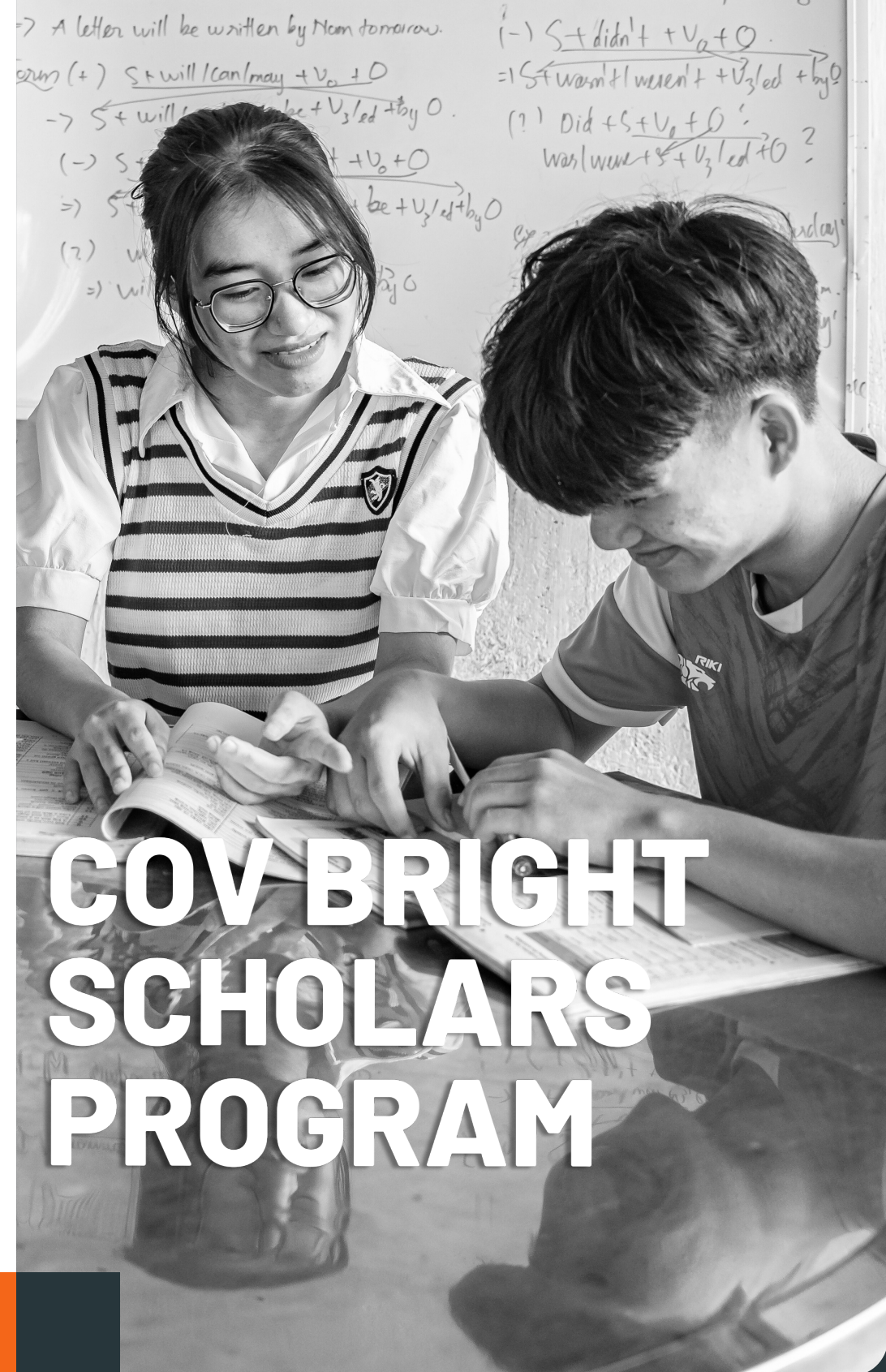


Full report

EVALUATION OF

COV BRIGHT SCHOLARS PROGRAM



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METHODOLOGY & SCOPE

For this report, Australian National University anthropologist Dr Ashley Carruthers conducted 13 hour-long, semi structured interviews with current and former beneficiaries of the COV Bright Scholars program.

In addition to this he took part in extensive informal discussions with COV staff, and conducted participant observation in meetings and other daily activities with the NGO over a period of 10 days in March 2023. He also reviewed materials on the organisation's website and social media to better understand its philosophy, range of programs and impact. In addition, the report draws on a survey of 187 students from the 2020-2021 graduating cohort carried out by COV staff, and student profile sheets for 27 scholarship recipients selected at random.

This report is intended to give an initial appraisal of the approach, implementation and effectiveness of the Bright Scholars program. It seeks to evaluate the program, and assess students' individual experiences of study and social mobility by putting them in the broader context of social and economic change in Vietnam today. In so doing it draws on recent research about social class, economic inequality, differential access to education and life-chances within the opportunity structure of post-reform Vietnam. The report makes some limited quantitative and comparative observations based on the data available, and suggests some strategies for collecting data on graduates that the NGO might consider implementing in future. In the "implications" sections throughout, the report makes suggestions about areas in which the program could be extended or improved.



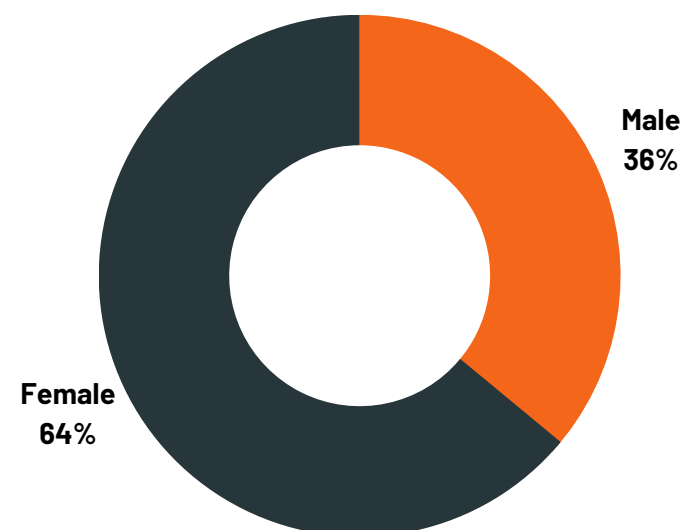
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THE PROGRAM

The Children of Vietnam (COV) Bright Scholars program is an initiative aimed at improving access to tertiary education for talented students from disadvantaged backgrounds in Đà Nẵng City and Quảng Nam province.¹ Bright Scholars receive a monthly stipend of 1 million VND, as well as having access to Social Skills workshops and other forms of COV support, for the duration of their undergraduate degrees.

- Between 2008 and 2021, COV has supported 290 students to graduation. Of this number, 185 were female and 105 male.
- Between 2019 and 2022, COV dispensed \$383 000 in scholarships.

[1] Đà Nẵng city lies geographically within Quảng Nam province, but sits within its own administrative region, similar to Hà Nội and Sài Gòn. Almost all Bright Scholars students from within Đà Nẵng are from the peripheral districts of the city.

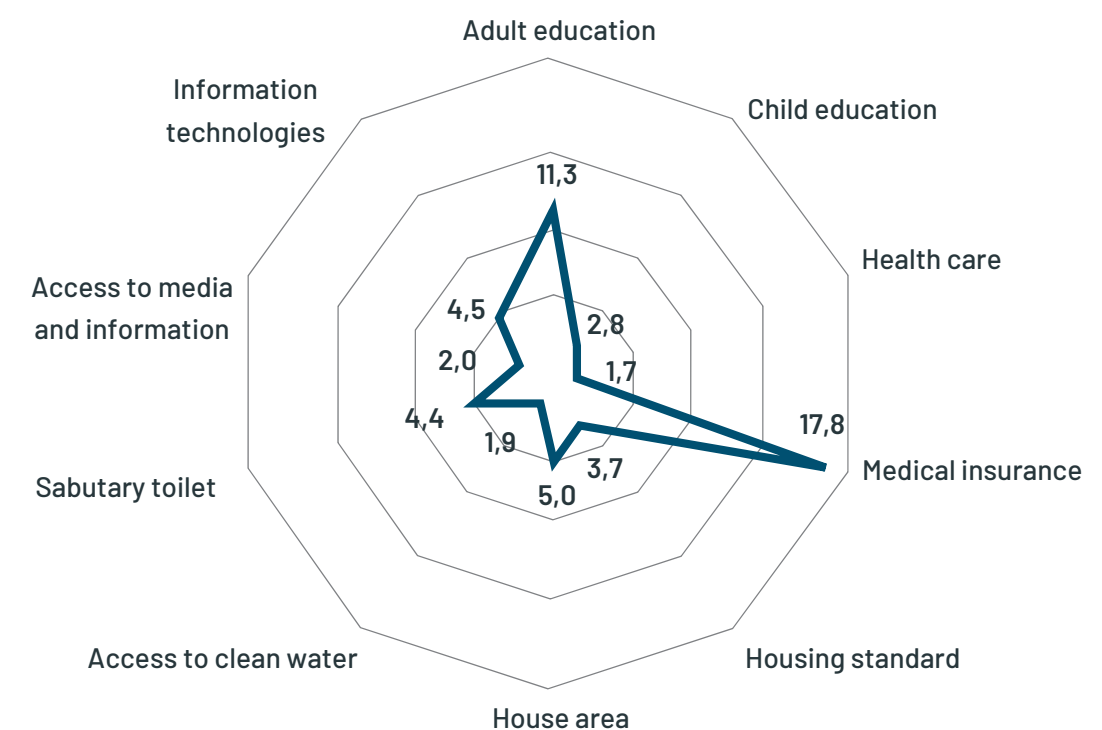


Eligibility

To be eligible, students must have passed the university entrance examination, and be from a household defined by local authorities as poor (hộ nghèo) or near-poor (hộ cận nghèo). The NGO conducts household visits to further determine the suitability of candidates. Students from single parent households who have been supported by COV's Empowering Foundations for Women & Their Children (EFWC) program are also eligible for the stipend, provided they have passed the university entrance examinations. Historically some of these families have still been classified poor or near-poor at the time students applied for scholarships, while some had escaped these categories as a result of COV aid and improved family circumstances.

Poor and Near-poor Households

According to decree 07/2021/NĐ-CP, a poor household is defined as having a monthly per capita income of less than 1.5 million đồng in rural areas and 2 million đồng in urban areas. In addition to this, it must demonstrate inability to afford basic social services, according to a points system. For near-poor households, the income figures are 1.5 - 2 million đồng monthly income for rural areas, and 2 - 3 million đồng for urban ones, with the same social services condition. 2.23% of Vietnam's population is currently defined as being poor and 3.11% as near-poor according to [these metrics](#), giving a total of 5.43%. For comparison, the national multidimensional poverty rate, a World Bank standard, is calculated at 4.4%, with medical insurance and adult education being reported the most out of reach social services ([2021 Household Standards Living Survey](#)).



Source: [2021 Household Standards Living Survey](#).



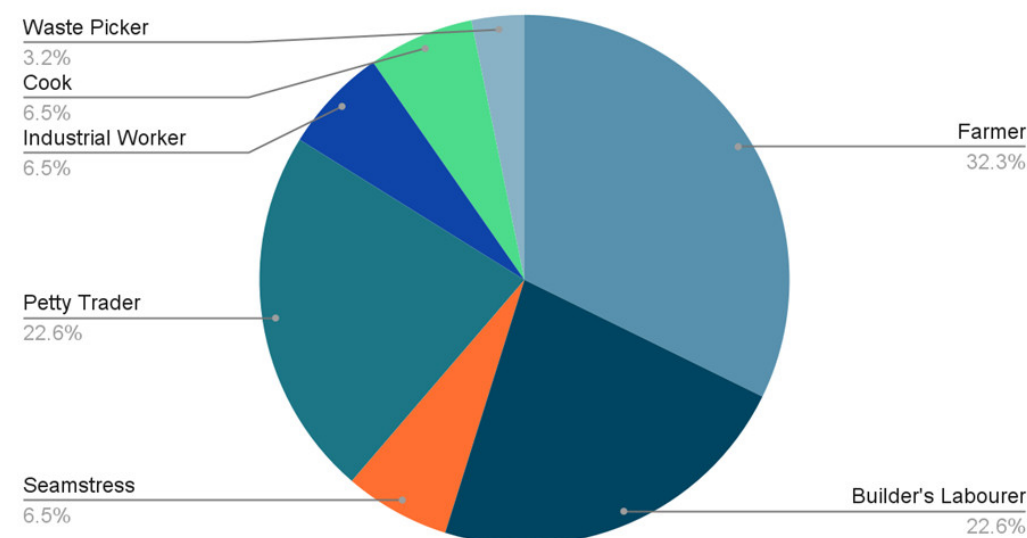
QUẢNG NAM has a population of almost 1.5 million, around 25% of whom live in urban areas and 75% in rural areas. This makes the province more rural than the national average, which is 37.1% urban and 62.9% rural (Statistical Yearbook of Vietnam 2021, p. 87). According to the province statistics office, Quảng Nam had a 5.37% poor household rate in 2020, comprising 22 950 households (by contrast the 2021 Statistical Yearbook puts it at 7% (p. 882)). In addition to this, the provincial government website refers to 11 545 near-poor households. Reportedly some 18% of households in Quảng Nam's mountainous regions are poor, reflecting the situation of the 55 000-strong majority Cơ Tu hill community population of these areas. Quảng Nam has a 3 653 000 VNĐ average monthly income, below the national average of 4 205 000 (ibid., p. 862).

THE ĐÀ NẴNG administrative region covers 128 500 ha. In addition to urbanised land it includes forested and rural regions, most of which lie in the foothills of the Trường Sơn mountain range to the west. The city's population of some 1 195 500 is almost 90% urbanised, reflecting its administrative boundaries. Poverty in Đà Nẵng is concentrated in the city's periurban and rural zones. Đà Nẵng has a poor household rate of just over 4%, and near-poor rate of 1.7%, collectively representing around 10 000 households. Đà Nẵng has a 5 230 000 VNĐ average monthly income, above the national average of 4 205 000 (ibid., p.852).

With a very few exceptions, those in the Bright Scholars program come from families living in rural or periurban locations, parents with low educational status who are engaged in farming, manual labour or low-end service economy work, and possessing very few valuable household assets. Some households also carry debt, usually as a result of medical expenses, and many live in houses that are uncomfortable or unhealthy as a result of not having funds to repair and maintain them.

Almost half of the 183 surveyed graduating students from the 2020-2021 cohort come from outer districts of Đà Nẵng including Hòa Vang, Ngũ Hành Sơn and Cẩm Lệ in that order, with central Hải Châu district contributing less than 10%. In Quảng Nam, the top student sending districts are Tây Giang, a mountainous rural and forested area on the Lao border, and Điện Bàn, a mixed rural and periurban district that lies between Đà Nẵng and Hội An.

Occupation of Scholars' Parents

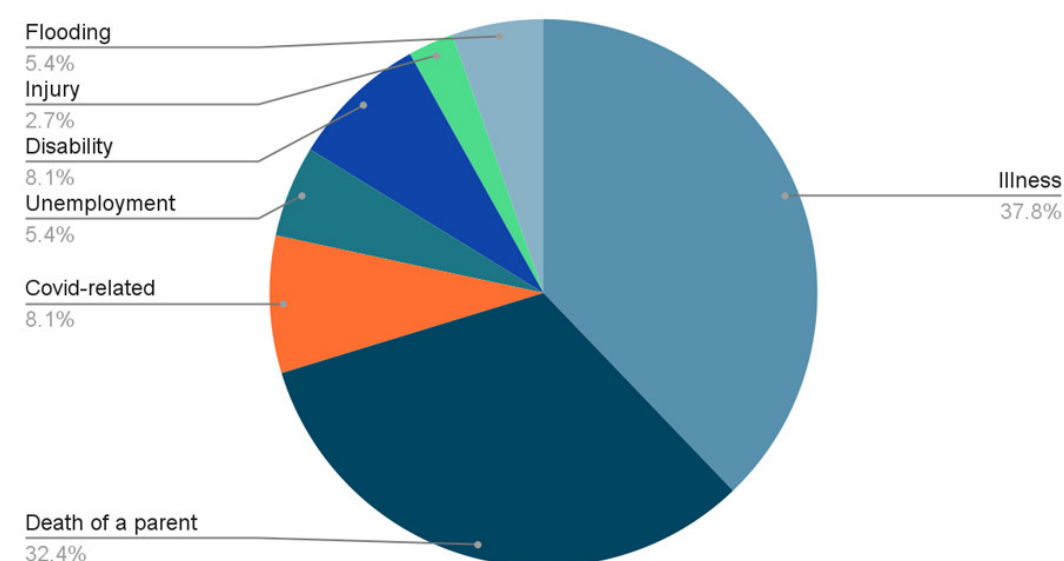


Based on data from survey of 27 currently enrolled Bright Scholars

Some Statistics from our sample of 27 currently enrolled Bright Scholars

- 89% come from social mobility "cold spots", i.e. districts with lower than national average income and education levels and poor opportunities for social advancement
- 100% are first generation higher education students
- 15% had a tertiary educated sibling
- 56% are from single parent households (all being female heads apart from one)
- Average combined monthly household income for those parents who are able to work is 3.1 million VNĐ. (NB this represents the best case scenario for monthly earnings)
- The average tuition fee per semester is 7.1 million VNĐ

Shocks Experienced by Scholars' Families



Based on data from survey of 27 currently enrolled Bright Scholars

Implications for COV

- Focusing on households classified as "poor" and "near-poor" by local authorities based on a national metric that takes into account both income and access to social services is a sound strategy for COV. It allows the NGO to make use of local government data-gathering to easily and transparently identify households eligible for assistance. A further virtue of this approach is that cooperation with local, province and city authorities to achieve shared goals around poverty reduction generates significant goodwill, something that is essential for any INGO wanting to operate effectively in Vietnam. Government priorities here are completely in sync with the World Bank's policy recommendations for ending "last mile" chronic poverty.
- Given the reality of limited resources, it makes sense for COV to prioritise those fitting the official definition of poverty. We should bear in mind however that, sociologically speaking, "poor" households don't represent a distinct class of people. Rather, it's best to understand them as members of a larger class of vulnerable rural and low-skilled urban people who have simply fallen on bad luck or difficult circumstances.

- The profile of the main “sending” districts in Quảng Nam most likely reflects the fact that COV has focused recruitment activities in these places. Điện Bàn, the top source of Bright Scholars in Quảng Nam, is adjacent to both Đà Nẵng and Hội An cities, and is less rural and more populous in its makeup than any other district of Quảng Nam. COV might like to consider whether Điện Bàn is being privileged because of its proximity, and weigh up the need there compared to more distant and impoverished parts of the province, especially the mountainous ones. It’s highly commendable that so many students are coming from Tây Giang, but surrounding districts of Đông Giang, Nam Giang and Phước Sơn are equally worthy of attention.

Vulnerability

There are several ways in which we can understand vulnerability as it relates to the families of the poor in Đà Nẵng and Quảng Nam. On the level of the individual, we can view it in terms of health, diet, and nutritional status. At the household level, it relates to factors such as maternal and child care status, livelihood assets, and access to food, knowledge, health services, water, and sanitation (Vo and Tran 2022). The underlying state of these dimensions of household wellbeing can determine how susceptible it is to both “idiosyncratic” shocks (those affecting individual households) and “covariate” shocks (those affecting whole communities).

As we will see below, the main idiosyncratic shocks experienced by the families of interviewees included illness, accident and loss of employment. In terms of covariate shocks, Covid-19 is mentioned in one case study, while unhealthy living conditions in the home as a result of leaking roofs is a common experience. Noteworthy is the fact that coastal North Central and South Central Vietnam have the nation’s highest vulnerability to climate shocks as a result of their exposure to typhoons and tropical depressions. Livelihoods and socio-economic development in Quang Nam have been heavily affected by flooding in recent years, with the popular activities of tropical acacia (cây keo) cultivation and shrimp farming being particularly exposed (Vo and Tran 2022).



Sketches of some “poor” households

LY hails from Quê Sơn, a district of Quảng Nam that stretches from the rice fields west of the Ly Ly River up into the foothills of the Trường Sơn mountains. Over 80% of the district’s population are farmers, and the average per capita income is under \$2000 a year, less than half the national average. Ly lost her father to illness when she was five years old, and her mother has supported she and her three elder brothers by working the family’s land alone since then. For around 10 days a month Ly’s mother also works as a farm hand on neighbouring properties for 180 000 VNĐ a day. So bad were the family’s circumstances that at the age of 9, Ly was sent to live at the Hoa Mai orphanage in Ngũ Hành Sơn, where she participated in a COV tutoring program. Her mother is a beneficiary of the EFWC program.

TƯỜNG is a final year Social Work student from Hòa Vang, a periurban district of Đà Nẵng city with an average per capita income of 2340 USD a year. He lost his father in an accident while still in his childhood, and his mother was left alone to care for the family’s land and look after Tường and his three siblings. She herself suffered a work accident in which she lost four fingers. Nevertheless, she still does farming work, and raises pigs and chickens for extra income. She is a beneficiary of COV’s EFWC program.

THUẬT was born in 1994 in Cẩm Lệ, a butterfly-shaped outer district of Đà Nẵng that at the time was still countryside with little in the way of urban services. His parents divorced shortly after his birth, leaving his mother to support the family alone. When Thuật was a mere two years old, his mother returned to work as a builder’s labourer, leaving him in the care of his 70 year old maternal grandmother. While he was in junior high school, Thuật’s mother developed severe back problems, most likely as a result of the heavy labour she’d done on building sites. By year 9 he thought he’d have to leave school to work to support her. Luckily she recovered somewhat, allowing him to complete senior high, but suffered a relapse when he was finishing year 12. At that time, in his words, “There was no longer any hope of me going to university”.

TUYÊN is from Hòa Vang district, born in 2004. She lives with her 59 year old mother, who has a small cafe, and also does piece work at home. She lost her father, a railway worker, in an industrial accident when she was still an infant. Tuyên’s mother suffers from a severe thyroid condition that costs 4 million VNĐ a year to treat.

NGHĨA’S hometown is in Đại Lộc, a periurban cum rural district of Quảng Nam that extends along either side of the Vu Gia River from the boundary of Đà Nẵng up into the foothills of the Trường Sơn mountain range. His father did sewing work [nghề may] until 2010, when illness prevented him from working any longer. Nghĩa is the middle child of three, and his mother does the best she can to support the family by working as an itinerant vendor.

In each of these cases, the family suffers an idiosyncratic shock in the form of loss of the earning power of one or both parents. The low resilience of these farming and working class urban households, lacking savings and other buffers, means that a single big shock is enough to cause them to slide into poverty almost immediately. In addition to other hardships, the interviews confirmed that access to tertiary, and sometimes even secondary education, is imperilled by such events.

Lack of educational opportunities substantially increases the risk that the family's circumstances will be reproduced in the next generation, as talented children are caught in a familial poverty trap that prevents them from maximising their own potential and achieving social mobility. To return to our first case study above, Ly's eldest brother had to leave school in year 10 to support the family, and her two other brothers did not progress beyond year 12. All three now work in low-income, low status fields: one is a builder's labourer, one farms the family's land, and the third is a migrant worker in Sài Gòn. With the aid of COV, Ly has become the first in her family to attend university. Without her stipend, she told us with a grave expression, she'd have had to ask her mother and brothers for financial support, thus imposing a further burden on the family. It's very likely she'd have become a low-skilled manual worker herself.



Other interviews demonstrated that we also find families having two working parents in the “poor” and “near-poor” categories:

BLING is a 23 year old Cơ Tu woman from Tây Giang, Quảng Nam province. This mountainous district, nestled between the Ho Chi Minh Road and the Lao border, is a steep and bumpy four hour bus ride away from Đà Nẵng. Tây Giang is a place where the traditional lifestyle of swidden farming and hunting and gathering on the high peaks has only recently transitioned to sedentary villages and wet-rice agriculture in the lower valleys. It has one of the highest percentage ethnic minority populations in the country, and an official annual average income of only 24 million VNĐ or \$1023, one half of the national average. Bling is one of eight children, and her elderly parents' only source of income is farming paddy rice, which brings in a small and unstable income.

BINH hails from Quê Sơn district, Quảng Nam province, and she still speaks with a noticeable country accent. Her parents are both able bodied farmers, and she has three siblings.

LINH was born in 2003 in Hòa Vang district of Đà Nẵng. She has two older sisters and one younger. Her father is a labourer, and her mother works as a tailor in a local market, making an income of a mere 2 million VNĐ per month. Linh's mother has in the past suffered a severe spinal condition, which the family had to borrow money to have treated. One of her sisters also has a chronic illness. During Covid her father was not able to work, but is now earning 6 million VNĐ monthly. Linh's house is in such disrepair that the roof leaks in the rainy season, creating a damp and mouldy environment.

VY lives in Thanh Khê district in central Đà Nẵng. Her father is a builder's labourer whose income is unstable. He suffers from chronic poor health, and is currently unemployed. Vy's mother works in the Hòa Khánh industrial zone, to the north of the city, where she earns around 4 million VNĐ a month. Vy lives with her parents, brother and paternal grandparents in cramped conditions in an old, leaky house.

NGỜ is a Cơ Tu woman from Tây Giang. Her father has an intellectual disability that prevents him from working. Her mother has osteoporosis, and draws an unstable income from agricultural work. The family's monthly earnings are only around 700 000 VNĐ. Ngờ's elder sister did well in the university entrance exam and commenced study at the University of Quảng Nam, but due to the family's circumstances she had to drop out after a year to return home to get married.

Lack of access to a livelihood beyond subsistence-oriented farming means that both Bling and Binh's families qualify as “poor” according to the official measure. While both of Thủy's parents are employed, their work is so unstable and their incomes so low that they are also deemed officially poor. Linh, Ngờ and Vy's families are in a similar situation, with the addition of illness and disability.

Here we can observe along with Chu (2018) that those “stuck” in smallholder farming and low-skilled urban jobs can be said to constitute a new social class in Vietnam's post Đổi Mới economic reform era. While lifestyles and identities between city and country differ, the families sketched above are united in the sense that they collectively experience a limitation of their life chances within the new opportunity structure of this rapidly developing Lower Middle Income Country (LMIC). As we'll see below, fast-rising inequality in access to education is a key dimension of their shared experience of structural exclusion.

Implications for COV

- Be aware that Bright Scholars' families continue to be highly vulnerable to shocks, especially associated with illness and injury, while they are undertaking tertiary study.
- In cases where aid recipients continue to live with their families while studying, they may share difficult living conditions such as leaky roofs, dampness and lack of space. Given the resources, COV could consider extending support to students' families in a way similar to the EFWC and Study Steps programs.
- None of our interviewees reported having to make regular or significant remittances to family while studying, and none had to borrow significant amounts of money from family members. This suggests that our interviewees at least have had a positive experience of economic independence while at university. Be aware that this may not be universal among Bright Scholars, however.
- COV should take into account that climate change-related shocks are likely to increase significantly in the short to medium term, and be conscious of this in its future programming.
- COV does not have quality data on students who may have dropped out or experienced interruptions to their course of study because of livelihood shocks. The NGO should where possible conduct follow up interviews with such students to determine whether their studies were affected by their families' situations.
- The dropout rate between 2008 and 2021 was 10%, which is reassuringly low.



Inequality and Education

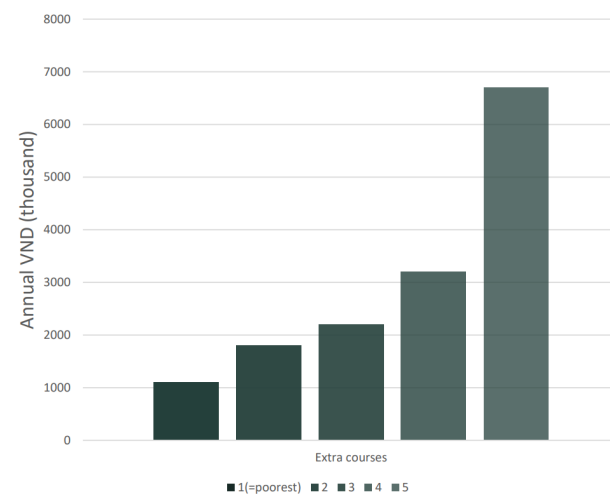
In recent decades, Vietnamese people have enjoyed unprecedented opportunities in education and employment; at the same time, however, they have experienced unprecedented degrees of social inequality. (Chu 2018, p.59)

Observers of social change in Vietnam are presently sounding warning bells about rising inequality. According to the World Bank's [2022 Vietnam Poverty and Equity Assessment](#), while the country's rapid economic growth since the advent of the Đổi Mới reforms in the 1980s has been "broadly inclusive" and livelihoods have "improved dramatically", chronic poverty reduction challenges remain. In a context of widening inequality as Vietnam moves towards Upper-Middle Income Country status, the poorest households are "increasingly concentrated in low-income agricultural activities" and "risk falling further behind and being less connected to the more vibrant sectors of the economy" (World Bank 2022, pp. 1-4). The income gap between the poorest and richest quintile doubled between 1990 and 2006, and Vietnam's 2021 Household Living Standards Survey showed that the top quintile now earns eight times what the bottom quintile earns. Chu contends that "income inequality in Vietnam has been escalating at one of the fastest recorded rates in the world" (Chu 2018, p.61).

Most significant for our purposes here is how this emerging inequality affects access to education and, by extension, opportunities for social mobility. Importantly, since the 2000s, the state has been transferring financial responsibility for the rapidly expanding education sector onto the shoulders of families and individuals, with a parallel trend in health and social insurance. For previous generations of rural people, the entrance exam was the main barrier to tertiary education, a result of the low quality of regional primary and secondary schools, and the biased way results were weighted in favour of urban students (in Quảng Nam it was popularly said that of 1000 students from the countryside who took the examination, 1 might pass). Nowadays university entrance is less forbidding, but the high cost of university fees relative to the incomes of the rural and urban poor has emerged as a new form of structural inequality. Scholars looking at this issue reported by 2010 there was "remarkable variability" in access to tertiary education between different income groups (Vu et al 2012).

Beginning with primary school, families with means spend substantially more on private tutoring than do poor families. In lower grades, households in the top quintile spend more than five times as much on private education than do those in the bottom quintile, and ten times as much at upper secondary level. 80 percent of the children of the top quintile remain in education until their early twenties, while virtually none in the bottom quintile do. The figure is only 20 percent for the second and third wealth quintiles. In addition to this, those in poor communities tend to have access only to lower quality schools, while the better ones are concentrated in metropolitan centres. This further disadvantages the children of the poor in the competition to enter tertiary study. Ethnicity is another significant measure of inequality in private education spending, where the ethnic Vietnamese or Kinh spend more than seven times as much on education as ethnic minorities (World Bank 2022, pp. 11, 202).

Figure 0.13. Household expenditure on extra education courses at compulsory grade levels in public school, by household quintile



Note: Categories by household quintiles. Average expenditures among households with children in public primary or lower-secondary education.
Source: World Bank staff calculations using VHLSS 2020.

Source: World Bank 2022, p. 12.

Bright Scholars' Experiences of Accessing Tertiary Education

Our interviews clearly demonstrated that unstable personal and family finances directly affect the likelihood of students from poor backgrounds being able progress to tertiary studies, despite having gotten over the barrier of the university entrance exams. Consider the following experiences:

TƯỜNG was planning to go straight to work after graduating from senior high school in order to support his family. His elder sister, who was at the time studying Social Work, intervened and advised him sternly not to do this, but rather to apply for a Bright Scholarship and follow in her footsteps. Tường in turn is encouraging his youngest brother, now in year 11, to do the same.

He tells us that without his scholarship, it's highly unlikely he'd be able to continue his studies: "I'd probably be an industrial worker doing shifts from 7am to 10pm". Several of his classmates have dropped out due to financial and other pressures, with friends from ethnic minority backgrounds being particularly at risk.

THẢO, a young orphan, was adopted by a single female academic living in the Hải Châu district of central Đà Nẵng. Unfortunately, her adoptive mother passed away when Thảo was 19 years old, leaving her in a precarious position as she began her university studies. While she inherited her mother's house, there were no savings for her to rely on. Despite starting a degree in medicine, Thảo was forced to withdraw due to the instability caused by her mother's sudden and unexpected death.

In 2016, she attempted the university entrance exams again, and also applied for entry to the Bright Scholars program, having been referred by an acquaintance. On her second application, she was successful, allowing her to pursue a degree from the Danang University of Foreign Language Studies.

Thảo is certain that if not for the assistance of COV, she'd have had to drop out of university for a second time. She confided in us that at the time of her mother's death, she was in a very dark place indeed. COV gave her the strength to get her life back on track.

Despite having done well in senior high school and having a strong desire to go to university, **THUẬT** decided that his best option was to do vocational study so he'd be able to support his ailing mother. He embarked on a course on industrial machinery repair and maintenance, planning to leave and take a decent paying job as soon as he was able to. When he had completed a year of study, his performance was so good that the school offered him a scholarship. However, Thuật's brother, who was by this time a government employee, encouraged him not to give up on his dreams of a tertiary degree, telling him that ultimately it would be more valuable. Heeding his brother's advice, Thuật bravely took the university entrance exams, and was admitted to Cultural Studies at the Danang University of Education (Đại Học Sư Phạm).

At this point, COV was referred to Thuật's family by the local authorities, since this was one of the households on their "hardship" list. After a home visit, COV accepted him into the Bright Scholars program, allowing him to pay his tuition fees, buy essentials for study, and focus on improving his grades from fair to excellent.

Without the help of COV, Thuật reflects, his "today" wouldn't be like this, with us discussing his past sitting here in comfort of the NGO's office, where he now works. Instead, he'd have returned to his vocational training, and probably left as soon as he found decent work. He wouldn't have had time to think deeply about his life and his future: "I'd be a manual worker, not a knowledge worker planning projects", he says. Thuật concludes our interview by joking that he'd be fixing machinery for the Hoiana rather than attending gala dinners there, as we did last week for COV's 25th anniversary.





When he was younger, NGHĨA'S family were classified by the local authorities as living in hardship. His mother worked as an itinerant vendor and his father did sewing work [nghề may] until 2010, when illness prevented him from working any longer. Nowadays Nghĩa and his brother are able to support their parents, something in which he clearly takes pride.

Nghĩa heard about the opportunity with COV through the university's Facebook page, after he had already commenced study. He says without the NGO's help, he'd have had to deal with a great deal of hardship indeed. As it was, he supplemented his scholarship with work as a waiter at a bar, and during summer study break he'd work as a manual labourer (lao động tay chân). Having a monthly stipend helped him a great deal with the burden of tuition fees and other expenses, Nghĩa stresses.

ĐẠT was born in 2002 in Thăng Bình, a rural district of Quảng Nam where the average per capita income is just over 2000 USD. He's currently in the third year of his degree in machine manufacturing at the University of Science and Technology, Đà Nẵng. He's the son of a single mother, and has an elder brother who was born in 2000. His mother, who is 56, still works the family's rice paddies as well as working as a labourer on neighbours' land.

Despite extremely difficult home circumstances, Đạt performed so well in the university entrance examination that he won a scholarship offered by the newspaper Tuổi Trẻ. A teacher encouraged him to build on this success by applying to COV's Bright Scholars program.

Without the COV scholarship it would have been extremely hard for him to go to university, Đạt confides. He'd likely have found a way, but would have had to do significantly more outside work. Đạt supplemented his COV stipend by working in a cafe frequented by students for a four hour shift every day, with breaks during intense study periods. Here the wage was 13 000 VNĐ or 55 cents an hour, but shifts were very flexible, and with good personal time management he has been able to keep up with his studies while working.

THỦY was born in 2001 in the Ngũ Hành Sơn District of Đà Nẵng, and was in the first cohort of recipients of the Study Steps scholarship from year 6, meaning that to date she has had 11 years of assistance from COV. She has two younger siblings, both in senior high school. Thủy's father works in construction, and her mother is a domestic helper (giúp việc).

Without the help of COV, Thủy tells us, it's quite possible she wouldn't have been able to undertake tertiary education because the fees and living expenses are so high. She studies at the Law University of Huế, and lives in a dormitory (trọ), which costs 1.1 million a month, including electricity and water. Thủy settled on studying in Huế after comparing law universities in Hồ Chí Minh City, Đà Nẵng and Huế. The latter made sense since the fee was half that of Đà Nẵng (5 million vs 10 million VND a semester), and the university was ranked top in Central Vietnam. Thủy works in cafes and wedding reception restaurants (for 12 000 VND an hour) to supplement her scholarship, and now and then has a small amount to give to her parents.

These stories give us a keen sense of the precarity of the students' backgrounds and the hardships they've had to overcome to access and remain in tertiary study. As many told us, support from COV made the critical difference between being able to go to university and ending up a manual worker. This is clear evidence that the NGO is making a distinct social impact.

Implications for COV

- Empirical research demonstrates that access to tertiary education is one of the key axes of social inequality in post-reform Vietnam. An NGO intervention aimed directly at ameliorating this is well conceived and well targeted.
- Our interviews show COV is having a demonstrable social impact in terms of enabling young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to access and remain in tertiary study.



Social Mobility and Returns to Education

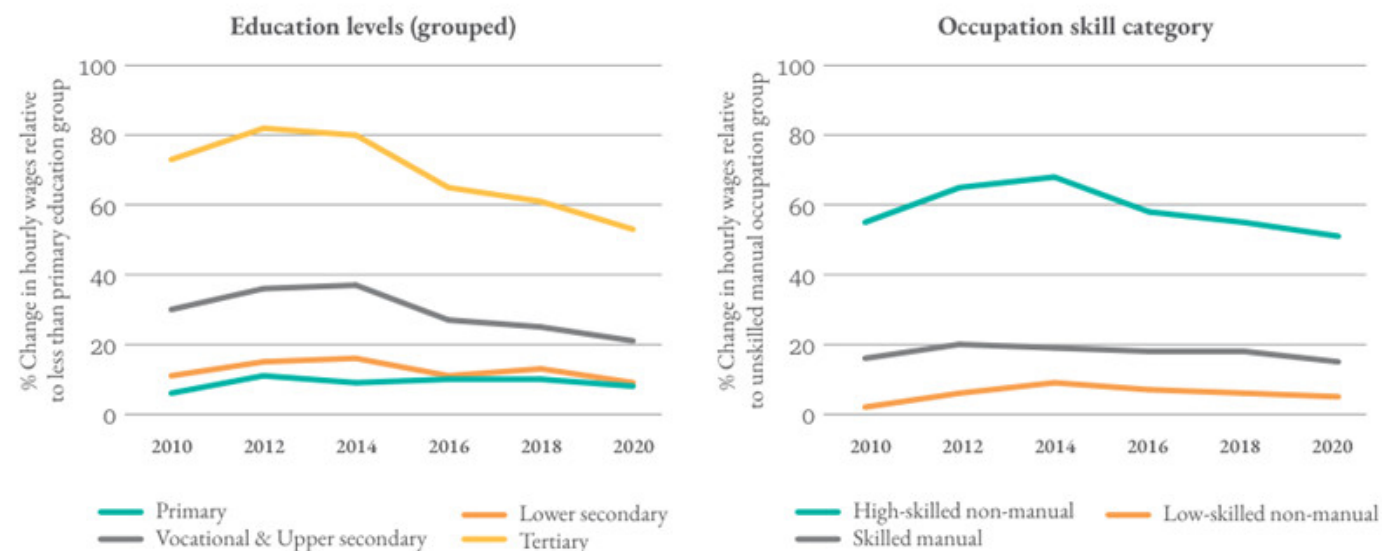
It would be simplistic to assume that education in itself guarantees social mobility. Rather, access to education and opportunities are complements (World Bank 2022, p.122). Drawing on sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, we can argue that education improves one's life chances, where educational qualifications are a kind of symbolic capital that needs to be "converted" into the things that constitute social mobility - appropriate employment, high wages, social status etc. Successful conversion is not guaranteed, but rather is probabilistic.

One way of thinking about this dynamic is by taking the narrow perspective of the monetary "returns to education" that economists speak of. Here we can identify several patterns. Tran (2023), who studied returns on secondary education in rural Vietnam, found that levels of qualification are closely correlated with one's wage income, with greater gains for men over women and Kinh over ethnic minorities. Oxfam also found, based on the VHLSS, that education is the most important factor in social mobility in the three low-income provinces they studied. Their analysis of the 2014 VHLSS was to the effect that return on investment in education was increasing over time. They found that almost 80% of the children of unskilled and traditional manual workers graduating from college or higher had skilled jobs in 2014. The figure for those with upper secondary diplomas was over 40% (Oxfam 2018, p.8). A World Bank report finds that "both private and social returns on higher education are high in Vietnam", having increased from 13 percent in 1992-93 to 18-21 percent in 2014-22. By comparison the global rate is 9%, returns generally being higher in developing as opposed to developed nations (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2018). Patrinos et al. argue this justifies not only a greater private contribution, but also continued public investment in higher education (2018). Despite this, in Vietnam today higher education still suffers from low investment, resulting in poor quality and relevance (Kataoka et al. 2020, p.51).

Some economists looking at the nationwide context have observed a decrease in returns to education after a peak in 2010. Since then, education wage premiums have declined, even as Vietnam's strong economic growth rate of over 6% has been maintained. Possible reasons for this include the fact that in recent years, growth has been driven by low value added and lesser skilled industries as manufacturers relocate to Vietnam from China, rather than by high value-added firms demanding higher quantities of educated labour. They also fear a "skills mismatch" caused by institutions offering courses not suited to the needs of the labour market. This is visible in the increase since 2012 of workers with a tertiary qualification working in secondary education level jobs - growing from 15.4 per cent in 2012 to 22.2 per cent in 2017 (ILO & ILSSA 2018 in McGuinness et al 2021). The world bank makes a similar finding, noting that graduates since 2010 "appear more engaged in medium-skill occupations and less so in high-skill occupations, despite being more educated". They observe that the current profile of occupations in the Vietnamese labour market means that it is under-utilising the high levels of human capital present in Vietnam (World Bank 2022, pp.143-146). At the same time, employers say they struggle to find sufficiently skilled workers, and complain that problem solving and analytical skills are lacking in the Vietnamese workforce, suggesting a skills mismatch (cf Tran 2019, pp.44-46).

This discussion suggests that cohorts born since the 1990s have had a less satisfying experience of employment than those born in the 1980s, and have struggled to find work that allows them to utilise their interpersonal and analytical skills, among other abilities they developed at university.

Figure 5.21. Returns to education and skills over time



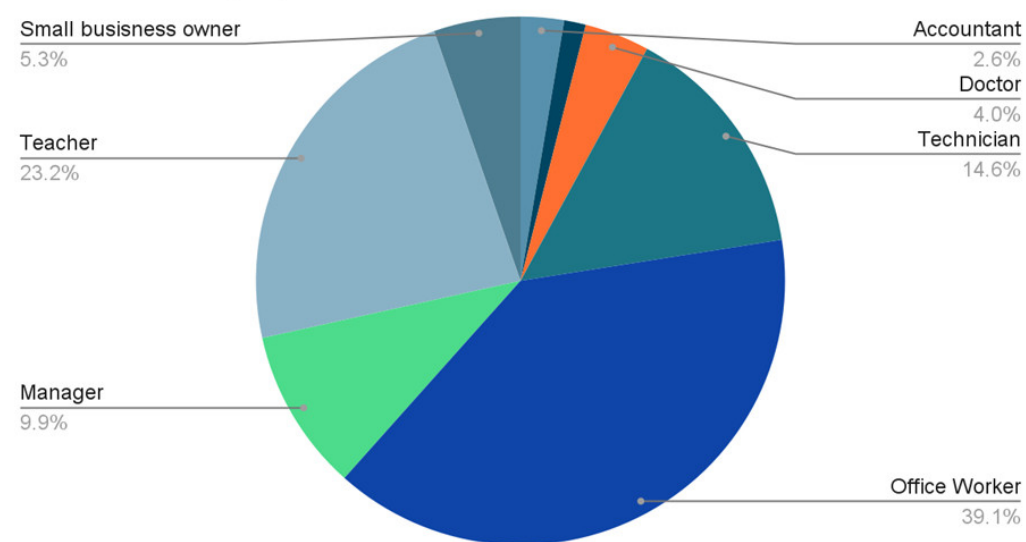
Note: The reported are calculated from (hourly) log wage regressions restricted to all wage workers controlling for age, sector, urban/rural, region, and gender. Ethnicity is not available in more recent LFS data sets and thus are not included. Source: World Bank calculation using LFS.

Source: World Bank (2022), p. 148

Bright Scholars' Experiences of Work

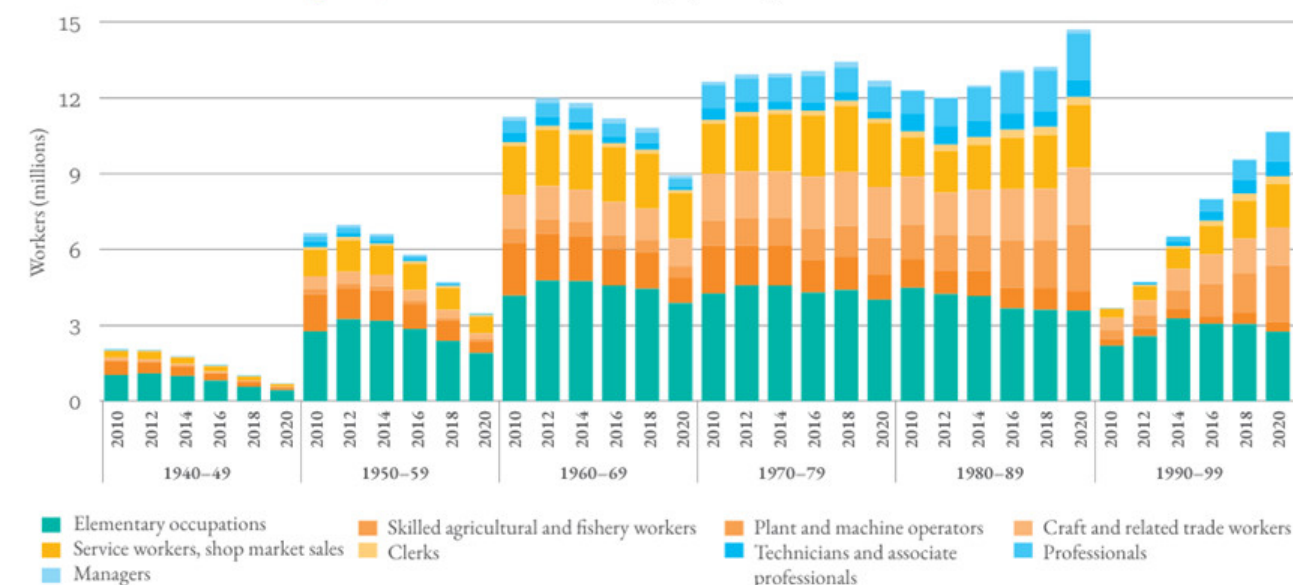
COV staff asked basic questions about employment in their 2021 survey of students graduating since 2008, allowing us to present the graphs below.

Graduate Employment



Jobs held by 151 surveyed Bright Scholars, 2008-2021 cohorts

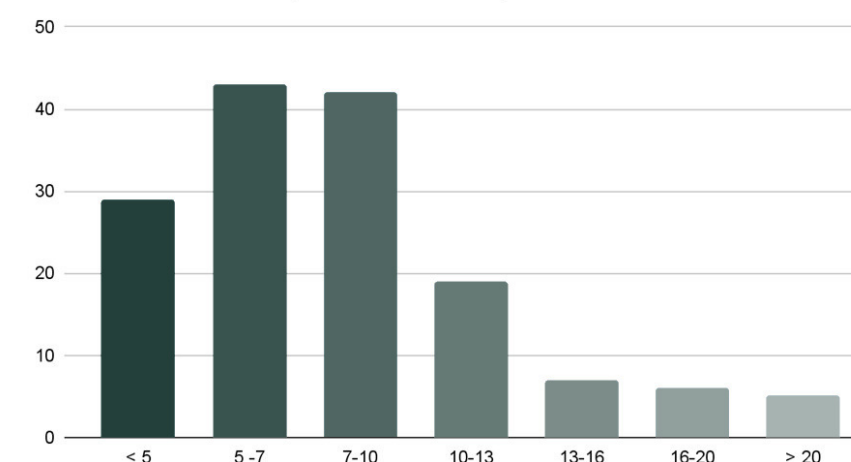
Figure 5.16. Number of workers, by occupation and birth cohort



Source: World Bank staff calculations using LFT.

Source: World Bank (2022), p. 145

Graduates' salaries (millions of VND)



Distribution of salaries from 151 surveyed Bright Scholars, 2008-2021 cohorts

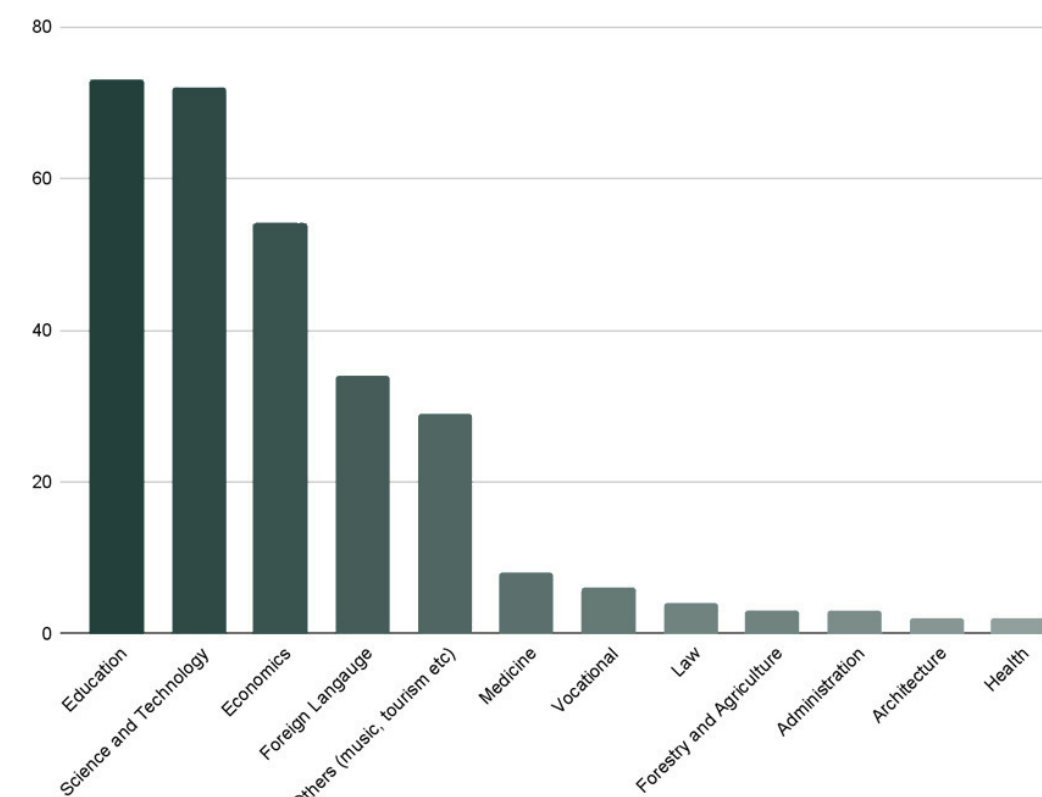
The employment profile of the 151 former Bright Scholars who responded to the survey is encouraging. All work in what would be classified as high skill, non-manual occupations, with an impressive number employed as managers, technicians/engineers and doctors. No graduates reported being employed in low-skilled manual occupations such as farming and manufacturing, which account for over 50% of the Vietnamese workforce. Less ideally, 40% stated they had not found employment suited to their qualifications, while 60% said that they had. This survey didn't discriminate between graduating cohorts, thus we aren't able to make any conclusions about the experiences of Bright Scholars' experiences of the job market over time. Recently graduated students are also included, and they no doubt account for some of the dissatisfied 40%, since they are still seeking suitable work. The income distribution is also very promising, but we aren't able to draw conclusions about how earnings are linked to occupation and experience based on the data collected in the survey.

Implications for COV

- Employment outcomes for Bright Scholars look positive, but COV lacks detailed data here. Consider surveying cohorts former Bright Scholars regularly and thoroughly to build up a picture of their experiences of work after graduation over time to find out how many secured employment appropriate to their qualifications, skills and desired level of interest and challenge.
- A longitudinal study of post-graduation experiences would help the NGO better assess the link between education and social mobility, as well as allowing a comparison between men and women, different degrees, ethnic Vietnamese and ethnic minorities, etc.
- Greater links between universities, vocational schools, and employers are needed to ensure that graduates gain relevant skills for the labour market, yet Vietnamese government mechanisms for promoting this have not been effective (World Bank 2022, p.203). COV might consider whether it can be active in this space, for example by working with employers to facilitate on the job vocational training leading to employment for graduates, or even as an alternative to university. This may involve supporting students through a training period as an incentive to employers.
- UK organisation The Social Mobility Foundation takes an active role in influencing and lobbying employers to improve their awareness and support for aspiring young professionals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. COV should consider whether it can perform a similar role in Đà Nẵng/Quảng Nam. Former Bright Scholars are a good potential resource for this endeavour, and may be able to act as a bridge to employers.
- If graduates can't find jobs where they get to use the skills they developed in tertiary education because of the state of the labour market, COV could consider focusing skills workshops, mentorships, internships, career counselling etc on small-scale entrepreneurship in social, creative, non-traditional fields. This would potentially empower Bright Scholars to craft their own desired jobs.

Choice of Degree and Equality of Opportunity

Types of University Attended by Bright Scholars



Based on a survey of 290 Bright Scholars 2008-2021

Fees

Our interviews show that tuition fees are an important factor for Bright Scholars when choosing a degree. While they feel they can more or less cover their living expenses by taking on extra work and borrowing small amounts of money from family in a pinch, high fees are experienced as a serious obstacle. In many cases, one hundred percent of their scholarship money goes on tuition costs, and many said explicitly that they had taken fees into consideration when choosing a degree and a university. Thủy, for instance, compared the cost of law degrees throughout the country, and ended up studying in far-away Huế because tuition fees there were half of what they are for the same degree at the University of Đà Nẵng, while confusingly the Huế law degree was ranked higher in terms of academic quality.

As students like Thủy find, the cost of degrees in different degrees at different universities is inconsistent. Clear information is often hard to find, and different institutions calculate fees differently: some per year, others per semester, some per quarter, and still others based on course credits. Students frequently report encountering “hidden” fees after enrolling and undertaking study. This situation reflects in part the greater financial autonomy Vietnamese TVET colleges and universities have been granted in recent years, and the fact that regulation has lagged behind. At the time of writing, the Ministry of Education and Training acknowledges this is a problem, and has called for more transparency and consistency in tuition fees and overall degree costs. It has also made moves towards capping or reducing fees, and urged local and province governments to ensure colleges and universities have adequate budgets.



Observers warn that striking increases in higher education enrolment over recent decades have not been matched by suitable reforms in tuition fees, public financing and private sector contribution, thus “pushing higher education to the race of low quality and low cost” (Patrinós et al 2018, p. 3). In such an environment, Bright Scholars face many potential pitfalls in choice of degree and institution.

Implications for COV

- Ideally, COV would be able to offer advice to Bright Scholars on choice of degree and university in terms of fees, quality of tuition, and employability. Currently enrolled and recently graduated Bright Scholars are an excellent resource here.
- COV could also help students consider the amount invested in fees against their likely earnings post graduation. As people from poor backgrounds, they may be risk averse in this regard. Financial and career counselling could be an important intervention here.

Education

Returning to our case studies, let’s look more concretely at the nature and quality of the social mobility students have achieved or anticipate achieving through tertiary education. We’ll first focus on the experiences of those doing Education degrees, since this is the most popular field of study among Bright Scholars (51/183).

LY will soon complete her four years teaching degree at the Danang University of Education (Đại Học Sư Phạm). She’s luckier than other students, since those studying Education are exempt from paying fees.

After graduating Ly wants to teach children in a remote, mountainous part of Quảng Nam out of a desire, she says, to help them achieve a better future in the same way COV has helped her. She is particularly keen to pass onto them the lessons she learnt in the COV life skills workshops, especially those about the right to self determination over one’s own body and confronting morally challenging situations.

If she can’t get the posting she wants, Ly plans to stay in Đà Nẵng doing after school tutoring while she works out what she wants to do. Thanks to COV, Ly says, she has some “thinking space” in which to work out her desired future.

NGỜ, a Cơ Tu woman from Tây Giang, is currently in her third year at the Đà Nẵng University of Education, majoring in primary school education. When asked why she’s studying education, Ngờ answers “To contribute to my family’s livelihood, and because it’s my dream to be a teacher”, in that order. After graduation she wants nothing more than to return to work in Tây Giang. Ngờ tells us that she’s known since she was young she’d like to be a teacher, so that she can help younger generations in her homeland.

CHƯƠNG, who is also a Cơ Tu person hailing from Tây Giang, is completing his fourth and final year at the University of Education, out of a desire to help develop his home province. He plans to seek a posting at the school in his natal village.

BINH graduated in English Education from the Đà Nẵng University of Education in 2019. After graduation, she applied for a job as an assistant teacher at a small private English school in Danang, and worked there a few months to build her confidence. She then submitted her CV to some English academies. In the first year she principally taught children until Covid arrived, after which teaching paused, then she transitioned to online teaching. She’s gone back to live with her parents, and continues to teach online.

As we noted above, Education is the most chosen degree in the survey of 183 Bright Scholars from the 2020-2021 cohort. This no doubt reflects a love of learning and the commitment of scholarship holders to return to home towns and districts to improve other young people’s lives through the education system – the same system that has helped them so much. It also reflects the fact that an Education degree is fee-free and includes a 3 630 000 VNĐ monthly living allowance for ten months of the year, since this field of study is prioritised by government. In exchange for this support, students must undertake to commence work in the field of Education within two years of graduating, and must work within it for twice their period of study. If they fail to do this, they or their families are liable to repay their fees and living allowance. They must also repay this money if they change degrees, fail or drop out.

Teaching is one of the very few skilled, white collar jobs available in most rural contexts, making it a natural choice for those who are committed to returning to home villages and towns. The near universal high regard for education and its importance to social mobility in Vietnam means coming home as a teacher makes one a respected, middle class member of the community, and raises the social status of one’s family. Indeed, the image of a child from a farming household designated as “poor” returning as a tertiary educated professional is a dramatic illustration of the intergenerational skills and social mobility that higher education can effect in Vietnam today. In rural contexts especially, there is a powerful subjective or perceived aspect of social mobility, whereby the “value” of the improved social status one has achieved by becoming a teacher is likely to be much higher in the eyes of one’s home community than from a metropolitan perspective (Carruthers and Dang 2012, 2018). Having talented young people return home to improve the quality of tuition in rural and periurban schools also improves chances for social mobility in a community-wide sense. A final important benefit is that work in the public education system promises financial stability: the education, health and social work sector is the biggest employer of high-skilled non-manual workers in Vietnam, and has one of the highest percentages of contract jobs of any sector (World Bank 2022, p.141). There is also the opportunity to supplement one’s income through after-school private tutoring, a near universal practice among teachers.

On the other hand, it has to be acknowledged that teachers are situated towards the low-income end of the public sector. If it’s the case that students from poor backgrounds are constrained in their choice of degree by the prospect of fees, we can say that despite gaining access to tertiary education, they are still disadvantaged in opportunities for social mobility and development of their own human capital relative to their middle and upper class peers. Professions with much higher earning potentials (e.g. medicine or pharmacy) are chosen by Bright Scholars at very low rates, since they involve not only high fees, but also postgraduate study and long periods of unpaid practice to qualify. Pharmacy for instance costs 50-70 million VNĐ in fees a year, and requires 5-6 years to complete study. Out of the 2020-21 cohort, only

7/183 studied Pharmacy, and only one of our 13 interviewees was studying undergraduate medical science.

While this is certainly something for a social equality and education focused NGO to follow closely, we should bear in mind that the predominant goal of many Bright Scholars is to avoid a future of low-skilled, low-status manual labour such as farming or factory work, and to be able to support parents and siblings. From the point of view of a young person from a “poor” family doing a low-cost degree such as teacher training, calculations about returns to education are unlikely to be a disincentive. Rather, their focus is on escaping intergenerational poverty and achieving “perceived” social mobility from the point of view of their home communities.



Science and Technology Degrees

The second most popular degree chosen by Bright Scholars is Science and Technology. Let's look at the experience of these students.

NGHĨA is 21 years old, the son of a working class family from periurban Đại Lộc. He studied Electromechanical Engineering at the Danang University of Science and Technology between 2016 and 2021. After graduation he worked in Quảng Ngãi province for a time, but last year found a job in Đà Nẵng working as a semiconductor engineer with Japanese company Renesas. Nghĩa works on semiconductors for automotive applications, making him particularly valuable to Renesas, who have a large contract with Vietnamese electric auto maker VinFast.

ĐẠT was born in 2002 in Thăng Bình, the younger of two sons of a single mother in a farming family classified as near-poor by the local authorities. He's currently in the third year of his degree in machine manufacturing (chế tạo máy) at the University of Science and Technology, Đà Nẵng. After graduation, Đạt wants to work in software and IT, which has been a significant part of his degree. He's confident he'll be able to find work easily in this industry.

LONG, who hails from Đà Nẵng city, studied from 2009 to 2014 at the Danang University of Science and Technology, majoring in auto-engineering. To supplement his scholarship he worked as a tutor while studying. Although his major was engineering, his true love was teaching. When I ask Long about his career after graduating, he replies that teaching has been his main work since beginning university until now. But, he jokes, "I've done about ten different jobs, some just for the experience". Compared to the young folks today he's been a bit slow establishing his path, Long says, ending up not working in the field in which he trained. He's recently opened a small training academy to help students with the university entrance examinations. He's full of hopes for the success of this endeavour.

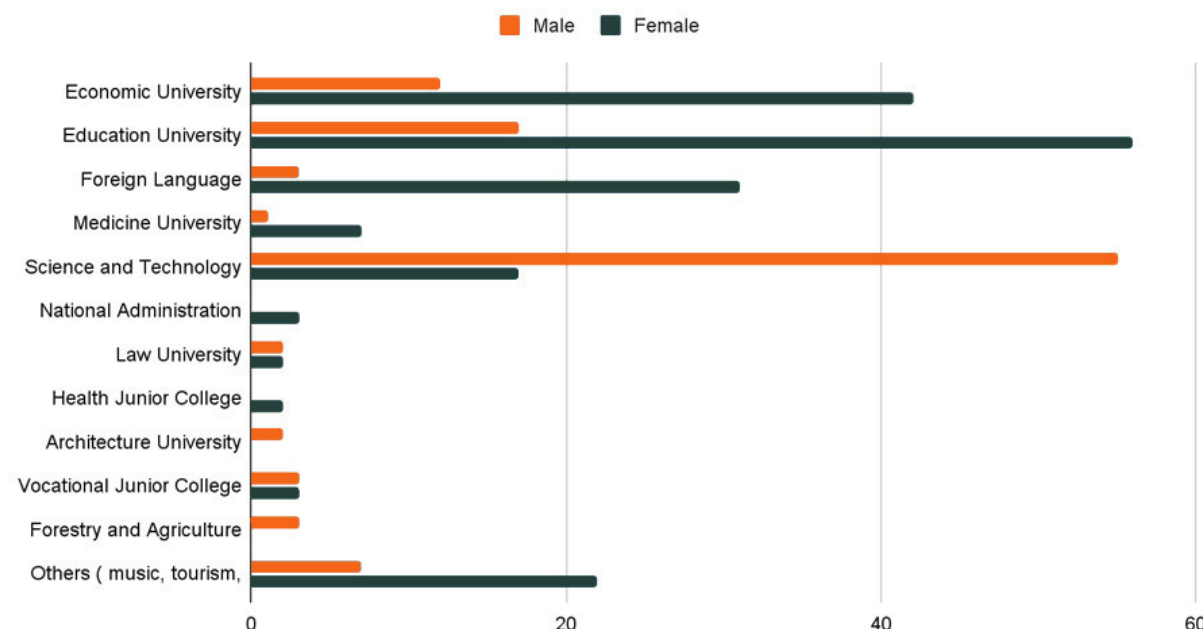
"No one can decide your career for you", Long concludes.

The social mobility Nghĩa has achieved, from humble son of a “poor” family to science and technology professional working for a global corporation in the big city, is a striking example of the rapidity of social change in Vietnam today. Another interviewee works in the THACO auto manufacturing facility in Chu Lai, a partner in BMW's Asia production network. These students are beneficiaries of a demand for skilled workers by high-value added, national and global corporations present in Đà Nẵng and Quảng Nam.

It's notable that their path to employment has been much more straightforward than that of Long, who graduated in 2014, but failed to find suitable work in the auto engineering or science and technology sector. This possibly demonstrates the more recent arrival of FDI in this sector in Đà Nẵng and Quảng Nam. Despite this, some ten years after graduating, Long now finds himself with the necessary confidence, capital, skills and connections to become an education entrepreneur in downtown Đà Nẵng.

Degree Choice, Gender and Ethnicity

Universities attended by Bright Scholars by gender



Based on data from 290 enrolments, from 2008-2021. Female = 185 total, male = 105 total.

Observations:

- Women are markedly under-represented in Science and Technology
 - Note that this is one of the more expensive degrees commonly chosen by Bright Scholars
 - Jobs in this sector are concentrated in urban and industrial areas, meaning that graduates may need to be free to live away from home villages. Men typically enjoy this mobility more than women.
- Men are markedly under-represented in Education and Economics
- Enrolments in Foreign Language are high, despite the high relative cost of this degree.
- 5 out of 7 ethnic minority students who have received Bright Scholarships studied Education, meaning they are over-represented in this government-subsidised degree.

Implications for COV

- Based on the data available to this report, we can say that there are many encouraging signs tertiary education is leading to social mobility for Bright Scholars. It would be desirable to have more information, however, about degree choice and experiences of employment. COV might like to consider:
 - Whether women and those from rural and mountainous regions are over-represented in Education and other low-cost degrees, and whether this risks “short changing” them in terms of the opportunities for social mobility available to them through tertiary education relative to their peers.
 - Whether rural origin men have greater freedom to pursue careers away from home than women. Does this inform their degree choice (e.g. Science and Technology over Education)? Is this a dimension of inequality? If so, how could it be mitigated?

- What are the experiences of employment and job satisfaction of those working in public education?
- What degree choices do Bright Scholars make compared to the national student population?
 - Are they choosing cheaper degrees at a higher rate?
 - Is there a gender bias here?
 - An ethnic bias?
- Considerations about limited social mobility through degree and employment choice should be balanced against the students’ own ambitions and definitions of what constitutes a good life, the social good represented by their return to home communities, and the limited resources available to COV.
- Given the resources, COV could consider making low or zero interest loans to students wishing to study expensive degrees with good prospects for income after graduation. Once graduates were employed and earning above an appropriate threshold, they could begin to pay their loans back to COV as a percentage of their earnings (after the Australian HECS scheme). Alternatively it could help inform students about government loan schemes available to students from poor backgrounds, and assess the risks and rewards in these schemes.
- Considering how many Bright Scholars come from farming backgrounds, it’s striking that only 3 have studied Forestry and Agriculture. Does this reflect truly low prospects of earning a good wage or starting a successful enterprise in these fields, or is it a matter of perceptions of agriculture as low-status and undesirable? It may be appropriate for COV to offer guidance to students about prospects in agriculture.

Class and opportunity

In addition to providing students from “poor” and “near-poor” backgrounds with stipends to facilitate university attendance and completion, COV offers life-skills classes on topics such as networking, communication and personal time management as part of its Bright Scholars program. Our interviewees reported participating in these classes once or twice a year, and were universally positive about them. All expressed a desire for greater engagement with opportunities for social learning and interaction with their Bright Scholar peers through these sessions. In order to assess the efficacy of these workshops, and to be able to suggest some areas for improvement or expansion of this side of the program, it is useful to engage in a brief discussion of class and social/cultural capital in Vietnam today.

First it’s important to note that the “poor” and “near-poor” designations COV uses to determine eligibility are strictly economic categories based on income and access to social services. In order to better understand the needs and challenges of scholarship recipients, it’s useful to supplement this with a more holistic way of understanding the nature of their disadvantage. Chu (2018) has observed that conventional ways of understanding social disadvantage in Vietnam rely on the key indicators of occupational category, income and geographical location to explain inequality in life chances. She contends that these economic categories of identity alone are not sufficient to explain observed “significant and persistent inequalities”, and that a more sophisticated understanding of social class in the post-reform Vietnamese context is required.

Cultural Capital

Most relevant for our purposes here is the idea that one's class position and identity is not determined solely by economic and occupational factors but also, among other things, by the quantity and quality of social and cultural capital one possesses. Cultural capital here represents the accumulation of knowledge, behaviours, skills, tastes and dispositions that one can draw on to demonstrate social competence, distinction and superiority. This form of capital is both inherited through the family and learnt in social and institutional contexts, most importantly the school. A good example of cultural capital, and one particularly relevant to the Vietnamese context, where rural and regional accents are strongly marked, is language. Thompson and Hickey observe that

Class boundaries are also maintained by language, speech patterns, and pronunciation. Members of the upper class speak more directly and in a more assured manner than do members of the working and lower classes. Their confident demeanor, in turn, enables upper- and upper-middle-class speakers to project images of credibility, honesty, and competence that are important in all social arenas—especially the workplace (2012:221).

Our interviewees, with a few exceptions, were painfully shy, soft-spoken and uncomfortable in the novel and challenging social situation of being interviewed in Vietnamese by a foreign academic in the office of COV. In our experience, this demeanour is in striking contrast to the relaxed, confident and even assertive stance of their middle and upper middle class urban peers when put into a similar scenario. These different levels of interpersonal skill and familiarity with cosmopolitan experiences represent an inequity in cultural capital, and can be understood as a persistent form of class distinction. Cultural capital is particularly hard to recongise as a form of class distinction since things like differences in confidence and speaking style are most often put down to differing individual and “natural” qualities. This “misrecognised” form of class identity is not necessarily erased by the experience of tertiary education, and might be expected to disadvantage graduates from poor rural and urban working class origins in future contexts such as job interviews, wage bargaining or promotions rounds. Tran (2019) notes that such “soft skills” are a “significant determinant of employment outcomes”.

Cultural capital is also an important factor in the process whereby people make a subjective estimation of their “objective” life-chances, i.e. the process of asking themselves questions such as “What kind of degree, occupation and lifestyle can a poor scholarship kid from the village like me really aspire to?” King et al have argued that Vietnamese middle class youth identity is “characterised by possession of cultural capital, a commitment to education, and aspirations for personal and career development” (King et al 2008). Young people of different class origins in Vietnam thankfully share that commitment to education, but unequal levels of cultural capital could lead to inequality of aspirations. The sociological argument here would be that self-limitation of chances (e.g through timidity or lack of the capacity to imagine wider horizons for oneself), in tandem with forms of objective limitation of their life-chances (e.g. due to poverty, family expectations, or lack of social capital), could lead to the reproduction of the subordinate class status of young people of poor rural or periurban origins – albeit as lower paid, lower status tertiary qualified workers rather than manual workers or farmers.

BÌNH, as a village girl, found it a real challenge living in Danang. At first she was so timid she couldn't even cross the road. “I used to take half an hour,” she told us. “In the countryside, you wait until there aren't any vehicles before you cross the road. In the city, that never happens! One day a driver felt so sorry for me he stopped and helped me across the road.”

At first Binh didn't dare talk to anyone, but after taking part in COV's communication workshop, and being encouraged by staff, she felt she could adapt to city life better, and speak more naturally.

The life skills workshops were extremely useful to NGHĨA, and gave him the opportunity to meet friends his own age from other universities. Nghĩa genuinely feels these workshops helped him improve his communication skills, and agrees with the proposition that students from rural backgrounds often lack the self confidence that those from the city naturally possess. The skills workshops have definitely helped him get a leg up in this regard. Even so, when asked Nghĩa tells us that he didn't feel he had anyone close enough to share his troubles with during his studies, but rather relied on himself.

ĐẠT has had contact with other Bright Scholars via the scholarship disbursement day, and the activities COV organised. The life skills (kỹ năng mềm) workshops around self confidence and communication were particularly useful, he notes. He's still soft-spoken and shy, with a thick Thăng Bình accent that identifies him as a village boy, but underneath this you sense a resolute young man. When faced with adversity Đạt prefers to be self-reliant, saying “You just have to get through it. Ultimately you have to own it”



Our interviews suggest that, thankfully, students don't have to deal with overt class or regional prejudice. When asked about this directly, several students stressed the accepting and egalitarian culture of Danang. "We're all from Quảng Nam, after all", explained one. Cơ Tu students from Tây Giang expressed a similar sense of warm acceptance. At the same time, when asked about the social skills classes, the majority mentioned that the communication (giao tiếp) workshop had been the most useful, and expressed an interest in more training in a similar vein. To identify in oneself a deficiency in communication skills is, we'd argue, some kind of recognition that one lacks social confidence in cosmopolitan urban contexts because of one's humble origins. In our opinion, this is a significant concern, but also one that COV is very well placed to address.

Implications for COV

- Consider ways to enable familiarisation with cosmopolitan spaces and consumer cultures in the city, for example a "buddy" program whereby Bright Scholars are paired with classmates from middle class Đà Nẵng households. University partners may be able to facilitate this.
- Further emphasise and develop the embodied and performative aspects of existing communication workshops
- Help students "de-naturalise" their shyness by bringing the concepts of cultural capital and social class into the discussion in an approachable way
- Consider a workshop or series of workshops focused on the culture and geography of the Quảng Nam uplands. Here upland students from ethnic Vietnamese, Cơ Tu and other communities could be asked to help design presentations, activities and field trips that help other Bright Scholars understand their local cultures and livelihoods. The aim here would be to help all recognise the unique and valuable cultural capital they and their fellow students possess, and appreciate how this has been and can be used as a resource (e.g. for cultural, eco and sustainable tourism, alternative agriculture, handicrafts and artisanship, and forest and wildlife protection). This is something that might allow them to positively distinguish themselves from city people.
- Find out if any of the universities popularly attended by Bright Scholars are offering "soft skills" training
 - Be sure to inform scholarship recipients these courses are available
 - Explore opportunities for COV to participate in such programs
- Promote the idea of participating in university clubs and emphasise that these are an important means of developing both soft skills and connections with peers as well as club sponsors and partners in industry and overseas.
- Make use of this excellent resource: Nghia, Tran Le Huu. Building Soft Skills for Employability: Challenges and Practices in Vietnam, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019.



Social Capital

Social capital is an allied concept to cultural capital, but focuses us more on the “value” embedded in social relationships – that is, the extent to which one can use relationships as a resource to accumulate the kinds of attributes that enable social mobility. Social capital “resides in the individual and is linked to social connections that a person can utilise for advancement”. Like cultural capital, it is “convertible” into other forms of capital, most importantly economic capital. Here we can consider nepotism – prevalent in Vietnam – as an example whereby one “converts” well placed social connections, especially familial ones, into high status and well paid work, particularly in the state sector (Chu 20189, p.64).

As children of poor families without connections to middle class networks, Bright Scholars can be considered to have low levels of social capital. In our interviews we saw clearly the positive impact COV is having in terms of helping ameliorate this. COV itself can be understood as an organisation that formalises and “institutionalises” the social capital embedded in the network of donors, staff, associates, local government counterparts, private sector partners, volunteers, and former and current students that is centred around the NGO. Scholarship recipients not only receive economic aid, tuition and coaching, but also get access to this set of networks, or at least to some nodes of them. A good example of this in practice was when one of our interviewees took the opportunity, after the formal conversation had ended, to counter-interview Ashley and COV staff member Tiên about studying abroad. This led us into a detailed conversation about fees, scholarships and how university funding models in Australia, the US and Europe affect international students. Here she was able to access some frank, expert opinions about overseas study (valuable cultural capital) by using the fact that COV had brought Ashley and Tiên into her social orbit (institutionalised social capital).

Long, another interviewee, gave us another good example of how COV’s social capital enables social mobility for disadvantaged young people:

LONG’s father, a construction worker, happened to do a repair job for (COV Country Director) Cô Hương’s mother. At that time, Long had had his bicycle stolen, and his dad was telling the story to a co-worker. Cô Hương’s grandmother overheard, and told Hương, who then replaced Long’s bicycle, and from then it seemed he was fated to be connected to COV!

Hương told Long’s father to encourage him to study hard and pass the university entrance exams. Since his family was classified as living in hardship, he’d be eligible for the Bright Scholars program, making Long determined to pass, which in time he indeed did. He then went to COV’s old office with his father for an interview. After a follow up home visit, he was granted a scholarship, allowing him to pay his university fees.

Aid from COV can also be said to increase the “value” of the familial and communal social relationships in which students are embedded, in the sense that these links become resources that can aid their social advancement. A concrete example of this is getting advice and encouragement around tertiary education and career choice from siblings or schoolmates who have themselves been recipients of COV scholarships. We see this in action in Tường’s story:

TƯỜNG was planning to go straight to work after graduating from senior high school in order to support his family. His elder sister, who was at the time studying Social Work, intervened and advised him sternly not to do this, but rather to apply for a Bright Scholarship and follow in her footsteps. Tường in turn is encouraging his youngest brother, now in year 11, to do the same.

Strikingly, all of the students whose families have been supported by COV’s EFWC program that have subsequently gone on to attempt the university entrance exam have passed and been awarded Bright Scholarships. This includes several families with multiple siblings in tertiary education.

Implications for COV

- Internship programs are an excellent way to help Bright Scholars further develop their cultural and social capital. Project Share, a Hong Kong NGO focused on helping disadvantaged youth improve their chances for social mobility, is a good model for COV to consider. The Social Mobility Foundation’s Aspiring Professionals Programme is another.
- Former cohorts of Bright Scholars working in the public and private sector (e.g. Trang, who works in the Education Office of Danang’s central administration) are potentially an excellent resource as internship partners
- Use workshops as a way of exposing students to unconventional and creative industries, and to match them with mentors who will then support individual internships (after Project Share).
- Excellent opportunities exist in Hội An and surrounds for internships in creative and alternative industries. These include successful small businesses run by young entrepreneurs based on:
 - Sustainable, eco and cultural tourism
 - Alternative or high value added agriculture
 - Alternative lifestyles (e.g. yoga, veganism, spirituality, music)
- Use the connections COV has with Tây Giang and Cơ Tu communities in other districts as a resource for internships , e.g. around the sustainable cultural tourism or forest protection initiatives
- Consider how opportunities to do volunteer work with COV and its partners might be folded into internships for Bright Scholars. Many expressed a strong desire to do such work, and have very positive orientations towards philanthropy and social justice initiatives.
- Consider what COV can do to further foster networks between Bright Scholars both within and between cohorts, since these are potentially highly valuable forms of social capital. Current Bright Scholars and graduates we interviewed from previous cohorts expressed strong enthusiasm for social activities and team-building opportunities.
 - A possible role for former Bright Scholars would be in mentoring current students in their university work and in preparing for internships and job applications.

Supplementary Work

Our interviewees universally engaged in paid work to supplement their COV stipends, with several working up to 20 hours per week for a wage of 12 000 VNĐ per hour. The most popular kind of work is waiting tables in cafes, bars and wedding reception restaurants. Eight out of twelve interviewees who discussed paid work reported doing this kind of labour, while four also said they had worked as after-school tutors in English and science subjects. Two had also engaged in manual labour on building sites and worked as part of crews that set up wedding marquees.

Paid work is an important part of student life, and represents both opportunities and pitfalls. The majority find work in hospitality, since it is flexible and has low barriers to entry. While one can debate the merits of learning the value of money through labour, it does seem regrettable that so many Bright Scholars are spending such long hours doing low-paid work unlikely to bring valuable rewards in terms of experience and skills (cultural capital) or networks (social capital).

For the sake of comparison, a non Bright Scholar middle class interviewee who studied media and communications in Hanoi told us that, free of the pressure to earn money through supplementary work while studying, she began her career doing unpaid volunteer work with a film crew. The experience she gained and connections she made through this led to a paid internship with a media company, where she worked in marketing throughout her studies, thus graduating with a good deal of work experience to note on her CV and many more connections in the industry.

To the extent that our Bright Scholar interviewees made positive comments about work, these were to the effect that it exposes one to the wider world and provides opportunities to improve one's communication and social skills, ultimately making one more dynamic. Thuật is an exponent of this view, and believes that interacting with people from all walks of life through diverse kinds of labour, as well as doing charity and volunteer work, is excellent preparation for life after graduation.

Thuật and Nghĩa were the only interviewees to have done manual labour. For them the main virtue of this work is that it is flexible, can be done during teaching breaks, and pays double the wage of light work such as waiting tables.

THUẬT worked to earn extra money to supplement his COV stipend. He focused on jobs “where you can earn money quickly”, for example working as a builder’s labourer on weekends, or setting up marquees for wedding receptions. Doing this over the long break, he could make 6 or 7 million đồng. With this money, and a little help from his mother, he was able to buy a laptop for his university work. This gave him an immense sense of pride and self-mastery.

None of our female interviewees reported having done such work, although it's not at all unusual to see women working on building sites in Vietnam, as well as doing other relatively well-paid manual work, especially collecting plastic and cardboard recyclables by bicycle. No doubt these occupations clash with the new middle class identities Bright scholars are seeking to forge for themselves. On the other hand, it's worth considering the fact that such temporary work could allow them to halve the hours they devote to labour and provide opportunities for social learning. Thuật is a proponent of Bright Scholars doing this kind of work.

Both Long and Thảo worked as self-employed tutors, which eventually led in Long's case to starting his own tutoring business for university students, and may do so for Thảo also. Tutoring seems a natural area for COV to focus on when considering advising scholarship holders about paid work. For that high proportion of Bright Scholars who study Education, tutoring work is clearly relevant to their studies and future careers, and is also potentially a space for entrepreneurship.

Implications for COV

- Consider offering a workshop or series of workshops offering students advice for strategies around supplementary work
 - This should include a conversation about different rates of pay, flexibility, working conditions and a critique of the social meaning of the various occupations available to students, including manual labour
 - Some attention should also be given to tutoring students about how to get the most out of paid work - for instance by using it as an opportunity to learn how a business is run
 - Thuật suggests COV facilitate something like a jobs clearing house via Facebook or similar, where students can find introductions to work, and also ask for help with filling in and taking shifts etc. This probably already happens among small groups.
- COV should consider giving advice to students about weighing up the benefits of paid work versus the cost of losing time that could be dedicated to study, participating in student clubs, recreation, socialising etc.
- Given that many students supplement their scholarships by tutoring, it makes sense to offer a workshop on how to find a job as a tutor or how to develop one's own tutoring business
 - online teaching methods is a useful associated skill here
- Consider strategies for finding students paid internships that allow opportunities for developing one's social and cultural capital as an alternative to long hours of “dead end” labour while studying
- Conduct research on what percentage of lower socioeconomic background students have to get a job to support their studies versus those from more privileged backgrounds.
- Be conscious that not being able to do unpaid intern work is disadvantaging Bright Scholars relative to their more privileged peers.





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CONCLUSIONS

The rationale for this program is, in our opinion, extremely sound. COV's focus on families living in chronic poverty is appropriately aligned with Vietnamese government policy around poverty reduction, enabling excellent collaboration with local, province and city authorities. It is also in tune with World Bank recommendations around reducing inequality in access to tertiary education in a context of increasing socio-economic differentiation after a long phase of inclusive growth in post-reform Vietnam.

The link between education and social mobility is well established in empirical research both in the region and globally. For the children of the urban and rural poor, tertiary education is the single most effective means of achieving social advancement, and the experience of skills and intergenerational mobility is almost universal for graduates from lower-educated families. Felicitously, positive attitudes towards education in Vietnam are shared across class divides, a result of traditional Confucian outlooks and modern ideas about the nobility of learning and importance of self-improvement. In such a context, investing a relatively small amount of donor funding per student brings outstanding returns in terms of social equity.

Despite gaining access to tertiary education, Bright Scholars continue to face challenges in achieving parity of life chances with their middle and upper class peers in the opportunity structure of post-reform Vietnam. They appear to be under-represented in (expensive) degrees leading to high income and high status jobs in areas such as medicine and finance. They can

also be expected to face enduring forms of class inequality such as lacking access to social connections that can facilitate advancement (social capital) and the elite skills, tastes, dispositions and knowledges that mark class boundaries (cultural capital).

ce by means of its life skills workshops and cohort-building activities. This aspect of the program could be usefully expanded, most especially by the development of a mentoring and internship program, which in our estimation would be the most effective way to bridge the social and cultural capital gap and further improve Bright Scholars' life chances.

An important trend for COV to track is the decline in the number of tertiary-qualified jobs and prevalence of skills mismatches in the labour market in Vietnam since 2010. Our recommendation here is that COV consider working with employers to facilitate on the job vocational training leading to employment for graduates as a supplement, or even as an alternative, to university. In addition, it should seek to foster partnerships with people in the region or beyond who are active in small-scale entrepreneurship in social, creative, and non-traditional fields.

Our final recommendation is that COV improve its data-gathering so that it may better understand the experiences of Bright Scholars at university and in the labour market. In this way it will be better able to demonstrate its social impact, which we can safely assume is significant.

Future Directions

Internship programs are an excellent way to help Bright Scholars further develop their cultural and social capital. Project Share, a Hong Kong NGO focused on helping disadvantaged youth improve their chances for social mobility, is a good model for COV to consider. The Social Mobility Foundation's Aspiring Professionals Programme is another.

Workshops and internships are an excellent way of exposing students to unconventional and creative industries, and matching them with mentors whose interests and values reflect their own.

Given that the trend in Vietnam since 2010 has been towards graduates finding it harder to secure work appropriate to their qualifications, stressing creativity and entrepreneurship is a good strategy.

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