom of Figure 2, the different family formations of the participants under study are shown.

### ***Interpretation and organising the findings***

The inductive analysis enabled data to be organised according to themes identified from the interviews with participants, and in response to the research question. The representative examples of thematic patterns from across the data set were subject to interpretive analysis via the phenomenological Janus Head lens. This sought to add interpretation and depth in meaning. Respect to the original meaning, based on what the participants were saying, are preserved in so far as possible. However, the phenomenological lens and my own lived experience of living in limbo enable me to nuance what was said and draw out the feelings behind the words in a socio-political context. I exposed my history and lived experience, accordingly, at the beginning of this thesis and through my occasional reflections.

Phenomenological analysis speaks to the emotional lived experience of people. It often cannot be separated during data interpretation from the emotion that is going on and the feeling that is coming up, for both participants and me as the interpretive analyst. Frequently, observations were made of participants' pasts influencing their feelings as they talked with me during interviews. However, there were many influential fears for the future that appeared to be taking its toll on the participants' experiences at that time. Applying the Janus head was summoned upon when realising that participants experiences represented emotions, tensions and fears in which their current feelings were wedged between their pasts, current state and imagined futures.

Following interpretive phenomenological analysis, I then re-examined through the lens of Janus head to also understand the *inbetweenness* going on. In answering my research question, this additional analytical layer illustrates the pattern of mixed and often complex emotions. I revisited some of the same quotes from the phenomenological analysis when overlaying the Janus head. Some of the findings are repeated in each of the two chapters as the analysis of meaning behind the phenomena is deepened. By building the Janus lens over the top of these quotes, many times I weaved together findings already used and teased it out further. This represents an analytical frame that is building, deepening and digging for meaning.

As an interpretive researcher, I wanted to make it clear why my analysis was being done this way. In identifying that the core experiences of the participants in my study was very much about uncertainty, the early analysis and conversations with my supervisors led us to observe the participants' *inbetweenness* as a state of living in limbo.

While the discussion chapter joins the body of existing knowledge with findings from this and the next two chapters, weaving in some literature among the finding chapters cannot be avoided. In fact, there are two different finding chapters, but they are not separate. To avoid risking a detached, e.g. a parallel analysis, findings from the first of these findings chapters was re-visited and re-examined through the Janus Head lens was crucial. Why did I do that? It is because people's lives, their parenting, relationships and values change with their move to living somewhere else. Feelings about their phenomena are transitory; a limbo, so to say. The Janus head makes sense of the people's tasting of their two worlds, including some of the past bitter tastes that linger and inform what lies ahead of them.

### **Ethical statement**

My research initially aimed to explore the experience of Vietnamese students who lived with their children in Australia, in particular their family experiences and parenting styles. Individuals comprising this population group, under the student visa immigration stream, faced a new society with very different parenting styles to their own. I initially intended to understand the factors affecting their parenting and partnering from a psychodynamic perspective. My original PhD supervision team convinced me that a psychodynamic analysis would offer new knowledge on the effects of the relationship between the Student Visa context, parents and their children, and of the effects of the Visa context on the parental couple relationship on parenting style. I soon learned when speaking with the research participants that this beheld a very blinkered view of Other – it assumed that Asian parents were set in their ways with authoritarian parenting and would potentially struggle to parent differently in Australia. This approach,



which drew upon an ill-informed hypothesis and sought to apply a gaze on the researched, was not appropriate for the current study and unethical.

### ***Evolving research focus as an ethical consideration***

An ethical approach to qualitative social work research respects the voice of the researched, draws key themes from the data itself, and it is emancipatory, anti-oppressive and respectful of the human experience of those under study (Strier, 2007; Rogers, 2012; Alston and Bowles, 2019). As I have already stated, I was pressured to form pre-conceived ideas of what was important to study about the experience of being parents and international students at the same time. However, the participants deemed what was important differently and a new PhD supervision team guided me to evolve in study focus, ethically and accordingly. Vietnamese student parents told me what was important for them in their transnational journey in Australia. Their parenting, relationships and family life were stuck between the two worlds of East and West, of there and here, at a point in time. They spoke eagerly on how they managed multiple dualities of their interpersonal, social and cultural experiences. They also compared the pasts and visions for their futures. The experiences of uncertainty, limbo and inbetweenness is that they fervently wanted to become heard.

There have been learnings on how the participants in my study carry out their roles as parents while being influenced by inter-cultural factors, norms and values. These included the elements of a new phase of their family life, the way they negotiated gender roles and managed to maintain family relationship in the face of significant change, alongside fulfilling both student

tasks and parenting responsibilities to meet their visa conditions. In the early stages of interviewing, the research question and aims were appropriately reformulated,

### ***Formal research ethics considerations***

The study received ethics approval for the project, which was granted by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee, initially on November 2016 (Appendix 1), then the revised approval granted on May 2017 (Appendix 2).

As the nature of parenting in a foreign land, the relationship between parents and children as well as parental couples relationships face numerous challenges (De Haan, 2012). The parents are then seen as vulnerable as they confront the power of immigration regulations, cultural differences and at the same time need to practice their parenting in an appropriate way. Moreover, sharing experiences about private family issues can be highly sensitive. Key considerations when conducting the current research, consistent with authorship on research ethics, were considerate of participant autonomy, safety, confidentiality, respect, beneficence and publication of the findings (Larsen and Krumov, 2013; Castaneda, 2013). In order to address such issues, I intended to adopt an ethical strategy throughout the researching process. Firstly, appropriate methods were applied, and reliable sources were used for the literature review to foreground study design and development of appropriate research questions. Secondly, to ensure safety, autonomy, confidentiality as well as a respectful attitude towards participants; a Consent form and an Information sheet were provided to them. Also, the Information sheet gave the participants detailed information about the researcher, the aims and objectives of the study, the conduct of the interviews, the benefit that the participants will gain

from being involved in this study, the way to protect their anonymity and their rights of voluntary participation as well as the right to withdraw.

The Consent form sought the agreement of the parents to participate through their signatures. The interviews were only conducted after the informed consent of participants and their signatures were received. Face to face and telephone interviews were held in a comfortable and quiet place. Such locations are suggested as beneficial as they provide a relaxing atmosphere and safety for the parents to share stories of their parenting life and unavoidably their marital life (Castaneda, 2013; Silverman, 2006; Dey, 1993). All interview recordings and transcripts were kept safely in the Flinders University researcher's computer, which could be accessed through a secure password, only known by the researcher. During subscription, the participants' names became pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

Despite being from a Vietnamese background and holding a Student Visa for about 6 years, I did not know any of the participants; the Vietnamese parents in Australia holding Student Visas. Therefore, I did not have any conflict of interest with the participants in the collection of data.

As the participants were above 18 years of age, they had the ability to give informed consent by contacting the researcher via email or phone and expressing their willingness to be involved. They all then signed the consent form and returned this to the researcher. All of the respondents that were interviewed were Vietnamese and, as expected, they came from different religious backgrounds.

The Information sheet and Consent form were provided in the English version. However, all of the potential respondents are Vietnamese and therefore interviews were conducted in Vietnamese. I am a Vietnamese person myself and Vietnamese is my first language. Therefore, I am used to speaking both casually and professionally in a Vietnamese language-speaking environment.

I was aware that the participants may have encountered some problems during data collection interviews due to conflicting cultural values. One such issue was the possible risk of unintended disclosure of illegal activities. For example, participants from other countries may engage in physical discipline toward children in ways that they perceive is acceptable in their country of origin, but the same acts may be deemed illegal in Australia and reportable to child protection authorities. Further, participants may remember past events in their lives with the possible risk of distress to them. In such cases I was prepared to either stop or postpone the conversation. However, all of the participants who commenced interviews completed them. While many of them talked about their past traumas and fears, including for the future, no adverse outcomes for participants were observed.

Participant well-being was a primary concern in the research. To ensure well-being, the information sheet and consent processes clarified that the interview could be stopped by the participants if they were uncomfortable, feeling upset or for any other reason. As well, I advised them that if I suspected they were upset or distressed that I would stop, and also provide information as per the Information Sheet about counselling and support services that they could contact. I did not perceive that any of the participants experienced upset during their

participation; many of them appeared pleased to speak with someone about their experiences. Nevertheless, I reiterated support services at the conclusion of interviews.

## **Limitations**

While conducting this study, there are some limitations that I will acknowledge here, including the participants' status consistency and the balance in numbers between male and female participants.

Firstly, (this may be not a limitation, rather I could recruit the participants differently) the student-samples were not consistent relating to the family status. Due to the initial intention of exploring purely the parenting experiences of Vietnamese students in Australia, I set the criteria for my samples to be Vietnamese students who had children with them while studying in Australia for at least 6 months. However, during the interview, I noticed that factors including being single parent; being divorced, separated; being with partner in Australia or leaving partner behind and enduring a long-distant relationship created a wide range of data. Different parents' status spoke in different directions about the way they conducted the family's lifestyle and parenting in a new environment. It might not be a necessity to explore the experiences of all of them in one study. Looking closer and focusing more on one particular parent-status experience could have produced a deeper exploration.

Secondly, although knowing that it was not considered important in my research to have an even gendered participants, when commencing this thesis, I had the intention of recruiting a balance in the numbers of male and female participants. However, it seemed that there were

more female students who brought children with them while studying in Australia than their male counterparts. So, I ended it up with 20 female and 6 male students. This may give me a less holistic picture, gender-wise, of parent-students' life and for me to use the gender lens when analysing at my data as I planned to do at first. Fortunately, the phenomenological approach together with the Janus Head concept then were found to be most appropriate to analyse the data in in this study.

Thirdly, 26 is a small sample size so it is hard to generalise. However, 26 is sufficient to form an argument about the experiences of a given phenomenon in society – and which is critical to examine, discuss and to explore further. I also acknowledge another limitation that although I looked for patterns, there were some unique examples in term of some participants' parental status, which must also be heard. Although there is not a pattern amongst these participants, these unique findings had some relationship with the remaining data. Occasionally there was only one participant who spoke about a particular issue or concern, but as an insider researcher I know from my experience of the Vietnamese way that other people experiencing something similar are often forced by cultural norms to maintain silence.

The fourth limitation is personal bias in the interview process. With the nature of an insider researcher, this is unavoidable. During interviews with participants, I could have unknowingly asked questions, steered the conversation and interpreted the data in a particular way that was familiar to me. I also had more personal and emotional investment in the process, which might have made the writing of the thesis a more laborious process. Dealing with these personal and emotional packages would have taken up a lot of time and effort also. Luckily, I had an

incredible and timely support and advice from my supervisors, especially through the interaction of my reflections. Reflective discussion helped me to separate my emotions from my research, while simultaneously exposing the value of my subjective interpretations, and for gaining a deeper understanding into the way I led and structured my thoughts when interpreting the data.

While thematic patterns are presented in the next two chapters, it needs reiteration that these cannot be generalised to other populations of Vietnamese student parents in Australia with exact certainty. However, the findings here are rich and strong, and provide insights for theory generation to inform working with these individuals and their families in their transitions.

However, while there are limitations addressed above, the methodology used in this study provides opportunities for future research to consider the lived experience of international student parents. It can also be used to explore how past and present experiences influence imagined futures and how these interact back with current experiences of a phenomena. Therefore, further research to understand fear or feelings of the imagined future is needed.

## **Chapter summary**

This chapter has firstly introduced the research's aims and questions. It was then followed by the explanation the study's recruitment process, description of the participants and data collection method. As an open-ended questionnaire was used to guide the in-depth interviews with the parents; a list of the guiding questions was also presented.

In showing how the data were analysed, there was a subsequent part indicating the subjectivity in data collection and analysis. I have shown that my cultural, family and education backgrounds and experiences can profoundly influence the design of my research, my interpretation and even the way I interviewed participants. There was the explanation of me using triangulation to increase the credibility, trustworthiness and confirmability of my study. This was in accordance with the methods of triangulation described in qualitative research literature while valuing the insider knowledge and mixing of my subjective self. The description of how my own lived experiences played a significant role in recruitment and analysis process then followed.

The main part of this chapter has shown how the data were analysed. Specifically, there were two sets of data analysis including interpretive phenomenology and Janus Head that enabled a depth of understanding that interpretive phenomenology could not do alone. This was illustrated through Figure 2, in which I demonstrated the development of my own conceptual research framework. It has assisted with guiding a methodological framework that integrates a rationale for the methods clarified in this method chapter. I then presented how my research findings were organised and interpreted.

The last part of this chapter addresses the ethical considerations and limitations of the study. It included an important section, in which I explained the original research study and rationale for the evolving focus as an act of respect for research participants and the data. This was the result of Vietnamese student parents telling me what was important for them in their transnational journeys to Australia. Throughout my writing, I kept identifying several key reflexive



considerations that reminded me to recognise myself as a researcher with interests, insider's experiences and bias. Therefore, I needed to develop strategies to deal with these when immersed in transnational student parents related research. However, my subjectivity and my interaction with methodology also enabled greater interpretation of the intensity of lived experiences of the sample under study.

Having described the data collection and analysis processes, in the next chapter, I start to present the first set of my research findings.

## ***Chapter 5: Experiencing Australia in limbo***

*... in which I explore the fertile land of Australia, where Vietnamese students and their family and children endure a unique journey full of hope, joy, excitement as they taste Australia; an odd soup, mixed grill and a snapper, a sense of autonomy, as well as many levels of uncertainty, fear, trauma and concern of being required to return to former family dynamics in their future...*

As the first set of research findings, I describe elements in a new phase of the participants' family lives upon moving to Australia for their studies. This includes the way that they negotiate changes to family roles and their intimate relationships, and the changes experienced in the division of reproductive labour from life in Vietnam to Australia. As the most prevalent finding, this one theme is presented as a discrete set of findings in this chapter. The subsequent chapter presents three additional strong themes identified from the data.

According to the participants, bringing their family and children with them while studying in Australia is joyful, yet sometimes overwhelming and many times stressful. This transitory migration journey invoked a whole other level of awareness, as one of the participants said, *'when a wife studies, her husband can cook; and if a man studies, he can also cook.'* In this part, I consolidate and present the data around the changing experiences in parenting and family roles and intimate relationships that changed when these Vietnamese families left behind their extended families and collectivist cultural norms.

Firstly, the students' previous experiences of gender roles, particularly responsibilities for reproductive labour, will be explored through the lens of phenomenology to present the vast changes in the lived experience of family life in coming to Australia. I will then demonstrate the patterns of changes, especially from the husbands, in sharing and being involved in family tasks. Moreover, I will discuss the time spent with family, which is one of the most significant changes and plays an important role in developing changes experienced by participants in family dynamics. Lastly, some reasons for these changes offered by the participants will be presented. These include the participants' experiences of the Australian social contexts, which especially for female participants involved challenging their partners' mindsets about gender divisions in productive and reproductive work. Some of the men interviewed had also changed their thinking about socially constructed divisions informing men's and women's work in family life.

Building upon this presentation of findings, phenomenologically, the subsequent findings chapter incorporates the additional layer of findings of the analysis through the Janus Head lens. Finally, as the women and men in this study speak with the use of language to describe themselves and their partners as '*husband*' and '*wife*', this language is often adopted in presenting and discussing the findings in this and the next chapter.

### ***Some previous experiences***

All of the participants of the current study were postgraduate students and they had good English language skills to satisfy Australia's student visa and university admission requirements. Most had partners who were formally educated to university levels, and who

were employed in secure employment with moderate pay – but had given up their employment security in Vietnam to enable one parent to study in Australia. Participants advised that they and their partners had made these sacrifices in consideration of wanting their children to have a good education and a happy, balanced life.

Although many of the participants were open-minded and quite progressive in relation to a family lifestyle based on gender equality, others reported having not so pleasant past experiences when in Vietnam. Participants talked about the division of family labour and household tasks back in Vietnam in their reflections. As a representative example by of women's experiences of their male partners and how this is reinforced by social pressures in Vietnam, **Quyen** said,

*Men from there... always think that going to buy groceries is a women's job. Especially my husband, who was quite extreme and patriarchal back in Vietnam. If he went to the market, he would be very embarrassed because people would think that he was 'scared of his wife'*

The term *scared of his wife* is an insulting term in Vietnam to represent the notion of a weak man. It is one such term expressed by participants that holds gender roles in place, in Vietnamese life. It serves to hold women accountable to do all the reproductive work and household labour and, in a sense, gives men legitimacy to do little to help.

The female participants expressed intense feelings, some were even quite angry, when speaking about their experiences of living these gendering of roles in Vietnamese tradition, culture and

societal norms. The women talked about how men in Vietnam typically get together after work every day, drinking in the bar until late or enjoying their own recreational activities. Many of the women described the same patterns in life that went unquestioned because the culture and society had created and sustained male privilege. For example, **Kim** remembered how life was ‘back there’ in Vietnam and reflected,

*Back there, my husband would just come home from work and then go to play sports. I didn't really like it that way. I hardly knew how many meals he would have at home. He would say that it was for developing social networks. He worked and played sports, so he had very little time for our family.*

Participants blamed the strength of their Confucian Vietnamese society for their uncomfortable family, parenting and division of labour experiences. For some of the women, they expressed difficulty harnessing the support of their male partners, especially when his family's expectations and the parenting styles of the men's parents were steadfast. This was evident in the women's narratives around spoiling sons over daughters, which they expressed a cause of men's dependency on women and intergenerational expectations that women would meet men's every need. Similar to other women, **Dung** recalled,

*I really don't agree with the way my parents spoil my youngest brother. He is now 23, 24 years old, has graduated university, but mum and dad look after him like he's still in high school. He depends on them too much. My sister and I are more independent and don't lean on our parents, we are strong. But my brother (sighs) ... My mum is 60 and she cossets him too much and keeps worrying about him,*

*cooks for him. And he thinks that of course mum has to cook for him. Mum and dad give him lots of money, he goes out and drinks a lot and gets sick. My mum keeps crying over him, keeps taking care of him over a bowl of orange juice. That's harming him, he is very reliant. I will not apply this on my son.*

Breaking free from this gendered pattern in life in Vietnam, as expressed by **Dung**, was difficult. Participants consistently mentioned and related their experiences with the family living arrangements, in which they, their partners and children lived with their parents. This multi-generational living is quite normal in Vietnamese culture. The women expressed their beliefs that living together with their own parents, or with the husband's family, was a primary feature of the men's lack of involvement in reproductive work.

When both parents engaged in productive work, participants advised how their parents would have already picked the children from school, changed and folded their clothes and prepared dinner for the whole family by the time they got home. Many of the female participants expressed that, even though they had their in-laws cooking for them, they felt really nice and warm when their husbands helped wash the dishes after meals. However, their mothers-in-law would tell them off for not fulfilling their women's duties. **Ha** said that her husband always felt bored at home, since he had nothing to do. His parents, especially his mother, took on all the tasks and shared them only with **Ha**. The mother left no opportunity for **Ha**'s husband (her son) to be involved in housework, even if that is what he wanted. He then, rather, went out with friends every night as there was nothing to do.

**Chi** had the same issue with her mother-in-law. She expressed being tired of hearing her mother-in-law constantly complaining. This was about **Chi**'s partner having no one to cook for him when **Chi** and he moved to a different city for work. **Chi** recalled the occasions when she and her husband had dinner together with the in-laws. The moment her husband finished his last bite, his mother would say, '*How come no one is getting him a cup of tea?*' While it is normal for Vietnamese people to have tea after having meal, it is also constructed as normal for the women to make it. **Chi** said she also experienced her husband's occasional help with dishwashing, and unhappy when his mother would immediately take over the job from him while saying that men could not be in the kitchen, should not cook or wash clothes. These were women' jobs. Intergenerational living arrangements and the collectiveness of family and parenting made it difficult to change the gendered patterns in life.

Numerous participants had the luxury of having paid domestic help at home in Vietnam. This added another convenience for their husbands' absences in the home. The women negotiated and organised domestic workers to assist with care for children and complete everyday tasks in the home, which enable the women to take on paid work themselves. While this helped women, it alleviated their husbands from any responsibility for reproductive work at all. Some participants, such as **Thoa**, had two domestic workers,

*My daughter mostly slept with my mother or one of our domestic workers. Another worker would just do the housework. So, my husband could pay full attention to his full-time job.*

Two domestic workers in the home effectively meant, for **Thoa**, full relinquishment of her husband from family life so that he could prosper in his life as he chose. Many of the female participants had similar unsatisfying thoughts inequity in reproductive labour; some of the male participants interviewed shared some similar views. **Hinh**, for example, experienced single parenthood on coming to Australia with his young son. On experiencing the work volume that caring for a child meant, he reflected on life in Vietnam with greater appreciation of the burden of reproductive work on his wife. **Hinh** explained,

*Back in Vietnam, I used to work very hard and go out a lot at night with friends to the bar. My wife mainly took care of our kid. It's difficult and time-consuming to take care of him. I couldn't choose clothing and shoes as well as she did. Sometimes, he brought notifications home from school, and I wouldn't be able to read through them until the last minute, or cooking too... Actually, at home in Vietnam, I could push it all on to my wife. Here, I must do it all myself. I need to learn and change.*

In this last statement, **Hinh**, said that he ‘*need to learn and change.*’ However, it is not known whether this is a forced change only for Australia or whether he was expressing longer term change when he would eventually be back with his family. The next theme from findings considers the experiences of change after coming to Australia. Findings in consideration of the forward-looking Janus head are presented later in this thesis.



## *The changes*

In fact, living and studying in Australia created many changes, especially in relation to the tasks in sharing housework between husbands and wives. The women who participated in the study gave stories of their husbands, when in Australia, volunteering to do chores that they have never done before in Vietnam. The men who were interviewed said they felt happy sharing tasks with their partners.

When his wife was busy with her afternoon shift at work, **Duong** said that he enjoyed cooking. He even read lecture notes for the next day while preparing dinner for his family. **Duong** said that he would not hesitate to tell his extended family and friends in Vietnam that, here in Australia, he emptied the bin from the kitchen to the outside refuse receptacle every afternoon. This is what he said,

*It has absolutely changed. Before, every afternoon I went straight away from my office to the bar until nightfall, so I didn't do dishwashing, didn't cook, nothing, I even didn't need to take the children to school too, we hired someone in our areas to do it, easy (laugh). Now I can do everything, and it is no problem with me at all. It would be at least 50/50 of our responsibilities in taking care of the children, cleaning, dishwashing, shopping for groceries... Equal roles shared is definitely better as it has a positive effect on my two daughters. I believe that it would significantly affect their point of view, perspective, and conception about family roles and function. They saw a different family picture.*

**Duong** experienced a change in family life where he and his children were actively doing domestic chores, which was different to former life where his wife and domestic help did it all. The small laugh as he spoke, when reflecting back on family life in Vietnam, could indicate many things, i.e., recognition and also embarrassment of the gender inequity, satisfaction and showing status with his former privileged life or, even, disappointment with the break in building his career and socialise with friends without burden. Without access to domestic help in Australia, there was little choice other than to share the reproductive burden with his wife. Whether or not **Duong** truly enjoyed sharing the domestic work cannot be known; nevertheless, he experienced the benefits of positive impact on his children and certainly experienced a very different family model of sharing work when compared to family life in Vietnam.

Another participant also reflected on the gender division in reproductive labour and the changes she observed in her family. **Ha** was in her second semester of study in Australia at the time she was interviewed. She expressed her frustration with her son's idleness in Vietnam, linking his behaviours to learned behaviour from his father who also did no domestic work in the home – which was the normative Vietnamese family way. **Ha** expressed her frustration with her son doing 'nothing' in Vietnam and was surprised that in such a short time of living in Australia that her son took the trash out, gave a hand in vacuuming or hanging clothes,

*It is very new, very new. I used to be really worried about him not doing anything around our house in Vietnam, just like his dad. I told them many times, but it was useless. And here, when my husband did housework, cleaned the house, looked after the garden, my son could see that all these chores were done by both mum and dad, equally divided. He had an image to observe and he just did it. To be honest,*

*I came here to study, and it was because we wanted and hoped for changes for our children. I'm starting to see it now. I'm very happy, so is my husband.*

The change experienced by **Ha** only came through removing her husband and son from the patriarchal influences of Vietnam in which it is discursively constructed that only women should undertake the reproductive work. Without the former stigma and social pressures of being cast a 'weak men', **Ha** experienced her husband as an ally in change as opposed to his resistance.

Sharing housework was experienced by research participants to have impact on their family relationships, which appeared due to the shared work freeing up time to spend together as intimate couples and as a family. Many of them repeatedly stated phrases, such as, '*Coming here, we love each other more*' (**Oanh** stated), and **Nhan** recalled '*We have a lot of time together, doing chores, going out, playing with kids. We couldn't have asked for more.*' In the way they spoke, participants seemed to be overjoyed with this change – especially the female participants. Every one of them acknowledged their husbands' contribution to relationship change though his support in the home. Consistent with the experiences of others interviewed, **Quynh** affirmed,

*I have my husband here supporting me, yes, I have. There was so much studying to do, especially when there were exams or assignments due, I just completely left the task of taking care of our daughter to my husband. If he wasn't here, I wouldn't be able to study and take care of my kid at the same time.*

**Quynh** and **Dao** similarly associated improvements to their family lives with the loss of extended family resulting from moving to Australia to study. The lived experience was expressed in terms of having a smaller family unit that needed to function together, support and protect each other. **Dao** shared,

*My daughter was involved in everything in terms of setting up for a new life for us here. I am grateful for my husband always encouraging her that coming here in a new land, there is only three of us, no more extended family, [and] we really need to support, protect and love each other.*

The few male participants in this study, when observing Australian life, observed fault in themselves for their lack of caring for family. Even when it was the male parent who was the international student, they wanted to engage more in looking after children and increasing their own contribution to family function. Studying in Australia has created the opportunity for them to achieve this goal without the pressures of Vietnamese extended family shaming them for doing so. As in **Duong's** statement earlier where he experienced his daughters' exposure to sharing work in the home, **Trung** likewise stated this as a benefit. **Trung**, however, did not express the potential to challenge Vietnamese social expectations of his extended family or to sustain these changes beyond his studies,

*In Australia, we don't have the house maid like we used to in Vietnam. I need to do and share the housework with my wife. It can be tiring but it is better. Especially when my son sees my wife and I doing domestic tasks together, he will copy and do it with us naturally. When I did not do these works in Vietnam and requested*

*him to do it, it was not easy at all. Here, I am studying and working, but I still have time for my family whereas in Vietnam, I didn't. I was so different when we were there. My wife and I had just two nights at home together every week. Here, I don't have 'death time' which is the time for unnecessary relationships outside and I am home every night with my family. I don't know if we could still have it when we go back to Vietnam.*

In Vietnam we use the expression *thời gian chết*, which participants articulated in English as death time. What is meant here is free, unproductive time to go out with his friends, drinking and enjoying socialisation without burden – simply time to relax – which is more often the privilege of men, not women. While there is change experienced by coming to Australia, in which **Trung** agreed on some benefits for his wife and child, there were underlying complexities in his statement above. There is ambivalence over his loss of autonomy, evident in his words to express changes as ‘*not easy*’, changes in himself as ‘*I was so different*’ and ‘*home every night*’, and expressed doubts on whether changes would be possible to sustain ‘*when we go back.*’

When **Duong** talked about his family changes since being in Australia, he made relationships with the quantity of community activities and networks he had to enjoy in Vietnam. Without these, his couple relationship became the heart of his attention and active life,

*Vietnamese culture is all about community with strong bonds and support of networks, friends, neighbours and extended family. These people get involved in many aspects of our life. But in Australia, it is all about the nuclear family. So, I need to make myself understand it*

*very clearly that when we go to Australia, to a new culture, if the couple relationship is not good, it would be hell. That is what I have always said to my wife. It is obvious that living here means we need to shape a totally different form of our everyday life. For me now, family is our centre; our everything. Family is the most important. And I am happy that we have more time for each other than in Vietnam.*

In fact, all participants expressed happiness in particular aspects of change experienced as international student parents. Uniformly, they identified the changes in the division of domestic labour, family roles and their relationships. While some of these changes can be attributed to the smaller family unit and no longer having domestic help, there were other aspects identified in the findings that may have also contributed change.

### **Additional aspects of change**

The women who participated in interviews identified a range of underlying feelings in which they hoped for change and fought for change on coming to Australia. They wanted a new relationship, resourceful family dynamics, and freedoms from their own domestically burdened lives. The women wanted their partners to see the pressures of their studies and be compelled to help, as well as to experience the Western society's influence in breaking down the patriarchal privilege that these men had been living.

### ***Women's fight***

Findings indicated that studying and living abroad helped the women in this study to change, and sometimes confirm, their perspectives about gender and equity. As educated women in a

global world, they knew of differences in gender division in the home across different countries and cultures. Once they had their husbands with them in Australia, many talked about their efforts to change their husbands' mindsets and attitude towards gender equity in the home.

Participants expressed that having family with children while studying abroad was greatly challenging. Without the support from extended family and without access to paid domestic help, as they had in Vietnam, students and their partners had to do everything themselves. The participants reflected on the need to multitask in order to become independent from extended family that reinforced the burden of reproductive labour on the women. Many embraced the challenges in their lives, as international student parents, and grateful for the shifts in societal discourses on their husbands, relationships and families **Kim** acknowledged appreciation for the transitory difficulties in her lived experiences when saying,

*To be honest, I like being independent like this. It's more difficult but I want it to be very difficult so that my husband can help me. I don't want him to depend on his parents or siblings to get the work done... Back in Vietnam, his mum took care of our children when they were younger. So, my husband didn't even know what feeding or taking care of his kids was like. Now, there's no family here to help us. I also have studying to do and the children to take care of. Therefore, he must do those chores and he has to be more mindful with his children. He starts to teach them more. If my husband doesn't do the tasks (raising and teaching the kids) the way I want, then I would say it.*

The women interviewed often articulated that men needed to see women's intense study workloads and immense difficulties in '*doing it all*', as a way of pressuring him to help. The domestic burden, as in **Kim**'s statement above, is not completely alleviated as she has to teach and manage her husband in his parenting. Hence, there are changes in the performance of reproductive labour but responsibilities to ensure that jobs were being done remained with the women.

Changes, however, were not so forthcoming for all of the women interviewed. Some did not observe any changes in the division of domestic labour in Australia. Instead, these women took up the domestic work in Australia that was once completed by paid domestic workers or extended family. They did this alongside the additional burdens of study, in a new land and educational system, and received little sympathy from their husbands. **Xuan** expressed her struggle by saying,

*Coming to Australia and doing the Women study topic has made me realise many things that before I did not pay attention to. Here, many times I thought, why I am so busy, why doesn't my husband help me, and I felt really stressed. I do also wish that my husband knows how to cook, or to do this or that, then he could replace me every time I have to submit my assignments. But he can't replace me, especially with cooking. If I don't cook, then everyone would eat boiled eggs.*

**Xuan** was not even asking for gender equity in reproductive life, but just a bit more help from her husband when the pressures of study were at their highest. The additional burdens of being



an international student parent in Australia went unrecognised and her husband did only what he could not avoid.

On the most part, women interviewed discussed the sharing domestic tasks as essential to strengthening the relationship. Thu, for example, talked about her experiences when doing housework together. She said that this gave her and her partner more opportunity to talk with each other and make family decisions together. It was time in which she had her husband's undivided attention to hear about her study and life pressures in general, which Thu expressed as building greater appreciation of each other and strengthening emotional connections between them.

**Kim** likewise expressed the importance of sharing tasks and the association with growth in the intimate relationship, as she had learned from her formal studies, but was not as successful in achieving this outcome,

*I study here and gain knowledge (laughs). That makes women different... To be honest, I do want a family to be able to share the tasks and have a balance. It's a way of bonding also, not just the work. If we share tasks, then we understand each other better.*

Both **Kim** and **Thu** reflected on their thoughts of equality and their actions. As with many other female participants, they decided to speak up and discuss the issues with their husbands. There was one woman, however, who asked for help and her husband refused. **Lien** reflected back on life in Vietnam when her demands for help resulted in his refusals and her silence. In relating

this to her actions in Australia, she speaks up and fights for his help irrespective if there are conflictual consequences. She said,

*My husband doesn't take care of our kid... He doesn't play with the kid or tuck him in bed. He always leaves the kid to me. He can't help me with anything. It's terrible, because my husband just leaves it all to me. He's really bad, because he's on the computer until my kid gets home. My son needs to talk and play with his dad. When I tell him that, my husband would get angry at me. I ask him to do something and he says that he won't do it. That's something that creates lots of conflict. Plus, there's a lot of stress from studying and doing assignments. Things that are new to me. I get very upset and my husband wouldn't understand. He keeps saying that there's nothing to studying. He thinks that I'm very lazy. Sometimes, I even call him useless... Back in Vietnam, I could sympathise with him, now I sympathise less. Before, I accepted it [his lack of helping], I went to work, took care of my kids and took care of housework. But now, I don't (stay silent). I speak up. And it is important (laughs).*

**Quyen** experienced the same reaction from her husband, being one of minimising her studies and his refusals to contribute to the reproductive burdens. She kept fighting for support and she experienced some achievements. Small changes did not occur until it was confirmed by others that the studies in Australia were difficult, as **Quyen** said,

*I came back late from university and there was no food on the table. Everyone waited for me to get home to get things done. During assignment periods, I told my husband and children to learn how to look after themselves in the evening because I had to stay at the*

*library to get my assignments done. Sometimes he would even call me to get me to come home to cook and do housework. I would sometimes get angry and we would fight. A few times like that and anyone would have to rethink their actions. He also saw how stressful and hard studying can be for me. When we first came, he didn't think that it would be so much. When he went to work, he would meet other students doing their part-time jobs and they would also complain about their hard studies. So, he eventually understood how difficult studying can be.*

Participants confessed that being in Australia had strengthened their ideals and determination to claim a gender role balance. Many of them hummed the courage and confidence within themselves when they spoke out. **Ha** discussed housework with her husband, as well as her son, and felt proud of herself for her determination to speak out and address the concerns that she had previously packaged away as mere thoughts,

*Things that my husband didn't do was hanging the washing out etc., then I would tell my husband to, together with our son, clean the house and take care of the garden. I believed that telling them to share housework with me would be better, would be the first step, rather than not having that determination in my thinking at all.*

Frequently the participants advised of the further steps they took by sharing with peers their family issues and gender roles imbalance. Listening to others' common voice made them feel more confident, validated and understood. Having the opportunity to gather together after university time, they started sharing and discussing strategies to fight for change. **Thu**

experienced empowerment with the girls' talk. As an example of the women's collective stance, she said,

*At the university, the girls would sit together and talk about how husbands would still follow the Vietnamese culture, which was thinking that housework is the wife's duty. We had discussions. We needed to talk to the husbands clearly. We all said that once they came here, they couldn't maintain that lifestyle. It's just as simple as plugging in the rice cooker. A husband can't just pick up the kids and go home and wait for the wife to get home to do the housework... Afterward, I felt that I had a stronger voice (laughs).*

**Thu**'s words above present an image in which Vietnamese men had much to lose on coming to Australia, in particular their privileges to do nothing to help – simply for being male. Women, on the other hand, had foisted upon them the additional burdens of being international student parents. There would be no alleviation of their former Vietnamese gendered life if they did not fight for change.

There is only one case where a female participant articulated her acceptance of doing all the domestic tasks while keeping up with her study. She said that in her family, they respect each other's feelings. However, she did not want her husband to feel mocked or criticised. **Dao** explained,

*I needed to do everything; studying, working and doing housework. Getting home from his work, my husband did not do anything, even cleaning the toilet. He has never ever done such work even once in his life... There are many things I needed to maintain like we were in*

*Vietnam, they are imbedded in our mind traditionally, I couldn't do differently.*

**Dao** expressed elsewhere in her interview some sadness and disappointment in herself. This was directed at her own willingness to maintain the domestic relationship in the face of gender role imbalance, but she did so to maintain harmony in fear that family conflict may affect her ability to keep up with studies.

Overall, the women participants shared feelings of upset for their burdened lives and they valued the experiences of a sisterhood in which to fight the patriarchy brought with them from Vietnam. Globalisation gave them the knowledge of gender equity before coming to Australia, while their experiences in Australia gave them the context to fight for and drive change. In influencing men's changes in their attitudes towards gender-role balance, the women experienced some improvements to the burdens of reproductive life.

### ***Men seeing their partners' pressure from studying***

This theme, in which men were perceived as needing to see women's study burdens before they would change, was briefly mentioned earlier in this chapter. Women needed to fight for change, but many women detailed how they experienced extreme stress and breakdown before their husbands could do anything to help. For some women, it was as if participant's husbands did not believe them without scientific evidence that the burden on these women was too much.

**Thuong** recalled some experiences of her hardest and most stressful time. It took his seeing of her at breaking-point before he started to change. She said,

*When I am worried about my studies, it really stresses me out. Studying and reading in English is already so hard, and then assignments, which is a lot, and looking after my kid, and working on top of that. During that time, I was so stressed that I felt like vomiting and had a headache. I couldn't even walk; I just lay there at university.*

Similarly, **Oanh** recalled that being determined to achieve better outcomes in her study required extensive work and meetings that was time-consuming. She explained the difficulties in balancing work, study and family life in saying,

*When my son was with me and there was the time when I had assignments, I could just do them to pass, but I really enjoyed my studying and I wanted to get good marks, I had to research lots and seek advice from the lecturers. I've never done such courses and studying methods before, so it was hard. I realised that I wasn't investing a lot of time into my studies. And I really wanted to study more. But at night, I put my son in bed at 9.00 pm, he lay there and didn't sleep until 10:30. I started studying at 11.00. When I had assignments, I didn't go to bed until 3.00 am. Taking care of my son and studying... No, I can't just do everything badly. I didn't have a lot of time. I was so tired and exhausted.*

When **Oanh** was stressed, she detailed how her study and her parenting quality declined. Unlike other participants, **Oanh** sent her child back home to Vietnam to alleviate her burden. However, **Oanh's** lived experience on coming to Australia was very different to **Thuong's**. **Oanh's** husband could not help with many things, compared to **Thuong's** husband who would not until he saw her at breaking-point.

**Oanh**'s husband originally encouraged her not to bring their child to Australia, as the balancing study and parenting would be difficult. However, he agreed with her wishes and they brought their son with them. When in Australia, **Oanh**'s husband did not speak English and **Oanh** had to manage child, family and the household matters. This included renting house, opening bank accounts, taking car to the services, visiting doctor when their child was sick, communicating with childcare services and many other tasks, on top of study and a part-time job. **Oanh**'s husband played, fed and cared for their child as much as he could, but the pressure was still too much for **Oanh**. She and her husband agreed to return their child to Vietnam to the care of extended family.

**Oanh** and **Thuong**, consistent with other female participants, experienced the changes when becoming international students in Australia as extremely stressful and challenging. With the added pressure of additional parenting required of them, when without extended family, they needed the additional supports of their partners. Generally, participants expressed their appreciation when their partners eventually realised the burden and gave support at such critical times. On seeing **Xuan** struggle with balancing studying and doing domestic tasks, her husband started to proactively support her. He would keep the children quiet and prepare, without being asked, '*snacks for dinner.*' For **Xuan**, her husband came to know her pressure points; her experience in their relationship change being on of operating as a partnership. For example,

*Assignment time can get very intense, and sometimes I can even get panicked. My husband doesn't know my field to help me, but he knows when to behave like that and let the kids know that it is best to not approach me in those situations. Then they can eat snacks or eat*

*whatever my husband cooks. He would prepare something and call me out to eat. I do think that I'm lucky.*

Other participants also experienced that, when they were busy with their study, their husbands voluntarily initiated more housework and parenting support than normal. **Nhan** told of her experiences in saying,

*My husband already cooked and washed clothes, but when I was busy reading or writing, he did more and didn't mind doing anything, doing chores, taking care the kid, teaching him etc.*

**Oanh** also appreciated her husband's support during her first semester at university when their child was still in Australia with them. He was often also tired from the work and pressures life changes. She explained,

*Even though he was tired after a long day with all the farm work, if he saw me studying, he would shower the kid, made the milk and played with the kid. It was great that he did all that.*

Similar to **Oanh's** experience, many participants enjoyed their husbands' help in taking care of the children during their studying time. **Quynh** acknowledged,

*Sometimes there's so much studying to do, especially when there are assignments or exams, I feel ready to burst. I have to study and take care of my kid, so I just push the taking care part on to my husband completely. That way, I can really focus on my studies. If my husband*



*wasn't here, I wouldn't be able to study and look after my kid at the same time.*

**Ngoc** also saw her being lucky to have her husband's support, especially due to her study pressure, her husband had a great transformation which she always wanted to experience in their domestic role share. She said,

*I think that the lucky thing for me is that my husband is here with me. He's been able to support me a lot. In Vietnam, he didn't do housework much. But when he did find that studying here is more difficult and there is a lot of pressure on me, he did all the housework, so I could focus on my studies. He now knows to share and to support me in caring for and teaching the kids.*

While sharing happy feelings with their husbands' changes, female participants always expressed their appreciation for the opportunity of studying in Australia which produced positive elements for these changes. In saying they were 'lucky', **Xuan** and **Ngoc** inferred their knowing of other Vietnamese students who may not have experienced the same sorts of partner support as them. As presented in the findings so far, some of the female participants experienced increased support, some men were proactive in helping and others only when the women were showing extreme signs of stress, and some male participants expressed self-pride with their ability to undertake the reproductive work. While the changes in support and spending time together as a couple were vast, it was often the influence of the Australian social environment that propelled these changes as opposed to the women's fight for support or men's observations of the need to increase their support.

### *The influence of the Australian environment*

Participants advised that the Australian social environment played an important role in the positive changes they experienced in family life. This was despite the Vietnamese social pressures against the participants in their decisions to become international students. One such pressure that impacts their lived experiences was clearly evident among the narratives of female participants in this study, particularly when study would result in a higher educational qualification than their husbands.

Women with higher qualifications are often judged poorly in Vietnam. Firstly, for women who gain higher educational qualifications than their husband, they are often deemed to have insulted him and his extended family. Secondly, women who travel abroad to study and leave their partners behind may be deemed neglectful of their husbands, of their duties to him as a wife, and blameworthy by extended family or friends for pursuing their own interests. These feelings of guilt and shame linger in the experiences when studying abroad and may be reinforced in the communications with family and friends back home in Vietnam. Some examples of the experiences of cultural pressures were provided by participants, which offer a background to understanding changes experienced in their way of thinking about these discourses as a result of the Australian environment, values and social context.

For example, **An** brought her son to Australia during her PhD journey, while her husband remained in Vietnam to work. She recalled the whispers of colleagues and rumours about her suggesting that by doing her PhD, she was more insulting than supportive. **An's** experience was

not of direct communications; instead, they passed through many people like gossip. In reflection of these comments, she stated,

*“What kind of family is that, husband and wife are not together, they must have an affair” ... I found this very insulting. In fact, in my working context, a woman ‘climbing to do’ PhD is a bit unusual. So, colleagues thought that if I dared to give up the relationship with my husband to go overseas to study, it meant that I was determined to get a better and higher position in the workplace, attempted to take their position or even planned and prepared for a top position there. They also gossiped about my parenting. If I was in Vietnam, no one would talk about such things.*

Many participants discussed how such rumours and gossip reinforce discourses that facilitate opportunities for men to work and get higher positions than women. After this statement above, **An** elaborated by explaining, *‘[the] standard Vietnamese mother, a wife who always listened to her husband’* was normalised in Vietnamese society. She inferred that women rather fulfil domestic obligations over work and study to conform to these pressures, because it is easier. Living in Australia, even for a short period of time when studying, was presented by many participants as an option that could make the difference. Removing their male partners from the Vietnamese social expectations meant that the women in this study were only fighting for their husbands to change and not the whole society and culture. **Ha** explained the impact of the lifestyle in Australia on her husband’s change in saying,

*In Vietnam, there’s no educating their awareness and creating the opportunity for them to do housework. Even some men are educated*

*to be aware, but the environment [in Vietnam] has created them to be less aware. For example, we lived with my husband's parents, and my parents-in-law did everything. Even if my husband wanted to do those things, he wouldn't have the opportunity to do them. In many Vietnamese families, it's the mother or the wife that does everything. .... The reality of many Vietnamese men not doing housework can also be attributed to the environment. Whereas here [in Australia], there isn't anything like that because in the evening during weekdays, nobody meets up. It's only the weekend that some close families catch up. They can see that any men here would do the housework, it's their responsibility and duty. My husband too. He saw it and started getting involved in doing chores, cleaning and looking after our son.*

Participants constantly mentioned how the positive influence from the Australian society on Vietnamese men provided the greatest changes to their experiences in family life, as a parent, partner and student. **Kim** expressed feeling grateful for living in Australia because changes were experienced without the extended family conflict. She attributed the success of change when men gained understanding, learned from observing the environment around them and men decide to make changes themselves. **Kim** recognised that,

*The society here [in Australia] respects women more than in our Vietnamese society. Their thinking is different. The men respect the women more and Vietnamese men here look around them. Like my husband, he observes how the other couples take care of each other and that can have an influence.*

The few men interviewed also spoke about the influence of Western culture and values on their perceptions. They expressed that men should share tasks with their wives and do chores around

the house. **Minh** reflected how he believed that men cooking, washing dishes and doing other chores is normal in Australia and he explained,

*The reason why I say that is because I'm influenced by the Australian culture here.*

Since participants understood how social environments could influence men's attitudes toward respect for women and sharing of the burden of family life, many were simultaneously worried about potential reverse-changes should they need to go back to Vietnam. Here I start to introduce how the past, present and the forward looking of participants interact in their reflections of lived experience, such as when **Kim** said,

*I don't have much hope. Going back to Vietnam, if he helped me in the kitchen, his family and friends might look and judge. He might not want to do those things anymore. Although, I think that if they've done it once then they might be able to do some of it again. It won't be completely lost. He might understand me more when we were here. But, going back to that culture will make it difficult because it also depends on the society*

In considering the influence of the environments, other participants expressed their uncertainty of looking forward into the future. For example, **Quyen** said that she enjoyed the change that her husband made, but she felt constantly uncertain at the same time. In her words, she said,

*I really want to maintain our lifestyle here, but I'm also worried that everything will just go back to the old ways. I can only hope, but I can't be sure.*

The six male participants all recognised their own changes and, despite being the student in the family, they supported their wives more than in Vietnam. They, too, expressed concern on whether the changes they had made in Australia could be sustained when the time to return to Vietnam came. **Thi**, for example, sung praises of himself in talking about spending more time looking after his daughter, reading books to her and watching movies together, attributing these changes to the Western lens and culture. **Thi** was experiencing a different family lifestyle and he felt proud of himself. Consistent with both women and men interviewed, he voiced the following worries.

*The environment can influence a lot. Me going back to Vietnam will definitely not be like here. That's what I think. The life in Vietnam is much busier than here. There are many connections that I have to maintain. So, when I talked about those 3-4 parts that I spend on my daughter, it's because I don't have those connections anymore. But when I get back, aside from doing my own things, I might have to pull 1-2 parts from those 3-4 parts to spend with my connections. So, I'll only have 1-2 parts of my time to spend with her.*

There was a key difference between the women and the men interviewed, which is one of the original contributions that this thesis makes. This is in respect to the influences of the social environment on the change that they experienced, and visions related to sustainable change into each of their futures. Women were found to have enjoyed changes in their men when in Australia and they hoped that men's changes could be sustained in going back to Vietnam, but they doubted it and feared the reverse-change. Men, on the other hand, understood the social influence on their changes in Australia and bared truths that they would not sustain these

changes on returning to Vietnam, inferring that they would slip back into dominant gendered practices. When interviewing the women, I could observe that they expressed certain levels of gender equality when they spoke, but this was nearly always followed by a flash of worry and concern in their eyes and body language. This was for reason of being required to return and potentially lose the benefits of change that they had reaped while living in Australia. For the men, however, a sense of relief on going back to Vietnam and returning the burdens of reproductive work to women was apparent.

Overall, the more that participants enjoyed changes in their family dynamic and their new lifestyles in Australia, the larger uncertainties they held in looking forward at their imagined futures of returning to Vietnam on completion of their studies. For the women, especially, this provoked uncertainties about their achievements in navigating the patriarchy, challenging their men's mindsets and changing the behaviours of their husband's parenting, relationships and family life. Especially the women, also worried about their children's return to Vietnam – that their sons would be spoiled by the collective family and become lazy, and the daughters could be heading to a life of inequity and exploitation.

Finally, it needs to be clarified from the utterances above that men are primarily constructed as doing chores for the women, to alleviate pressures and share out some of the household tasks that would have normally been born in Vietnam by women. This continues to locate the responsibility of reproductive labour towards women, as the women studied were accountable to oversee and ensure tasks were done and the men looked to the women for here approval of his contributions. Nonetheless, both the women and men experienced changes to their family

life, parenting and intimate relationships that were pleasing to them, in association with becoming an international student in Australia.

### **Findings from overlaying Janus Head**

As stated earlier in this thesis in chapter 2, Erichsen (2009) argued that the experience of studying abroad was transformative. He advised that the processes involving change greatly impact identity development and a sense of self in the context of the world around them. Among the participants, this transformation resulted from the reconciliation of one-self and one's identity as parents, students, and transitory migrants, which sat somewhere in-between their past and present life contexts. The findings, however, indicated that the transitory experiences of Vietnamese international students in Australia continually involved in negotiation with their imagined future family and parenting lives. The sense of inbetweenness in this experience, sense of self, their relationships, society and culture actually rested in the present, located somewhere among the past and future. One would expect that, due to experiences of studying abroad being transformative, that the sense of self is constantly evolving. However, in their state of inbetweenness participants described their feeling that indicated often being immobilised when future imagined, or hoped-for, selves in the context of family, intimacy and parenting were uncertain. This phenomenon, being the state of inbetweenness, I call limbo. In overlaying the Janus Head philosophy, this provided a deeper phenomenological analysis of the research findings which I continue to present here.

The findings showed a process in which the participants experienced sense-making about their lives by stepping back and reflecting on their experiences and feelings, while they also engaged



with contemplations about what their futures beheld. Recalling unpleasant experiences in Vietnam in their intimate relationships with their partners, seeing the changes in family life in Australia and hoping to maintain such lifestyle based on gender equality in the future were evident. In drawing on the two faces of Janus (Piller and Gerber, 2018), this offered meaning to the experiences of limbo that Vietnamese students endured while living in Australia. Many of them, when looking forward to their futures of returning home to Vietnam, entertained much uncertainty. In elucidation, some of the previous quotes are revisited in this subsection.

In applying the Janus Head lens, this highlighted that there remained a constant uncertainty for both the women and the men. Reinterpretation of the participants' narratives drew attention to women's uncertainty about how they could maintain a more equitable division of reproductive labour on returning to Vietnam, which held the women in a state of limbo when facing the reality of returning to their burdensome gendered lives. The men, on the other hand, appeared to look forward to relinquishing this newfound burden and taking back the patriarchy they once enjoyed in Vietnam. The men did not appear committed to helping in the reproductive labour when they returned home to Vietnam. One could suggest that on looking forward, women hoped for peace through hoping their men would continue to help and men hoped for peace in hoping they did not have to endure sharing household tasks. The lived experiences related to the phenomena of limbo, therefore existed in different ways for each the women and the men; women potentially dreading their journeys home; and, men looking forward contemplating both ways (e.g. keeping new ways and returning to enjoying old ways).

Three of the male research participants, **Trung**, **Thi** and **Duong**, for example reflected uncertainty and precariousness in their narratives. They were continually making comparisons between their joy and concerns of their pasts, current lives and future returns home. There was an ongoing looking back and looking forward inherent in their uncertainties. **Trung** expressed his appreciation for the opportunity to study and live in Australia and he expressed how family helped him to use his time wisely, both in study and his private life. On looking back at his former parenting, he expressed some self-blame for not having contributed more towards caring for family and looking after his son. He wanted to 'fix' this upon experiencing different divisions between the reproductive labour of fathers and mothers in Australia. He enjoyed every night with his wife and young son, and he contributed his labour to his family. The following statement repeated from earlier in this thesis to highlight **Trung's** doubt about sustaining change on looking forward.

*Here, I am studying and working, but I still have time for my family  
whereas in Vietnam, I didn't. I was so different when we were there.  
I don't know if we could still have it when we go back to Vietnam.*

**Trung** expressed enjoyment in his lived experiences in Australia. He expressed doubt in the sustainability of this phenomenon when comparing his past family life with the portrait of family he experienced in Australia. Underpinning his words were the social expectations he must face upon finishing his study and going back to Vietnam. While **Thi** entertained certainty in his words on going back to Vietnam that he would again have to change, but how much and in what ways remained unknown. As segment of his previous statement provided, offers insights, next.

*The environment can influence a lot. Me going back to Vietnam will definitely not be like me here.*

In **Duong's** case, his Janus Head facing both ways heralded two main concerns. He worried about his relationship with his wife and he was uncertain about his daughters' future life in Vietnam. Since his family had been in Australia, he noticed that the relationship between all members was at the heart of his attention. He appeared to enjoy adapting to his perception of the Australian nuclear family construct, and even expressed some pleasure with the sharing of reproductive labour. Moreover, he expressed beliefs about sharing domestic tasks in Australia as being better than in Vietnam. This being due to his observations of the positive effects on his two daughters and their views about family roles and function.

While **Duong** affirmed that family had become his centre, meant everything to him and that he was happier with family life as an international student parent in Australia, he worried about the need to carefully prepare his children for going back to Vietnam. He imagined that it would be difficult for them and also him as a parent. He entertained an abundance of uncertainties that roused fears for his children. Uncertainties multiplied and intensified as the future of returning to Vietnam grew closer. In speaking his thoughts, and on behalf of his partner, **Duong** said,

*Our concerns are always there, since we are worried about our daughter being back after 2 years. What would happen?*

'*What would happen?*' This very question was repeated in almost each and every interview with the participants, both the women and the men. In drawing again on the description of limbo by Dante (Alighieri, 1954), the limbo expressed here by **Duong** and others is the living Hell of

the indeterminate turmoil in their inability to resolve uncertainties about the future. These Janus Head actions of looking forward for peace while suffering their own inner wars meant that nothing was certain whether they prepared themselves, partners or their children for their return journeys home or not. The emotional inner wars inbetween the past and future, for participants, were endless.

The female participants had much more to express about their uncertainty. This is because there was more enjoyment to experience from the changes in family roles due to gaining autonomy from extended family on coming to Australia. Sadness often prevailed, however, on narrating their forward-looking lives of returning to Vietnam. Consistently, the women said that their future lives would most likely replicate the old life that women once knew. As it is argued by Erichsen (2009) women engaged the transformative process in which they reconciled their identities in relation to their past and present, but they also tried to make sense of the precariousness of their identities when talking about their studies in Australia coming to an end. In repeating the statement from **Quyen**, as an example, she offered dialogue that hosted a constant state of limbo amidst the inbetweenness of hope and worry the two cultures, practices, relationships and parenting. She said,

*I really want to maintain our lifestyle here, but I'm also worried that everything will just go back to the old ways. I can only hope, but I can't be sure.*

As said already, the feelings of uncertainty for the future heightened as the research participants neared the end of their studies. Ending their studies would mark the official end to their

transitory migration experiences in Australia, unless they attempted to stay. For the women, their experiences and feelings when forward-looking multiplied and intensified. While **Quyen** was not sure about her future family life in Vietnam, **Kim** expressed negativity and fear when she said,

*I don't have much hope. Here, my husband can understand me more. But, going back to Vietnam will make it difficult because it also depends on the family, friends and networks around him. I really don't have hope. Well, not much.*

While **Kim** was searching for future peace, her back-facing Janus Head focused on the discursive pressure and societal norms to inform the forward-facing head that presented a knowing of her future. She was stuck in the middle and experiencing her limbo amidst the inbetweenness of knowing what she wanted for the future and knowing what she would get.

During interviews, every participant was comparing their pasts and their imagined futures without being prompted to do so. While enjoying their present lives as international student parents, their fears related to the inability to hold onto and sustain their desired changes. Current states of being exemplified limbo as a place of uncertainty where the ambiguity of contemporary experience was both in the past and the future, but not in either one or the other. I presented findings that suggest the volume of uncertainty that these student parents experienced brought forth a constant and enduring feeling of inbetweenness, such as with the inbetweenness described in existing authorship on student migration (Roman, 2018; Judge, 2017). This inbetweenness is located amidst the multiple dualities of extremes of time, place, culture relationships and parenting. This living Hell experience of living in limbo, particularly

for the women interviewed, was epitomised as an unwinnable tournament of the emotions, cultures and family transitions.

## **Chapter summary**

In this chapter, which presented the first set of research findings, I have presented the dominant themes in participants' experiences of family life in Australia. This includes some comparison with family constructions, gender and performativity in Vietnam and how they felt about each of these experiences. The most common recognition made by participants, both males and females, was that '*men could cook*', and men could do housework and look after children. This recognition could not be made without participants recalling previous experiences of the imbalanced gender roles in their family lifestyles back in Vietnam. According to the participants, however, being able to do tasks to alleviate women's reproductive burdens could not necessarily be sustained when the time comes to return to Vietnam.

Despite many participants with decent jobs, good education and an open-minded towards gender equity in the family, most of the female participants did not have pleasant experiences of family life in Vietnam. In Australia, they appeared to be satisfied with some changes in the roles and tasks being shared in their household. Participants, especially women, recalled how their husbands were embarrassed in Vietnam about going to buy groceries or cooking. They talked about that this discourse arose as a result of Vietnamese traditional, cultural and societal norms about gendered living; reinforced across generations due to collectivist family living in Vietnam. Women and men in this study agreed that when Vietnamese men got together after work every day, drinking in the bar until late or enjoying their own recreational activities. These

practices are not necessarily liked among women in Vietnam, but in having no power to stop it many accept it to save family face and protect their marriages.

Female participants expressed that this reality in life was due to the discursive expectations of the men's parents, more so than the women's parents. They blamed the Vietnamese parenting style for spoiling sons over daughters. When living with their in-laws, they experienced this ongoing privilege of men as the cause for the dependent and irresponsible men they were married to. In-laws, they experienced, as facilitating men's lack of involvement in reproductive work. Usually, female students said that it was their mother-in-law that left little opportunity for husbands to be involved in housework, children's and family life, even if their sons wanted to. Added to husbands' convenience was the luxury of having paid domestic help, who would look after all the hard work and everyday tasks around their houses in Vietnam. This very lifestyle changed dramatically once they arrived in Australia as international student parents with partners. The vast changes experienced appeared in all the participants' narratives.

Having no support from extended families, or domestic help to do their chores in Australia, meant that non-study partners needed to help. Some men volunteered to do chores that they have never done before, while other men resisted and only helped when it could no longer be avoided, and one returned their child to the care of relatives in Vietnam due to life without extended family being too difficult. When reproductive burdens were shared, both females and male participants expressed being pleased with the impact this had on family, study and life. They expressed happiness in the positive impact of sharing reproductive work on their children. As a result, many participants spoke sharing the burdens meant freeing up family time together.

They also related this to relationship bonding. As one participant said, '*coming here, we love each other more*'. While female participants experienced positive change in their husbands, the male students interviewed made links between studying in Australia and the opportunity this offered for them to be more engaged in their caring for family.

The reasons for these changes in participants' family lives were then examined. According to the participants' disclosures, reasons included women's fight for support, men's seeing their partners' pressure of study and Western society's influence, and the influences of Australian society.

Female students felt empowered and good about themselves when they spoke up. Many suggested that studying and living abroad helped them feel confident to ask, or demand, their male partners' help. Female participants reflected on their thoughts of equality and their actions. Many recalled their decisions to discuss family and household issues with their husbands. Many of the narratives focused on finding the courage and confidence after speaking with peers about family issues and gender role imbalances. It appeared that by listening to others' common voice that it helped their confidence to act.

Most participants expressed their feelings of appreciation for the opportunity to study in Australia. This is because, they suggested, it provided an environment that supported positive changes – especially when they could not influence changes alone.

The participants constantly compared their lives previously in Vietnam and the changes in the new environment with concern about their futures of going back. That constant teeter-tottering



of the Janus Head in their actions meant that they could imagine, based on the lives as they knew it, the fate of their intimate relationships, and their parenting, when and if they return to Vietnam. This constant state of ‘Janus-faced moments of migration reflection and potentiality, unsettling past and future’ (Bedford and Rai, 2010: 12) invoked fears for woman when visioning going back to the past they no longer wanted. For the men, it appeared that they looked forward to their futures with fewer reservations than the woman, as men would regain some freedoms from domestic burdens that were questionable for the women.

Exposure to Australian societal ways was experienced by participants to have the most positive influence over Vietnamese men and family relationships. In coming to Australia, and being exposed to Western lifestyles, the next findings chapter presents themes related to the interaction between the Australian education system, changes to the international students’ parenting and hopes for their children – the next generation.

## ***Chapter 6: Hosting hopes for their children***

*... In which I describe the fuzziness in the multiple dualities of life where imagining the taste of something new, in a new place, can be pleasing and also unpredictable. Ruminating these cultural tastes is an experience that keeps repeating on you ... while also imagining a future of sucking sweets, but instead chewing the cud in two diverse worlds, simultaneously being torn between divergent values, educative systems and parenting, and dreams for our children ...*

The participants in this study engaged incessantly comparing of all aspects of family life in Vietnam and Australia, while trying to reconcile their thoughts in the pre-understandings that mobilised their transitory journeys in the first place. The former chapter unearthed the one, most meaningful theme. This was the redistribution of reproductive labour, which was met with immense delight by the women and mostly agreement by the men. The yearning for new experiences, independence from the collective family systems in Vietnam and opportunities for their children that initially drove their transitory migration journeys as international students, however, were often met with ambivalence and uncertainty for the future. Likewise, this chapter presents the remaining three strong themes identified from the data that continue to intertwine with time, place, culture, relationships and parenting.

This chapter presents the participants' experiences of the Vietnamese education system, then changes to their parenting and formation of hopes for their children's futures. Their experiences

of inbetweenness are explored. Inbetweenness was found to represent existences amidst the extraordinary space, as Alexander et al. (2010) wrote, of multiple binaries. In this space, observations of the participants could be made of their ambivalence and inbetweenness. This was fundamental to understanding that the uncertainty of reality in their worlds, and the lack of clarity of experiences in that they did not fit neatly into binaries. Key is the understanding that certainty in knowing about their existence, when experiencing inbetweenness was not possible. The experience is best, again, described as limbo.

To begin, the participants' engagement in their children's education and school community is presented. The exposure to different parenting styles appeared to have challenged existing mindsets, stimulated adoption of change as parents, and their thinking about the way they interacted with children. Participants sifted through their mixing of past and present as we spoke and, amidst the multiplicity of experiences discussed, I could see the ambivalence that was constantly challenging their experiences, perceptions, attitudes as parents and family members, and the range of desires for their own and their children's futures.

### ***'Australian education system is better'***

Parents expressed feeling content with their perceptions of their children receiving a better education in Australia in comparison to what was available to them in Vietnam. Their main reasons offered related to the stress and pressures upon children in Vietnam to achieve academic superiority. They pointed out that in the Vietnamese education system, there is much pressure upon children to achieve the best of marks in every exam, perfect results by the end of the school year, and a senior school certificate with the highest level of study achieved. Under this

system where the educational documents are revered to ensure life chances, this persuades a black economy where corruption, bribery by parents and school administrators as accomplices was perceived by participants as rife. Educational corruption is consistently noted in research on educational systems across many Asian countries (excluding the middle-east) (Quah, 2016; McCornac, 2012; Ho, 2017). In Vietnam, authors describe how teachers ask for payment from parents prior to exams (Nguyen, 2018b; McCornac, 2012) or teachers may teach poorly to encourage parents to pay them for private catch-up tutoring (Dang, 2014; Dang, 2011; Dawson, 2009). Authors note the growth in shadow tutoring in Vietnam, sitting behind the façade of free school education in public schools, with the payment expectation or supplementary tutoring meaning that achieving good grades is based on financial and class status and only available to certain population in Vietnamese society (Bray and Kwo, 2013; Dawson, 2009). The participants in the current study confirmed many of these corrupt educational practices in their experiences.

In comparing their pasts with current experiences of their children's education in Australia, participants agreed with the sense of relief that bribery was not needed to ensure the teaching of their children or the achievement of higher grades. In fact, many participants described loosening the pressure on their children to achieve at the highest of levels when they began to understand from their Australian counterparts the importance of having a childhood. For example, **Thu** talked about the Vietnamese practice of *điểm giả* (fake marks and children getting a good exam results on the basis of parents giving teachers under-the-table money or gifts). She explained that in Vietnam, there seemed to be no shame in paying for a child's fake

marks and exam results. Once exposed to the Australian society and educational system, she called it, '*a stupid thing to do*'.

In resolving the uncertainty about the binary between pushing for grades versus loosening the pressure on children, **Quy**en told of her conscious shift in thinking about her children's school existence in Australia. She said,

*At the moment, my kids' high achievements and grades are not important to me anymore. I give myself a target, which is not to pressure my kids to achieve this or that. I will still try my best to make sure they are exposed to knowledge one way or another. It's not important whether they receive any titles or certificates. What's important is how much knowledge and skills they learn. I just want my girls to be happy and comfortable. That is what I have learnt since I have been here.*

This shift in parenting attitude experienced by **Quy**en in the exemplar above provided a sense of satisfaction on bringing their children to Australia, especially when observing the happy children and interactional effect on family harmony and contentment in life.

On looking back, participants did not like the way Vietnamese children had too much pressure and over-supervision from teachers and parents. **Duong** brought his two daughters and wife with him while doing his postgraduate studies in Australia. He stated that, at first, he experienced worry about the change in educational approaches. He spent a lot of time to carefully prepare himself and his wife in readiness their girls schooling in Australia. Then, he realised,

*In fact, coming here was much better for my children. They found that there was less pressure it was less stressful for them when studying here than in Vietnam. The education here is quite flexible and easy for our children. The school is really supportive. They help international students a lot. At first, they allocated my daughter in a special class for students with English needs. Students still learn all other topics, but they will be provided more English lessons. Eventually, she moved to the mainstream class.*

A young father, **Phuc**, said he did not want to hide his joy when talking about his daughter's improvement in her English language studies at school. He gave compliments on the teaching styles.

*I was really surprised with her language development. At first, my wife and I, we were both really worried because we didn't know how she would go at school. She did study 1-2 months of English in Vietnam, but it wasn't too much. However, she adapted very fast and was very confident here. She almost only speaks English. She speaks pretty much all in English with me and would teach me pronunciation. Her teachers at school must have done a great job. I believe that she would be able to develop well and learn all the best things from the education here.*

In the statements of both **Quyen** and **Duong**, the reduction of pressure and stress on their children were critical features. **Quyen** let go of her expectations as a parent for her child to achieve high educational levels, whereas **Duong** worried about the changes he later experienced as better for his children. **Phuc**, on the other hand, was pleased with the outcomes of his child's education, eagerness to learn and also teach him. He attributed this to the quality of education

and teaching styles in Australia. Actually, many participants looked back and compared the differences between Australian and Vietnamese education. They admitted uncertainties on coming to Australia, but then attributed vast changes for their children, themselves and family to the teaching styles. **Chi** explained,

*To be honest with you, I was very scared initially, because the education here is different to Vietnam. In Vietnam, right is right, or rather, anything teachers say, it's definitely right. Here, you can think what you want and express yourself quite freely. And for that, now, I am relaxed and find things so much more enjoyable.*

Interestingly, **Chi**'s description of the teaching styles in Vietnam somewhat mirrors the dominant authoritarianism style of parenting children in Vietnam. The shift in parents' thinking about their experiences of children's schooling in Australia was understood as coinciding with their own changes from authoritarian to less strict parenting, relaxing of rules for children and becoming more open to children's overall wellbeing.

Australian schools were also experienced by participants as parent friendly and community inclusive. For example, **Thu** responded to calls for parent volunteers and she did not mind spending time at her son's school. She enjoyed observing how her son was taught in his classes and admired the way that teachers in Australian schools treated children and their parents. Parent engagement at the school was something she had never experienced in Vietnam. **Thu** reflected on her feelings and thoughts when she said,

*I signed up for some volunteering sessions at his school. I have observed the way they teach or involve the kids, like group discussions. I think it is very useful for them. For example, they were working with music sticks today. I sat at the back to watch. My son would go to a designated area himself to grab a stick. The teacher then showed the steps to play. The kids played together. Afterwards, they discussed what was hard, and how everyone played differently. Through this, he learned some new skills. So, I've said that their techniques here are quite good. Instead of just telling him how things are, there are opportunities for everyone to discuss amongst themselves and learn themselves.*

**Thu** recognised the shift in pedagogy where the children were encouraged to be learners, with the flexibility to inquire according to their interests within the class structure. In looking back, she said, *'instead of just telling him how things are'* in comparison to expectations of rote learning and repeating what the teachers tell them in many Vietnamese schools.

**Quynh** shared a similar point of view about the Australian teaching style, in that teachers generate student interest to make school enjoyable.

*I think that the teaching style here is good, because it is based around passion, and it develops from there. You live for your passion. There's a lot of pressure for children in Vietnam, whereas here, teachers generate the interest to study in kids. My daughter likes it then she develops that way. She really likes it here. I believe that's a good aspect of the teaching style here.*



The parents' experiences of the Vietnamese educational environment extended to reflections on organised extracurricular activity. For example, **Chi** recalled and compared the schools' involvements with the local community, library and outdoor activities.

*Outside of school environment, in Vietnam, there weren't many activities for children like they organise in Australia, such as at the local library, they let kids borrow books and toys for free. Sometimes artists are invited by the public library and they teach children like my daughter how to draw and to sing many songs. There are also many outdoor activities. I really like Australian education environment.*

Participants were continually comparing their observations, experiences and feelings about the two education systems during data collection interviews. Many made known that their transitory migration intentions were founded upon having access to better education for their children. Although they commenced their journeys to Australia with some uncertainty for their children, participants soon came to experience the interactions between school, community and family life as harmonious. However, in their Janus Head movements of looking forward as well as back there were also concerns.

### ***Education as the main motivation***

As an international student completing a PhD in Education, **Phuc** was able to clearly explain the differences between the two education systems. In his motivations and decisions to study in Australia with his family accompanying him, he felt satisfied with his decision. He said,

*I am happy that after a long time discussing with my wife, we could bring our daughter here. I knew that would be very difficult for me to do both, studying overseas and parenting at the same time, but I remembered how determined I was. And the main motivator was that I wanted my girl to be exposed to a better education in Australia.*

**Phuc** expressed having to convince his partner to bring their child to Australia. As a mother of two sons, alternatively **Ha** had the support from her husband and parents from both families on deciding to bring their children with her to Australia. **Ha** also expressed feeling positive, as a parent, with the changes.

*My decision has been encouraged and supported by my husband and families a lot. I think that it is a very fortunate opportunity for my sons. We wanted the change for our children, we wanted them to have a better education. Until now, the parents on both sides are still very excited about their grandkids being able to study in such a much greater environment.*

With access to literature in the global academic community, many participants' extended families were noted as encouraging the opportunity for the children to also be schooled in Australia. **Dao** had strong support from her mother-in-law, who knew of the differences in the two education systems. **Dao** was encouraged to take her daughter with her to go overseas and study. While education was important, both she and her mother-in-law prioritised the opportunity for a 'real childhood' as stated next.

*Since my mother-in-law worked in the education field, she clearly knew about all the inadequacy in Vietnamese education. So, we both*

*wanted to bring my daughter here for her to experience the Western education, to see how it would be different from Vietnamese education. We want her to have the real childhood, a childhood that's meant to be.*

Participants had been international students for various lengths of time. **Chau Anh** had almost finished her studies, having spent nearly two years in Australia. **Chau Anh** was contemplating a higher degree, following her current studies. She was open in planning extensions to her own studies to enable opportunities for her children to study for longer in Australia.

*I want to study higher. But it is not a big want for me. I want my kids to stay and study more.*

**Chau Anh** repeated a conversation she had with her husband. The importance for them as parents was seeing the confidence in their son, perceptibly associated with his schooling in Australia. Many parents, such as in this discussion between **Chau Anh** and her husband, kept comparing education in each place. Family life was perceived as good, due to finding comfort with their children's wellbeing in Australia and its impact on family life. Inferred in many of their narratives were aspirations of finding ways to stay.

*When my husband was stressed about life, he looked at our son as encouragement and said, "Look, our son is so much more confident and happier. So, no matter what happens, it's still better here."*

In saying, 'no matter what happens, it's still better here' was the acknowledgement that their time as international student parents would come to an end. Inferred here was the possibility

that they could find a way to stay. In fact, the more that participants enjoyed experiencing the changes in their children' school and family life in Australia, the more that these parents felt worried and uncertain about going back home. This is another example of living in limbo between complex arrays of binaries, and hence the inbetweenness of time, place and culture invoked fears of going back to the pressures of Vietnamese society, educational systems and family stress. **Quyen** collected her thoughts and said,

*I think that the enormous societal pressures of having a successful life on parents force them to transfer some of those pressures onto their kids' study in Vietnam. While here, that burden doesn't seem to fall on their little shoulders. When we go back, we may fall back into that same cycle.*

While similarly expressed by **Duong**, he also engaged the looking back and forward to make sense of his current experiences of the Australian education styles and concerns for his children. There was much to worry about. He and his wife prepared well for their two daughters before coming with them to Australia and he expressed their content with the two daughters' adaptation to Australian school life. However, his worries about Vietnamese schools, teachers and the corrupt system endured due to the constant knowing of going back and the constant living Hell he experienced in the uncertainty of what going back would mean for his girls' education, safety and wellbeing. There was no relief, just more limbo, as he said,

*I thought we could be relieved now, but in fact, our worries are still the same, since we are worried about my daughter being back after two years. What would happen?*

Participants had supported their children to integrate in a new environment, learn English and embrace Australian education. At the same time, parents consistently articulated the need to prepare for their return.

As an example of participants' preparation for the home journey, **Kim** started setting rules and homework for her children. During the weekdays they could speak English, but weekends they needed to study Vietnamese and read many Vietnamese books. **Kim** had her children practice writing in readiness for the day they go back to Vietnam. **Kim** said it was not easy, but she feared that going back to Vietnam's education system would be even harder than her children's transitions when coming with her to study abroad. She added,

*If there's an opportunity for my kids to stay and develop in this Western society, then I would like that.*

Many suggested that going back could be more difficulty for them and their children than coming to Australia. **Khanh** had about six months before she was due to return to Vietnam. To satisfy her uncertainty about going back, she talked to her sons every day about having to leave the education environment in Australia, at least temporarily. In such preparation, **Khanh** and her husband committed to search for schools in Vietnam that used Western models of education for their children. International schools, while very expensive, were their top priority. **Khanh** explained,

*Although my husband prefers living in Vietnam, for our children we could do anything. We want them to have a good education and better future. So, I will definitely get them to study abroad, for them to go*

*back to an environment that is as good as this in Australia. We have been here almost two years. We know what it is, and we love it so much. I think that I'll try hard to maybe come back here or go to another Western country. So, we look for international kindergartens and schools in Vietnam, which follow the model here. There's more interaction with students, and students are at the centre. I tell my kids that I will try to place them in those kindergartens. They can then be ready to go to study abroad when they get to a certain age. But now we need to go back. That is all I can prepare for them.*

Many participants experienced their children's dislike of the cultural differences between Vietnam and Australia. In putting her child's best interests at the heart of her own experiences as a parent, **Lien** said that she would do anything to help her son return to Australia. As with many of the participants, their search for ways to stay in Australia or return on a subsequent visa became more intense as they saw the potential impact of returning on their children. Parents' uncertainty appeared to be infused with emotional investments in their children's social, emotional and educational wellbeing. For example, **Lien** suggested that she would find a way to help her son stay.

*My son really likes living here, which is what I noticed. I remembered the time when we were back to visit family, as soon as he got out of the car, he kept pulling and saying that he didn't want to be in Vietnam, he wanted to go back to Australia. I am really worried. I tell my husband to apply for his study when I need to go. So, if I can't come back here and have to stay in Vietnam then I can send my son here with his dad. That's good for him.*

Many parents expressed that they had such concerns before they even brought their children to Australia, these concerns being to do with the children's return to school in Vietnam after spending years away. **Xuan** talked about feeling torn by decision for her children involving whether to leave them behind in Vietnam or to bring them with her to Australia. She explained her biggest fears for her children was the need to go back. **Xuan** was worried that her children would experience reverse-cultural shock and find it difficult fitting back into Vietnamese schools. Nonetheless, **Xuan** decided for her children to accompany her.

*I still brought my children here with me, but I let them know that they would only stay in Australia with me for 2 years. If they want to study more, they need to find out a way for themselves in the long future. And I really hope that my son could have the opportunity to go to Australia for his further study, or to any country with a developed education system like Australia.*

Having the same concerns, **Nhan** prepared for her child's going back even before they arrived in Australia. She explained,

*Thinking of how my son would find difficulty in going back and studying in Vietnam, when I finish my PhD, is what I am most worried about before I leave Vietnam. So, I brought with us three big sets of Vietnamese textbooks, from years 1 to 3. Just one book set was over 10 kg... I just think that the education in Vietnam is probably not okay yet. In Vietnam, my son was afraid of going to school ... But here, he went to a brand-new environment. The first day he went to school in Australia, he didn't cry. No, he didn't cry. Wow. The subsequent days, he went to school very happily. He liked going to*

*school. I felt happy for him. I don't want him being scared of going to school and cried his eyes out like he was in Vietnam. That is why I said, it would be the thing I was most worried about even before we came here.*

However, it is not only the education style that parents, and their children enjoyed while they are studying in Australia or that gives them uncertainty about the day of going back. There were also findings on the parenting styles in which the Vietnamese student parents interviewed experienced additional aspects of living in limbo amidst the inbetweenness of time, place, culture, relationships and parenting.

### **Parenting in the two worlds**

Most of the participants indicated that education was their first and main motivation for their decision to bring children to Australia. They were conscious that their parenting styles had changed since migrating temporarily to the new environment. In all 26 interviews, parenting was the topic that participants compared the most consistently. While many parents reflected on embracing a combination of parenting styles from across the two cultures, some parents expressed feeling confused when considering what was best for their children. Some parents considered either returning to Vietnam prematurely or sending their children back without them.

Instead, as the parents experienced change in their own perception about life in Australia, they also changed in their choices for their children. Many spoke about the need to parent differently in order to assist their children to also change. One of these teachings, experienced as a parent,



was on gender roles, equality and equity. For example, **Xuan** was learning about and applying gender theory in her studies in Australia. This had a large impact on the way she informally educated her children. She said,

*I always wish that in my children's generation, gender roles could be balance and equal. I also want them to not be judgmental towards others and to be able to achieve it. I believe that parents need to educate their children since they are at a young age. At times, when my son critiqued his little sister about the way she sat or ate, which was not the way a woman should. Or he commented what toys should belong to boys or girls, I knew that I needed to fix it. I talked to him day after day and hoped for the change in him. Studying gender in Australia has given me such thinking.*

Parents drew their observations from many places in Australia to inform changes in the ways of their parenting. While **Xu** drew understandings from her formal studies, others saw the way that Australian parents took engaged with their children. Observing other parents from her daughter's school, **Dao** expressed her admiration towards the ways that Australian parents were involved in their children's school and leisure time.

*I have noticed that parents here [in Australia] spend much more time for their children than Vietnamese parents. On Saturday mornings, there are plenty of parents with children in the parks everywhere. Or at birthday parties, they do many things for their kids, driving them around. I don't know which one is better, but the way Western parents [informally] educate their kids is more suitable for me.*

**Dao** expanded on her perceptions that Australian parents ‘*do everything for their children*’ for the purpose to optimise their children’s health, educational opportunities and life chances. She continued,

*Many of them think that before 18, they will do everything for their children, so they have the best health they could, work for them to have good education, and spend as much time as they could with their children. So, when the children turn 18, they would have a good foundation to survive on their own feet independently.*

The want for a similar parental engagement with her child gave **Dao** a sense of peace. She was infused with hope that change for the next generation was possible, she said,

*I want to do that for my daughter. And what I like most is that they share this parenting task equally. I like it. I believe when children see it, they will copy and do it for their next generations.*

Many of the participants shared similar feelings about parenting, advising that informal education that helps their children to respect each other, regardless of gender, was important to them.

Feeling sad about her husband’s family valuing boys more than girls, and men more than women, **Chi** was determined to raise her daughter in different way. The experience of coming to Australia was perceived as educative for her daughter as opposed to using media to show that life did not have to be purely privileging of men. After reflection of her own hardships with

expectations of women in Vietnam, **Chi** faced hope for the future in offering of an alternative life for her daughter. She explained,

*I want my daughter to be in an environment like here where there's equality between the two genders so that she can see that women are valued and not just there to serve men. I can talk to her through TV shows and books. I can show her how women are valued, and how her husband should be taking care of her, not the other way around. So, if she's busy, her husband can run errands for her. Because women are valued now. I want her to have a husband that respects her and cares for her.*

**Chi** emphasised the need for immersion in a more equitable environment in order to potentially achieve intergenerational change in respect to gender equity for her daughter. Participants who had male children also expressed the need to be in a more equitable society to experience and drive change.

As presented in the previous findings chapter, the male student parents helped with the reproductive labour but did not necessarily entertain attitudinal change, indicating that helping with household tasks would unlikely be sustained on going back to Vietnam. There was a point of difference for male children, according to many of the women interviewed. They wanted their children to be exposed to gender equitable role modelling in Australia to potentially break the intergenerational privilege of men. Through the active engagement and development of understanding about gender, participants suggested greater possibility of change. For example, **Kim** stated the importance of her children learning about gender roles by example of the parents, as in the following quote.

*Kids these days are very perceptive. If the parents don't set good examples, then they'll be wondering about it straight away. Seeing their dad doing those domestic tasks, it is a motivation for them to also do housework and understand rightly about gender roles.*

All of the participants, at some point, questioned the way they were parented as a child growing up in Vietnam. They compared this when looking forward at the changes they wanted for their own children. Many of them spoke about the influence of school and the Australian way of life in which children were respected, relating this to the children's development of confidence and independence.

### ***Developing their children's independence***

Comments like, '*children in Australia are more independent*' featured in the majority of interviews. Participants perceived Australian children's independence as being due to the education system, freedoms at school to be independent inquirers, and from the informal teachings in their families. A representative example is provided below in which **Phuc** recalled the traditional way in Vietnam where parents had all the power and their children simply obeyed, followed by her experiences of her child's development in Australia. She said,

*When we're too strict with our kids, they might have a reaction against us. The consequences could be them losing their self-confidence. They always have to follow and fit into a mould. When they're in a situation where it's a little bit different, they won't know how to handle it. I dislike and disagree with this.*

In contrast to making all decisions on behalf of her child in the Vietnamese authoritarian parenting way, she summarised the benefits for children's development when they are supported to face their challenges, make appropriate decisions, own them and be respected for them. **Phuc** added,

*We also need to teach her independence. When she makes her own decisions, she will also learn to be responsible for such decisions. That'll be different to the way my parents and grandparents taught me. Faced with a challenging issue, Vietnamese children might handle it according to what their parents or teachers would want. But here, children decide on their own. Kids' decisions and ideas are more respected.*

**Duong** also commented on the benefits of children having challenges, making decisions and experiencing some level of risk as important for learning and development. He made comparisons between Vietnamese parents being overprotective and Western parents offering freedoms for their children to explore and grow, per below.

*I have learnt that the biggest difference is that Western people let their children decide and be independent in their reactions and decisions. Whereas Vietnamese parents are mainly overprotective and if the child couldn't do something, they would help them immediately. Western parents will let their kids go further to the edge, push longer barriers and observe how their kids face and react with the challenges. When I look at the outcomes and efficacy, I prefer the Western style.*

Evident in the statements of participants were strong desires for their children's development that they did not perceive possible in Vietnam, and which was inextricably linked with participants' identities as parents. However, in the inbetweenness of two perceived styles in parenting there was still some confusion about how to act as parents. Many spoke in interviews about the need to change their own practices. Learning new ways to respond to their children from observing Australian parents, in ways that might contribute to the development of children's identity formation and resilience, was explained by **Chi**.

*If they fall down, parents would let them stand up by themselves. Whereas, in Vietnam my mother would rush to take her up and hit the table or the chair for hurting her granddaughter. I immediately noticed that I learnt from parents around me in Australia and I already applied [it].*

Another participant, **Duong**, articulated how he harnessed the opportunity to study abroad as one in which learning would take place for him at the university, as well as outside in the society. **Duong** talked about his interests in going to the park and to his children's school to observe the way Australians informally educate and raise their children. **Duong** shared some of his observations, as stated below.

*When I go out or be in the playground with my kids, I can see Australians educating their children. I noticed that children here are not only developing their physical health but also their personality and characters. The music and the songs on TV, they have education purpose in all aspects of everyday life.*

Participants constantly compared the two education systems, children's informal learning, and opportunities to develop and grow, as well as changes to themselves as parents. Most important were perspectives about gender roles and breaking the Vietnamese patriarchal model for the next generation. Visions of a different future for their children, when looking forwards, was often inseparable from observations of their pasts. With insight that sustained change in their partners' attitudes and behaviours may not be possible after returning to Vietnam, many of the women tried to break the intergenerational cycle whilst in Australia. While already mentioned, extended findings on this is provided next.

### **Some more wishes for the next generation**

Demonstrated already, in the previous chapter, is the influence of environment on the sharing of household and parenting tasks, and perceptions of more love in adult and family relationships when reproductive responsibilities are shared, resulting in more family time together and communication between parents. These experiences and associations made with Western lifestyles, whether insightful or not, influenced many of the participants' ideals about parenting, child wellbeing and their intimate adult relationships. In this current chapter, so far, the parental experiences and perceptions of their children's exposure to different approaches in the formal education system and informal teachings by parents has been presented.

The fervent need for parents to break free from the perceived mould of Vietnamese gendered life and authoritarian parenting was so strong that some participants created ideas for their children's future adult lives. For some, they wanted their children act like Western people, or to get married to Australians or Europeans. Some also fabricated notions that having Western

fathers, would be beneficial for their children. As I delved into the participants' lives during interviews, some of the women had the confidence to tell me about violence they had experienced at the hands of their partners in Vietnam. A small number of women told me stories of child abuse perpetrated by their children's fathers when in Vietnam. On looking back at their darkest experiences, it then made sense why many of these women developed fantasies for their children's futures that involved marrying Western men in order to escape, especially when sexual violence and harassment is experienced by the vast majority of women and girls in Vietnam (ActionAid Vietnam, 2014). The prevalence of abuse towards women and girls is serious (Harany, 2019; Thanh and Ha, 2019; Loan, 2019) and attracts comparatively little penalty under Vietnamese laws.

Hitting children is also the act that participants realised that was wrong, no matter whether it was done by father or mother. **Trinh** portrayed her husband as a cruel violent man under the cover of a gentle and well-respected medical doctor. She remembered the experience about her husband hitting her and their daughter harshly when they were in Vietnam. 'Scary' was the word **Trinh** used most when she described her bad memory about him,

*He kept hitting our daughter. He scared me when he hit her. Yes, the way he hit was so scary. So, I would imagine that if somebody saw him hitting me, it would be just as scary. He pushed me against the wall and hit me, punched me. My head swell up so much. Afterward, my memory declined dramatically, my functioning also declined terribly.*

**Trinh** brought her daughter to Australia to fulfil her Master study dream, but it seemed that she also successfully escaped the situation by doing so. She stated that by coming to Australia and



learning about domestic violence, she could fully comprehend the extent and seriousness of her and her daughter situation in Vietnam. This has strengthened her promise to never treat her daughter the same way her husband did. She held intense fears for herself and her daughter when thinking about going back to Vietnam.

Trinh's story is somehow reflected in Lien's narrative. Lien recognised that having bad childhood memories of abuse influenced her way of educating her son. Living in Australia has changed her a lot. However, she also kept expressing worry about the time she needed to go back to Vietnam. She said,

*Ever since I got here, I haven't hit him. I don't know if I would still be the same when I go back to Vietnam, because the lifestyle here is different. Now I'm so far away from my family and a whole society. When I return home, all those burdens just come back, responsibilities, being a daughter-in-law, ceremonies. The pressure just comes back. I think that it can only be partially lessened, and I try to consciously lessen it. But there are just things in my subconscious. My dad used to tell me off very loudly, so now when I hear someone raising their voice or a door slamming loudly, my heart jumps to my throat. I flinch. Those are scars. It's just the same in raising my child. There are things that I don't want at all, but I'm affected.*

As with other participants, **Trinh's** trauma histories informed the imperative to make life different for their children, for the boys to respect gender equity and for the girls to experience safety.

Experience about being hit by their parents in their childhood in Vietnam was shared by many participants. They expressed their feelings of being angry, sad and stated that they did not want

to repeat it in raising their children. Living in Australia gave them more determination as **Chi** said,

*Observing family life in Australia made me realise that my parents' ways of parenting were so different to the way I wanted to raise my kid. My parents always ordered me to obey them. If they say this food is good, so I need to eat it. I must cook the way my mother cooks; I can't have my own way. I can't do the thing I like. Later on, until when I was in year four at the university, I had boyfriend for the first time in my life. One day, he wanted to take me out. My mother said to me "he needs to come to see me first, if I agreed then I let you go with him". I remembered at school, I must meet the requirements and achieve my parents' expectation. If I didn't get the mark that my parents set out, they would hit me. My mother hit me, not my father. She hit me and my three siblings harshly if we didn't perform well at school or we went out too much after school time. My mother asked us to lie down on the bed, all three of us, semi-naked and she hit us.*

**Chi** stated that she always remembered this memory and determined that it would not be the way she treat her kid especially, when she already lived in Australia and has learnt a lot. As mentioned before, some participants created fantasies that Western men were better than Vietnamese men, Western fathers and husbands better than Vietnamese, and so forth. In so doing, many imagined transitioning their lives more towards what they constructed as Western ways. When they could not for themselves, many participants imagined their children partnering with Western men in resolving their uncertainties for the future.

When the participants spoke about Western people, they were very much influenced by cultural discourses that conflate people who are of particular skin colour with goodness as partners,

fathers or parents. This racialisation of motherhood, fatherhood and parenting is well documented in literature that highlights the constant need of societies to discursively categorize people based on race or skin colour phenotypes (Crozier, 2001; Hofferth, 2003; DePouw and Matias, 2016; Matias, 2016). While deconstruction of race goes beyond the scope of this thesis, this clarity is offered for understanding that when participants desired to be more like Western parents and families, they were inferring that white Europeans made good parents.

In participants' reflection of their old selves and discovery of their new selves, when all was not ideal, they developed hoped-for identities and dreamed-up new selves. This is consistent with Erichsen (2009) and Tran and Gomes (2017) who write about how transnational students reinvent their identities in attempt to resolve uncertainty through transforming ones' self into something else. The experience of limbo, however, was influential in the participants' identity reinvention when transformations were impeded by imperatives to return at the end of their studies to Vietnam. When tormented by the limbo, dreaming-up new selves involved also dreaming up new identities for their children. As an example, **Chau Anh** said, '*I plan to teach my son to be gallant like a Western man*' which discursively constructed her as a good parent.

Some participants observed Western men's attitude, manners and actions and idealised the image of these men. The way **Chau Anh** described and compared her sons with other Vietnamese men, born in Australia, started to demonstrate this. She said,

*In Vietnam, my younger son liked doing housework like Western men, while the older one was patriarchal just like his dad. The people who were born here and have made their family here recently, I've observed*

*that they have both. They have a bit of the Asian style, but there are also Western characteristics. They're gallant like the Westerners.*

**Quynh** was pleased with her husband's help in reproductive work, as stated earlier, and his respect for her decisions. She reasoned, '*because my husband has been overseas [in Western countries] before*' that he was capable of this change. **Quynh** was also quite clear about the different Western communities in Australia and she confidently expressed her preference in teaching her son.

*There are many communities here, like the British, the French, etc. Those communities have different cultural traits. There are many Asian as well. Within those communities, I really like the Europeans, because their culture is very good. I really want to guide my kid like that.*

Similarly, **Ha** made comparisons between Vietnamese and Western men, and her desire to have Western influences in her son's upbringing, behaviours and respect towards women.

*I've always thought that foreign men share the housework with their wives. In my thinking, foreign men see that as their responsibility, and they have the habit of sharing a bit or a lot. The way Westerners behave is very polite. I want my kid to follow that. I then wanted to change the way my sons are taught, as I definitely wanted him to follow the civilised way of Western men who knew to help women. Definitely not the Vietnamese way...*

Many participants, both women and men, kept repeating the expression of, '*behave like Western men, act and treat women like Westerners*' with their admiration. Their willingness to educate their sons in such light of attitude was continually mentioned. However, underpinning this

among the women was the understanding that Vietnamese men do not necessarily sustain their changes upon going back to Vietnam. The Western-like behaviours and attitudinal changes developed while young, women participants suggested, were more likely to persist. Hence their focus remained strong on changing their children.

Many participants who had daughters did not appear to entertain beliefs that Vietnamese boys could be trained to ‘*be gallant like a Western man,*’ not even second or third generation Vietnamese males born in Australia. Some, rather, wanted their daughters to marry Western men who were perceived to already have the desired identities and qualities within them. As a representative example of the women interviewed, **Dao** declared,

*I told my daughter that she needs to get a job, be equal, and be independent. Once you are financially independent, everything would be good. Western men think that way too. They share housework, not like in Vietnam. My daughter would not be the woman who comes home after work, cook when her husband watches TV. I believe that the chance for my daughter going back to Vietnam to get married is ZERO. Even an Australian man with Vietnamese or Asian background is a NO too. Because they still have their family culture impact.*

**Quynh** was proud of her husband’s support and sharing of domestic tasks. But she, too, disclosed regret for getting married and advised of sometimes wishing that she was free and single. On experiencing what she perceived as the Western way of having adult intimate relationships, she had similar wishes for her daughter. **Quynh** was quite determined with the hope-for self for her daughter in wishing she would get married to a Western man.

*If just my personal preference, then I would like her marrying a Westerner. That's what I hope for. I think that he will have a culture of sharing and helping each other in the family. The husband and wife are happily living and enjoying the family life together, and with their kids too. Local Vietnamese? Well, maybe the Vietnamese culture still affects them here. So, I'd still like it if she marries a Westerner (laughs).*

In their desires for their daughters to marry a Western man, there was the perception that these men would treat their daughters with greater equity and respect than Vietnamese men. What needs saying is that these are the participants perceptions founded upon their experiences of life in Vietnam and Australia, on looking back and looking forward to resolving their experiences of limbo as transnational student migrants. This is not to say that all Western men treat women well, as is known from the prevalence rates of abuse in Australia by men towards women, of every race and creed (Partnerships Against Domestic Violence, 2003; Special Taskforce on Domestic Violence in Queensland, 2015; McLaren and Goodwin-Smith, 2016; Zannettino and McLaren, 2014). The Vietnamese student parents hoped for certain things for their children, founded upon their experiences of society and family life in Australia. On the other hand, the lens was reversed when the children of some participants stated that they wished their parents were different. This provided challenges for participants in their experiences of parenting and in managing the relationships between father and child. This was explained by **Diep**, as follows.

*He likes Western dads more than Vietnamese. He's said that he would like a new dad that can take him out to play, take him out camping or fishing or something like that. Perhaps he's learnt this from school, and he has contact with Western teachers and the other parents. He really likes male teachers. In his mind, a dad has to be strong, active and has to love him.*

In **Diep's** case, the couple had ended their relationship with a divorce. **Diep** expressed her determination to find a new father for her child; a Western dad for her son. The experiences of difficulty in balancing single parenthood and studies as an international student, following a partner who did little to help, influenced both her and her child's perceptions for an ideal family.

Another participant, **Dao**, decided to stay together with her husband despite conflicts they experienced in the intimate adult relationship. She said that staying together was for the sake of her daughter, which was potentially drawing on discursive influences that children need a mother and a father. However, **Dao** observed her child's struggles in her own childhood that led to the desires to admire Western fathers and their families. **Dao** explained,

*Perhaps it first started here. Here, gender equality between men and women is very different to Vietnam. When I first came, I couldn't think that far ahead. The place of a woman here is very different to in Vietnam. My daughter saw and told me that, in other Western families, the father would do this and that. Western fathers are handier than Vietnamese father. They take their kids to play sports. For 99% of the time, I take my child, but a whole Western family would go. I think it's a disadvantage for my husband when he doesn't go, but he doesn't think so. I go, and I enjoy it, and I don't force him. I don't compare with other families. Eventually, my daughter doesn't see that it's necessary for her father to go.*

Again, as with many other women in this study, **Dao** expressed the perception that Western men treated women with greater equity and respect than Vietnamese men in general, in the family context, and likewise in the quality of relationships with their children. Western fathers in Australia, in **Dao's** and her daughter's eyes, was constructed as a good parent, or a better

father when compared to Vietnamese fathers. This expressed belief was further reinforced in hearing her daughter's perceptions of an ideal family, which they did not experience with their own Vietnamese husband and father respectively.

While **Dao** and her daughter no longer demanded change from the father, upon experiencing his resistance, they both developed opinions that pitched Vietnamese fathers against the perceived engagement in children's and family's lives of Western fathers. She said,

*I study and work, but still have to do housework at home. He doesn't do anything. For example, he's never cleaned the toilet once in his life. But Western parents would share equally, that is what my daughter asserted.*

Participants experienced the influence of the Western gender lens in their children's ideas of a good family and attitudes towards men. They experienced their children's imagined self with a Western father as representing an ideal family dynamic, whereas this was a reflection of the hoped-for self of these participants to become parents of children responsible for intergenerational change. As educated people, the participants already knew and had some ideas about such family life when coming to Australia, but many experienced being able to freely practice these family ideals as international student parents. If they could not perceive practicing a greater gender balance in their own lives, especially the women interviewed, they influenced their children to hope for a better gender equity in their own futures. While educating and parenting their children in a new way, student parents in this study seemed to experience the process of informally educating themselves.



## Parents' changes self-identity and attitude towards others

*Studying in Australia helped a man like me to realise that men need to change the way they think about family and women's role.*

Male participants seemed to talk about their changes as a parent, resulting from having children and family in Australia with them, more than the female participants. **Thi** noticed that when he was in Vietnam, he got angry easier, told his daughter off many times and even hit her. But things changed since he came to Australia, as elaborated next.

*If I didn't come here, then I wouldn't know to take initiative to apologise to my daughter. When I got angry and yelled at her for example, in Vietnam, I wouldn't say sorry. Never. But here, sometimes I know that what I just did was wrong. I needed to say sorry. And it is precisely because of the environment here. Going to her school, I can see the local parents with the respectful way they treat their kids. On top of that, it's the media and everything else that comes with living here. The way the older people talk to the younger people, for example lecturers with students, it's very respectful and courteous. They don't want to have to touch on each other's nerves. So, that's what I realised. My kid is an individual and so am I. I'm not allowed to yell at her like that, because it's offending her. I think that the environment has caused the changes in my thinking when it comes to raising my kid.*

On looking back at his life before becoming an international student in Australia, **Thi** treated his daughter like a possession as opposed to a person. In his statement above, he indicated not knowing how to treat his daughter differently until exposure to society and parenting approaches in Australia. The other fathers interviewed also expressed pride in the changes in their respect for and relationships with their children. By being a single father while studying

in Australia, **Hinh** described that he and his son loved each other more because of the changes in interactions between them. He expressed pride for being able to do many things for his son that he could not before. **Hinh** said,

*I think I'm changing for the better for my son. I can take care of him better. In Vietnam, I used to work very hard and had to pick up my son very late from school. Now, I think that the role of the person who looks after the family is very important. I understand my son more and he loves me more. We are much closer, he told me about everything, small things. I now notice when his clothes are getting dirty, when he is hungry, cold, when he gets sick, when he wants to go to the toilet... All these things I didn't know before. I think I am a better father now. And I am so proud of this.*

When **Hinh** was in Vietnam, he had a good position in his workplace since he was very young. He admitted that he did not understand why some young female staff were not focused on their work, and they left office earlier to pick their children from schools. He said he was not content. But now he gradually understood. There were some days, when **Hinh** came to pick his son late from his school in Australia, there were only very few kids at school, he just felt so sad for his son. He talked about the children and considered, if they could be picked up earlier, they could be washed and fed properly. He elaborated that staying too late after school time was not good for the children, make evening times with family more tense and resulted in stressed parents. **Hinh** speculated that if he went back to his position in Vietnam, he would let women who have small children to leave their work 30 minutes earlier. He stated that they then could be more focused on their work during the day and it would be much better for his staff family life as well as his organisation. **Hinh** said,

*I must say that it is the most regret of mine that I thought badly about them, the mothers with young children, I considered them as not good staff. I did not understand them. It is so sad that when I thought that way. Another thing is that when I prepared to study abroad, I needed to take really long time to learn English to go to Australia, so I did not have time to make up to them, my staff. I really hope that you as a researcher, you could write or do something to help people and society to understand more about family, women and their tasks. And for men to understand that they need to change the way they think about family and women's role. Being a father studying in Australia, I think I gain more such valuable understanding than just knowledge I cultivated at the university.*

It was not until **Hinh** experienced the burden of balancing productive and reproductive work that he understood the burden on women in Vietnam. Sharing the same realisation, **Minh** felt proud of himself because he had developed understanding about the burdens of his wife's reproductive labour, which he used to minimise back in Vietnam. In his statement below, he described his increasing appreciation and admiration for her.

*I should apologise to her. The way I see my wife has been so much different since I came here. Now I admire the effort of her and other Vietnamese women, I realised that the role of women in family as well as in our society is very amazing.*

Two of the six men interviewed appeared to genuinely appreciate the difficult work for women in negotiating their productive and reproductive lives, and said that a stronger effort by them could help to improve family bonds and relationship. The women expressed similar sentiment. **Thu** felt quite happy with her and her husband's way of organising their family time, especially time for their son as stated below.

*Back in Vietnam, sometimes we wouldn't even have time to listen to our son. Now, my hubby and I, we would sit and talk together and talk to our son a lot. That is something that we were able to learn and bring back home. I think we have grown a lot.*

Having a husband coming from a traditional Vietnamese family, **Quyên** stated that men in Vietnam generally are patriarchal. She experienced men from the centre of Vietnam, like her husband, as the most extreme and patriarchal. She said that back there, she always felt sad about her husband's attitude towards her and their children. Since they came here, **Quyên** has been much happier. In relating her feelings to experiences of her husband's changes in behaviours and attitudes towards her, she said

*He has changed a lot. He changed in the way he behaves toward me and our kids. He became gentler. He spends more time with children now and he knows to do the housework with me. He is the man I could be proud of and dream for. I could not ask for more.*

Participants, when looking forward, were generally uncertain whether the many of the changes they had achieved in Australia could be sustained in their future returns to Vietnam. In **Thu's** statement above she expected, at the very least, that she and her husband could continue to communicate more with each other and with their children. However, not all female participants could embrace the positive change of their husband, especially when it comes to gender perspective and the way they treat their family.

Although **Kim** recognised that her husband could now help her in doing housework, she still felt worried about his attitude towards their son and daughter. As mentioned earlier, the men's engagement in reproductive tasks did not necessarily coincide with attitudinal change. **Kim's**

main concern was around her daughter's feelings and how this would affect her perception about gender roles in the future,

*There was a bit of a change when he came here. He sometimes went grocery shopping for me. He went to supermarkets faraway. Sometimes, he did the dishes. That's already an improvement. But my husband likes boys more than girls. Sometimes, he's not very sensitive around my daughter, so I have to remind him about it. But men, they don't listen to suggestions. Perhaps my daughter's seen it ever since she was born, that her dad plays with her brother more. She sees it as a natural thing. She thinks that I belong to her, and dad belongs to her brother. I don't like it that way. I am worried.*

This adverse experience of cultural values, where boys are more valued than girls, was also recalled in **Trinh's** narrative of her husband dictating early in their married life in Vietnam.

*My husband always wanted a son. When I was pregnant and had an ultrasound, the doctor said that it was a girl. My husband did not talk to me for 3 days. I felt really upset about his conservative mindset that was still so dominant. It hurt me deeply when he said that if our first child was a son then the second pregnancy could be put on hold for a while, but because it was a girl then we needed to have another child very soon.*

**Trinh** said while she was enjoying freely living in Australia with her daughter and her husband back in Vietnam, she was constantly tormented by her fears and uncertainty related to their return to Vietnam. **Trinh** worried about how her daughter could cope with her husband's attitude towards females when they go back. More than that, **Trinh** expressed how she was

worried about her daughter. This was because she perceived her daughter to share the same worry as her.

*It would be very difficult for my daughter. She always told me how she enjoyed herself here but at the same time, always thought about how she would live back in Vietnam. She kept telling me that if we needed to go back, she did not want to live with her father. My daughter was determined to stay here.*

During the interview, **Trinh** told me that the worry for her daughter ‘tore’ her apart. She knew that she must go back to Vietnam as her scholarship to study in Australia was only for two years. **Trinh** was yet another example of being torn apart by the multiple social and cultural binaries, experiencing torment, gloom, pain and hopelessness in being unable to resolve her own living Hell, nor her daughters. She was at war with herself, wanting to support her own and her daughter’s escape from patriarchal oppression but with no place to go except back to Vietnam. Since her daughter was under 18 years of age, and a visa was dependant on **Trinh**’s student visa, she must go back too.

The alternative would be to find someone who could be a visa guardianship parent/carer for her daughter in Australia. However, **Trinh** expressed that she was also so worried and uncertain about leaving her child in the care of someone else after **Trinh** goes back. **Trinh** said she endured so many hardships, was determined to improve her daughter’s life and was immensely unsure about their future. Nevertheless, **Trinh** expressed that she always appreciated the international study opportunity, including the opportunity of bringing her daughter on this trip and to build a foundation for her. As with other participants who could not reconcile their

futures, they tried see benefit in their transitory experiences. This included opportunities for their children to go abroad to study later in their own lives. **Trinh** repeated that the short period of time in Australia offered a steppingstone for her daughter's future that included having a good understanding about gender balance, women's greater autonomy and a violence free family.

Other female participants who had their husbands accompany them to Australia also expressed being worried about returning to Vietnam. Many of them spoke about the reverse culture shock their children and the reversed change of their husbands in term of the attitude towards women. **Quyen** just has had the joy of seeing her husband becoming less patriarchal while in Australia. She gathered her thoughts and expressed the reality of life going back to the old gendered ways. For **Quyen** her limbo was amidst the turmoil of being caught between the way of life she wanted and the way of life she expected on going back. She said,

*Would he be like that when we go back? That the question I'm always asking myself. I'm worried that everything will just go back to the old ways.*

**Quyen** faced forward and visioned her life on going back. As with the majority of female participants they expressed feeling more pressure, more turmoil and more living Hell as their international student journeys drew nearer to an end. For example, **Kim** expressed negativity about the time when her studies finish, and she has to return home.

*I don't have much hope. Although, I think that if they've done it once then they might be able to do some of it again. It won't be completely lost. He might understand me more. But, going back to that culture will make it difficult because it also depends on the family, friends and networks around him. I really don't have hope, not much.*

As with other participants, **Quyen** expressed little hope to sustain change family and parenting change when returning to Vietnam. However, most participants told of how they kept searching and looking for opportunities for life as they knew it in Australia to continue. Some spoke of intentions to search for international schools or to travel again for their children's study overseas. While some spoke as if they had no hope, the hope was still there. Their limbo endured, and still would upon going home to Vietnam as they look back at their past where they had a chance to taste a different life when in Australia.

## **Chapter summary**

In this chapter, I presented the engagement of children and parents in education and parenting of their children. The chapter also includes the hopes for their children's future and the parents' self-changes. Bringing children to Australia in their study journey, Vietnamese student parents constantly made comparisons about the two education systems. The most common comment that participants expressed was, '*Australian education system is better*'.

Looking back at their own childhood and their children's studies in Vietnam, participants pointed out that the main issues why families and schools struggled was due to the pressure for children to have top marks in every exam, perfect results at the end of the school year and a certificate with the highest level of study. They also did not like the way Vietnamese children



got too much stress from study schedules and over-supervision from teachers and parents, comparing this with the Australian formal and informal education systems. All parents in this study agreed that their children did not face such issues when studying in Australia, where they found going to school was not completely about achieving the highest of marks, certificates or degrees, but instead about making friends, learning new skills and gaining knowledge in a friendly, enjoyable and multicultural environment. They expressed the feelings of satisfaction with the flexible and supportive education framework in Australia and admiration for the ways Australian teachers treated their children. Participants also drew on their observations in the formal education system and applied these to their own informal educating of their children.

Participants gave various examples of what they observed from the teachers in Australian schools and how the teachers engaged with their children in and out of classrooms. Vietnamese parents then always concluded that it was exactly what they wanted for their children. It is about how teachers generate the interest to study in young children, promote creativity and passion, and let children to learn what they really want and express themselves freely. They also gave compliments to other school recreation activities as well as community activities for children in Australia. Most of all, it pleased participants to experience that their children were simply being treated as humans.

Participants also stated that education was the main reason behind the decision they made in bringing their children to Australia with them. They expressed that they would never regret the opportunity. For some participants, making the transitory migration journal was not solely their own decisions and many had to convince their partners and extended families to support or

accept their decisions. Coming to Australia was usually the decision of the whole extended family and their willingness for their children to have a better education, in consideration of the education being an important steppingstone for their futures. However, the more the participants enjoyed their children studying in Australia with them, the more they were concerned about going back home at the end of their student period overseas.

Vietnamese student parents expressed their feelings of worry about going back, especially that they and their children would fall back into the Vietnamese patriarchal family system, Vietnam is *'where the enormous societal pressures of having a successful life on parents force them to transfer some of those pressures onto their kids' study* as **Quyên** stated. Participants all prepared for their family and children to journey to Australia and, while they were in Australia, they needed to prepare much more carefully for their time of going back. Ironically, some participants said they even needed to prepare for their children's going back before they came to Australia in the first place. How their children would re-adapt and re-adjust back into Vietnamese culture and education environment was the biggest concern of Vietnamese parents, as they expressed in their interviews. Alongside education at school, the parenting styles they adopted was another topic they discussed in relation to their transitions and changing practices as parents in Australia.

Again, most participants expressed their admiration toward Australian parenting styles. What they noticed and reported was that parents in Australia spent more time with their children than parents in Vietnam. They appreciated the way children in Australia were taught to be more independent and confident in themselves. Vietnamese parents indicated their determination in

copying some positive parenting methods that they learnt in Australia while compromising with Vietnamese ways to prepare for their time of going back. Meanwhile some parents disclosed their wishes for the next generation in wanting their children to get married to Australians or Europeans and fabricated notions that having Western fathers would be beneficial for their children. As interviews endured, it was found that fantasies that Western fathers or husbands were less abusive towards women and girls despite research evidence stated to the contrary.

Lastly, the chapter presented the parents' stories about their positive self-changes in the way they treated other people, their children and partners. There were the changes in participants of being more respectful and less judgmental toward others, valuating women's roles in family, as well as in society, and educating children informally when at home or on family outings.

Participants demonstrated how they celebrated joy in family life, parent-children's relationships, and education for their children in Australia. At the same time, the reality of returning to Vietnam on completions of studies raised many concerns and uncertainties about their future, driving many of the participants into various states of limbo and living Hell.

## ***Chapter 7: Discussion***

*... in which the two faces of family migration decisions are spiced with hopes and dreams, policies and policing, disappointments and fears. As Diana Grant (2018) wrote, “The good man is no angel, the bad man is no beast. The Romans called him Janus who faced both West and East.”*

It has come to the last stage of this thesis requiring the threads of the previous chapters to be drawn together. Here, in this final chapter, I address the research question: *How do Vietnamese parents, who are international students in Australia, experience living in limbo amidst the inbetweenness of time, place, culture, relationships and parenting?* However, before continuing in the consolidation of key learnings from the research participants and interpretation phenomenologically, some last-minute explanation is required of my observations of candidness during interviews. This is critical to researcher interpretation and this discussion, and potentially something that only a researcher with lived experience of Vietnamese gendered transitory life in contemporary times might initially understand.

### **Hearing and interpreting the silence**

There is something in the traditional cultural practices of Vietnamese people that influence the way they speak, hesitations or maintenance of silence. Silence here is a discursive phenomenon in itself. Huckin (2002) and others (Patil and Ennis, 2016; McLaren and Patil, 2016) identified the use of silence in textual media as a conscious act to manipulate the reader. I am not

suggesting the participants' silences intended to manipulate me as the researcher and listener of their words, but instead they responded in ways that I as a Vietnamese person would understand cultural and gender practices as common knowledge. They told me about what they enjoyed in Australia, such as the education system, both parents' involvement in the children's lives, and greater equity in domestic chores. They told me in the Vietnamese way in which the silences, on the flipside, were the intentionally unspoken pasts involving burdens upon mostly women in Vietnamese life that did not have to be said. More clearly, what was said told me even more about what remained unsaid. These silences were both influential and also influenced by traditional Vietnamese cultural practices; for example, the curling of the tongue seven times before they spoke, or not.

I could read the hesitancies and silences in which many participants, especially females, were cautious during interviews. I presume they were protecting the feelings and dignity of their husbands, extended families and children. This protocol is especially important for Vietnamese women who risk being shamed or mistreated by the extended family and society when saying things that may be confronting, and for not conforming, even during interviews. They were still cautious of where I sat in terms of my perspectives on cultural norms; nevertheless, as an insider I could read and interpret this.

The women who participated in this study carried with them their past lives in which they had married into the man's family. The monotonous reiterations of the good aspects of family life that participants spoke of in their Australian experiences, which is mirrored in the repetitious research findings in this thesis, served to highlight just how much they enjoyed the alleviations

from their burdensome pasts. Even the men, who expressed enjoyed helping their wives and looking after children, could do so because they did not have the alternative expectations of the Vietnamese intergenerational families and communities around them. On the other hand, three women participants experienced some help from their husbands in Vietnam, so long as there were none of his family or friends present who would judge and embarrass him. Both men and women said how they would like to maintain greater shared support and balance on returning to Vietnam, but did not know how they could.

Speaking in interviews brought forth realisation of how burdensome lives would again become real upon returning to Vietnam. The specifics of past burdens and that often remained unsaid in interviews. Hesitancies, then expressions of hope held essences of knowing that life on going back to Vietnam meant going back to all the burdens. However, the silences of participants and mumbling indicated that participants did not want to let go of this hope. I frequently experienced silence from the women, especially, interviewed when discussions were heading in the direction of going home. Often participants simply mumbled, followed by '*you know.*' They were curling the tongue seven times during my long and protracted interviews with them.

For women who broke their silence, many described what they observed from other Vietnamese women not wanting to have daughters. This was safer than talking about themselves. This was not because of favouring sons over daughters, or that they did not love or care for their children, but because they dreaded the future where their daughters would have to fulfil burdensome reproductive and community tasks after marrying. When the participants talked about other women who had adult sons, they suggested a tendency of those women to be very harsh on

their daughters-in-law. They proposed that many women sought revenge on what they, themselves, had to endure from their own in-laws. More simply, they wanted to mould their daughter-in-law into following the four virtues (*tứ đức*<sup>7</sup>) that are traditionally expected of Vietnamese women. On the one hand these participants described how Vietnamese women protect their daughters, but also participate in and perpetuating the triple burden upon females intergenerationally through cultural and rituals practices.

I pause from discussing the findings for a moment, but with relevance I reflect on my collective experiences as a Vietnamese woman. One of the memories I host, and which many other brides in Vietnam would never forget, relates to our wedding days. On the most important days of our lives, the burden upon women in Vietnam does not stop. Many weddings, especially in rural areas, are held in the family home – the groom’s home, where the woman is to live. After the guests left, the bride takes off her gorgeous outfit and without time to remove her makeup, rolls up her sleeves and sweeps the floor, cleans up the leftover trays, carries out and washes all the dishes. If the man’s extended family lives across different cities, then the bride will find herself travelling afar, preparing festivities, meals and cleaning up many times.

The memoirs of James Monan (2015), called *Vietnam in a changing time*, details his observations of life in Vietnam during the 1990s. Monan (2015: 48) provides a dialogue of

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<sup>7</sup> Traditionally, a proper Vietnamese woman had to fit the Confucian mould with four virtues. These are: housework (*công*), appearance (*dung*), speech (*ngôn*) and conduct (*hạnh*), which were designed to guide parents to raise daughters into appropriate women. *Công* requires a woman to be competent and hardworking in all domestic aspects. Despite this, she still needs to maintain her appearance at all time to be neat and humble, according to *dung*. Then, to reach the virtue of *ngôn*, she needs to “bend her tongue seven times before she speaks”. *Hạnh*, or inner beauty, is considered to be the ultimate outcome of virtue training, where she is devoted and filial, and possesses “self-control, self-sacrifice, and self-cultivation” (Ngo, 2004: 49-51).

when he attended a wedding in Vietnam. He was surprised at the bride's engagement in reproductive labour, as he wrote:

It had been a wonderful day and had been finished off by a speech in French from the groom's father thanking us profusely for coming to the wedding of his son. The one slightly discordant note of the entire day was seeing Minh, still in her wedding finery, squatting on the floor of the kitchen washing dishes as we left. She was being watched by her new sisters-in-law who were making no attempt to help her.

This practice is still prevalent in Vietnam. One of my friends reminds me of her traumatic experience every year on her wedding anniversary; as a mirror of this very experience in questioning what there is to celebrate about weddings – they are not a happy day for women. I can still hear her words in my head:

*As for me, after having smiled to nearly 600 guests having meals, I still have my bride's white on and went to the well to wash the mountain of dishes. My face was still full of make-up, my hair was curled with flowers on. Suffering so much. If I did not wash the dishes, my bride's new reputation would be really bad as lazy and shameful for my husband's family.*

Most likely due to multi-generational living holding the status quo with stealth is a reason why little has changed in Vietnam. These practices imposed upon brides is an implicit test by the husband's family of the newly arrived bride. In becoming a daughter in-law, every young girl in Vietnam yearns not be laughed at. It is an easier life to be praised as a hard-working daughter-



in-law, than to endure shame, blame and guilt associated with refusing to slave. So, new brides are compelled by the socio-cultural pressures to sit in and wash the dishes, clean the house right after the ceremony finished while the groom was drunk or still chatting with his friends. Noted in Vietnamese literature, the groom is never to be judged; however, the women marries into a form of indentured servitude to the in-laws and to societal expectation (Duong, 2013). The gaze is so strong, she is fearful of not conforming. This intensity of women's burdens and of traditions imposed on men and women helps to explain the participants' silence in matters that may shame their culture and families.

Shame for family is another reason for the research participants to curl their tongue seven times during interviews, hold on to silence and, when they do speak, to not tell their life stories directly. This silence was portrayed in many ways during the interviews. As stated in the findings, **An** had future visions about the discrimination towards Vietnamese who study overseas. It concerned her that she could potentially face judgements at work on the same basis as the comments she heard from her work colleagues towards others. **An** said she felt insulted when there was gossip about her intentions to achieve the top position at work after undergoing higher studies overseas, especially when she did not intend to take her husband with her. This imagined future was due to unspoken Vietnamese cultural and social expectations of women having to fulfil domestic obligations over work, higher study and career advancement. These expectations are still considered normal, and thus I speculate that they were not spoken about in the interviews; but, understood by both the researcher and the researched. **An** was one of on a few outspoken participants who talked about these things. From other participants' silences, hesitations and indirect mentions, were subject to researcher interpretation. Many participants

appeared to express similar perspectives and experiences in their own, social and culturally influenced ways.

All more important to this study, therefore, was the subjective and theoretical interpretations required of the researcher to add meaning and understanding to both the spoken texts and textual silences related to hoped-for changes to life experiences of being international students, family relationships and child rearing.

### **Harder but better**

The participants left their Vietnamese lives behind to study in Australia. They came with some knowledge of the non-Vietnamese life, departing with joy and hope for a better future for themselves, their families and their children. They did not foresee the challenges they would face. As in the literature, there were issues of cultural shock, the loss of support from the extended family, changes to parental earning capacity and economic hardship, time related constraints, racism or discrimination, growing acculturation gaps between the student parents and their children, isolation and marital stress (Lewig et al., 2010; Vaez et al., 2015; Myers-Walls et al., 2011; Naeeni et al., 2015; Leidy et al., 2012; Osman et al., 2016). More than that, Vietnamese student parents shouldered the two roles of being parents alongside being students in Australia. Daily life in many respects was harder.

Participants recognised changes in their relationships between husband and wife, parents and children. New insights towards themselves emerged, especially when living in the inbetweenness of the two worlds of East and West, and the two cultures. In acquiring the two

different education systems and practicing two parenting styles, they were living amidst the multiple dualities of their interpersonal, social, cultural and personal experiences. Many participants attempted to realise their dreams and fantasies of an ideal family life that they wanted to build, and how this could not always be achieved in Vietnam. There were those familial practices, expressed earlier in this thesis, which were influenced and affected by Confucianism. Obligations to hierarchal relations and filial piety of Confucian ideology created the so-called traditional social and familial expectations, norms and prejudices so often written about in literature (Gao, 2003; Hoang and Yeoh, 2012; Ha, 2014) and understood from the findings of this study. These ideals-forced stereotypes imposed on women's socially scripted responsibilities related to family functions of reproduction, nurturing and fulfilling the duties of a mother, wife, and also daughter-in-law. At the same time, they still needed to work, earn money and build social development like all male partners and counterparts. Meanwhile, the majority of men could be more flexible and relax after working hours. Often, the female and even male participants talked about gender inequity and male privilege. Men could play sports, have a few beers with friends or simply relax by doing their favourite things, while waiting for their wives to prepare dinner. Even transporting, caring for children and helping children do homework was sometimes entirely the responsibility of the woman. Many participants, both males and females, confirmed this. Those who resisted in Vietnam were met with dissent from the in-laws.

The international student parents in this study were almost all from upper or middle-class Vietnamese society. They were educated, had secure and quite well-paid jobs back in Vietnam. Education and globalisation had exposed them to a range of relationship and family dynamics.

Thus, they were open-minded towards a non-traditional Vietnamese family construct. Not all of them were satisfied with the roles and tasks shared in their household, the division of labour in care for their children, heavy influences of extended family in holding back change, and the impact on the quality of family life and their intimate adult relationships. In Vietnam, it was too difficult to resist or rebel against patriarchy and achieve change.

Female participants, such as **Quyen**, expressed resentment with patriarchal privilege in Vietnam. Many authors have likewise highlighted how Vietnamese men may experience embarrassment and shame, such as when shopping for groceries and being discursively constructed as doing women's work (Scott and Chuyen, 2007; Drummond and Rydstrom, 2004; Reeves, 2014). In **Quyen**'s earlier statement, she talked about men being '*scared of their wife*', but this is more about fear of discursive shame experienced by men for being seen to cross the gender performance line than fear of the wife in itself. While many female participants shared similar unsatisfying thoughts about their reproductive burdens, some male participants also expressed their annoyance with these societal customs – but they could only express their annoyances when physically in Australia. This gender division of reproductive work, and the discursive influences reinforcing them, is consistent with other authorship on Vietnamese traditional, cultural and societal norms (Gao, 2003; Hoang and Yeoh, 2012; Ha, 2014).

Both women and men spoke of social routines in which it was normal for men to gather after work every day, drinking in bars until late or enjoying their own recreational activities. Participants expressed that this was not intentional, but that is just what culture and society have created, making men out as victims of societal power. Conversely, both the women and men

who participated were making excuses. They were coincidentally participating in regulating dominant discourse and perpetuating their own oppression, which is frequently noted as a paradox in Foucault's work on discursive power (Foucault, 1972; Foucault and Hurley, 1985; McLaren, 2016; McLaren, 2013; Zannettino, 2012; Foucault, 1980). I suggest that the regularity of this privilege of men in Vietnam has become unquestioned due to the strength of male privilege as opposed to intention. The transition to Australian family and parenting life awakens the reality of Vietnamese men's privilege and their avoidance in assisting with the reproductive work. For mostly the women, there were many uncertainties about their relationships, sustaining sharing of reproductive labour, and the impact on their children's social development as respectful, supportive and altruistic humans. When what they want for their futures seem uncertain, this feeds into their experiences of limbo.

Many of the women interviewed advised that the men's families back in Vietnam expected them to engage traditional authoritarian child rearing practices, and for them as women to take the full responsibility of caring for the child or organising domestic workers to assist. This is consistent with the findings of literature about non-Western parenting styles and practices (Dyson et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2013; Hoang and Yeoh, 2011; Lim and Lim, 2004). However, when the women were living and studying in Australia, this created numerous changes. Both women and men talked about task sharing the childcare and housework, i.e. the reproductive labour. Some men volunteered to do chores and share tasks in ways that they had never done before. The wonderful aspirations of women were for gender equity in domesticity. While the men's help with tasks was pleasing for the women interviewed, women remained primarily responsible for instructing their partners on how to care for children and the continued oversight

of the domestic terrain and therefore they inadvertently continued to dominate domesticity in Australia. Other authors have similarly found in studies on transitory migration, involving both with domestic workers and international students, which women who drive the migration decisions inadvertently continued to reproduce ideology of female domesticity even when abroad (Parreñas, 2012; Kim, 2013; Soong, 2017; Soong et al., 2018). The triple burden (Moser, 2012) is often endured and silence discursively maintained.

The division of reproductive labour may have been altered in the migratory transitions of participants, but the gender division of responsibility for the reproductive work remained. For the women interviewed for the current study, they tried to escape their domesticity while concurrently contributing to sustaining many of the pre-existing gender divisions by remaining responsible for decisions concerning the children. Despite this, the small changes experienced in their husband's contribution to household tasks and the joy of seeing their children actively doing chores, modelled by and observed of their fathers, offered a new portrait of their families. Most of the participants hoped for these changes, but did not necessarily expect them when coming to Australia.

A lesser number of female participants revealed that they knew their husbands were intimate with other women in his spare time. It was expressed in very bitter ways among these women. Some of the women were of a high education, financially the breadwinners, seeking to ensure the quality of life for the family, to build houses and purchase valuable items for her family. These women expressed having to accept that their husbands were cheating on them, for one

even during her pregnancy. This husband was much less educated than her and had no income due to his inability to find stable work.

However, the narratives of participants were diverse. A few were satisfied with the balance of shared family responsibilities they had experienced in Vietnam. However, most of the student parents experienced of their lives in Vietnam, that the family structure and dynamic very much favoured the men. Even the relationships between parents and children were, inevitably, heavily influenced by rigid and hierarchical norms. Many were happy with the transitions to what they experienced as Australian family life, where reproductive responsibilities of women and men became more balanced. Researchers on transitory migrant families found that the loss of support from grandparents and relatives impacts on family dynamics and practice (Lewig et al., 2010; Osman et al., 2016; Leidy et al., 2012). Others highlight that when those who usually provide additional care and support are lost, this can create limited time to spend with family and produce tensions in family relationships (Ashbourne et al., 2012; Desouza, 2014). The participants in this study also experienced the difficulties of the lack of extended families' support, however, their family relationships seemed to be perceived differently. Many advised that doing household work together fostered more communication between the adults and created more free time for both to spend with children and family.

Studying in Australia created opportunities for family, parenting and relationship changes. All the participants expressed positive feelings for the change they had experienced so far. Many of them that indicated that the changes in their family and intimate relationships were significant but identified that changes were only possible upon moving to Australia. The

women fought hard to engage their husband's support in the reproductive labour. Most of the men resisted the reproductive labour, but eventually conceded when the women were either at breaking-point due to stress or when the men were influenced by Western environment and embarrassed for not helping.

Many of the women repeatedly stated how they and their husbands loved each other more on coming to Australia; women conflating their partners' help as acts of kindness, support and love; men admitting fault in the lack of caring for family and looking after children, with expressions of wanting to repatriate their pasts. I remind the readers of this thesis, here, that the constant harping on women's and men's sharing in reproductive work was in contrast to silence that drew angst when looking back to former Vietnamese life and also forward at what was to come.

Participants who experienced positive changes in their family relationships were more likely to express perceptions of how their love for each other grew and changed the overall family dynamic. In stating how they explored a new phase of their family life, which they have never endured before, was perhaps a reason for their continually comparing of past with present experiences in Australia in imagining their futures with uncertainty, and in a state of limbo. In the context of being international students, in a particular time, place and culture, mobilised a continual comparison of past and present in which concerns were raised.

The thought was always present for participants that their family lifestyle experienced in Australia would end in with the expiry of their student visa. In being amidst their time-limited transitory journeys, these comparisons in which they looked back to the past to appreciate the



present opened doors during interviews in which they also looked into their near futures. Looking into the future meant facing the reality of returning to the old gendered life. Many were sad and in fear.

Participants knew their pasts, they enjoyed the present, but over time they became less certain about their futures. The women, and the men to some extent, worried about it. Each of them were living in a state of precarious uncertainty. Stated in the literature reviewed earlier, Robertson and Runganaikaloo (2014) called such precariousness and uncertainty of student-migrants as living in limbo. As in their study, my research participants had settled into Australia, put down their roots with initial knowledge that their experiences were temporary, but over time they changed. Some participants faced forward and contemplated becoming student-migrants when generating intentions of staying in Australia. They found it increasingly difficult being positive about returning to Vietnam. It was these participants, when experiencing barriers with getting residency that hosted even more uncertainty and limbo.

As with Robertson and Runganaikaloo's research participants, my research participants invested financially and timewise as international students, many had been residing in Australia for several years, and they all were unsure about the future of their family life. Experienced for some as a 'living Hell' of not knowing if their relationship dynamics could be sustained, they then entertained further uncertainties of not knowing whether they could stay in Australia or had to leave at the end of their studies and, if forced to go home, how they would be received by extended family if divisions of reproductive labour did not return to Vietnamese cultural ways. The participants who had a spouse and children with them, while studying in Australia,

experienced the additional stress and uncertainty associated with feelings of inbetweenness with no resolve.

Participants expressed working harder at their own study in hope for sustaining positive changes. They worked harder when children are at school or late at night to free up time for the children. They were carrying the fear of not passing and the shame of not getting the result they needed to meet their own expectations, and potential shame going back if they did not succeed, and the limbo here too. Women participants work harder to convince their partner to help because they needed to succeed, but there remained a lot of uncertainty. If they left their children behind in Vietnam, this inhibited their study as they would be distracted thinking about their children's welfare back home. Coincidentally, they would also experience the pressure of other Vietnamese families in Australia who may accuse them for selfishness for enjoying life in Australia without bringing children and partner. All these images were compounded by past observations towards student parents before them and on looking back at the range of social surveillances they had carried lifelong.

In looking forward for peace, the uncertainty and precariousness of life for themselves and of the next generation made their feelings difficult to placate. In literature, the words of participants and their unspoken texts highlighted the intensity of parenting pressures in Vietnam that were hard to resist without moving away.

### ***Uncertain parenting of ngoan children***

Again, here I contribute my subjective interpretation as an insider researcher and Vietnamese person, and which sits behind the spoken words of the researched. The concept of *ngoan* is explained here in order to further discuss interpretation of the findings. *Ngoan* is one of those ‘you know’ unspoken concepts from the interviews. It relates to the way that children are brought up in Vietnam. Children are strictly taught by their parents, grandparents and surrounding adults that they need to be *ngoan* (Dror, 2018; Pham, 1999). It is hard to find the equivalent English word to this Vietnamese concept of *ngoan*. It is not simply obedient or docile. A child who is seen as *ngoan* is a child who has respect for older people, has self-denial, is devoted and committed, and is not allowed to confront parents and the elderly (Pham, 1999; Dror, 2018). More broadly, a *ngoan* child is also understood as a sweet and gentle child who behaves well according to the hierarchical order of relations in family and society (Drummond and Rydstrom, 2004). Then, by the time this child goes to school, they are continually and repeatedly taught to never question teachers and be unconditionally obedient toward them. With going through their whole childhood being educated to be *ngoan*, as well as receiving wishes at every birthday and New Year’s to be *ngoan*, a girl grows up, gets married and is always expected to be a *ngoan* daughter-in-law (Drummond and Rydstrom, 2004; Rydstrom, 2017).

Yet, this concept of *ngoan* might no longer be so rigid in Vietnam. It is often perceived as the extreme view of Vietnamese traditional male-female hierarchy that is summarised in Confucian maxim for women, ‘Obey your father when at home, obey your husband after marriage, and obey your son after your husband’s death’ (Van Luong, 1984: 310). However, a *ngoan* daughter-in-law is conceived as a girl who has the ability to show her sweetness, self-denial

and respect, adjust to family life, contribute socio-economically to her husband's family, and produce male progeny (Drummond and Rydstrom, 2004). These are also the experiences that many Vietnamese student parents said they endured in Vietnam and did not want their children's lives to repeat. It also relates to the reflection of daughter-in-law's experiences of their wedding day and life in their husbands' families, introduced at the beginning of this discussion chapter.

On moving to Australia, Vietnamese student parents were able to witness the different parenting methods compared to their own Vietnamese parenting styles. Many, upon going back to Vietnam drew on their exposure of Western parenting styles and their holistic education, readings, work opportunities and networking. Even when talking about the Tiger Mother (Chua, 2011) depiction of extremely strict parenting styles of Asian mothers living in the USA, participants indicated how they were not in favour of this image. Without having to say directly that they hated the Tiger Mother discourse, they focused on what they loved about parenting in Australia. The Vietnamese student parents in this study started to develop desires to raise their children following some principles of non-Vietnamese styles with a blend of the Australian way. They had wishes for their children to live in more positive and liberal environments, and this became even stronger the longer they were in Australia. Participants wanted balance for their children in terms of wellbeing and doing well in school, which they recognised may not have been their perspective if the family had remained in Vietnam. Likewise, they expressed fear in going back because they enjoyed and valued the not so harsh dynamics of their lives. Again, they exposed preferences for balance between Vietnamese traditions and perceptions of Australian family and cultural practices. The longer they lived in Australia, the more their

dreams for lifestyle changes, family relationships and opportunities for their children grew in strength and clarity, but uncertainties grew on whether these were possible.

Uncertainty in achieving balance between Vietnamese traditions and Australian ways led some participants to host extreme ideas about how to hold onto what they wanted. In the example provided in research findings, **Dao** planned her daughter's future. She said, "In the future, my daughter's possibility to marry a Vietnamese husband, even a man who was born in Australia with a Vietnamese background is zero". She took her daughter to Australia on commencing her studies as an international student and raised her daughter with rather liberal methods in Vietnamese terms. **Dao** allowed her daughter to learn what she wanted at school, join clubs at schools and, later appreciate financial independence as a woman. Consistent with many other women interviewed, **Dao** rejected the expectations for her daughter to learn how to do cooking and housework, or to serve her family members well. She said, "My daughter would not be the woman who comes home after work, cook when her husband watches TV". This view of zero chance of her daughter marrying a Vietnamese man represents **Dao's** Janus Head contemplation of life behind and ahead. She drew on traditional discourses and proposed that Vietnamese men and their families would find it difficult to accept a daughter-in-law with a progressive Western mind. She hosted certainties that her daughter could never live with Vietnamese in-laws, as a result of their rejection of the performative protocols of Vietnamese gender. Vice versa, she and her daughter neither wanted nor accepted the rigid framework and lifestyle of these Vietnamese families. While many other Vietnamese student parents with daughters did not outwardly express this willingness as strongly as **Dao**, a few likewise shared the desire when looking back and forward to have their daughter marry a Western man. In interviews these

participants often curled their tongue and softened their voices as if they were telling me secrets. It appeared as if they were in fear that someone might hear about their desires to choose the best of life from the East and the West in looking forward.

There was a common feature among all the Vietnamese student parents who were interviewed. This, I observed as agency in combining the strengths of both Australian and Vietnamese ways into their repertoire of parenting. In their temporary living in Australia, these parents were exposed to the Australian parenting style through meeting the parents and friends of their children and other Western families around them. They carefully selected aspects of the parenting styles of others, which included teaching their kids to be independent, creative, and genuine and to speak their minds respectfully. These qualities, usually found in authoritative approach that Western parents employ, emphasise children's independence, self-esteem, open emotional expressions and personal growth (Kim et al., 2013; Su and Hynie, 2011; Driscoll et al., 2007).

The participants frequently incorporated some of best perceived aspects of the Vietnamese parenting style, in particular to ensure their children were respectful, supportive of others, submissive, and caring for all members in the family. These qualities reflect the desired outcomes of Asian parents' authoritarian style that promote family bonds and collectivism (Park et al., 2010; Yeh and Bedford, 2003; Kwan, 2000; Ho, 2014). Holding onto their pasts and infusing new ways of raising and teaching children featured in the interviews of all of the participants who were parents. They presented beliefs that the cultural blend in parenting would

support their children to grow up and thrive across borders, situation and environment, while becoming immersive and active agents in their dual worlds.

In looking back and forward, and in comparison, to Vietnam, Australia bestowed upon the Vietnamese student parents the enjoyment of a clean environment and food safety, respect for the law, roads with orderly traffic and many other simplified, risk free aspects of daily life. First feelings on arrival were quickly supplemented by the appreciation of the education system of their children, as well as a progressive and flexible parenting styles in a different familial environment. As the result, the main aspect that interviewees celebrated was positive changes in the relationship between parents and children. The vast majority of participants said they experienced significant improvements in these relationships. This included stronger attachment, more frequent conversations between them and increased understanding, something they had previously not experienced when they were in Vietnam – thought to be due to busy lifestyles as well as hierarchical family relationships.

### ***Bonding, children's education and school life***

The bonds that participants expressed existed with their children were thought to be due to the way they were involved in their children's education. It was different from the experiences of migrant parents' relationship with their children, when compared to previous research (Renzaho et al., 2011; Nieuwboer and van't Rood, 2016; Pauwels, 2005; Birman et al., 2002; Ashbourne et al., 2012). This is because the children from migrant families have the ability to learn the language of the host country faster than their parents (Kim et al., 2015). The children of migrant parents are known to help their parents fill out medical forms, translate notifications sent from

schools, banks or insurance companies and translate bill information (Corona et al., 2012). As said before in reviewing migration literature, this results in the children's feeling of pride in undertaking responsibilities in the family context, which in turn strengthens their connection with their parents and preserves family unity (Roche et al., 2015; Corona et al., 2012). This reverse support does not happen in Vietnamese student parents' families because of the requirement to speak English before they come to Australia, yet the family bond became similarly strengthened.

Vietnamese student parents have good English language skills; a requirement to be accepted for studying in Australia as the host country. The connection between these parents and children, related to language skills, is that student parents can participate in their children's activities at school, directly discuss with teachers about their children's learning and wellbeing. As a point of difference from the migrant parents' experiences that is recognized in literature (Capps et al., 2010; Estrada-Martínez et al., 2011). Vietnamese student parents are fully confident and enjoy doing these activities. They are even more involved in their children's school activities because when they live in Australia, they have less support from extended families and friends – another feature of being in between two places, two cultures, two languages, and two ways of engaging with their children's schooling.

Despite good English affording the participants the freedom to engage in their children's school activities, there were difficulties in arranging time to both ensure the parents' own education and not miss opportunities to join their children in sports and cultural activities. Many of the participants advised of skipping classes, seeking permission to be absent, learn online or rely



on the benevolence of classmates for extra help. Research highlighted the time constraints of family responsibilities as a major concern for international student parents (Brooks, 2013; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010). Time leads to some international student parents prioritising their parenting responsibility or roles over their study priorities. Research has identified how many participants spent time with their children, rather than study, or attended children's events, rather than classes (Sallee, 2015). Some participants in my research expressed guilt with skipping classes or sidelining required self-guided study, but expressed it as was well worth it. This is because the opportunity to participate in children's school activities was experienced as strengthening the relationship between parent and child – something not experienced in the same way when looking back at life in Vietnam where children rote-learned and parents left education to the school. Parents interviewed expressed gratitude for the opportunities to understand the educational environment in Australia and to become a valued part of it, the teacher-student relationships, and see the ways that teachers engage children and the Western family in learning. Many of the parents were unlikely to have experienced this type of community inclusive school life in their own childhoods, or at university in Vietnam, and it was evident that they had some uncertainty in how their children might cope on going back – another form of Limbo they experienced.

A representative example of the experience of two educational systems for their children was provided earlier **Duong's** story. To reiterate, he said that when coming to Australia it was good to have the opportunity to gain professional and academic knowledge as well as a valuable qualification from Australian universities. **Duong** experienced when observing the children studying in Australia, that learning took place in the classroom as well as outside in society.

**Duong** expressed interest in going to the playground in the parks with his daughters, to their school events to observe the way Australians educated them and this subsequently influenced how he changed in parenting his children. Much more than that, from observing daily life activities in Australian society he gained an understanding about liberal Western parenting styles. This gave him an appreciation of a progressive education system in a developed country, as opposed to a restrictive rule-based one that the backward-looking Janus Head face kept seeing in Vietnam. Indeed, education in Australia brings many benefits to the development of the children of Vietnamese student parents, as well as arousing interest in the learning of their children that most participants shared.

Vietnamese student parents expressed being overjoyed to see that their children developed the ability to think independently, creatively and used English fluently in learning contexts as well as in everyday life. This creative freedom for their children were priorities, when still in Vietnam making decisions to bring their children with them in their journey to study in Australia. Most student parents recalled that when attending parent teacher meetings or when they had the opportunity to attend their children's graduation ceremonies in Australia, they were always deeply moved to see the results of the children's passion for learning. They indicated that this sort of passion was something they rarely saw when living back in Vietnam. Some of these parents found themselves going against the traditional parenting practices in Vietnam, where parents required their children to study hard and play less, and parents imposed future career choices on their children early on (Nguyen, 2011; Vu, 2006; Wong et al., 2011). While the parents enjoyed the Australian way, particularly for their children to freely make decisions

in their path of study and life choices, they were often conflicted because they understood this may cause dilemmas for their children after returning to Vietnam.

Many parents said they had wanted to provide choices and educational freedom to their children previously in Vietnam, but the pressures and expectations of their extended family, networks and societal expectations did not allow. On looking back to Vietnam, many explained how on attempting to change they would get drawn back into the intergenerational cycle in which their own study and career choices were influenced by their parents. Then, the participants likewise decided for their own children for the sake of family face. Many said that they could imagine their children being influenced by this cycle if they were still in Vietnam. Only after having the opportunity to live in Australia, they were able to let their children have free choices in their life, enjoy the Western educational system and familial context.

Consistent among the Vietnamese student parents were observations of changes in family dynamics, which they associated with their children's schooling. These parents also described changes in their own behaviours, in particular their own respect for their children's opinions and children's decisions to follow their interests. Parents described seeing the children's passion that was created by their efforts, and the orientation and support from the school. In visioning futures in which their children could do miracles, eventually the Vietnamese student parents could not imagine school and family life other than this newfound Vietnamese-Australian liberal way. This change in the lifestyle of these parents, and the enjoyment they experienced in seeing their children prosper, also had many positive effects on their children.

Most Vietnamese student parents in this study shared similar observations of the impact of positive changes in their family life in Australia on their children. The children had valuable learning about the responsibilities that family members needed to share. They perceived that their children came to know what a successful family life was, where parents spent more time together than when in Vietnam, more equally participated in housework, spent time at children's school and together looked after the children. For those who had lived in Australia for only a short period of time, these parents saw in their children to develop many positive feelings since witnessing the family positive changes. No more pictures of their fathers having beer with friends until late at night or curled up on the sofa reading newspapers, playing games while waiting for their mother to clean up the house and prepare dinner. Especially for the women interviewed, this made them happy when their children were actively involved in family activities through parental modelling by both mother and father.

Here, it is needed to note that there were still a few female participants who expressed their feelings of disappointment as they were continuing to experience the unequal burden of reproductive labour, as not much had changed since they had moved from Vietnam. In contrast, the latter were a little disappointed with family life due to experiencing negative impacts of carrying on the Vietnamese way on their children, and in the interactions between adult and child. However, majority of student mothers in my study constantly expressed their feelings of happiness when noticing the changes in their children's wellbeing as well as in their partners' mindset.

Female student parents told of their non-study partners shifting in behaviours. They saw their partners' recognition of the stressfulness of studying in Australia, then the eventual willingness to clean the house, take care of the children and prepare meals to enable these women to focus on their studies. In the same vein, some male participants talked about their surprise that housework was actually very hard and required time and multi-tasked skills. These men expressed self-blame for not having contributed more to caring for the family, looking after their children and home life. They were ashamed, until experiencing life in Australia, that they had left their female partners to do everything, by herself, before. Those men who perceived shifts in their own behaviours offered a sense of pride during interviews of the changes in their own mindsets toward women, gender performativity and sharing more equally than before in parenting, their relationships and family life generally.

In considering the actions of many men, whether they helped more in the family or resisted, it appeared that women interviewed were determined to greater equity in reproductive work, while simultaneously navigating the patriarchy they brought with them from Vietnam to Australia. On weighing up their efforts, these women feared that would be undone on returning to Vietnam. This state of limbo in now knowing how life would be on going home, fear of their relationships with their children and partners returning to old ways, was more intense for those participants who were closer in time to going home.

### ***Hope, opportunity and limbo***

The closer it got to returning to Vietnam, the more participants revisited their original motivations for bringing their children to Australia with them in the first place. Observable

among the narratives of participants that having the opportunity to send children abroad, especially to developed Western countries to study, is a dream that they beheld. Dang (2014) noted this as the dream was a reflection of many Vietnamese families. Yearning to study abroad is consistent with findings from other researchers highlighting push-pull factors; push factors being the perceived poor quality of Vietnam's education system and living standards, alongside pull factors of student migration offering improved career prospects and increased opportunities for economic wellbeing (Nghia, 2019; Nguyen, 2013; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). The education system is noted consistently by researchers to be of poor quality and many children in families are educated in traditional ways that may prevent integration of young people in a globalised world (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Le, 2014; Nghia, 2015). Access to Internet and other media, however, offers parents insights into how life could be for their children abroad, dream of it and want it.

In Vietnam, many social issues are not adequately and thoroughly addressed. This includes the living environment, air quality, food safety and the quality of life, which authors argue are not guaranteed due to obstacles in the administrative system and in light of policy governing these issues (Stark-Ewing, 2018; Baylis et al., 2016; Ortmann, 2017a). Ortmann (2017b) blames hierarchal political systems in which power is monopolized as obstacles. These are some of the reasons why many parents may seek opportunities for their children's outbound education and changes to quality of life in general.

In addition, there was an attractiveness observed of the participants in their desire to become international students and experience the new cultures. Many developed the necessary language

and living skills in preparation to embark on the international environment, also sending their children to English language school prior to coming to Australia. Although most of the participants, as international students, would only be in Australia for two to four years, bringing their children was a chance to expose their children to alternative education and ways of living. As motivations to study internationally, the participants' retrospective narratives on coming to Australia mirrored findings offered by researchers on the attraction (pull factors) of studying abroad (Nghia, 2019; Nguyen, 2013; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). Scholars note that families are known to go to great lengths to plan, secure scholarships, finances and to meet visa conditions to study abroad (Pham, 2018). It is thought that around 90 percent of Vietnamese who travel abroad for their or children's education is self-funded (IECF Monitor, 2013).

Some of the participants in the current study were self-funding their studies and others were on scholarship. In my own experience, I know of many families who go to great lengths to access finances to enable travelling abroad and for study. Many families are known to sell off their assets, lands, properties or borrow from relatives, friends or banks to invest huge sums of money into their children's education abroad (Mok et al., 2009). Participants in the current study, and mostly their partners, gave up their jobs, networks and family relationships to come to Australia. They desperately chased scholarships or try to satisfy immigration financial requirements by selling properties, cars and household goods, to have a taste of a different life. For parents, both those who receive scholarships or are self-funded, expressed the great opportunity to bring children with them on their study journey. There was a double benefit expressed here, being to escape perceived poor education for their children and the opportunity for the whole family to learn new skills, interesting cultures and working. Speaking about these opportunities were said

alongside the many silences, particularly of the multiple burdens in Vietnamese family and society.

There were multiple benefits for their children's perception of international study. On the surface, participants advised of coming to Australia for better food safety, fresh air and public services. During interviews, what became important to them were the living conditions in Australia; in particular, they appreciated expressing their own perspectives, opportunity for creative thinking in their study and for their children's development. Participants had opportunities to access different resources in Australia, news media, information about world history and political issues. Finally, parents did not need to pay bribes to teachers or school administrators for admission, or to pay for *điểm giả* (fake marks). This was highlighted in **Thu's** example in the findings. In the silence between **Thu** and other participant's statements were often the unspoken alleviation of the need to engage corrupt practices that included bribing teachers, doctors and nurses to ensure being treated properly in schools, hospitals, or for access to other services. Many simply said '*điểm giả*', followed by '*you know*' when responding in interviews to why they pursued outbound studies. Reflected in the literature, many parents in Vietnam pay extra tuition to teachers who do not teach properly in school and then charge for catch-up private tutoring (Bray and Kwo, 2013; Dawson, 2009). The participants in the current study confirmed many of these corrupt educational practices in their experiences. As a Vietnamese diaspora, I knew.

Many of the participants expressed how they were luckier than their peers living in Vietnam to be able to go to university overseas and for their children to benefit from non-Vietnamese



schooling. They said that their friends and family often expressed admiring the luck and privilege they had but questioned why they could not spend their money on better quality education in Vietnam. Participants questioned themselves in the same way. Later when they were in Australia, the participants suggested that friends and family in Vietnam probably did not fully understand the additional benefits of not having to pay corrupt education and health providers, and the benefit of critical and creative pedagogies. Uncertainty and the experiences of limbo of participants when in Australia intensified as they reflected on the benefits in Australia, knew these were unattainable in returning to Vietnam, had to face ongoing questions on their return; however, they hoped that all could be different.

In focusing on participants' hope, after experiencing changes to daily family life, they tended to over-focus on the chores in the family home and with children. What they were doing here, often, was self-governing and censoring much more that could have been said about being stuck between two cultures and the many questions they could not resolve about their forward-looking Janus Head visions.

In resolving their limbo, I suspect that many of the participants have entertained ideas to stay in Australia beyond their studies. Almost every time conversations in the interviews headed into the direction of intentions to return to Vietnam or to stay in Australia, most participants changed the topic or were simply silent. Only one female, **Ngoc**, who had two sons, firmly wanted to go back to Vietnam. She did not want her sons to be burdened with both productive and reproductive labour like the men in Australia. However, in my observations Ngoc kept referring to her husband's wishes in presenting her answers. All her expressed thoughts, desires

and actions were participating in the patriarchal order of society, irrespective of contemplating staying or going back. I kept asking, ‘*And you have the same thoughts as your husband?*’ She kept saying, ‘*Yes.*’ A few participants told of their intentions to find another way to stay or return to Australia, or at least to ensure their children could remain. As in the findings, **Chau Anh, Xuan** and **Lien** all talked studying abroad, again, as a family on another scholarship or sending their children back to Australia for school. This is all about breaking the intergenerational cycle of educational access and gender burdens for their children, consistent with literature cited earlier (Roer-Strier et al., 2005; Johnsdotter, 2015; Ochocka and Janzen, 2008; Pyke, 2000; Nguyen et al., 2014). In hosting future hopes and dreams, however, there was an intense ongoing fear that the hoped-for future might not be attainable.

### **Janus-faced transnational student parenting**

Woven through this thesis are the Vietnamese student parents' stories of changes in their parenting practices, care and concern for their children, and intimate couple relationships. These are, associated with the transitory life in Australia. Temporary living in Australia enabled parents who participated in this study the experience of enjoying family life at levels they had not ever experienced before. These Vietnamese student parents' lives in Australia were full of memories about their family life and the relationship experiences from the old environment back in Vietnam. Comparisons were made frequently during their interviews, and were focused on many aspects of family life, educational experiences and societal expectations of them in contrast to what they wanted life to be. Grace (2017) articulated this phenomenon in which life exists between what has gone by and what is yet to come, as emblematic of Janus. She wrote in her poem:

The roman god of open doors... he is symbolic of thresholds... his image is carved with two heads, one face looking forward and one looking back, poised between past and future.

In the state of limbo, amidst the inbetweenness of time, place, culture, relationships and parenting, the participants were finding moments of enjoyment. On looking forward and looking back, they were appreciating all to be gained from the Australian education style and system. They admired the way teachers in Australian schools treat their children and recalled what they did not like of the pressures upon children in Vietnam resulting from over-supervision from teachers and parents. The more these Vietnamese student parents enjoyed their children studying in Australia with them, the more they felt experienced uncertainty, worried and limbo when entertaining thoughts about going back home.

As said before, the children easily adapted and quickly integrated into a new learning environment. They were free to develop their imagination, creativity, independent thought and expression of their opinions. It was important to parents that their children were interested in and enjoyed these learning, as it infused parents with pride and peace. This was in contrast to parents who made short returns to Vietnam, such as **Lien** quoted earlier in the findings of this thesis on her son's wanting to be in Australia. That very strong attitude that Lien spoke about of her son of not wanting to be in Vietnam worried her. Like **Lien**, most parents in this study were worried that their children may get reversed-cultural shock and would not fit back into Vietnamese schools. There was also an unspoken concern about going back that related to whether they and their children would be able to curl their tongue enough to avoid trouble at work, at home, at school and in public. The participants then prepared their children for their

uncertain futures by teaching them what to say and what not to say to avoid shame in Vietnamese society. Many of the participants skilled-up their children to smile and keep their thoughts to themselves as part of resolving the inbetweenness of the two cultures fuelling their limbo. Many worries held the parents in a deep sense of uncertainty and insecurity for the duration of their studies. Questions like, *What would happen [if] ...?* appeared in almost every interview. As already mentioned, there were worries about education for their children on returning to Vietnam, fears for family life, couple relationships and networking at work and the social order, generally, of all things. Recalling unpleasant experiences in Vietnam with their partners and seeing the changes in family life in Australia were the two sides of the Janus Head that always existed in parallel with their transitory lives in Australia.

Despite women fighting to achieve more equitable family life, and the men being influenced and acquiescing to the Western environment, there was always a constant stress in deliberating how to maintain such a lifestyle when they go back to Vietnam. It was these lifestyle changes that participants reasoned were associated with their growing love for their partners. Many talked about how they prized this new phase of their family life that they had never endured before. Perhaps this was a reason for continually comparing the past with the lifestyle that they were having in Australia, and the development of uncertainties in forward looking. The comparison helped them to see the positive changes, but also fear their futures. The comparison has made them appreciate the gain that they might not have expected before coming to Australia, but also grief their envisioned losses to come. The comparison created the opportunity to realise the family life they endeavoured to achieve. By comparison with the past,

many said they had augmented their intimate partner love, but did not know if love could endure life after Australia.

Comparisons of life with their past living in Vietnam were frequently expressed by participants, also, with concern for going back. This was generally similar for both women and men. Their futures imagined lives drew on the Vietnamese lives as they knew it, of their intimate relationships and their parenting. The participants in my study experienced a constant state of Janus-faced moments of migration reflection and potentiality, unsettling past and future (Bedford and Rai, 2010). They could not foresee the maintaining of their Australian lifestyles on going back to Vietnam. They could only imagine going back to the past they no longer wanted. The comparison, (in this study's context again) however, also created concerns.

Since overseas students' time in Australia is limited, their family lifestyle in a less patriarchal context might be soon terminated. The comparison brought them to look back to the past to be able to appreciate the present. The comparison has also taken them to the door through which they could look at the near future with dread. Looking into the future meant a return to the old gendered life. They knew the past and, on looking forward, there was no peace. When the Janus Head represents looking back on the experience of war and looking forward for peace (Anderson, 1965; Barbetti and Robbins, 1998), with no foresight of peace left participants in limbo, with uncertainty, even if they enjoyed the present. Participants expressed being worried and were unable to pull themselves out of living in limbo, in the midst of a state of uncertainty.

Authors (Robertson and Runganaikaloo, 2014; Wright et al., 2016) called such precariousness and uncertainty of student-migrants as this phenomenon of 'living in limbo'. Limbo occurred

when students were trying to settle into the host country, establish a life and “put down roots” without knowing if their stay would be temporary or ongoing. Consistent with migration literature (Robertson and Runganaikaloo, 2014), this uncertainty and precariousness inherent in their temporary period of living created significant tensions internally, in their daily lives and among the members of these transnational families.

In sum, participants demonstrated how they celebrated positive changes in family life, and parents’, children’s and couples’ relationships in Australia. At the same time, they were worried about the futures of returning to Vietnam on completions of studies. It was seen in the participants’ happy smiles when they talked in interviews of their Australian journeys full of hope for gender equity in work and family, children’s educational opportunities and sustained relationship change, while their eyes were frequently infused with worry, concern and fear. The main facial expression captured throughout the interviews when they were comparing their past and articulating their fear of inability to hold onto their current lives. The more participants enjoyed the Australia experience, the greater their uncertainties for the future. These Vietnamese parents were evidently looking for peaceful futures, same as Janus, but were scared that it may not come. Going back to family and networks in Vietnam meant enduring the discursive pressure and societal norms presenting hardships as opposed to the changes they experienced when in Australia.

Overall, the findings of this study about the influence of time and limbo (the closer to end of study, the greater uncertainties felt), the degree of positive changes in family relationship enjoyed and limbo (the more they experienced happiness with intimate or gender relations with

partner and children development, the more they worried), and the different patterns of limbo experienced by men and women degree of enjoyment have not been identified in key findings in previous research. They form part of the original contribution to knowledge, such that they are key phenomena identified that are unique and also warrant additional inquiry into the future.

## *Concluding commentary*

*... in which I end this thesis by chewing and churning the torment in my own Janus head, which is a “temple [that] always stands open in time of war [and] closed when peace has come” (Plutarch of Chaeronea).*

How many times have I already said that Vietnamese student parents’ temporary living in Australia enabled them to enjoy family life at levels they had not experienced before? In doing so, they had the opportunity to *taste* Australia and to decide whether they would like to savour more or not. Whether they perceived a negative or positive reception, irrespective if they intended to stay or return, these Vietnamese student parents carried a battle in their own minds.

### **The Janus Head is always there**

Janus’ doors, however, ‘stand open wide, that when the people hath gone forth to war, the road for their return may be open too’ (Ovid, 2012). The Vietnamese student parents had inner turmoil and had no peace in their minds, while experiencing the phenomenon of living in limbo in Australia. But peace is what they looked for in the future. All of them expressed satisfaction with everything they learned, how they grew and had something special to take away from the transitory experience. There was the hope to maintain changes to their parenting styles and family relationships in going home to Vietnam, and the potential to blend what they liked from the Australian lifestyles with Vietnamese traditions and norms dear to them. The issue with the Janus Head, like the participants, is that the future hope for peace remains in sight but never



reached, leaving them to endure the pain of uncertainty and opacity in knowing what beholds them in future life. It is the persistence of uncertainty and inbetweenness in the participants' lives that this thesis offers as the original contribution to knowledge. The associated feelings of limbo will most likely continue long after they return to Vietnam.

As the nature of my data collection, I interviewed students who had children with them in Australia. Their stories, however, were not limited to their parenting and the relationship with their children. The large part of my analysis about their intimate relationships as couples indicated that for someone to have spouses with them in Australia, their non-study partners played an important role in parenting their children and in their study journey overseas. Through my research participants' stories, these partners' figures were mentioned quite constantly. It was shown that the students' partners went through many similar experiences like the participants did. There was the stage of living in limbo and uncertainty. There were hope, joy and frustrations. But they are not the population examined in my study, so as in the larger literature. Their experiences have been unexplored, and their voices have been not recorded. Alongside with them, the children in this picture were also described, and yet also were not examined.

Children who accompanied their parents in their studying journey overseas were brought up in the two worlds, two cultures and especially two education systems. They literally grew up in a strange environment and learnt a new language while working hard to maintain their mother language and lifestyle in order to continue their study and fit in when they go back to Vietnam with their parents one day. Observing a freer lifestyle and different family dynamics through

their peers at schools in Australia, they endured a great level of confusions, nervousness and even loss, perhaps. They were also not my researched community and to my knowledge, they have not been the main figure in field studies.

While the participants in my study expressed their experiences of living in uncertainty about their future when they go back to Vietnam, the question of “What would happen?” was always there. They have concerns about their future, and I am, as a researcher, curious about their life experiences and their feelings when they go back to their origin country. There are studies about Vietnamese returnees after gaining qualifications from overseas. However, these papers’ focuses are on the experience of reverse culture shock with feelings that they are strangers in their own country or being discriminated against at their workplaces by their employers for having been away for overseas study; and their intimate romantic relationships.

So, further studies about the experiences of international students’ partners and children who accompany them while studying overseas and the experiences of international students’ families being back in Vietnam after graduation are worth conducting.

Finally, the gender differences between family life upon Vietnamese students in Vietnam, then Australia, and uncertainties related to their journeys of going back in this study can have important implications on better informing educational support and student migration services. This is crucial to ensure that these services will meet the specific needs and demands of Vietnamese student parents in Australia.

## Reflective epilogue

*Sometimes I think, I need a spare heart to feel all the things I feel*  
(Sanobar Khan, *A Thousand Flamingos* 2016)

Since I used to be a reporter in Vietnam (both radio and print newspapers), I am quite familiar with the feeling of uncertainty. In the early stage of my career, every time I put the final draft of my news article on my editor's desk, I immediately felt uncertain about its future. There were so many layers of uncertainty. Would it be approved by the editor, then the editor in chief, then be published? And if so, would it be read, listen to, loved and remembered by the readers and audiences? Or would it be cruelly thrown on my desk and followed by blunt questions, "What is this? Are you sure you wrote it after interviewing the right person and checking reliable sources?" And if so, might I become severely damaged or still have the courage to re-write it and stay in this job? These were the moments where I was in limbo when I did not know if I would be jumping for joy upon hearing my article on air or published the next day; or shattered by the crushing feeling of rejection. As in Dante's (Alighieri, 1954) description of limbo as living Hell introduced much earlier in this thesis, I sought freedom from my own indeterminate turmoil depicted in my Janus Head actions of looking for peace while suffering my own inner wars. Nothing was certain about the future of such articles of mine, the articles into which I had put so much time, effort and emotion. I felt vulnerable, always, repeatedly and extremely.

Brené Brown (2015: 34) defined vulnerability as the uncertainty, the risk and emotional exposure of how when we love someone, we speak in public or put our ideas and writing "out

into the world with no assurance of acceptance or appreciation”. We always live with such vulnerability and, myself, I have lived in this uncertainty of my writing career thousands of times. But even so, I kept doing it and have kept experiencing the uncertainty throughout many different phases of my life, since my childhood, transitory adolescence and adulthood. Recently, the uncertainty is with me in my student parent journey in Australia.

As it happens, I am now finishing my research on the uncertainty that occurred in the stage of living in limbo experienced by the Vietnamese student parents who gave me their words.

### ***Highlights of the thesis journey***

*... in which the dull ache to write returns again, and in nearing the end of this thesis the proximity of my own homeland return draws nearer...*

While I am writing this final chapter of the thesis, I still remember by heart every single interview with my research participants. It is as if I still can hear their voices and see their faces, their smiles, their sighs and tears. I remember the quiet library corner by the window with a plain white wooden table, where I used to arrive earlier than the scheduled time and turn on the recorder in standby (also with the back-up recorder), and neatly arrange the pen, notebooks and other required documents. I often let my imagination wander about the person with whom I was about to talk to, while reading the questions I had prepared. Despite thinking I knew the Vietnamese student parent story, each one of them always surprised me with their life narratives. They told pieces of their lives that could not have been given in any ordered pattern, as in a set of closed-ended questions. In-depth interviewing is the method I chose to elicit the

depth of meaning about lived experience, and I am grateful that it was the most appropriate method for me to receive this valuable data. But I am most grateful to those who have volunteered to participate in this study.

My Vietnamese student parents who participated gave me a generous amount of their time to do the interview in a lifestyle quite tight for them due to both studying and being a parent in a foreign country. They shared with me, as a complete stranger, their joys, sorrows, worries, hopes and hidden fears. There were sometimes long silences and, in understanding these hidden fears I felt that I could look backward and forward through my own Janus Head and hear their meanings among these silences. In the course of doing this PhD thesis I experienced my own ups and downs, and impacts from external and internal factors. I thought about letting go of my studies many times, as did many of the participants. However, my feelings of being indebted to them for their time and their stories. Many of their unique experiences and deep feelings of being in the two worlds often triggered the intense conflicting feelings in my own mind. However, these generous participants made me realise that our experiences of uncertainty, fears from our pasts and about our futures, and hostilities in our Janus Heads had to be shared if there was ever to be a chance of peace in our futures.

There were moments when I was bursting with joy by the wishes and hopes they shared that they had, more or less, fulfilled. Yet there were times when my heart could not stand the intense emotions generated from the conversation, repeated when I was again listening to while transcribing. There were times that my research participants' pieces of life and the details of their stories touched the deepest corner of my own memories and experiences. The torrent of

thoughts that often kept me awake all night and into the morning made my fingers curl up on the keyboard, leaving me unable to type a single line for days. The participants shared with me the same painful feelings. These feelings were because I am also a mother studying, raising children and maintaining family relationships between the two cultures. My supervisors, especially my main supervisor, played a vital role in such critical moments. I would not have survived this journey without the positive working relationship with her, her shoulder to cry on, her endless support for me in handling such an overwhelming amount of triggering information in my data. Her texts, emails and messages in the early morning, then later at night instilling me with confidence and professionally guiding me when I was tangling with theoretical frameworks and concepts to deal with and apply to such a wealthy volume of data. Here, too, she reminded me of the reward of peace I could achieve upon looking forward towards the completion of this thesis – even if my limbo could not be resolved due to the multiple Janus Head dualities still confining me as I continued to experience life in-between two worlds, between cultures and between lived experiences. This inbetweenness, like the participants in my study, has and will continue to haunt me as I continue to seek education and safety for my children, harmony for my family and understanding of my ways.

The interpretive phenomenology that I used in this study likewise gave insights into the participants' lived experiences, transitions in living, partnering and parenting in Australia. But there was more. I wanted to explore in this thesis, as I have mentioned throughout, a deeper understanding. Applying an additional analytical overlay, the Janus Head concept, provided a lens for deeper interpretation of the Vietnamese student parents' experiences of living in limbo.



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# Appendix 1: Final Ethical Approval

Re: 7511 SBREC Final approval notice (22 March 2017)

**From:** Human Research Ethics <human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, March 22, 2017 12:43:26 AM  
**To:** nguy0476@flinders.edu.au; George Karpetsis; Helen McLaren  
**Subject:** 7511 SBREC Final approval notice (22 March 2017)

Dear Kieu Nga,

The Chair of the [Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee \(SBREC\)](#) at Flinders University considered your response to conditional approval out of session and your project has now been granted final ethics approval. This means that you now have approval to commence your research. Your ethics final approval notice can be found below.

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## FINAL APPROVAL NOTICE

Project No.:

Project Title:

Principal Researcher:

Email:

Approval Date:  Ethics Approval Expiry Date:

# Appendix 2: Ethical Modification Approval

Re: 7511 SBREC modification No.2 approval notice (31 July 2018)

**From:** Human Research Ethics <human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, 31 July 2018 3:30 PM  
**To:** Nga Nguyen; Helen McLaren  
**Subject:** 7511 SBREC modification No.2 approval notice (31 July 2018)

Dear Kieu Nga,

The Chairperson of the [Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee \(SBREC\)](#) at Flinders University has reviewed and approved the modification request that was submitted for project 7511. A modification ethics approval notice can be found below.

## MODIFICATION (No.2) APPROVAL NOTICE

|                             |  |                              |               |
|-----------------------------|--|------------------------------|---------------|
| Project No.:                | 7511   |                              |               |
| Project Title:              | Parenting in a foreign land: Exploring the experiences of Vietnamese parents studying in Australia under the student visa immigration stream |                              |               |
| Principal Researcher:       | Mrs Kieu Nga Nguyen  |                              |               |
| Email:                      | nguy0476@flinders.edu.au   |                              |               |
| Modification Approval Date: | 31 July 2018   | Ethics Approval Expiry Date: | 31 March 2021 |

I am pleased to inform you that the modification request submitted for project 7511 on the 30 July 2018 has been reviewed and approved by the SBREC Chairperson. Please see below for a list of the approved modifications. Any additional information that may be required from you will be listed in the second table shown below called 'Additional Information Required'.

| Approved Modifications                   |   |
|--|---|
| Extension of ethics approval expiry date |   |
| Project title change                     |   |
| Personnel change                         | X |
| Research objectives change               |   |
| Research method change                   |   |
| Participants – addition +/- change       |   |
| Consent process change                   |   |
| Recruitment process change               |   |
| Research tools change                    |   |
| Document / Information Changes           |   |
| Other (if yes, please specify)           |   |

| Additional Information Required |
|---------------------------------|
| None.                           |

# Appendix 3: Information Sheet



Kieu Nga Nguyen  
PhD Candidate  
School of Social and Policy Studies  
Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences  
Social Sciences South Rm 126  
Flinders University, Bedford Park SA 5042  
GPO Box 2100  
Adelaide SA 5001  
Email: [nga.nguyen@flinders.edu.au](mailto:nga.nguyen@flinders.edu.au)  
Mobile: 0468412748

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## INFORMATION SHEET

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***Parenting in a foreign land:  
Exploring the experiences of Vietnamese parents studying in Australia  
under the student visa immigration stream***

**Investigator:**

Kieu Nga Nguyen  
PhD Candidate  
School of Social and Policy Studies  
Email: [nga.nguyen@flinders.edu.au](mailto:nga.nguyen@flinders.edu.au)  
Mobile: 0468412748

**Supervisor:**

Dr George Karpetis  
Senior Lecturer in Social Work  
Program Director – Master of Social Work  
School of Social and Policy Studies  
Phone: (08) 8201 2270 – Email: [george.karpetis@flinders.edu.au](mailto:george.karpetis@flinders.edu.au)

**Associate Supervisor:**

Dr Helen McLaren  
Senior Lecturer in Social Work  
School of Social and Policy Studies  
Phone: (08) 8201 3025 – Email: [helen.mclaren@flinders.edu.au](mailto:helen.mclaren@flinders.edu.au)

**Description of the study:**

This study is part of the project entitled *Exploring the experiences of Vietnamese parents studying in Australia under the student visa immigration stream*. This project is supported by the Flinders University, School of Social and Policy Studies.

**Purpose of the study:**

The objectives of this project are to:

- explore the parenting experiences of Vietnamese Student Visa parents in Australia
- understand the factors affecting their parenting
- understand the effects of the relationship between Student Visa parents and their children in their parenting
- understand the effects of the parental couple relationship on parenting
- develop recommendations for the services needed for Student Visa parents in Australia.

**What will I be asked to do?**

You are invited to attend an interview with a PhD candidate who will ask you questions about your parenting experiences in a new land. The interview will take about up to 1.5 hours and will be digitally audio-recorded. The interviews will be subsequently transcribed and stored as a computer file. Once the results of the study have been finalised the audio recording files will be erased.

**What benefit will I gain from being involved in this study?**

Your parenting experiences in a foreign land will help in developing recommendations for the services needed for Student Visa parents in Australia.

**Will I be identifiable by being involved in this study?**

Your name or surname will not be identified in the research. Any identifying information will be removed and the typed-up file will be stored on a password protected computer that only the researcher will can access. Your comments will not be linked directly to you, but to an interview number. You may also elect to receive a copy of your interview transcript, or embargo specific sections from the interview.

**Are there any risks or discomforts if I am involved?**

The investigator anticipates few minimal risks from your involvement in this study. If you have any concerns regarding anticipated or actual risks or discomforts, please raise them with the researcher. Disclose of illegal information including child abuse is subject to mandatory reporting, since researcher is bound to mandatory child abuse reporting stemming from their social work professional identity.

**How do I agree to participate?**

Participation is voluntary. You may answer 'no comment' or refuse to answer any questions and you are free to withdraw from the interview at any time without effect or consequences. However, once the interview is completed, your withdrawal request cannot be processed.

A consent form accompanies this information sheet.

If you agree to participate in the interview please read and sign the form and hand it back to me during the interview

**Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and I hope that you will accept my invitation to be involved.**

*This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project number 7511). For more information regarding ethical approval of the project the Executive Officer of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on 8201 3116, by fax on 8201 2035 or by email [human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au](mailto:human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au)*

# Appendix 4: Consent Form



Kieu Nga Nguyen  
PhD Candidate  
School of Social and Policy Studies  
Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences  
Social Sciences South Rm 126  
Flinders University, Bedford Park SA 5042  
GPO Box 2100  
Adelaide SA 5001  
Email [nga.nguyen@flinders.edu.au](mailto:nga.nguyen@flinders.edu.au)  
Mobile: 0468412748

**CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH**  
**Parenting in a foreign land:**  
**Exploring the experiences of Vietnamese parents studying in Australia under**  
**the student visa immigration stream**  
**(by interview)**

I .....

being over the age of 18 years hereby consent to participate as requested in the information sheet for the research project *Parenting in a foreign land: Exploring the experiences of Vietnamese parents studying in Australia under the student visa immigration stream*.

1. I have read the information provided.
2. Details of procedures and any risks have been explained to my satisfaction.
3. I agree to audio recording of my information and participation.
4. I am aware that I should retain a copy of the Information Sheet and Consent Form for future reference
5. I understand that:
  - I may not directly benefit from taking part in this research.
  - I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and am free to decline to answer particular questions.
  - I may ask that the audio recording be stopped at any time, and that I may withdraw at any time from the session or the research without disadvantage.

**Participant's signature**.....**Date**.....

I certify that I have explained the study to the volunteer and consider that she/he understands what is involved and freely consents to participation.

**Researcher's name**.....

**Researcher's signature**.....**Date**.....

# Appendix 5: Letter of Introduction



25/05/2017

Dr George Karpelis  
School of Social and Policy Studies  
Social Sciences South, Room 241  
GPO Box 2100  
Adelaide SA 5001  
Tel: 08 82012270  
George.karpelis@flinders.edu.au  
<http://www.flinders.edu.au/socialandpolicystudies>  
CRICOS Provider No. 00114A

## LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

Dear research participant

This letter is to introduce Kieu Nga Nguyen who is a Doctor of Philosophy student in the Social and Behavioural Sciences, at Flinders University.

Kieu Nga is undertaking research leading to the production of a thesis or other publications on exploring parenting experiences of Vietnamese parents studying in Australia under the student visa immigration stream.

She would like to invite you to assist with this project by participating in an interview which covers certain aspects of this topic. It is expected that the interview will take no more than 1 hour to complete. Please refer to the "Information Sheet" and "Consent form" for further information.

Any information provided will be treated in the strictest confidence and none of the participants will be individually identifiable in the resulting thesis, report or other publications. You are, of course, entirely free to discontinue your participation at any time or to decline to answer particular questions.

Any enquiries you may have concerning this project should be directed to me at the address given above or by telephone on (08) 82012270, or e-mail [george.karpelis@flinders.edu.au](mailto:george.karpelis@flinders.edu.au)

Thank you for your attention and assistance.

Yours sincerely

Dr George Karpelis  
Senior Lecturer in Social Work  
Program Director – Master of Social Work  
School of Social and Policy Studies, Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences  
Flinders University

*This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (Project Number: 7511)  
For more information regarding ethical approval of the project the Executive Officer of the Committee can be contacted by telephone on 8201 3116, by fax on 8201 2035 or by email [human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au](mailto:human.researchethics@flinders.edu.au)*

# *Appendix 6: Recruitment Flyer*

## **Announcement on the Vietnamese International Student Association in Adelaide (VISA)**

### **Invitation for participation in the study about**

#### *Parenting in a foreign land:*

#### *Exploring the experiences of Vietnamese parents studying in Australia under the student visa immigration stream*

Dear friends,

My name is Kieu Nga Nguyen and I am a Vietnamese PhD candidate at Flinders University.

My research aims to explore the experiences of Vietnamese students who live with their children in Australia under the student visa immigration stream. Studying abroad and being a parent at the same time can be both rewarding and challenging. Within an approximately one hour-long in-depth interview, I will be asking you about your parenting experiences in Australia in relation to your academic aims. Your participation will be voluntary, and your name/surname will not be identified in the research.

Your parenting experiences in a foreign land will help in developing recommendations for the services needed for Student Visa parents in Australia.

I would be grateful if you were able to share your experiences with me.

You can contact me via email at: [nga.nguyen@flinders.edu.au](mailto:nga.nguyen@flinders.edu.au) or mobile 0468412748 to learn more about my study and arrange for a meeting.

I appreciate your interest in my research, and I am looking forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,

Kieu Nga Nguyen BEd., MSW., MA

PhD Candidate,  
School of Social and Policy Studies - College of Education, Psychology and Social Work  
Flinders University



