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The evolution of requirements for university lecturers in Vietnam: A policy analysis of the 2010 – 2025 period

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Abstract
Vietnam's higher education sector experienced significant development during the 2010–2025 period. Correspondingly, the requirements for university lecturers have undergone substantial changes. During the 2010–2015 period, the primary focus was on standardizing the academic workforce. From 2016 to 2020, greater emphasis was placed on improving lecturers' qualifications and research capacity. In the 2021–2025 period, these requirements expanded considerably, demanding that lecturers not only meet professional qualification standards and demonstrate strong research competence but also possess digital competencies, innovation capabilities, and the capacity for international integration. These emerging requirements have contributed to enhancing the overall quality of the academic workforce; however, they have also created new challenges, highlighting the need for further refinement of policies governing university lecturers in the next stage of higher education development.

Keywords: Higher education, university lecturers, academic workforce, research capacity, digital competencies

Introduction

In the context of globalization and the rapid development of the knowledge-based economy, higher education has increasingly been recognized as a key driver of economic growth, innovation, and national competitiveness. In Vietnam, the 2010–2025 period marked a profound transformation of the higher education system, not only in terms of governance but also in its development objectives and the requirements imposed on university lecturers.

At the same time, the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the ongoing digital transformation in education have fundamentally reshaped teaching and research activities. The adoption of digital technologies, online learning management systems, artificial intelligence, and digital learning platforms has not only changed the organization and delivery of teaching but has also required university lecturers to continuously enhance their digital competencies, innovate their pedagogical approaches, and improve their capacity to design flexible learning environments.

Furthermore, the internationalization of higher education has intensified the demand for lecturers to possess foreign language proficiency, publish in international scholarly journals, engage in cross-border research collaboration, and participate actively in global academic networks. These emerging expectations have significantly expanded the role of university lecturers from knowledge transmitters to researchers, innovators, learning facilitators, and key contributors to the development of knowledge ecosystems within higher education institutions.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines the evolution of the requirements imposed on university lecturers in Vietnam during the 2010–2025 period from a policy perspective. It identifies the major trends in these changing requirements and discusses the challenges and implications for academic staff development in the context of university autonomy, quality assurance, digital transformation, and international integration.

Requirements for University Lecturers During the 2010–2025 Period: A Policy Perspective

1. The 2010–2015 Period: Standardizing the University Academic Workforce

One of the key policy documents initiating the standardization of Vietnam's university academic workforce was the University Charter, promulgated together with Decision No. 58/2010/QĐ-TTg dated September 22, 2010, issued by the Prime Minister of Vietnam [1]. For the first time, the qualifications and requirements for university lecturers were comprehensively and uniformly stipulated in a legal document governing the organization and operation of higher education institutions.

According to the Charter, university lecturers were required to satisfy five fundamental criteria: (1) demonstrating good moral character, professional ethics, and political integrity; (2) holding at least a bachelor's degree together with a certificate in pedagogical training; a master's degree or higher for lecturers teaching theoretical courses in undergraduate programs; and a doctoral degree for lecturers responsible for teaching specialized subjects and supervising theses and dissertations in master's and doctoral programs; (3) possessing foreign language proficiency and information technology skills appropriate to the requirements of their positions; (4) meeting the health standards required for the profession; and (5) having a clear personal background and employment record.

From a policy perspective, these standards demonstrate an approach to developing the university academic workforce through the standardization of entry requirements, with particular emphasis on political commitment, professional ethics, and academic qualifications. Compared with the previous period, the required level of educational attainment was raised substantially. This reflects the government's policy orientation toward gradually improving the quality of academic staff to meet the evolving needs of the higher education system in the context of international integration.

At the same time, the inclusion of foreign language proficiency and information technology skills as formal

requirements indicates a growing recognition of the importance of these supporting competencies for teaching and research. However, during this period, such requirements remained broadly defined as the ability to "meet job requirements" and had not yet been operationalized through specific competency standards or measurable proficiency benchmarks.

A further significant policy shift was reflected in the Law on Higher Education (2012) [2], the first comprehensive legal framework governing higher education in Vietnam. While retaining the fundamental qualification requirements for university lecturers, the Law substantially expanded their roles and responsibilities.

According to Article 55 of the Law, in addition to teaching, university lecturers are required to conduct research, promote the application of scientific knowledge and technology transfer, ensure the quality of education and training, engage in continuous professional development to enhance their political awareness, academic qualifications, and professional competencies, and continuously innovate their teaching methods. They are also expected to uphold professional ethics, preserve the reputation and dignity of the teaching profession, respect students, and ensure fairness in their treatment of learners.

Compared with previous regulations, the Law on Higher Education (2012) marked a significant shift in policy by redefining the role of university lecturers. Rather than serving solely as teaching professionals, lecturers were recognized as key actors simultaneously engaged in scientific research, knowledge transfer, and quality assurance within higher education institutions.

To operationalize the provisions of the Law on Higher Education, the Ministry of Education and Training issued Circular No. 47/2014/TT-BGDĐT, dated December 31, 2014, on the workload regime for university lecturers [3]. The Circular further reinforced scientific research as a mandatory component of the professional responsibilities of university lecturers.

Under the Circular, lecturers were required to allocate at least one-third (1/3) of their total annual working time to scientific research activities. This was the first policy document to quantify research requirements through a specific workload allocation, marking a significant shift from merely encouraging research to making it a compulsory responsibility within higher education institutions.

This regulation represented a significant policy milestone in reshaping perceptions of the role of university lecturers. Whereas scientific research had previously been regarded primarily as an encouraged activity or one concentrated within a limited number of research-intensive universities, from 2014 onward it became an official and integral component of the workload of all university lecturers.

This policy also laid the foundation for evaluating, appointing, and promoting university lecturers on the basis of both their teaching and research performance, rather than relying solely on teaching workload, as had been the case previously.

In summary, the 2010–2015 period was characterized by the standardization of Vietnam's university academic workforce through the gradual refinement of policies governing professional qualifications and responsibilities. The primary policy focus during this period remained on standardizing entry requirements and enhancing academic qualifications. At the same time, these policy reforms laid the foundation for a transition from a traditional model in which university lecturers were primarily responsible for teaching to one in which teaching and research became integrated professional responsibilities, in line with the evolving trends of modern higher education.

2. The 2016–2020 Period: From Standardization to Quality Enhancement and Research

A major policy turning point during this period was the Law Amending and Supplementing a Number of Articles of the Law on Higher Education (Law No. 34/2018/QH14) [4]. Compared with the Law on Higher Education (2012), the 2018 Law further strengthened qualification requirements for university academic staff by aligning them more closely with the quality standards of different levels of higher education.

Specifically, the minimum qualification required for lecturers teaching undergraduate programs was established as a master's degree, except for teaching assistants. Lecturers teaching in master's and doctoral programs were required to hold a doctoral degree. In addition, the Law stipulates that higher education institutions should give priority to recruiting doctoral degree holders as lecturers and develop preferential policies for leading professors to strengthen academic disciplines and fields of study [4].

These provisions indicate that the policy focus extended beyond the standardization of academic qualifications toward improving the overall quality of the academic workforce. Specifically, the reforms sought to increase the proportion of lecturers holding doctoral degrees and to cultivate a cohort of leading academic experts capable of enhancing universities' capacity for teaching, research, and innovation.

The requirements for university lecturers were further specified in Circular No. 40/2020/TT-BGDĐT [5], which prescribes the professional title codes, qualification standards, appointment procedures, and salary grading for teaching staff employed in public higher education institutions.

For the professional title of lecturer, in addition to the required academic qualifications, the Circular stipulates that lecturers must possess the capacity to conduct scientific research; apply advances in science, technology, and engineering to teaching and other assigned duties; and demonstrate competence in the use of information technology and foreign languages in performing their professional responsibilities.

These provisions indicate that the policy requirements for university lecturers expanded beyond teaching competence to encompass research capability, technological application, and international integration through proficiency in foreign languages and information technology.

For the professional title of Senior Lecturer, Circular No. 40/2020/TT-BGDĐT established, for the first time, specific and measurable criteria for research and scholarly performance. Specifically, Senior Lecturers were required to serve as the principal investigator of at least one institutional-level or higher scientific research project; lead or participate in the compilation of at least one textbook or training-related book; and publish at least three scientific articles in academic journals with an International Standard Serial Number (ISSN).

The requirements for the professional title of Senior Principal Lecturer were set at an even higher level, reflecting the expectation that individuals holding this position should provide academic leadership and disciplinary expertise. Under the Circular, Senior Principal Lecturers were required to serve as the principal investigator of at least two institutional-level scientific research projects or one research project at a higher level; lead the compilation of at least one textbook or training-related book; and publish at least six scientific articles in academic journals with an International Standard Serial Number (ISSN).

These criteria clearly demonstrate a policy orientation toward developing the academic workforce in accordance with the research university model, in which research capacity, scholarly publication, and the development of teaching and learning resources constitute core requirements for senior academic positions.

It can be observed that the defining feature of the 2016–2020 period was the transition from broadly defined, qualitative regulations to a system of specific and measurable standards for each professional academic title. Whereas earlier policies primarily stipulated that university lecturers were responsible for conducting scientific research, during this period these responsibilities were translated into explicit performance indicators, including requirements relating to research projects, scholarly publications, textbook development, and competencies in information technology and foreign languages.

At the same time, policy placed greater emphasis on scientific research and technology transfer, recognizing them as key criteria for assessing professional competence, appointment, and career advancement within the academic profession. This shift reflects the broader policy direction of Vietnam's higher education system toward quality enhancement, strengthened research capacity, and international integration. It also laid the foundation for the new competency requirements imposed on university academic staff in the subsequent period of digital transformation and innovation after 2020.

3. The 2021–2025 Period: Digital Transformation and International Integration

The 2021–2025 period marked a new phase in the development of higher education policy in Vietnam. During this period, the requirements for university academic staff extended beyond meeting standards of academic qualifications and research competence to encompass digital competencies, innovation capabilities, and the capacity for international integration.

This policy direction was clearly articulated in Decision No. 749/QĐ-TTg, issued by the Prime Minister of Vietnam on June 3, 2020, approving the National Digital Transformation Program to 2025, with a Vision to 2030 [6]. The Program identifies education as one of the priority sectors for digital transformation. It aims to comprehensively transform teaching, institutional governance, and research through the application of digital technologies, thereby fostering the development of a digital education ecosystem and cultivating a workforce equipped with the digital competencies required for the digital economy.

For university academic staff, these policy objectives imply the need to adapt to online and blended teaching, effectively utilize digital platforms for instructional delivery and student assessment, and progressively develop proficiency in emerging technologies that support teaching, research, and other professional activities.

Further operationalizing this policy direction, Decision No. 131/QĐ-TTg, issued by the Prime Minister of Vietnam on January 25, 2022, approving the Project on Strengthening the Application of Information Technology and Digital Transformation in Education and Training for the 2022–2025 Period, with a Vision to 2030 [7], established a policy framework for developing a digital education ecosystem, expanding digital learning resources, promoting the adoption of learning management platforms, and innovating teaching methods in digital learning environments.

Within this policy context, digital competence has become an essential requirement for university academic staff. Beyond being proficient in the use of Learning Management Systems (LMS) for course delivery, learning management, and student assessment, lecturers are also expected to be capable of designing digital learning resources, utilizing learning analytics, and applying digital technologies to enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) in recent years has further expanded the range of competencies expected of university academic staff. AI not only supports the development of digital learning resources, the personalization of learning, and the assessment of student learning outcomes, but also enhances scientific research and data analysis. Consequently, university lecturers are expected not only to use AI tools effectively but also to guide students in the appropriate and responsible use of AI, ensuring academic integrity and adherence to ethical principles in both teaching and research [8].

It is evident that the 2021–2025 period marked a profound transformation in the expectations placed on university academic staff, driven by digital transformation and international integration. Whereas university lecturers had previously been evaluated primarily on the basis of their academic qualifications and research performance, the policy framework now encompasses a broader range of competencies, including digital competence, the ability to design and deliver online learning, the effective application of artificial intelligence (AI), proficiency in the use of Learning Management Systems (LMSs), participation in quality assurance and accreditation processes, engagement in internationalization initiatives, scholarly publication, innovation, and knowledge transfer.

Accordingly, university lecturers are no longer expected merely to serve as educators responsible for teaching. They are also expected to act as researchers who generate new knowledge, innovators who drive pedagogical and technological advancement, learning facilitators who support students in developing self-directed learning competencies within digital learning environments, and technologically proficient professionals capable of leveraging the opportunities created by digital transformation to enhance the quality of higher education.

These developments reflect the inevitable evolution of the academic profession in response to the growing demand for an open, flexible, high-quality, and internationally integrated higher education system.

Challenges for Policies on the Development of the University Academic Workforce

Although the policy framework introduced during the 2010–2025 period has made a significant contribution to the standardization, quality enhancement, and capacity development of Vietnam's university academic workforce, its implementation has also revealed a number of challenges that require further policy attention.

First, the pressure to publish internationally has continued to intensify as international publication records have become key criteria for evaluating academic performance, appointing academic positions, assessing professional achievements, and ranking higher education institutions. While this policy has helped stimulate scientific research activities, it has also imposed considerable pressure on university lecturers, particularly those working at institutions with limited research capacity and resources.

In addition, disparities persist among higher education institutions in terms of financial resources, infrastructure, research environments, and opportunities for international collaboration. While leading universities have been able to invest substantially in research, digital transformation, and internationalization, many local and private institutions continue to face significant challenges in meeting the increasingly demanding policy requirements. As a result, differences have emerged in lecturers' capacity to fulfill the prescribed standards, despite the fact that these regulations are applied relatively uniformly across the national higher education system.

At the same time, the workload of university lecturers has continued to increase as they are expected to perform multiple responsibilities simultaneously, including teaching, conducting scientific research, publishing in international journals, supervising students, participating in quality assurance and accreditation activities, advancing digital transformation initiatives, engaging in international collaboration, and contributing to community service. While the expansion of lecturers' roles represents an inevitable trend in the development of higher education, the absence of effective workload allocation mechanisms and commensurate compensation policies may adversely affect the quality of their professional performance.

Particularly in the context of rapid digital transformation, support for developing lecturers' digital competencies has not kept pace with practical demands. Many lecturers continue to encounter difficulties in effectively utilizing learning management systems (LMS), applying artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, designing digital learning materials, and delivering online instruction. This indicates that digital transformation requires not only investment in technological infrastructure but also the implementation of systematic and continuous professional development programs to enhance the digital competencies of university lecturers.

Conclusion

The policies governing the requirements for university lecturers during the 2010–2025 period demonstrate that the focus of higher education in Vietnam has shifted from expanding enrollment to enhancing educational quality, strengthening scientific research, fostering innovation, and promoting international integration. This transition reflects the inevitable demands of Vietnam's development in the context of increasingly intense global competition, while also demonstrating the country's commitment to fundamentally and comprehensively reforming education and training in accordance with the orientations and policies of the Communist Party and the State. Nevertheless, raising the standards for university lecturers has also exposed a number of challenges arising from the institutional mechanisms and policy framework governing the academic profession.

The foregoing analysis suggests that, alongside the continued enhancement of standards for university lecturers, future policies should be refined in a more coherent, feasible, and context-sensitive manner, taking into account the diverse conditions of higher education institutions. It is essential to establish effective mechanisms to support the development of lecturers' research capacity and digital competencies, reduce disparities in resources among institutions, improve remuneration policies and workload allocation, and strengthen investment in digital infrastructure and international collaboration. Only by achieving an appropriate balance between higher quality expectations and the conditions necessary for their effective implementation can university lecturers fully perform their role as the core driving force behind higher education reform, scientific research, and the development of high-quality human resources in the contemporary context.

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