



Credit: Quan-Hoang Vuong

# Breaking barriers in publishing demands a proactive attitude

Requiring Ph.D. candidates to publish to obtain a Ph.D. can provide much-needed improvements to academic systems in developing countries such as Vietnam, argues Quan-Hoang Vuong.

The ripples of globalization can be found in many forms, but little attention has been paid to the developing world's embrace of international publishing standards. Vietnam, a fast-growing emerging economy in Southeast Asia with a population approaching 100 million, presents an exemplary case study of how the pursuit of publishing in certified international journals has become a duty for researchers as well as a gateway to more transparent science policymaking. Since 2017, the government has set a new requirement of at least two publications in international journals for all Ph.D. candidates and their supervisors, creating a kind of 'publish or perish' race toward the final qualification line. The new law has revitalized the local research landscape, particularly within the social sciences and humanities (SSH), motivating young researchers and empowering a rising number of female researchers.

Upon closer examination, the stereotypical image of the academic ivory tower being ruled by old men is fading in Vietnam. The strength of young researchers is apparent for example when considering grant submissions to the National Foundation for Science and Technology (NAFOSTED)—the Vietnamese equivalent of the U.S. National Science Foundation. Young female and male applicants show their qualities as researchers in the strength of their research proposals, the skills they demonstrate and the evidence they provide for delivered research outcomes. NAFOSTED demands their grantees meet required research outcomes as proposed in their grant applications as a condition for the next disbursements of research funds. These accomplishments, typically in the form of one publication per year during the project life, stand in stark contrast to those of the State Council for Professorship Promotion (SCPP), a supposedly prestigious circle, consisting of mostly men in their 60s, tasked with reviewing academic credentials and granting the honorary professor title accordingly. Indeed, a significant number of academics in this committee do not meet the minimum publication requirements, which currently call for as few as two as 'lifetime' achievements.

This example, though not representative of the whole SSH research population in Vietnam, highlights the will and grit of the younger generation to engage in serious scientific activity. As academia is about sharing knowledge, questioning assumptions and being constantly challenged, to publish is an act of responsibility and duty for every researcher. Freshly-minted Ph.D. graduates in particular need to be exposed to the long-awaited and harsh peer review battles, to have their quality of thinking and writing repeatedly questioned and revised; for it to be otherwise means to surrender unconditionally and unscientifically. What can better prepare young researchers for the long academic journey ahead but the process of publishing, of letting themselves face their own shortcomings and addressing them head-on?

This proactive attitude is neither cliché nor cheap talk. It has real and meaningful consequences. In the case of Vietnam, shattering the glass ceiling of academia is not being done by just the young and rising researchers but also by the growing presence of female researchers across SSH disciplines. Our peer-reviewed database system on SSH publication output in Vietnam (<https://sshpa.com>) shows that Vietnamese women with published articles today account for 42% of the total number of authors in SSH, compared to 30% ten years ago, refuting the misperception that research is a typically male job. Similarly to other East Asian countries, Vietnam is characterized as a typical Confucian society where unequal relationships—which favour men's position in society and family—have been preserved over millennia through sociocultural ties, power hierarchies, life functions and jobs. The shifting gender paradigm in scientific publications is undoubtedly the result of hard work by female researchers. At the same time, from a policymaking perspective, the new Ph.D. publishing standard, by virtue of requiring every researcher, male or female, to meet the minimum publication number, does have a role in empowering women in academia. Unleashing women's research capacity indeed promotes women's rights and enriches the national scientific output.

The publish-or-perish mentality in Vietnam and elsewhere may be perceived negatively because it implies an emphasis on quantity over quality. This focus may lead to a loss of morale and dedication to short-term values. Despite these drawbacks, the value of requiring publications outweighs these concerns not only for the above-mentioned reasons but also because it increases the public's trust in the scientific process. However, a functioning system requires appropriate policy making.

To this end, the government's decision in Vietnam wakes the local academics from their slumber, helps regain the public's trust in sciences and reduce wastes in science funding in the long run.

This policy, however, is just the beginning. In an 'unnaturally high-entropy setting' such as Vietnam, quantity-oriented Ph.D. publishing requirements may incentivise scientific misconduct, including gift or ghost authorship and data fabrication, a situation that demands policymakers and scientists alike to be relentless in punishing and setting examples. To avoid such a circumstance, the best solution is to nurture an academic ecosystem in which creativity, resilience and contributions are valued and in which researchers are appropriately incentivized. For Ph.D. candidates, publishing in top journals is about breaking existing academic barriers as much as about surpassing one's limit while being held accountable to the highest standards possible. The path can be treacherous but rewarding in terms of personal growth for it pushes the scientific enterprise, however little it is, forward. □

## Quan-Hoang Vuong<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Centre for Interdisciplinary Social Research, Phenikaa University, Hanoi, Vietnam. <sup>2</sup>NAFOSTED Scientific Council on Basic Research in Social Sciences and Humanities, The Vietnam Ministry of Science and Technology, Hanoi, Vietnam. e-mail: [hoang.vuongquan@phenikaa-uni.edu.vn](mailto:hoang.vuongquan@phenikaa-uni.edu.vn)

Published online: 10 October 2019  
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-019-0667-6>

## Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.