

Charles Howie case study

At 65, most of us are looking forward to retirement – perhaps this is the time to travel, to take up a new hobby, or do some gardening.

Instead, Charles Howie decided to study for a PhD. Charles undertook his PhD in political ecology in the Geography Department at Royal Holloway, University of London between 2002 and 2010, investigating farmer decision-making in a developing country. Previously, during his master's degree at the Royal Agricultural University, he visited the Mekong Delta in Vietnam, where he met Professor Vo-Tong Xuan a leading researcher working in this area and, after completing his research, he sent him a copy of his master's dissertation, an important step to developing the personal links necessary for any successful research career.

The PhD was supported by both the Economic & Social Research Council and the Natural Environment Research Council through the Interdisciplinary Research Studentships scheme. Charles felt it was important for funding to come from both the research councils – due to the mixture of natural and social science that would be conducted over the course of his research, and especially considering his interest in working in the developing world.

Before his PhD, Charles contacted Professor Vo-Tong Xuan, who by now had become the founding rector of An Giang University, only the second university in the Mekong Delta, and jumped at the opportunity to work with someone who had established himself in his chosen field of research, and also in developing the structure for training future teachers within his PhD field. Charles travelled to Vietnam and subsequently helped the university develop Vietnam's first curriculum in rural development. The course continues to this day, and trains 150 graduates each year, many of whom go on to teach and work for business and government in the surrounding provinces.

During Charles' PhD he spent considerable time communicating with farmers. He wanted to work out how they managed their agriculture within a landscape of seasonal flooding and dykes, as well as the political systems and economic factors affecting their decision-making. He was stunned when he received the response: "This must be the only country in the world where farmers grow their crops, then look for a buyer." Due to the overarching state control, farmers had very little vision of demand for their produce.



"I was doing household interviews, and I would try and visit their fields if they were located nearby." Picture taken in An Giang Province, Vietnam

Charles spent a lot of time based in Vietnam both during and after his PhD award. He decided at an early stage that learning Vietnamese would be essential to his research. “To anyone who wants to do a PhD in a hard language country, view learning the language as a future investment to develop your career, not just as a means to an end,” he says.

As part of his research he interviewed local and provincial government officials in charge of environmental decision-making; as well as local farmers who were concerned about the effect of dyke building on rice production. Speaking with these groups required an understanding of their different cultures. “To communicate with government officials I needed to know who to talk to, how to talk to them and the best way to deliver my findings. To communicate with local farmers, I also needed to learn to drink Vietnamese rice wine.”

His work has had a significant influence on Vietnamese agricultural policy. After returning to the An Giang University as an adviser, he spent six months helping reconstruct the crop science department. He instilled in the team that not only must they prepare people to work in agriculture now, but they must prepare to handle the great agricultural and social changes that are coming to Vietnam, as well as the impact of climate change.



Charles Howie (far left): “My position in the field: white, male, older, foreign, researcher, and sometimes a figure of fun!” Photographs taken by Miss Pham Huynh Thanh Van

Charles proves that working towards a PhD is not just a young person’s game; waiting until later in life to start this learning experience can bring its own benefits.

“Reflecting on what benefit older people might get from tackling a PhD there is a prominent point. If you are in your 60s you may well have grown-up family of your own and grandchildren, but there are generation gaps there. However, when you work and relax each day alongside bright and enthusiastic folk in their mid-20s this gap becomes irrelevant. I

was blessed to be in a geography department with around 80 fantastic and very interesting doctoral students, many of them from far away. So now, through social media, I follow the lives of 20-30 of them. It is a rejuvenating experience for which I’m immensely grateful. I have regular contact with former colleagues now back at their homes across the globe.”