

## Harmonising traditions and modernity: Exploring the characteristics of healthy working environments in Mekong delta higher education institutions in Vietnam



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### ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the characteristics defining a healthy working environment within higher education institutions in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam, emphasizing the interplay of regional cultural, historical, and natural elements. The study employed a Social Constructivist Framework, Symbolic Interactionism, and the Phenomenological Approach to interpret findings from semi-structured interviews with five leaders from two institutions. These methodologies facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the institutional leaders' perspectives on the elements integral to a thriving academic setting. The findings revealed several key themes: the significance of interpersonal relationships and mutual respect; the importance of continuous professional development; the role of institutional transparency and open communication; an emphasis on cultural and historical reverence; and a unique relationship between the institution and the natural environment of the Mekong Delta. These insights contribute to the global discourse on academic environments, highlighting the universality of certain educational values while underscoring the importance of context-specific factors. The study's practical implications suggest the need for future research to further investigate these themes, aiming to enhance our understanding of healthy academic settings in diverse cultural and geographical contexts.

**Contribution/ Originality:** This study is unique in its examination of higher education institutions in the Mekong Delta, using cultural, historical, and environmental elements to establish the characteristics of a conducive academic environment. This approach has not been previously examined in this particular geographical and cultural context.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent times, there has been a growing emphasis on comprehending the complexities of work contexts in higher education. This heightened interest stems from the acknowledgement that such environments are foundational to the overall health, vibrancy, and efficacy of educational institutions [1, 2]. Historically, the higher education landscape has been a crucible for intellectual pursuits, breakthrough research, and academic freedom. However, it has been observed that to truly harness the potential of these establishments, the conditions under which educators and administrators operate must be conducive and nurturing.

In the ever-evolving landscape of higher education, the vitality and well-being of institutions are intricately linked to the health of their working environments. The latter not only determines the productivity and efficiency of

the staff but also plays a crucial role in attracting and retaining top talent, fostering innovation, and ensuring the overall success and sustainability of the institution [3]. Particularly in the higher education sector, where intellectual rigor and academic freedom are held in high esteem, the nature and quality of the working environment can significantly impact institutional outcomes.

Over the years, many studies have underlined the significance of a healthy working environment. Yet, the question remains: What exactly defines this environment, especially in the unique milieu of higher education? And how does one navigate this definition in diverse socio-cultural contexts? Despite the recognized importance of a healthy working environment, definitions and parameters for such an environment in higher education remain somewhat elusive and highly contextual. Across the globe, cultural, economic, and societal nuances shape perceptions about what constitutes a “healthy” workplace [4]. The situation is not different in Vietnam, a rapidly developing Southeast Asian nation with a rich cultural history and a burgeoning educational sector. As the higher education system in Vietnam undergoes transformation and expansion [5], understanding the dynamics of its working environment becomes even more pertinent.

Considering this backdrop, there is a pressing need to listen to those at the helm of these institutions. Vietnamese higher education leaders, entrusted with the task of steering their institutions towards excellence, are uniquely positioned to offer insights into the attributes of a healthy working environment. Their experiences, perspectives, and vision not only reflect the current state of affairs but also serve as a blueprint for future endeavors [6]. However, there has been a noticeable gap in the literature with regards to Vietnamese leaders’ insights on this topic.

With the intention of shedding light on this overlooked area, this study embarks on a journey. Through a deep exploration of the perceptions and experiences of Vietnamese higher education leaders, it seeks to illuminate the defining characteristics of a healthy working environment in the Vietnamese context. The findings of this study hope to contribute to the broader discourse on workplace well-being in higher education and offer guidance for institutions seeking to cultivate healthier, more vibrant working spaces.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. *Defining a Healthy Working Environment in Higher Education*

A healthy working environment in higher education is often characterized by factors such as job satisfaction, professional development opportunities, an equitable workload, respect among colleagues, and a sense of belonging and purpose [1, 2]. Institutions that foster a culture of collaboration, transparency, and inclusivity tend to witness higher staff retention and job satisfaction rates [7]. Psychological well-being, often linked with perceived autonomy, adequate support from leaders, and a balance between work and personal life, emerges as a critical component [8].

### 2.2. *Cultural Context and Working Environment*

Several studies indicate that cultural nuances profoundly influence perceptions of a healthy workplace. For instance, Western institutions might prioritize individual accomplishments and autonomy, while those in Eastern contexts might value community and consensus-driven decision-making [9, 10]. In many Asian cultures, harmony, respect for hierarchy, and interpersonal relationships significantly influence workplace dynamics [11, 12].

### 2.3. *Challenges in the Higher Education Sector*

Higher education globally faces challenges like limited resources, increased competition, and high expectations from stakeholders, which can strain the working environment [13]. Factors such as academic workload, administrative responsibilities, and the “publish or perish” culture can contribute to stress and burnout [14].

#### *2.4. Leadership and Its Impact on the Working Environment*

Effective leadership, characterized by clear communication, empathy, and strategic vision, plays a pivotal role in cultivating a positive working atmosphere [15]. Leadership training and development have been recognized as essential in ensuring that leaders are equipped to foster healthy working conditions [16].

#### *2.5. The Vietnamese Context*

The Vietnamese higher education system is undergoing rapid transformations, influenced by globalization, technological advancements, and socio-economic developments [5]. Cultural norms, historical influences, and socio-economic conditions uniquely shape the working environment in Vietnamese institutions [17]. However, there is a dearth of comprehensive studies that delve into the perceptions of Vietnamese leaders on what constitutes a healthy working environment in higher education institutions.

While there is an abundance of studies that address the general characteristics of a healthy working environment in higher education, there remains a noticeable gap when it comes to Vietnamese leaders' perspectives. Understanding their insights not only contributes to the broader academic discourse but also offers valuable recommendations tailored to the Vietnamese context. This study, by focusing on the insights of Vietnamese leaders, seeks to provide a nuanced and in-depth understanding of a healthy working environment in higher education institutions in Vietnam.

### **3. METHODS**

#### *3.1. Research Design*

This research adopts a qualitative approach, recognizing that understanding the multifaceted and deeply contextual nature of a healthy working environment in Vietnamese higher education institutions requires an exploration of human experiences, perceptions, and interpretations. Qualitative methodologies, with their focus on generating rich and nuanced data, are particularly suited to grasping the depth and complexity of this subject [18].

#### *3.2. Theoretical Frameworks*

##### *3.2.1. Social Constructivist Framework (SCF)*

This research is grounded in the social constructivist paradigm, which posits that individuals construct their realities based on their experiences and interactions with the world around them [19]. In the context of this study, Vietnamese leaders' perceptions of a healthy working environment are understood as constructed through their experiences, cultural backgrounds, and interactions within the academic sphere. By engaging with leaders in-depth, we aim to unravel these constructed realities and the meanings they associate with their experiences.

##### *3.2.2. Symbolic Interactionism (SI)*

SI, rooted in the works of Mead [20], underscores the significance of symbols, meanings, and interactions in human lives. This framework is apt for this study as it emphasizes understanding the symbols and meanings that Vietnamese leaders attach to the concept of a 'healthy working environment.' Through this lens, we can decide how leaders interpret their interactions, how they derive meaning from them, and how these meanings influence their perceptions and actions concerning the working environment.

##### *3.2.3. Phenomenological Approach (PA)*

Given that this study seeks to understand the essence of experiences concerning the phenomenon of a healthy working environment, Davidsen's [21] PA is also employed. This approach emphasizes capturing the lived experiences of individuals, aiming to discern the essential characteristics of the phenomenon under study. By adopting this approach, we aim to delve deep into the essence of Vietnamese leaders' experiences and perceptions.

The combination of semi-structured interviews and the selected theoretical frameworks provides a robust foundation for the research design. The SCF allows for a deeper appreciation of the constructed realities of the participants; SI aids in decoding the meanings and symbols attached to their experiences; and the PA ensures capturing the essence of their lived experiences. Together, these frameworks guide the research towards a holistic and nuanced understanding of the perceptions of Vietnamese leaders concerning a healthy working environment in higher education institutions.

### *3.3. Participants*

The participants for this study were selected from two prominent higher education institutions located in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. This region, characterized by its unique geographical, cultural, and socio-economic attributes, plays a pivotal role in the nation's education landscape. A total of five Vietnamese leaders were purposively chosen based on their experience, leadership roles, and willingness to participate. These leaders held various senior positions, ranging from deans to vice-chancellors, with a tenure of leadership that spanned between 5 to 25 years. Their diverse experiences and roles provided a comprehensive view of the intricacies of the working environment in higher education institutions in the Mekong Delta.

Given the sensitive nature of discussing workplace dynamics and the potential for personal and professional ramifications, several ethical precautions were taken. Before conducting the interviews, all participants were provided with a clear and concise information sheet detailing the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, potential risks, and benefits. They were then asked to sign an informed consent form, ensuring they understood their participation was voluntary and they had the right to withdraw at any point without any repercussions. To maintain the confidentiality of participants, all identifying information was anonymized in the study's findings. Pseudonyms replaced real names, and any potentially identifying details were omitted or altered without affecting the essence of the data. Recorded interviews and transcripts were securely stored in password-protected files. Only the research team had access to this raw data, and any external presentations or publications strictly maintained participant anonymity. Recognizing that discussions about workplace experiences could evoke strong emotions or distress, participants were assured they could skip any questions they found uncomfortable. Furthermore, they were provided with contacts for counseling services if they felt the need to discuss or process their feelings post-interview.

### *3.4. Data Collection*

At the core of the data collection process were semi-structured interviews, renowned for their ability to yield in-depth insights while maintaining a certain level of structure. This format was instrumental in guiding the conversation while also leaving ample room for participants to share their unique perspectives and experiences. Prior to the main data collection, a pilot study was conducted with two leaders from outside the target participant group. The aim was to test the relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of the interview questions. The pilot's feedback was really beneficial, including insights into unclear wording, the question sequence, and the overall length of the interview. Post-pilot, the interview protocol underwent revisions based on the feedback received. Ambiguities were addressed, certain questions were rephrased for clarity, and a few were reordered to ensure a more logical flow and progression during the interview. Some revised interview questions include:

- How would you describe a healthy working environment within a higher education institution?
- Can you provide specific examples or incidents that epitomize a healthy working environment in your institution?
- How do cultural factors within the Vietnamese context influence perceptions and realities of a healthy working environment?
- In your leadership role, how have you contributed to fostering a healthy working environment?

- What challenges or obstacles have you encountered in ensuring a healthy working environment, and how have you addressed them?
- How do you envision the future of the working environment in higher education institutions in the Mekong Delta region?

Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes, ensuring comprehensive coverage while being mindful of the participants' time. The interviews took place in quiet, private rooms within the respective institutions to ensure confidentiality and minimize potential disturbances. These settings also offered a familiar environment for the participants, thereby potentially increasing their comfort and openness during the interviews. Given the cultural and regional focus of the study and to ensure participants could express themselves most naturally and comfortably, all interviews were conducted in Vietnamese. This choice was essential in capturing nuanced perspectives and cultural undertones that might otherwise be lost in translation.

### 3.5. Data Analysis

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews underwent rigorous thematic analysis, a widely employed method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data. This approach, as described by Braun, et al. [22], involves a systematic yet flexible process suitable for obtaining a rich and detailed yet complex account of the data.

Upon completing the interviews, each session was transcribed verbatim. These transcriptions ensured that every nuance, pause, and emphasis from the conversations was captured. Given that the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, care was taken to preserve cultural and linguistic subtleties during this phase. The initial stage of the analysis involved familiarization with the data. This entailed multiple readings of the transcriptions, allowing for immersion into the depth and breadth of participants' responses. Through this iterative process, preliminary ideas and notes were jotted down.

Following the immersion phase, the process of generating initial codes from the data commenced. These codes aimed to identify and label key features of the data that appeared relevant to the research question. By systematically coding across the entire data set, a comprehensive list of codes was established. With codes in place, the next phase involved searching for potential themes. This required collating codes into possible themes and gathering all relevant coded data extracts under these tentative themes. Subsequently, these themes and sub-themes were reviewed and refined, ensuring they resonated with the coded extracts and the entire data set.

After a satisfactory thematic map was developed, themes were defined and named. This step ensured that there was a clear and identifiable essence to each theme, capturing its scope and content. Lastly, the results were written up, interweaving extracts from the data to showcase the depth of the themes and provide a narrative that resonated with the research objectives. Throughout the thematic analysis, a constant comparative method was used, ensuring that themes were consistently related back to the original data and the overarching research question. This meticulous approach ensured the validity and reliability of the findings and provided a comprehensive view of Vietnamese leaders' perceptions of a healthy working environment in higher education institutions.

## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1. Interpersonal Relationships and Mutual Respect

One of the most salient findings from the study was the emphasis on "interpersonal relationships and mutual respect" as an integral component of a healthy working environment in higher education institutions in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. Out of the five participants, all mentioned, in various capacities, the significance of interpersonal dynamics and mutual respect in shaping their understanding of a positive working environment. This unanimity underscores the centrality of this theme in the Vietnamese higher education context.

Participant A noted, *“In our culture, relationships are the foundation. Whether it is between faculty members or between leadership and staff, mutual respect and understanding are the bedrock upon which a harmonious and productive environment is built.”* Similarly, Participant D shared, *“Every time I walk through the corridors, I am reminded of the intricate web of relationships that hold our institution together. There is an unspoken code of respect and trust – it is almost palpable. That, for me, is the essence of a healthy working environment.”*

From a SCF perspective, the unanimous emphasis on interpersonal relationships can be seen as a construct shaped by participants’ experiences within their cultural and institutional settings. Mutual respect and understanding have become essential elements in their conception of a productive workplace as a result of their daily interactions and experiences. This perspective resonates with SCF’s notion of individuals constructing realities based on their interactions and experiences.

The SI perspective provides further depth, emphasizing how the symbols and meanings attached to ‘relationships’ and ‘respect’ influence leaders’ perceptions. In this context, interpersonal dynamics are not just relationships but symbolize harmony, unity, and institutional integrity. This theme, as noted in the excerpts, showcases how these symbols are deeply embedded in their daily experiences, influencing their actions and perceptions of the institutional environment.

Lastly, the PA underscores the essence of these lived experiences. The emphasis on interpersonal relationships is not just a surface-level observation but delves deep into the essence of what it feels like to be a part of the institution. This essence is best encapsulated by Participant D’s mention of the palpable sense of respect and trust, which highlights how these emotions and experiences influence their perception of a positive work environment.

#### *4.2. Continuous Professional Development and Growth Opportunities*

Another prominent theme emerging from the interviews revolved around the importance of “continuous professional development and growth opportunities” within higher education institutions in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. Four out of the five participants explicitly mentioned the significance of continuous learning opportunities, professional development, and the availability of growth avenues as pivotal indicators of a healthy working environment. The emphasis on this theme underscores its importance in not only personal advancement but also in enhancing institutional excellence.

Participant B expressed, *“A stagnant pond breeds disease. Similarly, an institution where growth and learning are stalled can never foster a healthy environment. Continuous learning is not just a personal aspiration; it is a collective necessity.”* Echoing a similar sentiment, Participant E remarked, *“Over the years, I have come to realize that the vibrancy of our institution is directly proportional to the growth opportunities we provide. Every seminar, workshop, or course we facilitate is a step towards creating an environment where everyone thrives.”*

From the perspective of the SCF, the emphasis on professional development can be understood as a product of participants’ interactions within their professional communities. Their values and beliefs about growth might be constructed from their experiences of witnessing the positive outcomes of continuous learning, both at an individual and institutional level.

SI offers insight into how leaders interpret the symbols of ‘workshops’, ‘seminars’, and ‘courses’. For them, these are not just events or tasks but symbols of progress, innovation, and institutional commitment to excellence. These symbols, embedded in their institutional narratives, shape their perceptions and drive their emphasis on the need for continuous professional development.

Lastly, from the PA, the deep-seated feelings associated with professional growth come to the fore. Participant B’s analogy of the “stagnant pond” captures the essence of their lived experience, articulating the feeling of stagnation in the absence of growth opportunities and its juxtaposition with the vibrancy of continuous learning.

#### 4.3. Institutional Transparency and Open Communication

A further significant theme gleaned from the interviews was the value placed on “institutional transparency and open communication” as foundational to a healthy working environment within the higher education institutions of the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. All five participants, at varying degrees, touched upon the critical role of transparent administrative processes and the necessity of open channels of communication in fostering trust and ensuring the smooth functioning of the institution.

Participant C reflected, *“In my years of leadership, I have realized that the easiest way to earn the trust of my colleagues is by being transparent in our actions and decisions. It is like sunlight, dispelling the shadows of doubt and mistrust.”* Contrastingly, Participant A provided a more pragmatic view, stating, *“Open communication ensures everyone is on the same page. It reduces friction, aids in faster decision-making, and most importantly, ensures that everyone feels valued and heard.”*

The SCF elucidates that the participants’ emphasis on transparency and communication is rooted in their individual and collective experiences. Their interactions within the institutional environment, witnessing the positive or negative outcomes of communication strategies, have shaped their understanding and belief in the value of transparency.

Through the lens of SI, transparency and open communication can be viewed as more than just operational strategies. For the participants, these concepts symbolize trust, collaboration, and a democratic ethos. Their interactions and experiences within the institution imbue these concepts with meaning, thus influencing their perceptions and actions.

The PA brings to light the essence of their lived experiences related to communication. Participant C’s use of the analogy of sunlight illuminates the theme’s profound emotional and experiential significance by capturing the tangible feeling of trust and clarity brought about by transparent practices.

#### 4.4. Emphasis on Cultural and Historical Reverence

Another noteworthy theme that resonated across the interviews was the “emphasis on cultural and historical reverence” within the operational dynamics and ethos of higher education institutions in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. Three out of the five participants, while discussing various aspects of a healthy working environment, touched upon the intrinsic connection between institutional practices and the rich cultural and historical legacy of the region.

Participant E observed, *“Our institution is not just a place of learning; it is a repository of our cultural and historical heritage. Every decision, every initiative, is infused with a sense of reverence for our past and the traditions that define us.”* On a similar note, Participant D added, *“Understanding our past, our traditions, and our values is crucial. It shapes our approach to education, influences our interactions, and reminds us of the legacy we uphold and pass on to future generations.”*

Using the SCF, it becomes evident that the participants’ emphasis on cultural and historical reverence is not an isolated sentiment. Instead, it is a constructed understanding, rooted in their interactions, teachings, and experiences within the larger socio-cultural milieu of the Mekong Delta.

SI offers deeper insights, highlighting how institutions, in the eyes of the leaders, are not just physical entities but symbols representing the region’s cultural and historical continuum. The values, traditions, and historical episodes associated with the Mekong Delta are not mere stories but symbols that guide institutional ethos, decision-making, and interpersonal dynamics. Lastly, through the PA, the emotional depth and experiential essence associated with this cultural and historical reverence come to the forefront. Participant E’s portrayal of the institution as a “repository” captures the profound sense of responsibility and pride linked to upholding and nurturing this legacy.

#### 4.5. Integration of Community and Institutional Well-Being

An emergent theme from the interviews that stood out was the “integration of community and institutional well-being” from the perspective of a healthy working environment within the higher education landscape of the Mekong

Delta in Vietnam. Four out of the five participants, in various nuances, emphasized the interconnectedness of the institution and the larger community it serves. They believe that a truly healthy working environment extends beyond the confines of the institution to impact and be influenced by the well-being of its surrounding community.

Participant B mentioned, *“Our institution does not exist in isolation. The community’s prosperity and our institutional well-being are two sides of the same coin. One cannot thrive without the other.”* Reflecting a similar sentiment, Participant C stated, *“We often say that our campus borders are permeable. The joy, challenges, and aspirations of the community find a way into our institution, shaping our decisions, our initiatives, and our very ethos.”*

From the SCF, it is clear that the participants’ understanding of institutional health, influenced by their interactions and engagements with the community, has led to a holistic view. They have constructed a reality where the institution and the community are inseparable entities, each influencing and being influenced by the other.

Applying the lens of SI, the ‘community’ becomes more than just a demographic entity. For institutional leaders, it symbolizes a reservoir of shared experiences, values, and mutual dependencies. The “permeable borders” mentioned by Participant C showcase this symbolic representation where the institution and community engage in a continuous exchange of values, challenges, and aspirations.

Lastly, the PA provides insights into the lived experiences of these leaders concerning this community-institution integration. Participant B’s emphasis on the intertwined prosperity of both entities captures the profound interconnectedness they feel, reflecting the deep-rooted emotional and experiential significance of this bond.

#### 4.6. Role of Nature and Environment

An intriguing and somewhat unexpected theme that surfaced from the interviews was the “role of nature and environment” as an integral component in shaping a healthy working environment within higher education institutions in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. All five participants, albeit in varied intensities, touched upon the unique relationship between the natural environment of the Mekong Delta, its rhythms and landscapes, and how it influences the ethos and spirit of the institutions located therein.

Participant A shared, *“You cannot separate the Mekong Delta’s soul from its waters and lands. This harmony with nature spills over into our institution. The serenity of our surroundings, the ebb and flow of the rivers – it all shapes our perspective on education and well-being.”* Capturing a more tactile essence, Participant E remarked, *“Every brick in our institution has a story of the land and waters. Our environment is not just a backdrop; it is a living, breathing entity that influences our academic rhythms, our interactions, and our very approach to education.”*

Through the SCF, one can understand that the participants’ perceptions of the role of nature and environment are not mere observations but constructed realities rooted in their daily experiences. Their continuous interaction with the vibrant natural landscapes of the Mekong Delta has led to a unique intertwining of nature with institutional life. The perspective of SI lends depth to how the Mekong Delta’s natural landscapes are not merely scenic views but powerful symbols. These symbols, representing tranquility, continuity, and harmony, deeply influence the leaders’ perceptions of a healthy working environment, as evidenced by Participant A’s analogy of the rivers’ ebb and flow.

Lastly, the PA shines a light on the emotional resonance of this bond with nature. Participant E’s description of the environment as a “living, breathing entity” encapsulates the profound lived experience where nature is **not** an external factor but an intrinsic part of institutional life, shaping its pulse and rhythms.

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1. Interpersonal Relationships and Mutual Respect

The finding on “interpersonal relationships and mutual respect” as a cornerstone of a healthy working environment resonates with various studies in higher education across different cultural contexts. For instance, studies by Edmondson [23] and Markakis, et al. [24] have pointed out the significance of interpersonal dynamics, collaboration, and respect in cultivating a positive academic environment. The importance of relationships as a



foundation for a harmonious environment is not exclusive to Vietnamese higher education but is an acknowledged factor worldwide.

However, what makes the current study's findings distinctive is the depth to which interpersonal relationships are intertwined with the cultural fabric of the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. While mutual respect and trust are common themes in higher education studies globally DeLong, et al. [25], the excerpts from participants A and D reflect an almost palpable, culturally imbued understanding of these dynamics. This cultural depth is seldom emphasized in Western-centric literature, where the emphasis often leans towards professional collaboration and communication rather than deeply rooted cultural values [26].

Another point of differentiation is the symbolic weight given to 'relationships' and 'respect' in the Vietnamese context, as highlighted through the SI perspective [20]. While many studies discuss interpersonal dynamics in operational terms King and Stevahn [27], this research illuminates the symbolic representation of these dynamics, suggesting they are emblematic of broader cultural values such as harmony, unity, and institutional integrity.

Furthermore, the phenomenological essence captured in this study, especially the feeling of interconnectedness and trust, offers a more visceral understanding of the lived experiences of institutional members. While many studies provide objective assessments or surface-level observations (e.g., Langenkamp [28]), the depth of emotion and experience in this study's findings paints a vivid, almost tactile picture of the academic environment in the Mekong Delta.

### *5.2. Continuous Professional Development and Growth Opportunities*

The emphasis on "continuous professional development and growth opportunities" mirrors findings from various studies in the broader landscape of higher education. Research by scholars like Lee and Lee [29] has consistently affirmed the positive correlation between professional development opportunities and both individual and institutional growth. Institutions globally are recognizing the importance of continuous learning, not just for individual career advancement but also for maintaining the institution's competitive edge and adapting to the ever-evolving educational landscape.

However, what differentiates the findings from the present study within the context of the Mekong Delta of Vietnam is the profound cultural and community-driven undertones associated with professional growth. As expressed by Participant B, the analogy of the "stagnant pond" goes beyond the usual rhetoric of professional development. It subtly intertwines cultural wisdom and communal knowledge, suggesting that continuous learning is not just about individual or institutional progress but about sustaining the vitality and health of the larger community. This perspective, rooted deeply in the region's ethos, is distinct from most Western or global narratives, which often prioritize individualistic or competitive motivations for continuous professional development [30].

The SI interpretation also illuminates a distinct perspective. While seminars, workshops, and courses are often seen as routine components of academic life in global contexts, in the Mekong Delta, they are symbolic of the institution's commitment to progress, innovation, and excellence [31]. This signifies a deeper cultural reverence for education and growth, where such opportunities are not merely operational but emblematic of an institution's values and vision.

The PA further enriches this narrative. Participant B's sentiments encapsulate a deeper emotional and existential connection to the idea of growth, reflecting the collective aspirations, fears, and values of the community [32]. This depth of emotion and cultural resonance is not commonly found in more transactional or utilitarian discussions on professional development in other contexts.

### *5.3. Institutional Transparency and Open Communication*

The theme of "institutional transparency and open communication" aligns with an increasing global emphasis on transparent governance and communication practices in higher educational settings. Several studies, such as those by

Singh and Srivastava [33] and Bansal [34], have highlighted the correlation between transparent practices, open communication, and overall institutional success and trustworthiness. Transparent governance and clear communication are commonly accepted as pillars for building trust, fostering collaboration, and ensuring the well-being of stakeholders in diverse educational contexts.

However, the findings from the Mekong Delta institutions add a distinct layer to this global narrative. The depth with which transparency is equated to “sunlight” by Participant C is indicative of a cultural orientation where transparency is not just a functional requisite but a moral and cultural imperative. Such vivid cultural metaphors and their frequency in the participants’ reflections are not typically as pronounced in many Western-centric studies on institutional transparency. Similarly, while open communication is universally accepted as beneficial, Participant A’s perspective emphasizes a deeper interconnectedness among members of the institution. The statement stresses not just the functional benefits of open communication, such as reduced friction or faster decision-making, but also its role in making everyone feel “valued and heard.” This implies a community-driven ethos, where communication is seen as a tool to strengthen communal bonds and shared values.

The interpretations offered by the SI and PA further deepen the unique contributions of this study. They highlight how universally accepted concepts, like transparency and communication, are deeply imbued with regional-specific symbolic and emotional nuances. Cultural values, societal norms, and shared regional experiences enrich the symbols of trust, collaboration, and democratic ethos [35].

#### 5.4. Cultural and Historical Reverence

The focus on “cultural and historical reverence” within higher education institutions in the Mekong Delta provides a unique perspective, drawing attention to how deeply embedded cultural and historical narratives influence institutional practices and values. This is particularly interesting when juxtaposed with global academic literature.

Research in global contexts, such as those by Linde [36] and Ndalamba, et al. [37], does highlight the role of institutional history and its founding principles in shaping its contemporary ethos. Yet, these studies often treat historical relevance as a backdrop or contextual factor rather than an active influence. In contrast, the findings from the Mekong Delta suggest that cultural and historical reverence is not passive; it actively permeates decision-making, interactions, and the very identity of the institution.

The description of the institution as a “repository” of cultural and historical heritage, as expressed by Participant E, offers a nuanced understanding that departs from more common global narratives. While institutions worldwide value and often showcase their histories Ndalamba, et al. [37], few might describe themselves as ‘repositories’, actively preserving and revering cultural and historical legacies. Moreover, Participant D’s emphasis on understanding past traditions and values to shape educational approaches brings forth a unique pedagogical perspective. This suggests that education in the Mekong Delta is not just about contemporary knowledge dissemination but involves a deep-seated respect for historical wisdom and integrating it with modern practices.

The interpretations through the SI framework further distinguish this study’s findings. In many global academic contexts, institutional symbols often revolve around emblems, mottos, or architectural landmarks [38]. However, in the Mekong Delta context, deeper, intangible symbols tied to cultural narratives and historical episodes guide institutional practices [6]. This distinction underscores the profound weight given to non-tangible cultural symbols in shaping institutional dynamics.

#### 5.5. Integration of Community and Institutional Well-Being

The theme of “integration of community and institutional well-being” offers a fresh lens to understand the dynamics of higher education institutions, especially within the unique cultural and geographical context of the Mekong Delta. Global literature on institutional well-being, such as studies by Daxner [39] and Edwards, et al. [40], often highlights the importance of institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and internal stakeholder satisfaction.

However, these studies typically delineate institutional well-being from the larger community, viewing them as separate, albeit related, entities.

In contrast, the findings from the Mekong Delta underscore a deep symbiotic relationship between the institution and its surrounding community. The assertion that an institution does not exist in isolation and that its well-being is intricately linked to the community's prosperity offers a radical departure from more individualistic or institution-centric global narratives [41]. This perspective reflects a more collective, interconnected worldview, suggesting that the prosperity of any single entity is intertwined with the well-being of its larger ecosystem.

Furthermore, Participant C's portrayal of "permeable campus borders" adds nuance to this discussion. While many institutions globally prioritize community engagement and outreach [42, 43], the idea of "permeable borders" suggests a more organic, continuous, and deeply embedded relationship between the institution and its community. This suggests an institution that continuously influences its surrounding community, going beyond structured community engagement programs.

The SI framework's interpretation further differentiates the Mekong Delta perspective. In many global contexts, 'community' is often seen as an external stakeholder group to engage with Bradshaw [44]. But here, it symbolizes a deep well of shared experiences, aspirations, and challenges [45]. This symbolic representation reinforces the idea of an institution as a living, breathing entity within its community rather than an isolated ivory tower. Finally, the Phenomenological insights highlight the emotional depth of this interconnection [21]. It is not just a strategic or operational linkage but a profound emotional and existential bond, as evidenced by Participant B's sentiments.

### 5.6. Role of Nature and Environment

The emergence of the "role of nature and environment" as a pivotal theme in shaping the working environment of higher education institutions in the Mekong Delta offers a unique vantage point, especially when placed within a broader global context. The significance of the built and natural environment in influencing academic outcomes and well-being is a topic that has garnered attention in higher education research, with studies by scholars like [46] and Lau, et al. [47] discussing the influence of architectural design and green spaces on academic well-being. However, these studies often approach the environment from a functional or aesthetic perspective, focusing on infrastructure, facilities, and aesthetics.

Contrastingly, the insights from the Mekong Delta add depth to this narrative by intertwining the natural environment with the cultural, spiritual, and emotional fabric of the institution [48]. Participant A's reflection about not separating the "soul of the Mekong Delta from its waters and lands" goes beyond the physicality of the environment. It draws attention to a profound cultural and spiritual connection between the land and its people, suggesting that this bond is not just a matter of geography but of identity.

Furthermore, while many global institutions might appreciate and integrate nature for its aesthetic or recreational value, Participant E's statement highlights a deeper connection. Describing every brick in the institution as having "a story of the land and waters" underscores the intrinsic relationship between the institution and its natural environment [49]. This sentiment suggests that the Mekong Delta's landscapes are not mere adornments but integral components of the institution's narrative.

The SI interpretation adds another layer to this discussion. While green campuses or natural vistas might be seen as amenities or environmental commitments in global contexts, for the Mekong Delta leaders, these landscapes are symbols of tranquility, continuity, and harmony [50]. This symbolic depth, especially Participant A's analogy of the rivers' ebb and flow, portrays nature as not just an influencing factor but a guiding principle. Lastly, the Phenomenological insights reveal the depth of the emotional bond between the institutions and their natural environment [21]. The environment is not an external, separate entity but an intrinsic, living part of the institutional narrative, influencing its rhythms, interactions, and ethos.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In an increasingly globalized world, understanding the intricacies of working environments, especially in higher education institutions, is paramount. This study delved into the landscapes of higher education institutions in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam, seeking to unravel the characteristics that define a healthy working environment from the perspectives of institutional leaders. Set against the vibrant backdrop of the Mekong Delta, with its rich cultural, historical, and natural tapestry, the research aimed to offer insights that might resonate not just within Vietnam but across global higher education discourses.

Utilizing a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method. These interviews, grounded in theoretical frameworks such as the SCF, SI, and PA, provided depth and structure to the analysis, ensuring the findings were both rich in detail and robust in their theoretical underpinning.

The study's findings illuminated several key themes that resonate with the essence of a healthy working environment in the Mekong Delta's higher education sector. Emphases on interpersonal relationships, continuous professional development, transparency, cultural and historical reverence, and the intertwined well-being of the institution and community all emerged as pivotal. Perhaps the most distinctive theme was the profound role of nature and environment, underscoring the symbiotic relationship between the institutions and the Mekong Delta's unique landscapes.

In essence, this research provides a nuanced understanding of healthy working environments, emphasizing the significance of context, culture, and community. While the specific findings are deeply rooted in the Mekong Delta's realities, their broader implications underscore the universality of themes like trust, growth, transparency, cultural reverence, and environmental harmony in shaping thriving academic communities. As the global academic community continues to evolve, studies like these serve as poignant reminders of the diverse tapestries that constitute the rich world of higher education, highlighting the value of localized insights in enriching the global discourse.

## 7. IMPLICATIONS

The findings from this study into the healthy working environments of higher education institutions in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam carry several profound implications that can inform both policy and practice, both within the region and beyond.

Firstly, the emphasis on interpersonal relationships and mutual respect underscores the significance of fostering a culture that values trust, understanding, and respect within academic institutions. Higher education administrators globally can leverage these insights to develop programs or initiatives that prioritize interpersonal bonds, enhance collaborative efforts, and foster a harmonious academic atmosphere.

The highlighted importance of continuous professional development suggests that for institutions to thrive, there should be consistent opportunities for growth, learning, and advancement. This has clear implications for curriculum development, faculty training, and institutional investment in professional growth avenues. Institutions that prioritize and embed continuous learning into their organizational fabric are likely to witness enhanced job satisfaction, increased innovation, and overall institutional success.

The findings related to institutional transparency and open communication provide a roadmap for effective governance. Institutions striving for stakeholder trust and cohesion should consider practices that ensure transparent decision-making and foster open channels of communication. This transparency can serve as a model for other institutions, particularly in regions where opaque administrative processes might be the norm.

The distinct emphasis on cultural and historical reverence carries implications for how institutions approach their foundational narratives. It suggests that for institutions to resonate deeply with their stakeholders, there should be a deliberate effort to integrate cultural and historical contexts into their operational and pedagogical practices. Such integration can enhance institutional identity, foster pride, and deepen stakeholder attachment. Perhaps the most resonant implication is derived from the theme emphasizing the role of nature and the environment. Higher

education institutions have a crucial role to play in an era of rapid urbanization and environmental concerns. By recognizing and integrating the natural environment into their ethos, as evidenced in the Mekong Delta institutions, academic entities can champion sustainable practices, enhance well-being, and provide holistic educational experiences.

## 8. RECOMMENDATIONS

The rich tapestry of findings from this exploration into the healthy working environments of higher education institutions in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam offers a foundation upon which future research can build. It is recommended that subsequent studies delve deeper into the nuances of interpersonal relationships, exploring specific strategies and practices that foster mutual respect and understanding within academic settings. Additionally, the profound interplay between nature, environment, and institutional ethos witnessed in this study beckons a more granular exploration. Future research could investigate the tangible and intangible benefits of such a symbiotic relationship and how they can be effectively incorporated in diverse global contexts. The role of cultural and historical reverence in shaping institutional identity and stakeholder engagement is another fertile ground for exploration, particularly in regions with rich historical narratives. Comparative studies between institutions in the Mekong Delta and those in different cultural and geographical landscapes can also provide valuable insights, illuminating both the unique and universal aspects of healthy academic environments. Lastly, given the rapid advancements in technology and changing dynamics of higher education, it would be prudent for future research to consider the implications of these findings in the context of blended or fully online academic settings.

## 9. LIMITATIONS

While this study offers valuable insights into the characteristics of a healthy working environment within higher education institutions in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam, it is not without its limitations. Firstly, the study relied on a relatively small sample of five leaders from two institutions, which may not capture the full diversity and range of perspectives present in the broader Mekong Delta higher education landscape. The qualitative nature of the study, while providing depth, limits the generalizability of the findings to other institutions or regions. Furthermore, the reliance on semi-structured interviews as the sole data collection method may have missed out on other potential sources of information, such as observational data or institutional documents. Cultural nuances and the potential influence of social desirability bias might have shaped the participants' responses, potentially influencing the findings' authenticity. Lastly, while the study employed multiple theoretical frameworks to interpret the findings, other theoretical lenses or methodologies might have yielded different insights or interpretations.

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