The role of policy reform in developing teacher educator professional competencies and identities in Vietnam: implications, tensions and possibilities

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Abstract

In this paper we consider a policy which was part of a larger reform movement in Vietnam, ostensibly designed to define the professional competencies of teacher-educators (TE), via a draft circular for professional standards. An initial intention to explore the impact of the circular with Vietnamese teacher-educators was reconsidered after the policy was withdrawn. Instead, we became interested in perceptions of teacher educator identity in Vietnam to locate where, within current global and local policy and practice landscapes, a professional standards framework would land. We locate this paper within a global context of policy reform in TE and situated and specific ecologies of contemporary education in Vietnam. As a group of English and Vietnamese academics with a common background in TE, we explore the current views of Vietnamese TEs regarding professional identity and their awareness of reforms in Vietnam around TE professional standards. To this end we consider the implications, tensions and possibilities engendered by reform around professional competencies through interviews with teacher educators. We conclude by asking what TE reform in Vietnam is responding to and the implications for the sector in terms of professional identities, professional learning and practices and the status of TE as a profession.

Keywords: teacher-education, Vietnam, policy reform, professional competencies, professional standards

Introduction

This paper has emerged out of the Research Development and Innovation strand of the Enhancing Teacher Education Programme (ETEP). The research team are a group of UK and Vietnamese Teacher Education researchers based with the Centre for the Study of Practice and Culture (CSPACE) at Birmingham City University (BCU) in the Midlands of England,

Thai Nguyen University of Education (TNUE) in North Vietnam and Vinh University in North Central Vietnam. Between us we have experience of teacher education in both the UK and Vietnam sectors. We see teacher education research as a specialist strand of the wider field of research in education and have a broad range of research interests that share a common commitment to improving the quality of teacher education and its impact on young people's learning experiences and educational outcomes. In this way, ETEP offers a unique opportunity to work together on research questions of common concern and to build new research and writing partnerships between our research groups, a 'both-way' (Forestier and Crossley, 2015) process which 'facilitates the mobilisation of global knowledge, practice and policy' (Zhu, 2021:950), as opposed to 'the traditional policy borrowing and lending paradigm...which created dichotomies between borrowing/lending, reception/diffusion, import/export' (Zhu, 2021:952).

When we began our collaborations and discussions toward the publication of this paper, we were unaware that the emerging policy around teacher educators' competencies would be stalled. Our initial proposal to discuss its early implementation with teacher educators in Vietnam was disrupted when the policy was put on hold. What unfolded instead was a much more speculative inquiry into the conditions in which policy reform in teacher education is possible. Vietnam has been successful in embedding policy reform across the education sector, and yet teacher education as a discipline continues to be contentious and insecure. The paper instead became generative of the questions and debates teacher educators must continue to be engaged in for reform and response to the challenges within the sector.

The Higher Education (HE) sector in Vietnam has expanded rapidly in size and scope over the past 20 years and undergone a period of rapid development in policy reform to align it with the social and economic aspirations of the country (Le, 2016). Le Thi Kim Anh's (2016) research suggests that some HE disciplines, such as applied sciences, support a stronger sense of academic identity, not least because those academics are often engaged with wider global disciplinary communities and networks. In comparison, teacher educators in Vietnam appear to have the least developed sense of a professional identity and be the least globally engaged within scholarly networks, with far fewer opportunities to engage in and publish research in their disciplinary field. This is a position that is often similarly experienced by teacher educators globally, for example in the U.K. A key aim of this paper and the ETEP project in general is to begin to remedy this lack of engagement and open opportunities for national and

transnational research in areas of mutual interest such as teacher education, professional development and identity.

This paper contributes to discussions around professional competencies for teacher educators in Vietnam based on the work done by a research group from TNUE who helped to design and pilot a set of professional competencies which are outlined below. As part of our shared conversations with teacher educators from a range of Universities in Vietnam, we became aware of the work of TNUE in the development of a professional standards framework, published as a draft circular, issued by the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) in 2018 - *Professional Standards for Lecturers in Teacher Education*. As those conversations developed, we found ourselves asking how teacher educators in Vietnam were responding to this policy reform within the context of their own work and experiences and what this might mean for their own professional identities and practices. It is important to note how this is a framework emerging in Vietnam within the context of a global policy move to 'centralise control over…teaching and teacher education' (Rosiek, 2017:25) and enactments of neoliberal, globalised governance through data, performance measurement and within contested discourses of the 'effective' teacher (Hardy, 2019, Vagi et. al, 2019, Zhu, 2021). Teacher education and teacher professionalism for the past twenty years has been something of a 'site of struggle between various interest groups concerned with the broader enterprise of education' (Sachs, 2001:149), so we were interested to explore with Vietnamese teacher educators their perceptions of what a professional competencies framework might mean with regard its potential impact on their professional identities and professional practices, given the globally contested and politicised nature of this field.

There are potential advantages of professional competencies to establish a shared language and expectations for educationalists to discuss the specialised knowledge base of teacher educators; the teaching, pedagogic and research practices and the evaluation of these in taking control of what constitutes professional work. At one level, professional standards have the potential to offer clear and transparent ways of understanding professional practices that might otherwise not be available. However, this implies an emergent and 'bottom up' approach where teacher educators themselves collaborate in building a set of philosophies, principles and practices that can do the complex, fluid and contested work of teacher educator professionalism. Conceptually, this is aligned to Apple's (1996) notion of a 'democratic professionalism' that builds alliances between all parts of the educational community,

including those who might find themselves excluded from it (e.g., students, schools, families). What we have seen in many Western educational systems are professional competency frameworks used bureaucratically and uncritically as a means of regulation and control; a managerial professionalism for accountability and measurable effectiveness (Sachs, 2001, 2003), imposed via 'top down' policy and monitoring as a means of governance of teachers and their professional work (x 2021, Thompson and Cook, 2014, Zhu, 2021). Certainly, this has been the case in the UK, where professional standards for teachers have been in place and codified teachers work since 1997, as elsewhere, for example in Australia (Clarke and Moore, 2013). It also suggests a shared and fixed understanding of what a teacher educator is. Globally this is defined in multiple ways, in some countries more inclined toward the university and research and others, such as the UK, increasingly describing mentors in schools. As a starting point for defining competencies are discussions about the ways *teacher educator* is understood within the context of local and national education systems and how these might be aligned or differ from international interpretations, 'located in a complicated nexus between policy, ideology and practice' (Stronach, 2010:109) and within an 'aggressive age of hyper-performativity' (Macfarlane, 2021).

The role of teacher educators globally

The role of teacher educators is not always clearly defined or indeed understood within Higher Education (HE) institutions around the world. It therefore sits in an uneasy and marginalised position within the academy. It is often located somewhat separately, with less regard and considerably more interference and control from political and outside agents and agencies. It is also subject to greater public scrutiny than many other disciplines for reasons we explore further below. For these reasons, the multiple, hybrid and highly variable nature of the academic/professional work of teacher educators are often subject to conflicting expectations and accountability structures within the academy. They are required to be expert practitioners, high quality teachers, mentors and school partners whilst also developing an academic research profile at both local and international level.

Governments globally recognise the central role of TE for 'improving' educational systems and outcomes, and their quest for the elusive indicators of both 'improvement' and 'effectiveness' has led to a sector in a state of constant reform. TE is implicated in student outcomes via the 'quality' of teachers, with both 'improvement' and 'quality' being contested

and complex concepts. Indeed, notions of 'quality' are, as Mockler (2018) writing from Australia, notes:

> increasingly tied to the agendas of standards and accountability, counted and quantified in hours and linked increasingly to improving student performance on standardised tests and other limited measures (p. 14).

TE's role in students' acquisition of '…the competencies needed to evolve in today's societies and labour markets…' (OECD 2005) positions it as integral to the production of 'human capital in advanced and aspiring knowledge economies' (Ellis and McNicoll, 2015:6, Menter and Flores, 2021) like Vietnam. Indeed, the OECD (2005) suggests that 'Education reforms that do not take into account teacher education are condemned to inefficiency' (Musset, 2010 in Ellis and McNicoll, 2015:6). However, to take the UK as an example of what is happening in much of Europe (with some notable exceptions), Australia and the US, TE has become subject to a standardisation of many aspects of its professional practices and experienced the associated controls of curricula content, highly managed top-down accountability structures (Sahlberg, 2012) and a return to more positivist research methodologies. This is relevant in the context of global policy movements and transnational projects that seek to build upon established, but highly contextual, national policies. Following years of French colonial administration of HE, followed by Soviet models of privileged, vocation specific education intended as a conduit to graduate employment in the state ministries (Le, 2016), the economic reform process Đổi Mới (Open Door policy) brought both opportunity for educational reform and threat in the form of a new imperialism through 'model borrowing' as a 'receiver and importer of international education' (Trinh, 2018:73). Being alert to how 'dominant epistemological traditions that pattern and frame higher education within… (usually Western) countries' (Kendall et al, 2019) might close down opportunities for alternative, socially and culturally situated practices, is important to our considerations of how professional competency frameworks in Vietnam are designed and articulated. As Le (2016) suggests, the cultural implications for Vietnam's engagement with global academic networks is not yet well understood and so these are pertinent considerations for Vietnam's educational policy development. The tensions inherent within accountability structures whilst maintaining intellectual and professional autonomy within the profession need careful and considered debate. Interestingly, Le (2016:24) notes how HE in Vietnam, continues to be 'restricted' by a lack of post-positivist research skills in ways that are 'deeply concerning' for the intellectual engagement for Vietnamese academics. This is pertinent for

teacher education not least because their research needs to respond to practitioners' lived experience and the myriad complex geo-political factors which are shaping the political arena within which teachers practise.

A further driver for policy reform is measurable gains in student achievement within global comparative league tables, for example OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Alongside this, TE is also increasingly called upon by governments to respond to complex social justice agendas. In order to meet the complex and ever-changing needs of a global community, one often characterised by wide reaching inequalities, TE is shaped by a wide range of global trends and concerns. In this context, it is unsurprising that a policy movement toward defining the 'competencies' of teacher educators is increasingly evident in many countries, not least Vietnam and the UK, as it is a sector in a state of constant scrutiny and reform, caught up in a struggle for control. It is important to note, however, that the pace of this global movement is experienced differently in different countries. Whilst TE reform is undoubtedly a travelling policy, as we see with the move towards professional standards in Vietnam, it is also 'mediated by local contextual factors that may translate policy to reflect local priorities and meanings' (Ozga and Jones, 2006:1). The social, cultural and historical ecologies of a country at national, regional and local levels are therefore significant in the ways policies are interpreted and implemented.

Across the globe then, teacher education is a site of considerable tension, caught in the nexus between adapting teaching to prioritise and meet local needs, and a demand for centralised control. This demand has shaped the current landscape of TE in ways that has become especially acute around notions of professional 'competencies' as observable and quantifiable skills, behaviours and knowledge manifest in the training and practices of teacher educators. There is, therefore, significant ideological investment in the notion of the 'competent' teacher depending on where and by whom it is being used, which deserves close and critical scrutiny. Specifically for this paper, there are cultural, social and economic factors that make developing academic cultures in practitioner and practice-based fields in Vietnam particularly interesting, as the next section of our paper goes on to discuss. It is into this complex field of professionalisation, policy reform and professional identities that we locate our study.

Teacher educators and Teacher education in Vietnam

The majority of the significant but contested body of literature around teacher identities has emerged from the West but suggests that concept-making around teachers is subject to the shaping forces of social, historical, political and cultural influences which Zhu, (2021), drawing on Stigler and Hibbert (1999), suggests produces an

> underlying cultural script, which embodies a series of tacit, commonly shared cultural beliefs... (that)... (un)consciously influences educational practitioners and policy makers' logics of knowing, doing and becoming. p.945

In Vietnam, this is rooted in Confucian traditions and beliefs with simultaneous contemporary demand to be responsive to a world being made and remade. The teaching profession fights for autonomy and agency in order to respond to local context and community, whilst globally traversing 'best practice' and 'what works' policies hold currency in the International educational market. Concept-making about teachers is also subject to considerable mythologizing and 'redemptive narratives' that provide the discursive structure of the teacher figure in popular culture and popular imagination across the globe. The positioning of schools as sites for social transformation can frame teachers as 'both the target of harsh social criticisms and the last agent of hope' (Fischman, 2020:244). Context is everything and nothing.

In Vietnam, where our study is located, Confucian beliefs about the inherent 'goodness' of learning locates teachers within a lifetime of continued learning and development around both moral character (Duc) and skills and subject knowledge or professional competencies (Tai), (Hallinger et al. 2021: 2). Awards for 'Good Teacher' (thi giao vien gioi) are prestigious, and indicate the status of teachers, although they are not necessarily in harmony with the demands and pressures in Vietnam to build an 'effective' and sustainable teaching workforce that is responsive to the accelerated and changing socio-economic needs of contemporary Vietnamese society. Concept-making about teachers has many contributors – parents, grandparents and carers, politicians and policy makers at local, national and international levels, children and young people, the media, teachers themselves – all these and more are invested in who teachers are, the work they do and how this work might come to matter within a nation's schooling. Unsurprisingly then, there is little consensus, either at local, national or international levels about the professional identity of teachers, other than teaching being a dynamic, multiple, shifting professional space, subject to revision.

Closely connected to and entangled within this concept-making, are the ways teachers are prepared for the roles, practices and complexities of education: the formal education of teachers. This is the work of TE described by Rosiek (2017:23) as 'never still'. A large body

of scholarship exists in the field of TE, mapping a dynamic and contested understanding of what practical and theoretical experiences and knowledge teachers need in order to fulfil the role of teacher and where these experiences should be located renders TE a 'troublesome category…hybrid or exceptional…' (Ellis and McNicoll, 2015: 57) that is subject to multiple demands and expectations.

As noted above, Vietnamese TE is largely grounded in a Soviet Union model of education characterised by narrow, didactic and career specific pedagogies (Nguyen and Trent, 2020:284). This critique is echoed by Hamano (2008: 402), who also considers the influence of French colonialism with its reliance on systematised pieces of predetermined knowledge in print, as well as an emphasis on passive learning and rote memorisation for some TE programmes (Nguyen, 2020). Nguyen and Trent (2020:292) note that the low quality of entrants in terms of academic qualification to TE in Vietnam together with TE programmes that are considered 'out of date', have led to an over emphasis on content knowledge at the expense of pedagogical knowledge as well as research methodologies that tend towards being 'ideologically limited in scope and restricted to a positivist paradigm' (Le, 2016:24).

Nguyen and Trent, (2020), in their study into community perceptions of TE in Vietnam suggest that there is significant attention from families and communities and society regarding both the quality of schooling and TE, although these community groups often find themselves excluded from conversations around how education might develop. They suggest, along with Payne and Zeichner, (2017:106) that TE reform in Vietnam needs to embrace the situated and indigenous knowledge and practices of communities that are 'contextualised or ecological' about communities, families, children.

The development of professional competencies in Vietnam

The development of professional standards for university lecturers in Vietnam started 10 years ago with very broad expectations largely for the purposes of job screening (including health, qualifications and language proficiencies), Decision 58/2010/QĐ-TTg. Related policy since 2020, has further defined the roles of lecturer and senior lecturer based on numbers of research projects, publications, subject area expertise and the supervision of theses (Circular 40/2020/TT-BGDĐT). Competency frameworks have also been introduced for lecturers at vocational colleges in subject matter, teaching, curriculum development,

networking and research. So, we see that a policy direction towards competency frameworks already has some momentum in Vietnam.

In 2017 a group of researchers in TNUE was assigned by the MOET Minister to propose a professional competence framework for teacher educators in Vietnam. The initial purpose of the proposed framework was to provide a 'useful tool for teachers educators to self-evaluate their professional development and for teacher training institutions to assess their teaching staff, conduct its quality assurance and make its strategy of human resource enhancement' (Nguyen et.al., 2018).

The initial foundation of the proposed framework lies in the idea of quality assurance in teacher education in Vietnam, which is specified in Clause 4, Article 60 of 2012 Higher Education Law. The clause identifies the conditions for quality in teacher education which should be provided. In addition, conditions of teacher educators and university staff are highlighted and thus drive the preparation of the draft professional competence framework for teacher educators.

The proposed Professional Standard Framework for Lecturers in Teacher Education in Vietnam has been drawn upon and is therefore reminiscent of similar documents on teacher educators' competence standards or framework in such countries as Australia, China, the Netherlands, Scotland and the USA. It has also worked in tandem with existing laws about officials and teachers as indicated in circulars of Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, Vietnamese government decrees and Vietnamese laws.

The essence of the proposed Professional Standard Framework for Lecturers in Teacher Education is reflected in the 5 standards and 21 criteria of teacher educators' competence which are listed in Figure 1 below.

Standard	Description of standard	Criterion
1: Politics, ethics and lifestyle	*Engage in and promote the implementation of the national laws, regulations, and policies; comply with teachers' ethics; healthy and civilise lifestyle*	1. Politics 2. Ethics 3. Lifestyle
2. Professional competency	*Achieving professional qualifications, foreign language and IT competencies to meet the requirements of career developments, professional developments, curriculum innovations, research implementation, and providing supports to learners*	4. Professional qualifications 5. Professional developments 6. Foreign language 7. ICT application 8. Designing lectures

		9. Applying teaching methods and strategies 10. Assessing and evaluating learning 11. Developing curricula for teacher professional development and educational management programs 12. Student counselling and supporting
3. Research competency	*Being successful in conducting research/projects and supervising research; transferring results of research in training, teacher professional developments; publish research results; publish learning materials for teaching and training purposes*	13. Conducting research / projects 14. Publishing research results 15. Publish learning and teaching materials 16. Research supervision
4. Democratic competency	*Compiling and promoting the implementation of democratic principles to create democratic learning and research environments*	17. Developing and implementing democratic organisation 18. Developing of friendly learning and research environments
5. Social competency	*Cooperating with other educational authorities to design and implement training mission, teacher professional developments, local educational developments, community and social developments; participating in educational evaluation to develop the educational system*	19. Cooperation in training and re-training teachers 20. Cooperation to develop community of education 21. Social feedbacks

Figure 1: Professional Standard Framework for Lecturers in Teacher Education in Vietnam

The Framework was approved by several reviewing committees and later was agreed by the Minister of Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training to be established as a draft circular in February 2018, which was supposed to undergo a strict process of referendum until April 2018. It has received a great deal of interest and attention from teacher educators, policy makers and administrators across the country. For example, Bui (2017) has highlighted the values of the Framework for the emergence of a framework on standards and competences of the teacher educator in Vietnam.

Several teacher education universities in Vietnam have conducted a pilot assessment of the proposed Framework with their teaching staff. The overall results suggested that the teacher educators could be classified into 4 groups labelled from Level 1 to Level 4 respectively: (i) Level 1 (Basic) refers to a lecturer who lacks experience and does professional tasks with instruction of a colleague; (ii) Level 2 (Competent) refers to a lecturer who has got experience and does professional tasks independently; (iii) Level 3 (Advanced) refers to a lecturer who has got much experience, do professional tasks independently, competently, creatively and supervise colleagues doing these tasks, and (iv) Level 4 (Excellent) refers to a lecturer who is leadership in doing professional tasks and show the critical thinking with feedback.

However, feedback from participants and the administrators in the pilot have been controversial, which may potentially lead to the cancellation of the official announcement of this mentioned draft circular. The teacher, in Vietnamese people's perceptions and practice, is often considered the noble and has been placed in high social status. The lecturer, who is teaching at the highest level in the education system, should expect even better respect from the public. Consequently, while the administrators may show their accordance with the framework, the teaching staff seem more sceptical about the decision of their professional performance level.

Another reason which may account for the current withdrawal of the proposed framework is its incompatibility among the Vietnamese legal documents on the requirements and assessment of officials, teachers and teacher educators. It is regulated in Vietnam that a circular is made official to provide guidelines and instructions for implementing a law. At this point, the current Vietnamese Education Law and Vietnamese Higher Education Law have no regulations of assessing and categorising the teacher and the lecturer; therefore, up till now the official framework on Teacher Educators' Competency Framework remains unissued.

Nevertheless, the core of the proposed Professional Standard Framework for Lecturers in Teacher Education has been employed to design the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) used for the assessment of annual performance of TNUE's staff (academics are included), which are regarded as more accurate, equal and objective in staff assessment thanks to its leverage of their performances based on the evidence provided.

Given the contestations above, and the uncertain future of the framework, in our research we explore more generally teacher educators' notions of professional competency and identity in

relation to the local and national tensions around TE as discussed above to consider the conditions in Vietnam for the possibilities of such policy reform.

Methodology

We were especially interested in the potential of the research to explore Vietnamese teacher educators' sense of professional identity as well as their knowledge of any TE policy reforms such as the professional competency/standards framework alluded to previously. To maintain an informal and collegiate environment for the data collection 5 semi-structured interviews with TEs, were carried out by one of our ETEP team, a Vietnamese TE herself, online in Vietnamese. The five interviewees, hereafter called TE1, TE2, TE3, TE4 and TE5, were based in three different higher education institutions in North Central of Vietnam (Vinh University, Ha Tinh University and Nghe An Teacher Education College). They were asked 12 questions, designed in collaboration by the ETEP team, related to professional identity, lecturer competencies and professional frameworks. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed the interviewer to maintain a focus on the research questions but provided space for unpredicted contributions to be explored as they arose. In our analysis of the data, we employed MacLure's (2010:238) 'glowing data' approach. This involved looking for points in the transcripts that had a particular resonance and 'glimmer [ed], gathering our attention' to issues identified in our literature review and raised in our own discussions as a team. The 'hot spots' (MacLure, 2013) that emerged pointed to

> […] the existence of embodied connections with other people, things and thoughts that are far more complex than the static connections of coding. P.171

Due to the small sample interviewed we are not claiming that our participants are representative or typical of their profession, rather, in a qualitative, exploratory piece of research like this, they offer an insight into 'a variety of positions in relation to the research topic, of a kind that might be expected to throw light on meaningful differences in experience' (King et al, 2019:57).

As the UK HE institution was the project lead for ETEP, ethical approval was gained from the UK institution of two of the authors. However, discussions regarding ethics, including making the research accessible to participants, recognising and minimising power imbalances between the researcher and participants, recognising the often very personal nature of

questions involving identity and ensuring anonymity were central to the project design and data collection.

The responses of Teacher Educators to notions of professional competency and identity

Significantly, the interviews revealed many teacher educators in Vietnam do not have a full understanding of the notion of professional identity or a notion of how it might ultimately be informed by a national competencies' framework. Indeed, one of the respondents (TE2) confessed that it was the first time she heard of the term. The other four seemed to possess some knowledge about the concept, for example TE1 and TE5, who regarded professional identities as representing their own sense of '*who we are as professionals working in our domain of expertise*'. This reflected a sense that a person's professional identity is constructed and reconstructed by their beliefs, values, motives, experiences, professional judgement, reasoning, and critical self-evaluation. There was an understanding across the participants that professional identity may continuously change and be connected to one's own work practices: '*It guides our thinking, actions and interactions with others at work*' (TE1). Likewise, TE2 saw professional identity '*as the values, competencies and skills shared among the people working within a field*'. TE3, meanwhile, made an interesting comparison to explain how they saw professional identity:

> *Professional identity for a professional works as identity card for a citizen. An identity card shows the distinguishing features of the person and other people can easily recognise the person basing on those details. Likewise, a professional identity shows the society the unique features of that profession and people working in that profession.*

TE3 obviously feels that a teacher educators' professional identity includes forms of teacher conduct, style and ethics that distinguish them from people working in other fields, and that an individual TE's professional identity is a combination of the profession's identity and their own competencies.

All the teacher educators interviewed appreciated the importance of a professional identity, underpinned by competencies framework, to their work. Even TE2, who had never heard of the term, agreed when it was explained, that professional identity is essential. The participants provided several reasons for their responses. First, they felt that defining one's

professional identity, though standards, could help TEs to better understand how they should perform at work and so function as a guide for their daily actions and interactions (TE1, TE3, TE4). Second, having a strong professional identity enabled TEs to connect their personal values to the professional behaviours expected of their role. Indeed, they felt that they would be prepared to adjust their behaviour and practices to meet professional expectations the better to fit into their work environment and to perform their role more effectively (TE1, TE5). Third, there was a shared feeling among the interviewees that a competencies framework would allow TEs to advance their career as it would help identify all the skills needed to meet short term or longer-term goals. The TEs in this study felt that ownership of a clear professional identity would enable them to be more willing to make plans to develop professionally in order to meet the demands of a changing workforce (TE2, TE3). Finally, the idea of a professional identity was felt to inform the values of the profession since it encouraged professionals in the field to improve themselves to live up to the identity, resulting in the development of the entire TE community (TE3). However, the extent to which an imposed competencies framework might end up determining the ways in which TEs in Vietnam develop their professional identity remains to be seen especially as this research suggests and as discussed above, TEs have a less developed sense of professional identity than other Vietnamese HE professionals (Le, 2016). Moreover, the experience of competency frameworks in the UK would suggest that the effect is prescriptive and narrowing, rather than generative and dynamic, which often has a negative effect on TE morale and their ability to act with autonomy and agency in the workplace (Ball, 2012).

As the respondents so strongly believed professional identity is crucial to TEs, it is unsurprising that they also assume it affects the way they perform their role. They suggested that it pushes them to try to become an expert in the field, as they believe that a university professor is a person with high expertise (TE1) who requires the ability to provide proper counselling and instructions to students (TE1, TE3, TE5). Professional identity has also influenced the teachers' behaviours in front of the students (TE1, TE4).

> *I am therefore always careful about the way I speak in front of the students. This is to make sure that they do not learn substandard ethics from me*. (TE1).

Additionally, it motivates them to collaborate with other stakeholders in the education process.

> *I think university faculty are service providers, so I put great efforts in collaborating with people at different positions and roles so that we can together serve the process as well as we can* (TE2).

In short, the interviews showed all the participants are convinced that a notion of professional identity has the potential to help identify the value of their work and help raise the profile of their role and the education partners they work with. It seems they see one effect of the growth in the Vietnamese Higher Education (HE) sector in Vietnam and the concomitant policy reforms (Le, 2016) as an opportunity to revaluate their undervalued contribution to the sector and bring them more line with other HE professionals.

We wanted to explore the extent to which these strong positive notions about professional identity chimed with the policy initiatives around professional standards and/or competencies. The participants were therefore asked if they had heard of the term *lecturer professional standards* and/or *faculty framework*. All of them said they had heard of lecturer professional standards, which was covered in Decision 58/2010/QĐ-TTg. The regulation states that a lecturer must have good health, stable political stance, qualified degrees, foreign language and technology proficiency, and clear background check. However, participants felt that these did not demonstrate the fullest meaning of the term 'lecturer professional standards' and were rather general and broad, and thus only really useful for screening job applications (TE1) rather than being able to be deployed developmentally.

In 2020, the Vietnamese government issued Circular 40/2020/TT-BGDĐT that describes requirements that lecturers must meet in order to be recognized as so-called senior lecturers (giảng viên cao cấp) or main lecturers (giảng viên chính). These includes criteria such as having carried out at least two research projects, having expertise in the subject, having proper knowledge of the developmental and academic context of the institution, having supervised at least two master students for graduation thesis, having published at least one book that has been used as a textbook or a reference book for an educational program, having published at least 6 articles, having the ability to apply technology and use a foreign language for work. The TEs were all familiar with this regulation. However, regarding *lecturer competency framework,* all the interviewees claimed that they had very little knowledge of this topic as it applied to them. TE1 and TE3 mentioned something called '*Competency framework for lecturers at vocational colleges'* while the others were not aware of this.

This framework was designed by a group of Vietnamese and Dutch experts working under a project sponsored by the Netherlands and consisted of five groups of competencies: Subject matter competencies, teaching competencies, curriculum development competencies, competencies for building relationships with the industries and professional development, and research competencies.

> *I may feel proud if I meet some of the standards, which may give me more confidence. I may also change my plans for mentoring new lecturers to make sure they aim towards the standards* (TE2).

Lastly, we wanted to explore TEs' needs regarding meaningful professional development. We asked the five interviewees what they thought the professional development priorities were for TEs in Vietnam. The answers are diverse but can be broadly grouped into time, funds, and training. All the participants felt that TEs in Vietnam should be given more time for professional development. Time management is a key factor that affects TEs' job performance (TE1), and it seems that many TEs in Vietnam are overloaded by the various tasks they are assigned to.

> *They have to teach too many students and many hours while having to complete endless lists of bureaucratic duties* (TE4).

There is almost no time for them and their colleagues to self-study, extend networks, or do research (TE5), responses which echo the findings of Le Thi Kim Anh (2016). The TEs' felt their workload should be reduced to increase work efficiency and provide opportunities for meaningful and sustained professional development. Another source of support identified by TEs was financial aid. This, they argued, would provide more opportunities for TEs to attend conferences on teacher education in and outside the country, which in turn, would facilitate their professional development (TE2, TE4, TE5). Moreover, funds should be allocated more efficiently, centrally as well as locally, to encourage TEs to do practice informed research (TE1, TE3). Finally, TEs spoke about needing training courses that provide them with knowledge needed for greater professional development in such areas as curriculum development, learning assessment (TE1, TE2, TE4, TE5), and teaching methods (TE2, TE3, TE4). These suggestions are not unexpected; however, they draw attention to the need for educational reform in general and professional competencies frameworks in particular, to acknowledge that they are difficult to implement if the right infrastructure and funding is not

in place. They may also reflect an awareness, discussed in our literature review, that the status of TE is relatively low compared to other HE professionals. This is reflected in the low entrance requirements and little ongoing research into TE pedagogies and curriculum development (Nguyen and Trent, 2020; Le, 2016). The implementation of a competency framework may well appear to be an opportunity to get support for the kinds of professional development our participants identified above, which are currently lacking.

> *As a teacher educator, I know the policies on professional standards will affect my work too. I will have to refer to the policies to make sure I meet the requirements, then plan my professional learning accordingly* (TE1).

Concluding thoughts

Clearly the unpublished policy reflects a recognition by the Vietnamese government that TE professional standards are a desirable part of their aspirational drive for international status and credibility in the field of TE. This education policy work will be part of the ongoing identity formation of TEs as a subset of academics in Vietnam working in HE. As elsewhere, the aim of Vietnamese policy reform is intended, as many of our participants indicated, to improve professional standards, to make more visible the work of TEs and to boost their status in HE and beyond. However, there are a number of internal mitigating factors to positive professionalisation that need to be considered with regard to TE's such as the historical backdrop of staff shortages, low status/and low pay which need to be addressed alongside a push for new standards and the working practices that go with them.

Participants in our research articulated a desire for a more clear-cut professional identity, the lack of which is often in contrast to the more clear cut professional identities of academics working in STEM subjects. This reflects perhaps the global inconsistencies and tensions around TE which has always positioned its practitioners as a very distinct and often problematic group of workers within HE in addition to the huge social and cultural changes that have taken place in Vietnam education across all sectors since the end of the war.

It was therefore not surprising that there was no shared or established sense of how professional TE identities in Vietnam might usefully be conceptualised at this point in time. This reflects the idea developed in our literature review that the professional status of TEs is especially and uniquely politically charged as they are so inevitably bound up with debates around wider educational issues to do with schools and schooling. For example, it is often

very difficult, in practice, to separate out professional standards from professional strictures about how politicians want the job of teaching children and young adults to be done and how they seek to measure the success of their schools and assessment regimes. The global drift towards neoliberal education policy has resulted in an obsession with measurable outcomes, which are often unproblematically linked to the performance of teachers, and by implication teacher-educators (Ball, 2012). Consequently, both groups of professional educators can lose autonomy and feeling deskilled as they struggle to adapt top-down professional standards to the challenges of their personal and institutional contexts.

Also, too often in countries like the UK, we have seen how standards, often because they are aspirational, can become very difficult to achieve for those striving to fulfil them without adequate resources and training. When that happens, they can easily become a stick to beat teacher-educators with. For example, in the pilot framework Criterion 13 requires TEs to conduct research and carry out research projects, whilst Criterion 14 requires the results of that research to be published. This will inevitably be more difficult for TEs than for many of their colleagues working in HE sectors because, as we discuss in our literature review, they tend to be less well-educated and without the level of English required for publication in an international journal. There is also a less well-developed global community of TE academics who are publishing and collaborating internationally, unlike say academics in physics or chemistry that have a more established international academic publishing community.

It is important to remember that these are not just Vietnamese TE issues, they exist globally. As in other countries there is a need in Vietnam to encourage ongoing conversations with TE within institutions about professional identity and professional standards, and perhaps this is what is intended by the government as a consequence of the current hiatus since the launch of the pilot. TEs in TNUE have begun that conversation as part of the pilot, as discussed above. However, even though it appears that their feedback may not fit with the policy aims as initially articulated in the framework, there is an imperative to think about how the debate can be moved forward. As part of that debate, we argue that experience in other countries suggests that the policy makers and practitioners need to maintain an open discussion about how professional competencies are mobilised across the workforce. For example, as our participants pointed out, can the government put the right amount of funding and infrastructure into the system to support TEs to achieve the competences they wish to develop around research and curriculum development. The experience in other countries

suggests that it will be difficult for full- time educators to upskill without time and financial security for study and further professional development. There is also the need to develop a more progressive career structure that reflects the professional advances made by the workforce, which of course should be financially rewarding.

Finally, there is the more philosophical question to keep in play regarding education policy around TE professional standards, namely where is the proof that they can raise performance and morale and/or help facilitate a positive professional identity for TEs? Unfortunately, the desire across the world for countries to do well in international education league tables such as PISA often manifests itself in policies that serve to control TEs in ways that undermine professional autonomy and job satisfaction. It may be that the ultimate test of Vietnam's professional competences framework for TEs is that it avoids this effect on the workforce it seeks to improve.

Word count: 7943

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