

# Social Construction of Public Intellectuals in Vietnam: Current Situation and Possible Changes

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**Abstract** On looking at the impacted factors to social development, it is always considered for the role of intellectuals with their contributions to any social spheres. Currently, there are debates and research about the title of intellectuals and public intellectuals as well in Vietnam. The common understandings are based on the social and community responsibility and the social contributions by the title of intellectual/public intellectual. However, it is hard to find any actual research on the public intellectuals in Vietnam recently. This research, as exploratory research with the survey on 225 scholars and academic staff, applies the current concept of public intellectuals as those who have their works impacted to public issues and contribute to make the public life better. The findings are expected to have the current knowledge, attitude and practice toward the research topics and to enlarge and contribute to the impacts by the public intellectuals in Vietnam.

**Keywords** Public intellectuals · Intellectual · Vietnam · Social construction · Social constructionism

## 1 Introduction

From its history, over a four thousand years, Vietnamese pays more attention to those who with wisdom and with well-based intellectual, and considers them as an intellectual resource for the nation. Such resource is the national strengths and background for national development and individual wealthy. From historical approach, Khánh et al. (2012) provides many evidences to suggest that ideas. Especially, such consideration is highly appropriate in the modern life, especially in the globalisation and integration process which Vietnam applies in nearly last 30 years. And it also witnessed the dramatic changes in the

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intellectuals, both quantity and quality, to become the resource for the social and economic development. In the recent statistics, it is found that there were 800 thousand intellectuals in 1995, then increased to 1.5 million in 2000. In 2012, that number reached up to 2.5 million, including 20 thousand at master level, 17 thousand at doctorate level and around 7 thousand of professor and associate professors (Khánh et al. 2012, p. 90) who are working in academic and research institutions. It means that Vietnam has its good intellectual human resource.

The intellectuals in Vietnam are diversified and joined in various sectors, with the highest proportion in professional unit (71 %) such as higher education system and research institutions, administrative Section (22 %) and enterprises ones (7 %). Especially there is an increasing number of intellectuals in the private companies with 8.04 % (Khánh et al. 2012). However, in the recent debates, there are statements about the lack of high professional degree level of university staff as two-third of those PhD holders in the administrative positions and in the research units which are almost separated from and located outside the university systems. The quality of Vietnamese intellectual is acknowledged in terms of the academic innovation and the contribution to social development. In the latter, there are various contributions in terms of the scientific suggestions on national policies, policy making, on the fundamental research in natural sciences, social research, on economic development and environmental protection, as well as new initiatives on new product manufacturing. The intellectuals are acknowledged by the legal document and government policies as the critical factors for social development and on creating a good condition for the whole nation to escape from economic and social crisis early 1990s.

From the recent research, there are some implications exposed on the intellectual characteristics and attributes in Vietnam: (a) Nationalism is the linkage among Vietnamese intellectuals which also make the strength of the intellectual group in Vietnam recently; (b) Ideas on humanity, equality is significant characteristic of Vietnamese intellectuals; (c) Vietnamese intellectuals do not well-update the modern knowledge and wisdom; (d) Vietnamese intellectuals have low critical, analysed, and referred competencies; (e) Vietnamese intellectuals are good at political and military thinking but not well enough in scientific, economic and arts capabilities which are latent competencies (Khánh et al. 2012). Such attributes are clearly stated and present the role and position of public intellectual in the daily life which reflect its number and groups, and reflect the limitation of intellectuals on realising their roles on social contribution and find the way to promote themselves. Recent research about intellectuals also pointed out that Vietnam has its own experiences on making the intellectual class from its history as the clear conceptualisations on intellectual and wisdom, the standards on recruiting, educating and selecting the intellectuals in the significant positions in society. However, there is still lack of research finding the detailed definition and social understandings of intellectuals in general and public intellectuals in particular, and their role and social contributions as well. So, this paper looks at the social construction of public intellectuals in Vietnam, based on the following research questions: how the public intellectual is socially constructed in Vietnamese contexts? How public intellectuals play their role in current conditions of Vietnam? And what are impacted factors to their role?

## 2 Literature Reviews

### 2.1 Concept of Intellectual

Vietnamese calls Intellectual as “Trí thức” those who get the university or higher levels working in professional areas. That concept seems broad focus, and not reflecting the main ideas of intellectual human resources in given society (Ivanov 2008; Thuyết 2012; Út 2012). And such conceptualisation is also based on the benchmark of degree which seems lead to the current debates on the degree preference in Vietnamese contexts.

According to the Party’s Resolution 27/NQ by Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) in 2008 on Promoting Vietnamese intellectuals in modernisation and industrialisation process: Vietnamese intellectuals are those with high degree in certain areas of expertise, capable of independent thinking, creativity, and spread the professional knowledge, creating spiritual and value products for society (Mạnh 2008). Vietnamese intellectuals are being formed from various class backgrounds, social classes, especially from workers and farmers; most mature in the new society, shaped from a variety of sources of training in domestic and overseas institutions, with successive generations, including a part of Vietnamese intellectuals living overseas. Vietnamese intellectuals have their own spirit of patriotism, pride, ethic deep dignity, and they always have impacts to the national revolutionary cause with the party leadership for people’s wealthiness, a strong country and an equitable, democratic and civilized state. By creative activities, intellectual has made great contributions in all fields of construction, national defence. However, many intellectuals also face restrictions should soon be overcome in order to meet the requirements of national development and national protection in the new era. The number of intellectuals in Vietnam has been increasing rapidly as the outcomes of social expectations to the role of higher education and the remarkable increase of the higher education institutions in last decade. The number of academic institutions is increasing which also requires number of people at high degree as known as intellectual group in society to work there (Vietnam Government 2013). Such situation also requires the concrete definition and theoretical framework on the intellectual in Vietnamese social conditions and contexts.

### 2.2 Concept of Public Intellectual

Recent reviews about the concept of public intellectual have focused on the different aspects, from intellectual to the public, from generalist to specialist or from general to professional. From Oxford English Dictionary: an intellectual who express views (especially on popular topics) intended to be accessible to a general audience.

The definition of public intellectuals has been broadened overtime. Public intellectuals can be defined as someone who speak-outs and writes “intellectual commentary, social criticism or popular academic work for an audience both the boundaries of academic professions and national-state system” (McLaughlin 2014), someone who is able “to expose the lies of government to analyse actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions” (Chomsky 1967), or someone who is actively seeking solutions to the problems directly affecting their communities.

Additionally, Issitt and Jackson (2013) pointed a wide range of ideas on public intellectuals: as an intellectual only those profession is defined by their professional intellectualism and their freedom within a recognised job role to pursue their intellectual interests, as those who works in the domain of academia, as those whose works pursue the

development of new knowledge for social application. Other ideas identify the public intellectual as:

- \* someone who is consulted because of their recognised command of a specific topic;
- \* someone who talks from a position of specific expertise on a general topic related to that expertise;
- \* someone who talks from a position of specific expertise on a general topic;
- \* someone who talks about anything whether they have any recognised specific expertise or not. (Issitt and Jackson 2013).

The other comments and debates on public intellectuals as those who are dissenter, reveals of truth, thinker, expert, media superstar, and knowledge gatekeeper. These ideas are applied in this paper as the key indicators for constructing the concept of public intellectual in Vietnamese contexts.

So, the expected roles of public intellectuals range from gaining real life knowledge and experiences, raising critical questions and providing solutions, to promoting social well-beings and cross cultural understanding between people from different societies, social contexts and cultures. Other discourse on the topic also found that everyone can be public intellectuals while they have social impacts from their current works, academically or non-academically, regardless their positions in the professional ones or not. Such ideas aim at the outcomes of intellectuals rather than the degree which they hold. In the recent online debates in Vietnamese also concern this aspect however there is lack of concrete research or explicit definition basing on these ideas about public intellectuals.

### 3 Research Methods

As the explanation of literature review, there are debates on the conceptualisation of intellectual in general and public intellectual in particular in Vietnamese contexts and there is also lack of research on this topic in Vietnam. So, this research aims at having the social construction of public intellectuals, their role, contribution and self-awareness, and the potential development in the short future in the contextual conditions. To look at the aim, this research is driven by social constructionism as theoretical approach (Kham 2013) and applies the survey as the main research method on finding the social construction of public intellectual by its term and social awareness from research participants. The survey is developed around questions on meaning of intellectual, public intellectual; evaluation on general statement on the role of public intellectual in daily life; making assessment on current social issue and looking at the potential changes of public intellectuals in Vietnamese contexts. The survey is developed by the self-administered questionnaires in Hanoi. And its survey sample is random with 68 % of participants is male, the age group is from 18 to 54 which is divided in two equal age groups for those under 25 and above, and the education levels are high school (6.7 %), university/college (68 %), master (17.3 %) and PhD (1.3 %). Research participants are selected based on the university network in Hanoi randomly, and they are freely involved in the research without any coercion. All information taken from the participants is anonymous. These indicators are known as the independent variables for further cross-tab analysis of the social construction of public intellectual from the survey.

Written informed consent was obtained from research participants for conducting the research and having publication of the research report (Table 1).

In order to provide the specific cases and deeper understandings from survey, other 5 individual interviews with expert were conducted. In addition, this research also applies the content analysis as a method for looking at the current research and legal documents and social policies in the related topic. This method aims at providing the ways to understand the current research and policy practices in Vietnam.

This research is followed by the ethics guidelines for doing research with human in which research participants are voluntary and none coercive. All personal information of participants are enclosed and encoded for analysis. And given information is used for the research report only.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 The Social and Educational Contexts in Vietnam

Vietnam population is currently around 90 million with high adult literacy rate, at 93.18 % in 2010 (the highest rate since 1979) (Worldbank 2014). It witnessed the rapid changes in all aspects of daily life in last two decades. The Doi Moi (Renew) Policy launched in 1986 in Vietnam is known as the significant factor, which brought profound changes to the country in comprehensive areas, including education system at different levels (Tuan 2009). From a country on the brink of economic collapse, Vietnam has revived itself and is now on a path to economic prosperity, enjoying a greater international status through participation in various regional and international institutions, such as the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum, the

**Table 1** Sample characteristics of the survey

Demographic	Sample (%) (n = 225)
Gender	
Male	68 (153)
Female	32 (72)
Sectors	
Higher education	68 (153)
Research institutions	4 (9)
Administrative units	16 (36)
Business sector	1.3 (3)
Unemployment	4 (9)
Other	6.7 (15)
Educational levels	
High school	6.7 (15)
University-college	66.7 (150)
Master	18.6 (42)
Doctoral	8.0 (18)
Age groups	
25 or younger	54.7 (133)
26 or older	45.3 (92)

World Trade Organization, and the United Nations. That globalisation process contributes to various chances and opportunities for Vietnam on approaching the international activities, in terms of education, cultural, and social exchanges as well as social development and the development of academic activities and high quality human resources as well (Tuan 2009). Such process also draws the challenges for Vietnamese education in general and higher education in particular on curriculum transformation and training staff and students in order to meet the international professional standards and post-graduated outcomes.

The higher education system in Vietnam is in a phase of rapid and sustained change. Since 1993, when the Fourth Plenum of the Communist Party Central Committee declared education as a priority area for national investment, the proportion of the relevant age group participating in higher education has increased from 2 % to over 13 %, and a higher education system that consisted of small, specialised institutions has been transformed into one in which a small number of leading universities are large, multidisciplinary, and progressively developing a research capability.

The changes of the system are witnessed with rapid changes recently. Some special resolutions were implemented as the national strategies for social development in Vietnam (MOET 2009).

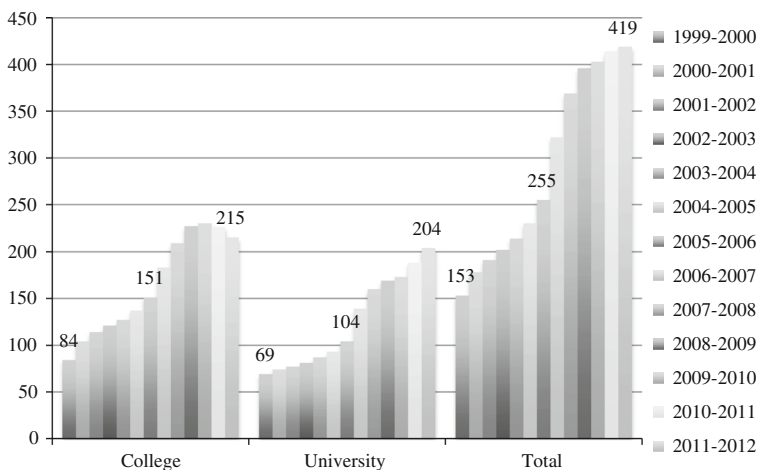
- (1) A HERA (Higher Education Reform Agenda) (Resolution 14/2005/NQ-CP) adopted in 2005 introduced measures intended to achieve further significant growth and change in the system by 2020. It is planned, for example, that, by 2020, 45 % of the relevant age group will participate in higher education, that higher education institutions will be more financially self-reliant, and that as many as 40 % of all enrolments will be in the non-public (or private) sector of higher education;
- (2) The Government has clear goals for higher education in its “SEDP (Socio-economic Development Plan) 2006–2010”. The SEDP aims for an overall quantitative goal of “increasing enrolment in universities and colleges by 10 % annually, to reach a level of 200 students over 10,000 population by 2010” and an overall qualitative goal of “approaching the advanced education standards of the region and the world”, specifically, by renovating curricula and teaching methods; developing systems that increase study opportunities through transfers; renovating financial mechanisms and policies to make institutions more pro-active and responsible for finance, staff, and organization; renovating management with stronger decentralization, and clearer responsibilities and authorities for different entities; implementing quality assurance and accreditation schemes, gradually applying standards and criteria used by developed countries and joining international educational quality accreditation systems; encouraging the establishment of private institutions, including high-quality, accredited, and 100 % foreign-invested institutions in science, technology, and economic management; and encouraging foreign scientific and educational experts and Vietnamese expatriates to teach in Vietnam;
- (3) The government has detailed its aspirations for higher education in the “HERA”. HERA develops a strategy for the development of higher education and research. The main objectives of the strategy are: (1) a dramatic increase in capacity to allow an increase of the participation rate in higher education (or tertiary) institutions, which implies huge investments in infrastructure and in training of new lecturers and faculty; (2) simultaneous increase in quality and/or efficiency of the system; (3) the introduction or reinforcement of research in universities—in order to better train the future new teachers, to enrich and upgrade present teachers’ teaching, and to

upgrade the quality level and international visibility of Vietnamese universities; and (4) improved governance of the higher education and research system at both national and regional levels, as well as of universities. These goals imply greater autonomy for individual institutions and measures that create a climate of competition between and within institutions. In HERA, the government has set the following targets for the higher education sector: (1) revenue from science and technology activities increased to 15 % of total university revenue by 2010, and to 25 % by 2020; (2) the proportion of university teaching staff with masters level degrees increased to 40 % by 2010, and to 60 % by 2020; (3) the proportion of university teaching staff with doctoral level degrees increased to 25 % by 2010, and to 35 % by 2020; and (4) the ratio of university students to teaching staff reduced to 20:1 by 2020 (MOET 2009; Khanh and Kham 2013).

Higher education in Viet Nam has a long tradition. The ancient system was established in the 11th century with Quoc Tu Giam, Vietnam's first university. The current system dated from 1906, when a part of the "University of Indochina (Université Indochinoise)" was established in Hanoi. Since the August Revolution of 1945, and especially, after the victory in the war of resistance against the French in 1954, the number of universities and colleges increased substantially. In the last 25 years or so, growth had been particularly rapid—from 101 universities and colleges in 1987 to the present total of 419 (see Fig. 1) (MOET 2013). Among them, there are 307 newly established and upgraded institutions in last decade. Nearly all provinces have at least one university or college (62 provinces among 64). Besides such number of higher education's institutions, there is also an existence of military and police's institutions 22 and six institutions respectively (MOET 2009, 2013).

In the nearly 30 years since Doi Moi policy in 1986, the higher education system in Vietnam has expanded in both scale and scope driven by strong household and labor market demand for higher education.

There are now 2.1 million Vietnamese enrolled in 419 higher education institutions, compared with just 162,000 students in 110 institutions in 1993, transforming the system



**Fig. 1** The increase of number of higher education system (Source: <http://moet.edu.vn>)

**Table 2** Statistical data on vietnam's higher education—academic year 2011–2012

Number of higher education institutions	419
University	214
College	205
Including	
Nonpublic institutions	82
Public institutions	337
Number of students	2,204,313
Number of graduates in 2012	402,277
Full-time staff in 2012	
Doctor (including professors and associate professors)	9152 <sup>a</sup>
Master and advanced professionals	36,803

Source: Retrieved from <http://moet.edu.vn>

<sup>a</sup> With statistic by Ministry of Science and Technology (2011), there are around 24,300 Ph.D. and 101,000 M.A. (as cited in Tuấn 2012). It means that only one-third of people hold Ph.D. and M.A. working full time in higher education system

**Table 3** Time series data on the growth of higher education system in Vietnam

	1987	1997	2009	2012
No. of institutions	101	126	336	419
No. of students	133,136	715,231	1,719,419	2,204,313
No. of graduates	19,900	73,736	222,665	402,277
No. of academic staff	20,172	20,112	61,190	84,109

Source: Retrieved from <http://moet.edu.vn>

from one that was reserved for the very elite to one that provides education to a wider population (see Tables 2, 3).

## 4.2 Overview of Vietnamese Intellectuals

From Vietnamese perspective, intellectual resource is very significant and regarded as the core factor for social development. It is found that the intellectual resource is those who got the university degree or higher and worked to exchange, develop and create the knowledge for the purposes of social development. On the Strategy on Scientific and Technology 2003–2010 (Vietnam Government 2013), it is found that Vietnam has 1.8 million at graduate degree including more than 30 thousand at postgraduate level working in more than 1100 research and development institutions consisted of 500 private organisations, 197 universities and colleges. The recent strategy for 2020 period, that number of scientists and researchers has been increased with higher number and degree levels, and as its consequences requiring a large number of intellectual working in academic and research institutions. And its specific activities are also placed on the intellectual resources national wide (Vietnam Government 2013).

In the 2009 Consensus, there is 8.6 million, accounts for 13.4 % of the population, has been professionally trained, including 4.2 % trained at university level and 0.2 % trained at postgraduate levels (GSO 2010).



On looking at the overview assessment of intellectuals in the social and economic development, Vietnam Communist Party had its own Resolution on their positions. And in each Party Congress Documents, there are sections and documents concerning to the role of intellectuals in the national development. The number of Vietnamese intellectual is increased but it is hard to point out the exact number as the lack of exact definition and measurements. As its results, it also would be hard to find the concept of public intellectual in Vietnam in recent research and discourses.

### 4.3 Survey Findings

The survey includes the 6 main questions with two main parts, the first part is individual information of research participants and the second one is constructed by 5 other questions on general understanding on intellectual and public intellectuals, evaluation and statements on public intellectuals.

#### 4.3.1 How Intellectual is Socially Constructed in the Survey

The first question is about the conceptualisation of Intellectual: Who is known as intellectual in daily life? There are some indicators for the responses:

- (a) those who hold the postgraduate level
- (b) those who hold the postgraduate levels and currently working in higher education or research institutions
- (c) those postgraduates with social impacted works;
- (d) those postgraduates with academic impacted works
- (e) those postgraduates with both social and academic impacted works

Responses to these indicators are presented in the following table (Table 4).

There are more responses on the (e) indicator, accounts for 73.3 %, while the responses for others in order are 9.3, 5.3, 2.7 and 9.3 % respectively. Such responses are very compatible with current dialogue in the online forum and debates about the intellectual resources in Vietnam as highly acknowledged by not only the degree level holders but also their academic and social impacts from their professional activities. For those responses to the (e) option, it is found that those PhD holders do not highly response to this option, only account for 66.7 %, in compared with the others in educational level groups, for high school group is the highest with 80 %, undergraduate level is accounted for 72 % and master level is 78.6 %. There is difference but not a big gap among them. Such responses are tested by the Chi square statistics (all is accompanied with  $p < .05$ ) with the confirmation of the significant association between these variables. And from the correlation of

**Table 4** Responses to the concept of Intellectuals by the education level (%)

Indicators	% by Education levels				Total
	High school	University	Master	PhD	
a	0.0	12.7	7.1	0.0	9.3
b	20.0	4.0	0.0	16.7	5.3
c	0.0	4.0	0.0	0.0	2.7
d	0.0	8.0	14.3	16.7	9.3
e	80.0	72.0	78.6	66.7	73.3

Pearson Chi square value:  
24.784,  $p = .016$

such variable, it is pointed out the question that why the PhD degree holders do not response to (e) as high as other educational levels.

Intellectual is publicly stated in the Party's Resolution number 27/2008, and the role of Intellectual group is redefined in followed Party's documents. However, from survey, it is found that the Resolution is hardly accessible by the voice of participants: nearly a half (46.7 %) do not know the existence of the resolution and added up 30.7 % of the participant only know the titles, it means that just nearly one-fifth of participants know its contents or read it throughout. And it is notable that 100 % of participants at PhD level do not know or know its title only rather than read it in details provided that when the Resolution was approved, all academic and non academic institutions did the introduction of resolution to all its members as the required activities.

The research also applies the interviews to look at the deeper concepts and ideas from those who got the high academic degree or those journalists, sociologists and non-academic people. From the interviews, it is also found that intellectuals are those who got the accredited degree and have the social impacts and have the public voices. It seems that intellectual got his/her role on public influences as internationally recognised and discussed.

From Vietnamese discourse, the term Intellectual is translated as Trí Thức with meanings that someone who uses his or her own knowledge (trí) or activities to awaken the society (thức). Research interview with one young staff in academic activities who also got good position in media also reflect this discourse: as lecturer in one university, he got good academic position as complete his master thesis and continued the PhD program, but he did not pay time on his thesis rather on his part-time as MC in television shows and music show which he earns more money from teaching as well as got his good social status. Many young people know his name, his working in university and many new comers of the university knew his name rather than some professors in the field before they become the university student in spite of his academic position. From interview, he expressed that by his part-time/or social participation he can make the social impacts and he can apply the academic knowledge for his show which also help him successfully. So, he is doing a job like a public intellectual.

#### 4.3.2 *Conceptualisations on Public Intellectuals in Vietnam*

In fact, from the public discourse on intellectual, it is found that the public opinion focuses more on the roles which are required the intellectuals to have the social impacted works and having the social engagement, participation with/for society, to make the voice for people, to tell the social truths and to awakening society through their academic knowledge or to apply their own wisdom and knowledge for others in their academic and non academic activities. Such opinions and suggestions, debates are in the focus of the term public intellectual as debated in Western countries. In addition, from the interviews, some ideas also pointed out that those intellectuals/or non high academic degree holders have their great impacted activities for society or for the social development are also recognised as the public intellectuals.

Based on such ideas, this research pointed out some statements to be analysed from the voice of research participants. Responses are explained in term of the means values as following table (Table 5).

The PhD's holders response more their agreement to those who have works for social contributions, social trust talkers and those with high academic degree as the Public Intellectuals. Almost responses are closed to the average ideas (reluctant between agreed

**Table 5** Who are known as PI? (from (1) very disagreed to (5) very agreed)

Statements	Total		Mean by educational levels							
	Mean	SD	High school	SD	University	SD	Master	SD	PhD	SD
Journalist as public intellectuals	2.92	1.11	3.00	1.60	2.94	0.97	2.93	1.40	2.67	1.13
University lecturers/researchers as PI	3.43	1.12	3.80	0.41	3.38	1.07	3.29	1.29	3.83	1.83
Policy makers as PI	2.99	1.24	3.40	1.24	2.98	1.16	2.86	1.47	3.00	1.32
Social trust talkers as PI	3.56	1.37	3.60	1.40	3.54	1.17	3.43	0.91	4.00	1.02
High academic degree holders as PI	2.59	1.01	2.80	1.01	2.48	1.00	2.71	0.89	3.00	1.18
Works for social contribution as PI	3.97	1.20	4.40	0.82	4.06	1.12	3.36	1.41	4.33	1.13

and disagreed). Only statements on University lecturers/researchers, those who have work for society and social trust talkers as PI are responded with higher one closed to agreed option. From the means value, it is found that public intellectual is socially constructed by both two spheres: Intellectual and Public Contribution. And in some cases in the interviews, it is found that PI as layer persons who have work/contributions to social development. And currently, in Vietnam there are some cases who have never been awarded with academic/professional degree but their work/daily activities are influential to society (submarine manufacturer, biogas designers, civil society organisers) which are quite opposite to the recent research by Khánh et al. (2012) that the outstanding of public intellectuals are almost political elites or prominent academic and professional professors. The survey also points out the other statements on the role of PI in current social contexts of Vietnam and the social awareness on PI and its roles as following table with means value (Table 6).

From the means values, it is one again confirmed that social contribution is very critical indicator on constructing Intellectual becoming PI in view of research participants. One statement was pointed out here “PI is actually not existed in Vietnamese contexts” to evaluate the current debates on that the Vietnamese intellectual which is not well-

**Table 6** Means value on the role of PI (from (1) very disagreed to (5) very agreed)

Statements	Mean	SD
As PI, journalists play their good role	2.71	0.96
As PI, university lecturers/researchers play their good role	3.04	0.90
To become PI, those graduates participate in social activities	3.95	0.83
To become PI, those don't have high degree, only have social impacted works	3.52	1.15
Those known as PI will work more effectively while retired or resigned	2.43	1.11
The view on PI is affected by mass media	3.48	1.11
To become PI, those who only focus on professional activities with social impacts	2.80	1.13
PI is actually not existed in Vietnamese contexts	2.48	1.30

developed and well-socially recognition, and responses in the survey seem closed to “disagreed” option for the statement.

By such responses, the term of PI is still covered by indicators of degree and social contributions. In addition, the overall social awareness on Intellectual in general and PI in particular is still framed in the word of high degree level/academic professional activities which seem formal thinking rather than the informal one of having the social impacted works regardless of his/her academic degree or position as exposed by the Western ideals. There are changes about the knowledge toward PI as there is a big responded percentage on social trust talkers who can convey the social problem or make their voice on behalf of the vulnerable group in society as well as to do their actual tasks on advocacy or making social criticism. Such responses are also very relevant to types of sociologists: theoretical sociologist, empirical sociologist, applied sociologist and public sociologist with the specific sociological activities on research, teaching, participation in public discourses, and being an expert (Posner 2001; Barbara 2007; Kalleberg 2012).

#### 4.3.3 Type of Public Intellectuals: Survey Discourse

From ideas of recent debates on PI on the public forum and blogs which are written and administered by famous researchers, scientists, policy makers in Vietnam and overseas, some ideas are discussed about the types of Intellectuals in general and PI in particular as following:

- Group 1: Those intellectuals who are well-knowledged and have considerations to social problems but are not will to endeavour themselves;
- Group 2: Those Intellectuals who do not considerate to social problems, and do not make their voices about them;
- Group 3: Those intellectuals who use their wisdom and knowledge not for the nation, society but for their success by overcome others;
- Group 4. Those intellectuals who are well-knowledged professionally and socially, and are will to endeavour themselves for the motherland, on dealing with the inequality in society (Út 2013)

From current debates, there are more intellectuals in the group 1 and less in the group 4. And those in group 2, 3 are very not good for the professional and social progress. From the survey, such debates and discussions are one again confirmed as the following Means value table (Table 7).

**Table 7** Means value of IP's groups (1 is more common while 4 is less common in society)

Groups	Mean	Mean by		Mean by educational levels			
		Male	Female	High school	University	Master	PhD
Group 1	2.00	2.04	1.92	2.60	1.92	2.07	2.00
Group 2	2.35	2.51	2.00	2.00	2.34	2.57	2.17
Group 3	2.53	2.51	2.58	2.80	2.66	2.21	2.00
Group 4	3.12	2.94	3.50	2.60	3.08	3.14	3.83

**Table 8** Chi Square tests (n = 225)

Educational Levels and ...	Value	P
Those intellectuals who are well-knowledged and have considerations to social problems but are not will to endeavour themselves	25.617	0.002
Those Intellectuals who do not considerate to social problems, and do not make their voices about them	33.383	0.000
Those intellectuals who use their wisdom and knowledge not for the nation, society but for their success by overcome others	33.118	0.000
Those intellectuals who are well-knowledged professionally and socially, and are will to endeavour themselves for the motherland, on dealing with the inequality in society	30.110	0.000

It is notable that the PhD holders find the most responses on uncommon of those in group 4 as known as real PI intellectuals in daily life which is higher than responses from other groups. So the group 1 (with those intellectuals) are those who have good knowledge, deep considerations, but do not make any practical activities to deal with social problems. This group is more common in society contexts (Table 8).

From Table 8, the correlation between variables of Groups and Educational Levels is existed while looking at the Chi square statistics with  $p < 0.002$  (98 %), it means that there is a significant association between the variables.

#### 4.3.4 Roles of PI: From the Research Projects/Activities

In terms of having research works which bring more social impacts, professional academia considers the academic activities based on the research projects, lecturing activities or the research contributing to the social development. In additions, for those in the position of an academic field, it is required him/her to do both lecturing and researching, especially for those who works in higher education in Vietnam. Annually, Vietnam Government pays a great amount for scientific research projects at national levels and institutional levels, intellectuals who work in academic and research institutions and scientific enterprises are eligible to conduct. The findings from such projects are significant and make a great contribution to social developments, in forms of practical initiatives, theory, policy makings or making advocacy and social criticism as well. As staff in VNU-Hanoi, who got the PhD are eligible to apply the project at VNU's level and not eligible to apply for one at VNU-Hanoi's colleges as overqualified and so on, those at the Professor or Associate Prof are suggested to apply the projects at higher levels rather than at the VNU-Hanoi's one. Such classification is best for young researchers and intellectuals on working as researchers and also making the research network in the academic field.

However, the big question is always raised out about the significance and the outcomes of research projects in the reality as many ideas suggested that to be a PI, the intellectuals need researching and having projects with social impacts, at professional and non-academic ones. The survey content also consists of a question with the following indicators to make the evaluation of scientific projects done by the PI (Table 9):

- S.1. Almost research projects with practical contribution
- S.2. Almost research projects with theoretical contribution
- S.3. Almost research projects with good social impacts
- S.4. Almost research projects are seriously implemented

**Table 9** Means value of the statements on research activities by intellectuals (1 is not very good to 5 is very good)

Statements	Mean	Mean by		Mean by educational levels			
		Male	Female	High school	University	Master	PhD
S.1	2.64	2.71	2.50	3.00	2.68	2.36	2.67
S.2	3.33	3.47	3.04	4.00	3.40	3.00	3.00
S.3	2.80	2.84	2.71	3.00	2.78	2.64	2.83
S.4	2.60	2.67	2.46	3.00	2.72	2.29	2.00

Only S.2. got the responses above the average levels and there are responses to suggest that the current research projects with less practical contributions, social impacts or not well implemented. It seems that the higher educational level's participants pay more negative feedbacks to the above statements. While male participants have more positive feedbacks than female participants do in each statement.

#### 4.3.5 Role of PI as Social Criticism Agents

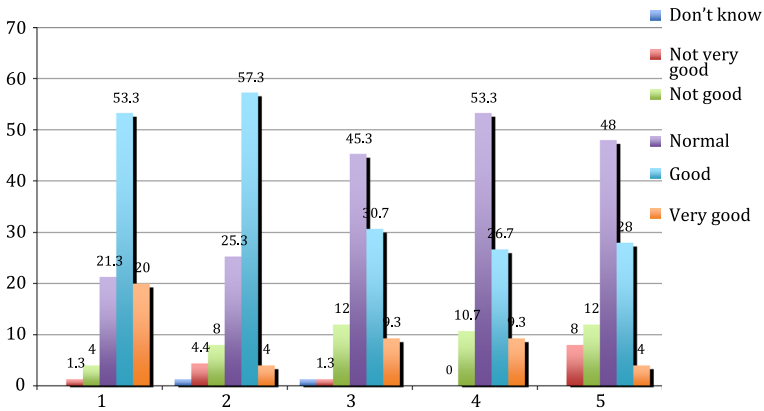
The next part of the survey includes two questions which are expected to collect the participants' views on the social participation in some current social problems Vietnam and a critical problem on sea disputes with China. In dealing with social problems, responses are quite active and positive with a high mean's value which is closed to good option (Table 10).

All responses to the statements are above the average level. There is less responses on look at the role of governmental units on dealing with social problems. And in the opposite way, the responses to the role of journalist and social research are more positive about the role and contribution to deal with social problems by showing out the solutions and making them public. Many social problems recently are opened to the public owing to the journalist, especially the online newspapers and social networks as Facebook, Twitter and blogs. By such networks, information is accessible, timely and conveyable the social attitudes and voices to the problems. So, in Vietnam, it is called that mass media is a powerful administrative tool making social impacts and influences. The recent of mass media, especially the online media and online forums which positively make the social impacts, which quickly convey and transfer information on social problems to readers and listeners, such as the domestic violence, the degrades of social services, the new changes in the educational system, the new social policies and action plans... (Fig. 2).

The diagram illustrates the changes of responses at 6 scales for each statement for further supports to the evaluation of the mean value. It is notable that there is big

**Table 10** Means values by the statements on the criticism role by PI (1: not very good, 5: very good)

Statements	Mean	SD
Journalists on dealing with social problems	3.87	0.82
Social researchers on dealing with social problems	3.45	0.94
Social movements on dealing with social problems	3.31	0.94
Civil society on dealing with social problems	3.35	0.79
Governmental units on dealing with social problems	3.08	0.93



**Fig. 2** Evaluation of the role about activities/agents on dealing with social problems. (1) Journalists on dealing with social problems, (2) Social researchers on dealing with social problems, (3) Social movements on dealing with social problems, (4) Civil society on dealing with social problems, (5) Governmental units on dealing with social problems

**Table 11** Means values of the role of social agents on dealing with social problems

Statements	Mean	Mean by		Mean by educational levels			
		Male	Female	High school	University	Master	PhD
Journalists	4.03	4.08	3.92	3.80	4.08	3.93	4.00
Social researchers	3.67	3.75	3.50	3.20	3.70	3.71	3.67
Social movements	3.05	3.02	3.13	2.60	2.92	3.21	4.17
Youth activities	3.89	3.94	3.79	3.40	3.90	4.00	4.00
Government units	3.55	3.65	3.33	3.20	3.80	3.00	3.00

proportion of evaluation on the Normal/Average on looking at the roles of such agents in dealing with social problems, especially for the agents of social movements, civil society and government units (from central to local). Responses on “not good” and “not very well” are paid more for the option of Government Units, Social movements, and especially for the Social Researchers.

The second case which is pointed out to look at the general KAP to PI in Vietnam as the current disputes between Vietnam and China in the South East Asia seas which attracts the social concerns. As given by the responses to the social problems, the agents in this question include five one as the above question: (a) Journalists, (b) Social Researchers, (c) Social movements, (d) Youth activities, and (e) Government units. The mean values for such agents as follow (1 is very not good, while 5 is very good) (Table 11).

From the mean value, it is described that there are more responses to the important role of journalists, youth activities and social researchers rather than the social movements and government units. However, from the voice of PhD holders, the role of youth movement is closed to the very good role. In overall, the high school degree’s holders responses are lower in others in the research.

#### 4.3.6 Impacted Factors to the Works of PI

PI is socially constructed in Vietnamese contexts. It is not highly recommended with PI as those who are lay persons or political activists in society. As from the world value survey, it is found that Vietnamese people feel happy with current political systems and current conditions that is peace and sustainable and request the critical changes for people in daily life.

So, the other aspect of looking at the social construction of PI in Vietnamese context is to find out the impacted factors to their work or their roles in the daily life. In the open/online forums and advocacies to the social policies and Party's documents, there are proposal factors which need considerations: Financial support policies, Scientific mechanism policies, Shared and open forums, Academic freedom, Efforts by the Intellectuals/PI; and Awareness on social responsibilities by the Intellectuals/PI which are approached around the question: How they are important to the role of the PI in Vietnamese contexts? (Table 12).

On looking at the means value table, it is found that some impacted factors are so significant for promoting their role, as the self-awareness on social responsibilities, self-efforts, mechanism and the financial policies while the academic freedom is just above the scale of average/normal. The topic of freedom is central for scientific activities and debates recently, especially while the Central Communist Party approved the plan for comprehensive education system renovation, from the down to the top of system, so the question of how to have the academic freedom and institution/s and individual autonomy on academic activities is raised and attracted with different voices, however, the voice of research participants is not high as responses to other impacted factors (Fig. 3).

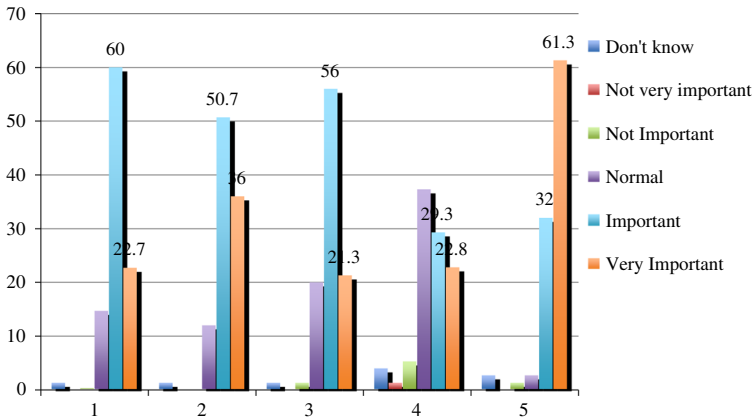
While recent research finds out the difficulties on running tasks by PI: 4.9 % of academic staff in Vietnam finds their current job is very compatible, while such percentage assessed by compatible, average, not compatible and very not compatible is 49.1, 40.9, 3.2 and 1.8 % respectively (Khánh et al. 2012, p. 237). So the compatible positions for PI are very critical for them to promote their roles and activities in the given position. And from Khánh et al. (2012), it is found that by the working positions and condition, almost PI have promoted themselves on professional activities: 16.7 % as very good up-holdings, 37.8 % at good up-holdings, 36.1 % at up-holdings, 8.4 % at less with up-holdings and only 1.0 % at never up-holds (Khánh et al. 2012, p. 243).

From such findings, it is suggested that the ways in which PI are awarded by their social status and social expectation are the significant impacted factors to their jobs and social

**Table 12** Mean values on the impacted factors to the role of the PI (1: very not important, while 5: very important)

Statements	Total		Mean by			
	Mean	SD	Male	SD	Female	SD
Financial support policies	4.00	0.80	3.92	0.90	4.17	0.45
Scientific mechanism policies	4.19	0.81	4.10	0.84	4.37	0.70
Shared and open forums	3.93	0.82	3.92	0.79	3.96	0.89
Academic freedom	3.55	1.17	3.37	1.10	3.92	1.23
Efforts by the Intellectuals/PI	4.45	0.95	4.37	1.10	4.62	0.48
Awareness on social responsibilities	4.53	0.84	4.45	0.91	4.71	0.61





**Fig. 3** Evaluations of impacted factors to the role of PI. *Notes:* (1) Financial support policies, (2) Scientific mechanism policies, (3) Shared and open forums, (4) Academic freedom, (5) Efforts by the Intellectuals/PI, (6) Awareness on social responsibilities

impacted activities. And throughout the interviews, some voices are clearly stated that when the PI are entitled with academic and professional position, they should endeavour for society as the way they show their own gratitude to society. It is also shown that their social responsibility is the shortcut for making the status of layperson to become the PI and works for the society.

Other factors which are impacted to the works by PI are also recognised in terms of the following aspects in Vietnam (Table 13).

Income to secure the life of PI and their family is very important which is found as a common issue in daily life. The salary for intellectuals in Vietnam is still limited and raised debates in many forums on how to promote the role of intellectuals in society and in their professional activities. It is an important factors need concerning and finding the way to make any encouragements for PI in Vietnamese contexts. The second one is the role of leader and the support facilities for doing research and applying theories into practice. From Khanh findings (2012), there are additional facts about the current policies which seem very critical to the activities of PI and also provides the motivations or restrictions for PI in their works (Table 14).

The given policies are very important and contribute critical impacts to the life of intellectuals. The mean values are range from 1 (lowest impact) to 5 (highest impact). All

**Table 13** Factors impacted to the works by PI (%)

Factors	%
Reasonable encouragement and awards	30.48
Good infrastructures and facilities	43.88
Autonomous in working	43.07
Working under good managers	47.69
Good collaborators	35.68
Reasonable division of labours	40.53
Good payment/salary	52.19

Citation from Khánh et al. (2012), pp. 246–247

**Table 14** Impacted policies for the work of PI (1 is not very important, 5 is very important)

Policies on	N	SE of mean	Mean	SD
Recruitments	836	72	3.48	0.94
Professional trainings	850	58	3.51	0.96
Staff promotion	821	87	3.34	0.92
Awards	836	72	3.38	1.01
Punishment	813	95	3.37	1.05
Salary	828	80	3.33	1.10
Subsidies	808	100	3.10	1.04
Gender equity	798	110	4.02	0.96
Policies on promoting professional activities	753	155	3.27	1.12

Reanalysed from Khánh et al. (2012)

responses are higher than the average means and closed to high impact. Policies on promoting professional activities are less responded as the Vietnam government currently invest its 2 % of the national budget for the scientific activities only while there are challenges and high requirements for the scientific innovation.

#### 4.3.7 Future of Public Intellectuals (PI)

The last question in the survey is looking at the voice of research participants on the future of the intellectuals and PI in Vietnamese context. Almost responses, account for 94.7 %, suggested that PI will be developed in case of having practical supports and need the comprehensive investment by the Government and provided with more reasonable conditions for their professional activities. Only 4 % of responses aims at the statement of PI is better itself without any supports. And it is so positive that only 1.3 % responded that PI will be worsened. So, the social attitudes are so positive to the social status of PI in Vietnamese contexts. PI is still acknowledged as the influenced factors to the social changes and development.

## 5 Discussions

Public intellectuals are socially constructed in Vietnamese contexts which is hidden in the term of intellectuals, or in vice versa way there are more inputs on the public roles for the intellectuals and the concept of intellectual is self-expressed with its content and expectation to PI. The debates on the terms are still existed and attractive in Vietnamese contexts and media. It is hard to find the current debates or research in the public intellectuals as its unique term in Vietnam recently. From the open discussion in the mass media and social networks, it seems that there are more views on the expected roles of intellectuals in their professional fields or in social participations rather than other ideas on sensitive topics politically such as debates on the bauxite project in the Central Highland of Vietnam, disputes on East-Sea or dealing with social problems or talking the truths underlying in society.

There are existing documents on the development and supports for Intellectuals in general and PI in particular in the legal documents in Vietnam which demonstrate the state

government's considerations to their roles. From Vietnam history, academic is still prestigious social position in social development which is the main aim of person's life, especially as the way to change each individual fate and their relative one. Intellectuals have their highly regarded in the social positions and got the social respect. However, from the reality, the intellectuals are facing the challenges on realising their roles in both academic and public activities in Vietnamese contexts.

From the interviews, and current debates, it is positive perspectives to the roles of PI for social developments and for their professional development. Intellectual in general and PI in particular hold his/her own prestigious social status with their knowledge, social contributions and social impacts.

Impacted factors for their role are mainly expressed in the aspects of the mechanism, academic freedom and self-recognition of their social responsibility. There is more considerations on the financial policies and the self-recognition by the intellectuals, especially in aspect of social/community responsibilities. There are views expressed the way society acknowledges the status of PI in the daily life and on making the social impacts.

Additionally, the definition and conceptualisation of the public intellectual is seen and framed in Vietnamese contexts and influenced by the traditional scholars and ideas, from the research and current debates, it is hard to find any ideas which reflect the public/non-academic ideas for the concept of PI. Especially when the researcher regarded to the sensitive topics, it is hard to get any responses for further discussion.

On looking at the role of PI, it is easy to find the social awareness to highly evaluate its role as education level and the status of academic and intellectuals is socially expected and are the aims for all. That recognition is traditional inherence in Vietnamese ideology and the other evidence that current educational expenses and investment for the young generation is so prominent in Vietnamese society. On recent research reports, the role of academic intellectual is still limited on the professional activities in compared with those in regional countries, particularly in the international academic publishing and academic journal papers.

This research is an exploration on the overall ideas and identification on the term of public intellectual which as known as the Vietnamese term of “kẻ sĩ” or “trí thức công chúng” who are able to awakening the society. Example of the Death of General Vo Nguyen Giap in 2013 or the debates about the incidents of disputes between Vietnam and China on the East Sea in 2014 or many ideas on the way to deal with social problems which are disseminated in the media are those evidences for making the society for public intellectuals. In additions, the changes in Vietnamese regulations about the non-government organisation (NGO) which now have location NGO is an evidence for making the more forms of civil society which is the best forum for the public intellectuals to prove their positions and contributions to the social development. The potential of public influences is highly regarded so many views confirmed that the role of the public intellectual is currently hidden and it will be boosted with new guidelines or new contextual in terms of support policy and encouraged mechanism as well.

## 6 Conclusions

Basing on the social constructionism approach, this paper brings the understanding of public intellectuals from their daily experiences in both academic and non-academic activities. It is noted that the terms of public intellectuals is still hidden in Vietnam

scholarships, there is more view looking at academics as public intellectuals which seem very socially constructed in Vietnamese contexts. In terms of academic as public intellectuals, they are still facing difficulties in their social contribution in Vietnamese contexts. In order to promote the role of public intellectuals in the social contribution, there are some recommendations as following:

*Firstly*, in order to promote the understanding of public intellectuals in the Vietnamese contexts, it is suggested to have further research in different areas of public intellectuals in Vietnam, to enlarge the research on this topic;

*Secondly*, the policies and legal documents about the intellectuals existed in Vietnam, but it seems inefficacy, it is suggested to have further supervised mechanism and more specific documents regulating and regarding the term of public intellectuals in Vietnamese contexts;

*And finally*, in aspects of academics as public intellectuals, it is expected to have more academic spaces and forums, from grassroot level to the national levels, from the public sectors to non-public sectors, for them to make the social contribution and the professional development as well.

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