



Young Professionals Leaving Public Universities: Value Disillusionment or Strategic Career Choice?

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Abstract

This study investigates why young professionals choose to leave public universities in Vietnam. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 16 former lecturers, researchers, and administrative specialists, the study explores exit not merely as a response to dissatisfaction, but as a moral and symbolic act. The findings reveal three major themes: perceived value misalignment and moral fatigue, blocked career development pathways, and the reimagining of career identity beyond the university. Using Hirschman's Exit-Voice-Loyalty framework and the concept of moral disaffection, the study shows how institutional cultures marked by hierarchy, performative autonomy, and bureaucratic inertia can erode organizational legitimacy in the eyes of young professionals. These insights contribute to organizational sociology by reframing exit as ethical disengagement, and offer implications for higher education policy and leadership in rapidly reforming systems.

Keywords: Organizational Exit, Higher Education Reform, Academic Precarity, Vietnamese Universities

1. Introduction

In recent years, Vietnam's public universities have been undergoing extensive reforms aimed at achieving greater institutional autonomy, increased competitiveness, and alignment with global higher education standards (London, 2010; Tran & Marginson, 2018) ^[4, 9]. However, as Le (2014) ^[6] observes, these reforms have often prioritized quantitative expansion—such as enrollment targets and output metrics—over qualitative improvements in academic culture and governance. While policy discourse has promoted institutional autonomy, Hoa (2022) ^[5] argues that actual implementation remains constrained by bureaucratic oversight, limited decision-making power, and ambiguous accountability mechanisms. These reform trajectories, while framed as modernization efforts, have introduced new pressures on academic labor, including performance-based evaluations and rigid managerial structures—generating growing discontent, particularly among younger professionals navigating precarious and uncertain career paths.

An emerging but underexplored phenomenon is the increasing number of young lecturers, researchers, and administrative staff leaving public universities to pursue careers in other sectors. Public narratives often reduce these departures to economic motives or “better opportunities elsewhere,” but such explanations risk oversimplifying the complex web of motivations, frustrations, and identity negotiations involved. From a sociological perspective, exit from an institution is never just a technical or transactional act — it is also a response to perceived misalignment between personal values and institutional ethos (Bauman, 2001; Feldman & Ng, 2007) ^[2, 3].

Despite growing media coverage and informal discussions within academic circles, empirical research on this trend remains limited. Existing analyses of Vietnamese higher education have largely concentrated on policy structures or systemic reforms, often emphasizing institutional expansion and governance frameworks (Le, 2014; Hoa, 2022) ^[6, 5], rather than exploring how individuals interpret the meaning of leaving a public university.

Moreover, little is known about how these exits reflect broader transformations in the moral and symbolic foundations of public higher education. In other words, what does it mean — ethically, emotionally, and socially — for a young professional to walk away from a system once seen as a prestigious and stable career path?

This study situates such exits within broader debates in organizational sociology about disaffection, meaning-making, and institutional legitimacy. It argues that these individual departures may serve as signals of deeper crises within public academic institutions — not only in terms of material conditions, but also in the erosion of purpose, trust, and belonging. By re-centering the voices of those who have left, this research seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how institutions lose — not just their people — but also their moral authority.

2. Theoretical framework

Understanding why young professionals leave public universities requires more than a functionalist account of organizational turnover. Rather than viewing these departures solely as reactions to material deficits or institutional failures, this study approaches them as meaning-laden acts situated at the intersection of individual agency, institutional structure, and moral valuation. Two complementary bodies of theory inform this analysis: Albert O. Hirschman's "Exit, Voice, and Loyalty" (1970) ^[11] framework and the sociological concept of moral disaffection within organizations (Thacher & Rein, 2004; Anteby, 2013) ^[10].

2.1. Exit as a strategic and symbolic act

Hirschman (1970) ^[11] conceptualized "exit" as one of the primary responses available to individuals confronted with organizational decline or dissatisfaction, alongside "voice" (expression of discontent) and "loyalty" (willingness to remain despite dissatisfaction). While initially developed to analyze consumer behavior and political allegiance, the framework has since been widely applied to labor studies and organizational sociology (Dowding *et al.*, 2000) ^[1]. In this study, "exit" is understood not merely as a physical departure but as a communicative act that signals disengagement from the perceived values, priorities, or legitimacy of the institution.

Particularly among early-career professionals in hierarchical and state-dominated systems, exit can serve both as a form of resistance and as a claim to autonomy. However, unlike voice, which aims to reform the system from within, exit often represents a rupture — a conscious withdrawal of trust, effort, and identification (Ng & Feldman, 2009). This framing helps reposition exit not as an absence of action, but as an intentional, morally inflected choice.

2.2. Moral disaffection and institutional misalignment

Beyond strategic reasoning, many exits are rooted in moral disaffection — the sense that one's values, identity, or ethical commitments are increasingly at odds with those promoted by the organization (Thacher & Rein, 2004). This concept draws attention to the emotional and normative dimensions of organizational life: people do not simply work in institutions; they invest meaning, belief, and hope into them. When such investments are repeatedly violated — through bureaucratic rigidity, symbolic performativity, or perceived

hypocrisy — individuals may experience a rupture of moral alignment (Anteby, 2013) ^[10].

This is especially salient in the context of public universities, where institutional legitimacy has historically rested on ideals of social contribution, intellectual integrity, and collective advancement (Marginson, 2011) ^[14]. For many young professionals, the decision to leave may reflect not only dissatisfaction with working conditions but also a sense of betrayal — a realization that the institution no longer embodies the values it proclaims. Moral disaffection thus expands the interpretive lens of exit beyond rational choice, incorporating affective, ethical, and symbolic dimensions of organizational life.

2.3. Generational consciousness and emerging career ethics

A final dimension shaping this study is the growing literature on generational shifts in career values. Research suggests that younger professionals (especially Millennials and Gen Z) tend to prioritize personal fulfillment, meaningful work, and value congruence over institutional loyalty (Twenge *et al.*, 2010; Lyons & Kuron, 2014) ^[12]. In contexts where public universities are perceived as rigid, opaque, or misaligned with such aspirations, exit may be interpreted as a search for ethical coherence, rather than merely upward mobility. These generational dispositions are not deterministic, but they offer important insights into how exits may function as moral positioning, particularly in rapidly transforming knowledge economies like Vietnam's.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in interpretivist epistemology, with the aim of exploring how young professionals construct meaning around their decision to leave public universities in Vietnam. Rather than seeking to quantify causal factors, the research focuses on the lived experiences, moral narratives, and value judgments of individuals who have voluntarily exited state-run higher education institutions.

Participant selection

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling strategies, targeting individuals who met three inclusion criteria:

1. They had worked in a public university in Vietnam (either as lecturers, research staff, or administrative specialists).
2. They had voluntarily left their position within the last five years.
3. They were under the age of 35 at the time of departure.

A total of 16 participants were interviewed, divided into three occupational categories:

- Lecturers (n = 7): Early-career academics who had held full-time teaching or teaching-research positions.
- Research staff (n = 3): Individuals primarily engaged in scientific research, policy studies, or project-based work within university-affiliated research centers or institutes.
- Administrative specialists (n = 6): Professionals working in academic support units, quality assurance offices, or international cooperation departments.

Participants were located across different regions of Vietnam (North, Central, and South), and diversity in gender,

university size, and disciplinary background was considered to ensure a rich range of perspectives.

Data collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted between February and May 2025. Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, either face-to-face or via secure video conferencing platforms depending on participant location and preference. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes, and all were audio-recorded with informed consent.

The interview guide included open-ended questions structured around the following domains:

- Personal and professional background
- Motivations for joining and working at a public university
- Experiences of institutional culture and values
- Triggers and reflections related to the decision to leave
- Post-exit trajectories and retrospective interpretations

Participants were encouraged to narrate their experiences freely, and follow-up probes were used to explore key themes in greater depth.

Data analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim in Vietnamese and coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed an inductive-deductive approach: while initial codes emerged from close reading of transcripts, they were later refined in dialogue with the theoretical concepts outlined earlier (e.g., exit, moral disaffection, value misalignment).

Data coding and theme development were conducted manually through a rigorous, iterative process. Three main analytical cycles were undertaken:

1. Open coding, using detailed reading and margin annotation to identify recurring patterns, expressions, and experiential markers.
2. Axial coding, in which related codes were grouped into broader conceptual categories concerning motivations, moral narratives, and organizational perceptions.
3. Selective coding, aimed at synthesizing cross-cutting themes and constructing coherent analytical narratives that captured the meaning-making processes of participants.

To ensure analytical rigor, the process was supported by memo-writing, manual code mapping, and reflexive journaling, enabling the researcher to trace interpretive decisions and maintain transparency throughout the analysis.

Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for qualitative research in the social sciences. All participants were fully informed about the nature and objectives of the study prior to participation. Verbal and written consent were obtained, and participants were made aware of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence.

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, all identifying information was removed during transcription, and pseudonyms are used throughout this article. Data were stored securely and accessible only to the research team. Special attention was paid to the potentially sensitive nature

of participants' reflections on their former workplaces, and care was taken to avoid any leading or coercive questioning during interviews.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were employed solely for language editing, data organization, and writing assistance in the preparation of this article. These tools were not used to generate, analyze, or interpret qualitative data, nor did they participate in any way in the interview process or thematic coding. As such, the use of AI did not influence the empirical findings or theoretical interpretations of this study.

4. Findings

The analysis of interviews with 18 former employees of public universities in Vietnam revealed three major themes explaining their decision to leave: (1) perceived value misalignment and moral fatigue, (2) blocked professional development pathways, and (3) the appeal of alternative career imaginaries. These themes highlight not only structural constraints but also emotional and ethical dissonances that shaped the exit narratives of young professionals.

4.1. Value misalignment and moral fatigue

A recurring theme across interviews was a deep sense of disconnect between personal values and institutional culture. Participants described feeling morally conflicted in environments that emphasized hierarchy, symbolic compliance, and administrative control over authentic academic or developmental missions.

"I came in believing in education as service, but over time I saw how much of it was about pretending. Reports were inflated, initiatives were performative—it just drained me." (P03, Lecturer)

"There was so much talk about 'innovation' and 'autonomy,' but all decisions were made behind closed doors. You were expected to follow, not question." (P12, Research staff)

"It became exhausting to fight small battles every day—just to organize a workshop or propose a new idea. I stopped believing I could grow here without losing parts of myself." (P08, Administrator)

This sense of moral fatigue contributed to a gradual erosion of commitment, as participants felt their emotional and ethical investments were not only unrecognized but actively undermined.

4.2. Stalled career pathways and structural invisibility

Many participants cited limited opportunities for advancement, lack of recognition, and a rigid, opaque system as key push factors. While some had entered their roles with aspirations to pursue academic careers or leadership positions, they soon encountered bureaucratic inertia and unclear criteria for growth.

"After three years, I realized I had no idea how promotion worked. It depended on who vouched for you, not what you achieved." (P06, Lecturer)

"My contract was renewed annually, but there was never a pathway to become official staff. I felt like I was just... there, filling in gaps." (P11, Specialist)

"I submitted two proposals that got approved, but there was no funding, no implementation. It was like being told to run but kept in place." (P02, Research staff)

The feeling of being structurally invisible—present yet not fully integrated—created a sense of professional stagnation,

especially among those with aspirations for meaningful contribution and long-term impact.

4.3. Imagining elsewhere: Agency and career reorientation

Despite the challenges, participants did not frame their exit solely as a failure or resignation. Rather, many interpreted leaving as an act of self-determination—a choice to reclaim agency and seek alignment between work and personal meaning in emerging career domains.

“I left not because I hated the university, but because I found a space where I could be creative, make decisions, and see results. It felt like I was finally breathing.” (P16, Specialist now working in EdTech)

“A friend told me: you’re loyal to a system that doesn’t even notice you’re here. That woke me up. I realized I wanted a career, not just a job.” (P05, Lecturer now working at an international NGO)

“Working in research used to be my dream, but now I’m consulting for a clean-energy startup. I still use my skills, but with more impact and much less frustration.” (P09, Former research staff)

These narratives suggest that exit was not merely reactive, but often accompanied by new career imaginaries rooted in flexibility, innovation, and ethical coherence. In contrast to the constrained identity offered by public institutions, participants described their post-exit trajectories as morally and emotionally affirming.

5. Discussion

This study set out to understand how young professionals interpret their decision to leave public universities in Vietnam, not merely as acts of resignation, but as ethically charged and meaning-laden responses to institutional experience. The findings, interpreted through Hirschman’s (1970) ^[11] Exit, Voice, and Loyalty framework and subsequent work on moral disaffection (Thacher & Rein, 2004; Anteby, 2013) ^[10], reveal that exit from academia is neither trivial nor purely utilitarian. Rather, it is embedded in moral evaluations, generational identity, and struggles for agency.

5.1. Exit as moral communication

Consistent with Hirschman’s theorization, participants in this study enacted exit when voice was no longer seen as effective or welcome. While some attempted to “speak up” or reform from within, their efforts were met with institutional inertia or symbolic gestures. As a result, leaving became not only a personal strategy, but a form of moral communication—a way of signaling that the institution had lost its credibility as a space of shared purpose.

This aligns with Dowding *et al.* (2000) ^[1], who emphasize that exit carries discursive and political weight, especially when performed by professionals with high expectations of value congruence. In the Vietnamese context, where public universities have traditionally been associated with stability and prestige, the decision to leave can be read as a rupture in institutional legitimacy, not just labor choice.

5.2. Moral disaffection and institutional erosion

The second theme, centering on value misalignment and moral fatigue, echoes Thacher & Rein’s (2004) concept of moral disaffection. Participants’ narratives revealed

emotional exhaustion not from workload per se, but from performative governance, bureaucratic opacity, and symbolic leadership. These elements collectively generated what Anteby (2013) ^[10] calls the “erosion of moral coherence” within organizations.

This finding deepens what we know about the emotional and ethical burden carried by academics facing institutional reform and labor precarity in Vietnam. For example, Phan, Lupton & Watters (2016) ^[7] examine how early-career Vietnamese academics navigate tensions between Confucian collegial norms and encroaching managerialist regimes, illustrating the identity dissonance and psychological stress triggered by performance-driven accountability and loss of collegial values. Likewise, Arnold (2013) ^[8] describes how structural precarity and informal managerial practices in Vietnam produce vulnerability, humiliation, and detachment among workers—a dynamic evident even in academic settings where job insecurity and symbolic exclusion erode institutional moral authority

5.3. Exit as identity repositioning: generational career values

The third finding—exit as an act of career reorientation—underscores generational shifts in career ethics. For many participants, leaving was not framed as failure but as reclaiming alignment between identity and aspiration, in line with research by Lyons & Kuron (2014) ^[12] and Twenge *et al.* (2010). These studies show that younger generations increasingly value autonomy, purpose, and flexibility over institutional loyalty.

This resonates with findings by Tran & Marginson (2018) ^[9] on the rising tension between globalized career imaginaries and localized institutional rigidity. In this light, exit becomes a generational critique of outdated academic cultures. Participants did not merely move toward better salaries or positions—they moved toward meaningful work, emotional safety, and self-recognition.

5.4. Contributions to organizational sociology

By conceptualizing exit as a moral and relational act, this study expands the analytical vocabulary used to interpret turnover in higher education. While conventional models emphasize push-pull or rational-choice dynamics, this research suggests that moral dissonance, emotional disaffection, and symbolic rupture are equally central in understanding why young professionals leave.

Furthermore, by foregrounding the Vietnamese context, this study contributes to a growing body of Global South scholarship that interrogates how institutional legitimacy is constructed, contested, and ultimately undone—not through protest, but through quiet, cumulative exit.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the experiences and exit narratives of 16 young professionals who voluntarily left public universities in Vietnam. Through a sociological lens that foregrounds moral disaffection, institutional legitimacy, and generational career values, the findings offer a nuanced understanding of organizational exit—not as a purely strategic or economic decision, but as a value-laden and ethically charged act.

Three key insights emerged: First, participants experienced moral misalignment and ethical fatigue, stemming from bureaucratic inertia, symbolic compliance, and a sense of

institutional hollowness. Second, their career aspirations were blocked by rigid hierarchies and opaque advancement systems, resulting in a sense of structural invisibility. Third, their departures reflected not defeat but reorientation, shaped by emerging career imaginaries that prioritize meaning, agency, and coherence over stability or prestige.

By re-framing “exit” as a communicative and moral gesture, this study contributes to broader debates in organizational sociology about how individuals respond to institutional decay, and how legitimacy is eroded not just through voice or protest, but through quiet acts of withdrawal.

7. Implications for policy and practice

For university leaders and policymakers, these findings call for a deeper reckoning with the symbolic and ethical dimensions of organizational culture. Retention strategies that focus solely on salary or promotion pathways may fall short if young professionals continue to perceive a disconnect between institutional rhetoric and lived experience.

Creating spaces where early-career staff feel recognized, empowered, and morally aligned with the institution's mission is essential. This requires not only structural reforms, but also a cultural shift—toward transparency, intellectual integrity, and genuine participation.

8. Directions for future research

This study is limited by its qualitative scope and focus on a specific demographic group. Future research could build on these findings by:

- Examining the experiences of those who remain in the system despite dissatisfaction (loyalty vs. constrained silence),
- Comparing public and private university environments across generational lines,
- Exploring how institutional narratives respond to or internalize patterns of quiet exit.

Ultimately, understanding why young professionals leave may be just as important as understanding why others stay—especially in contexts where institutional reform depends on the hope and commitment of the next generation.

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