

# Motivating University Lecturers: International Experiences and Lessons for Vietnam

Minh Thi Hong Bui<sup>1\*</sup>, Phuong Thi Thu Hoang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ha Noi Metropolitan University, Vietnam

\*Corresponding Author: [bthminh@daihocthudo.edu.vn](mailto:bthminh@daihocthudo.edu.vn)

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**Abstract:** *Motivation for work among university faculty is a decisive factor for the quality of education and research, as well as the competitiveness of higher education institutions in today's globalized context. This paper aims to summarize the factors that motivate university faculty, including salaries and benefits, academic autonomy, the working environment and academic culture, and opportunities for promotion and professional development, through document analysis. Based on a synthesis and analysis of international experiences from countries such as the United States, the Netherlands, Australia, Finland, Singapore, the paper compares these with the situation in Vietnam. The analysis shows that Vietnam needs to substantially improve its income mechanisms, genuinely empower academic autonomy, invest heavily in facilities and research, and diversify faculty career pathways to integrate into and enhance the quality of higher education.*

**Keywords:** Motivation, University Lecturers, Education Policy, International Experience

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## 1. Background to the study

In the context of deepening globalization and international integration, higher education faces new challenges in education quality, workforce competitiveness, and demands for innovation. The teaching staff—key drivers of educational quality—are under increasing pressure from multiple fronts: scientific publishing pressures, rising workload, demands for higher levels of professional expertise, and society's expectations for knowledge leadership. Some international studies affirm that the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of the teachers who directly teach within that system (Barber & Mourshed, 2007). Therefore, developing and implementing policies to motivate university faculty to work effectively has become a strategic task for higher education institutions and a top priority in national education policy.

Motivation for work among university instructors is regarded as a decisive factor influencing professional performance, job commitment, job satisfaction, and alignment with the university's mission in teaching and research (Michaelowa, 2022; Nelson & Quick, 2003). These factors include intrinsic motivation—such as passion for the profession, dedication, sense of responsibility, and the desire for self-assertion—and extrinsic motivation—such as compensation, working environment, and opportunities for career development (Han & Yin, 2016). While developed countries have built cohesive policy systems that emphasize balancing these factors, many developing countries, including Vietnam, still face difficulties in designing and implementing effective policies.

This paper aims to synthesize and analyze policy models for motivation of teaching staff in higher education across various countries worldwide, compare them with the Vietnamese context, and identify policy gaps while proposing solutions for improvement. The analysis will focus deeply on three core groups of factors: compensation and benefits mechanisms, working environment and conditions, and opportunities for career development, integrated with cultural–organizational factors and academic autonomy. At the same time, the article also analyzes a current policy in Vietnam, juxtaposed with international experience to draw lessons that are relevant to the current context of higher education reform and university autonomy.

Work motivation is a central concept across various disciplines, ranging from philosophy and psychology to human resource management. According to Marx and Engels (1999), the driving force of social development originates from the contradictions between opposing forces, which stimulate movement and progress. Michaelowa (2022) defines teacher motivation in education as the willingness and desire to engage in high-quality teaching, reflecting commitment and enthusiasm toward the profession. Perry and Wise (1990) introduce the concept of “public service motivation” – the aspiration to contribute to societal welfare – while Han and Yin (2016) emphasize the interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

In the global context, many countries have developed policy frameworks to motivate faculty members, with the aim of attracting and retaining talented individuals for long-term contributions. However, in Vietnam, such policies remain fragmented and, to some extent, ineffective. The objectives of this study are to: (i) synthesize and analyze policy models for work motivation implemented in advanced countries worldwide; (ii) compare these models with the current situation in Vietnam; and (iii) propose lessons learned and policy recommendations that align with the cultural and educational context of Vietnam.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

The concept of motivation has been examined by numerous scholars from diverse perspectives. In Marxist–Leninist philosophy, motivation for development in general, and for social development in particular, is understood as the outcome of the struggle between opposing forces, which drives the continuous movement and progress of phenomena (Marx & Engels, 1999). Labor and needs are considered two fundamental elements: without needs, there is no production, and it is precisely human needs that serve as the driving force behind all human activities (Nguyen Thi Bich Hang, 2014). For university lecturers, such needs may include the desire to impart knowledge, affirm professional competence, or gain recognition from colleagues and society.

Daniel H. Pink (2009) categorizes motivation into three levels. Motivation 1.0 is driven by basic survival instincts; Motivation 2.0 is based on rewards and punishments; and Motivation 3.0 stems from the desire to learn, create, and contribute to society. In the context of higher education, Motivation 3.0 is particularly significant, as faculty members are not only responsible for teaching and research but also for guiding, inspiring, and contributing to the development of a healthy academic environment.

Perry and Wise (1990) introduced the concept of *Public Service Motivation* (PSM), emphasizing an individual’s predisposition to contribute to societal well-being—an orientation that aligns closely with the mission of faculty members in public institutions. Han and Yin (2016) assert that teaching motivation is shaped by both intrinsic factors and contextual

elements, such as educational policies, working conditions, and organizational culture. Michaelowa (2022) defines faculty motivation as the willingness, drive, or desire to engage in high-quality teaching, reflecting commitment and enthusiasm toward the profession. Nelson and Quick (2003) further highlight that recognition, opportunities for advancement, a supportive work environment, and work–life balance are critical factors in sustaining long-term motivation.

## 2.2 Research Methodology

This study employs a literature review methodology combined with comparative analysis. Sources were selected from international academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, UNESCO) as well as national statistical reports.

The document selection process followed these criteria:

- Studies on faculty work motivation in the context of higher education in advanced economies.
- Research and reports on motivational policies in both developed and developing countries, with particular emphasis on policies in the higher education sector.
- Publications analyzing the current situation, existing policies, and proposed solutions applicable to the Vietnamese context.

Quantitative data related to faculty salaries, research funding, and other relevant indicators were compared in relation to GDP to ensure international comparability. The analysis focused on identifying the key criteria for developing policies that foster faculty motivation and contrasting the differences between Vietnam and the countries selected for the study.

## 3. Research Findings

### 3.1 Research Directions on Faculty Work Motivation through Salary, Incentives, and Benefits

At present, salary and bonuses remain the most common and visible factors influencing work motivation. Numerous international studies confirm that competitive remuneration packages have a direct impact on attracting and retaining faculty, particularly within the global knowledge labor market (Nyam & West, 2014). In developed countries, faculty salaries are typically designed to ensure a middle-class standard of living while reflecting the value of their contributions to the education and research system.

In Singapore, the base salary of public university faculty can be two to three times higher than the national GDP per capita, accompanied by research bonuses, responsibility allowances, and long-term benefits such as health insurance, pension plans, and additional housing support. This arrangement not only secures faculty members' material well-being but also enables them to focus entirely on their professional commitments without the need to take on supplementary work outside the institution.

In the United States, faculty salaries are often tied to the *Tenure Track* system—a long-term career progression in which income increases with rank (assistant professor, associate professor, full professor) and individual performance. In addition to base pay, research grants, funding for participation in international conferences, and personal development funds serve as important tools for sustaining motivation. Notably, many U.S. universities adopt individual negotiation mechanisms, allowing exceptional faculty members to secure higher salaries and benefit packages that reflect the value they bring to the institution.

In Vietnam, the current salary framework for public university lecturers is still largely based on the administrative–civil service pay scale, with limited linkage to individual performance and actual contributions (Ta Thi Lieu, 2023). Base salaries remain relatively low, allowances are minimal, and opportunities for bonuses are limited, making it difficult for faculty to sustain a decent standard of living solely from their institutional income. Consequently, some lecturers seek additional employment outside the university, reducing the time and energy devoted to teaching and research. Compared with countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, or China, Vietnamese faculty salaries remain significantly lower—both in absolute terms and relative to GDP per capita.

Studies also indicate that bonus policies in Vietnam are often symbolic and insufficient to create long-term motivation (Nguyen Ngoc Son et al., 2019). For example, rewards for international publications may be substantial in some institutions but remain unstable, dependent on annual budgets, and weakly connected to career development pathways. In many cases, research bonuses fail to cover the actual costs incurred during the research process, thereby limiting their appeal. To address these issues, Vietnam should shift from a fixed seniority-based salary system to a performance- and position-based pay scheme, while introducing competitive allowances and bonuses benchmarked against regional and international standards.

One relevant example is the “Compensation Package” model of the National University of Singapore (NUS), in which the base salary accounts for only 60–70% of total income, with the remainder derived from performance bonuses, research incentives, and professional support. This model establishes a clear motivation for faculty to sustain strong teaching and research performance, while providing flexible mechanisms to retain top talent. Vietnam could adapt this approach to suit its budgetary constraints and current policy environment.

### **3.2 Research Directions on Academic Autonomy and Career Decision-Making Authority**

Academic autonomy is widely recognized as one of the most significant non-financial factors in sustaining long-term faculty motivation (Perry & Wise, 1990; Han & Yin, 2016). It encompasses the ability to determine teaching content, select pedagogical approaches, choose research topics, and participate meaningfully in the institution’s strategic decision-making processes. The study by Pham Thu Trang et al. (2019) indicates that faculty members with higher levels of autonomy tend to demonstrate greater job satisfaction and professional commitment, along with a higher willingness to innovate in teaching methods and embrace curriculum reforms.

International experience shows that academic autonomy is often accompanied by robust accountability mechanisms. In the Netherlands, faculty enjoy complete freedom in selecting teaching methods and research directions; however, they are also required to meet specific annual performance targets related to teaching quality and scholarly publications as set by the institution. Performance evaluations extend beyond the number of publications to include the societal and academic impact of the research, ensuring that faculty maintain creative freedom without succumbing to purely output-driven “performance chasing.”

In the United States, the *Tenure Track* system—a long-term career pathway—serves not only as a job security mechanism but also as a safeguard for academic freedom. This framework allows faculty to pursue innovative and potentially unconventional research topics without administrative interference. However, progression along this pathway requires a rigorous

evaluation process, typically spanning five to seven years, which assesses performance in teaching, research, and community service.

In Vietnam, academic autonomy for faculty members has improved but remains constrained in several respects. Although the amended Law on Higher Education (2018) has expanded institutional autonomy, many universities still adhere to rigid national curriculum frameworks that limit creativity in course design. Research topic selection is often bound by institutional priorities or available funding sources, making it challenging for faculty to explore new research directions. Furthermore, mechanisms for faculty participation in university governance remain underdeveloped, with most key decisions made by the executive board or administrative leaders without broad consultation.

To address these limitations, Vietnam should establish mechanisms that grant faculty genuine decision-making authority while implementing transparent and objective evaluation systems. An independent academic council model could be adopted, granting faculty the right to vote on curriculum development, assessment methods, research criteria, and resource allocation. At the same time, performance indicators should be designed to avoid restricting academic freedom in research topic selection.

### **3.3 Research Directions on Academic Environment and Working Conditions**

The academic environment encompasses physical spaces, technological infrastructure, organizational culture, and relationships with colleagues and students. According to Blašková et al. (2015), a positive academic environment not only enhances work efficiency but also exerts a strong influence on faculty creativity and capacity for innovation. In some leading universities worldwide, faculty workspaces are designed with an open layout, combining private offices with collaborative areas to encourage interaction and research cooperation. Modern technological infrastructure supports online teaching, access to global academic databases, and the use of advanced data analysis tools.

In the United Kingdom, universities have made substantial investments in “learning commons”—integrated spaces that combine libraries, group study rooms, and open research areas for both faculty and students. Such facilities foster a collaborative academic culture in which faculty can easily conduct interdisciplinary research activities while accessing a rich array of scholarly resources. In Japan, universities such as the University of Tokyo provide specialized research support services, ranging from proposal writing consultation and funding search assistance to international journal editing support, thereby reducing the administrative burden on faculty.

In Vietnam, while some universities have made notable improvements in infrastructure, a considerable gap remains compared with advanced models. Many faculty members lack dedicated offices and must share workspace with multiple colleagues, creating challenges for focused research. Technological infrastructure is often inconsistent, with limitations in internet speed and restricted access to international academic databases. In addition, the organizational culture in certain institutions still reflects a bureaucratic orientation, with insufficient extracurricular academic activities and limited forums for regular scholarly exchange.

To enhance work motivation, the academic environment should be improved to be more supportive, creativity-friendly, and less administratively burdensome. Lessons can be drawn from the “Faculty Support Center” model adopted by many U.S. universities, where faculty receive comprehensive technical, administrative, and professional development assistance.

Furthermore, cultivating a positive organizational culture—rooted in respect, collaboration, and recognition—remains a critical factor in retaining and inspiring faculty members.

### **3.4 Research Directions on Career Development and Advancement Opportunities**

Career development opportunities are a core factor in maintaining the long-term motivation of university lecturers. According to Michaelowa (2022), the willingness to engage in high-quality teaching is often associated with clear prospects for promotion and opportunities to enhance professional competence. In many countries today, career development is not limited to salary increases or title advancements but also includes access to training programs, opportunities for international collaboration, and in-depth academic exchange programs.

In the United States, faculty career advancement is often tied to three pillars: teaching, research, and community service. Universities adopt comprehensive evaluation mechanisms in which achievements in all three areas are considered for promotion or appointment to higher positions. In addition, many institutions encourage faculty to participate in “sabbatical leave” programs—extended research leave (typically 6 months to 1 year) that allows them to focus on specialized research projects, returning with renewed energy and fresh ideas.

In Australia, universities implement the “Academic Promotion Framework”—a transparent academic development framework in which the criteria and requirements for each academic rank are made public. Faculty members are encouraged to build a “career portfolio” to track their progress and set development goals. This serves both as a self-orientation tool and as a fair basis for assessment by promotion committees.

Vietnam currently also has a faculty promotion mechanism, but it remains heavily formalistic and tends to emphasize administrative criteria (e.g., years of service, degrees, and certificates) rather than substantive achievements (Nguyen Van Luat, 2013). Many lecturers have noted that the process for awarding the titles of Professor or Associate Professor still depends heavily on formal factors such as the number of publications and teaching hours, without adequately assessing publication quality or the social impact of research. Opportunities to participate in international training programs remain limited due to both funding constraints and selection mechanisms. The lack of long-term academic exchange or international collaboration programs makes it difficult for lecturers to keep up with new research trends and build global academic networks.

To address this, Vietnam could learn from the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) model of the United Kingdom, where lecturers are required and encouraged to participate annually in training programs to improve pedagogical skills, educational technology, and research capacity. In addition, adopting “research sabbatical” policies as in the United States and Japan would enable lecturers to recharge, focus on in-depth research, and improve the quality of scientific publications.

### **3.5 Relevance to Policies in Vietnam**

International comparisons reveal that Vietnam has made certain progress in formulating policies to motivate university lecturers; however, significant limitations remain in both policy design and implementation.

First, regarding salaries and bonuses, although some universities have introduced incentive schemes for international publications, these bonuses remain inconsistent and vary across institutions. Compared to advanced models such as the National University of Singapore

(NUS) or universities in the Netherlands, Vietnam's salary system lacks flexibility and is not closely tied to performance. The continued reliance on an administrative pay scale, which has remained largely unchanged for many years, undermines universities' competitiveness in attracting and retaining talent. Without granting greater financial autonomy to universities and moving away from a fully state-budget-based salary mechanism, breakthroughs in lecturer income will be difficult to achieve.

Second, in terms of academic autonomy, although the amended Law on Higher Education has granted more authority to universities, in practice many decisions are still influenced by higher-level administrative bodies. This discourages institutional innovation and leaves lecturers with limited substantive power in designing curricula or selecting research directions. International experience shows that autonomy must be accompanied by transparent accountability mechanisms; Vietnam is still at an early stage in this process, lacking an objective and independent evaluation system.

Third, regarding the academic environment, technological infrastructure and physical facilities at many Vietnamese universities remain outdated and fall short of modern teaching and research standards. This shortcoming becomes evident when compared with universities in Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia and Thailand, which have heavily invested in digital libraries, open educational resources, and creative learning spaces. Furthermore, organizational culture in many Vietnamese universities retains an administrative orientation, with limited initiatives to foster academic networking or encourage interdisciplinary research collaboration.

Fourth, in terms of career development opportunities, promotion criteria for lecturers in Vietnam still emphasize quantitative indicators and pay insufficient attention to the actual impact of lecturers on students and society. Opportunities for international collaboration and training remain limited and are typically available only to a small number of lecturers involved in specific partnership projects. By contrast, countries such as Australia, Canada, and South Korea treat continuous professional development as a mandatory requirement and allocate dedicated budgets to support it.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The study indicates that Vietnam's higher education sector requires a comprehensive strategy to enhance faculty motivation, encompassing four key elements: reforming salary and bonus systems toward international competitiveness; expanding academic autonomy; investing in facilities and academic culture; and diversifying career pathways. International experiences from the United States, the Netherlands, Australia, Finland, and Singapore demonstrate that effective policies must integrate both material and non-material factors while ensuring fairness and transparency. Flexibly applying these lessons in ways suited to Vietnam's context would contribute to improving the quality of higher education and fostering international integration.

To achieve this, Vietnam's higher education should implement a holistic strategy informed by global best practices, with remuneration reform as a central pillar. The salary and bonus framework should be more competitive, performance-based, and comprehensive. Each institution should empower faculty in academic decision-making while expanding career development opportunities, particularly through international collaboration and long-term professional development programs. The academic work environment should be improved to foster respect, recognition, and creativity. Evaluation and reward mechanisms must be renewed

to reflect substantive contributions rather than relying solely on publication counts or administrative metrics.

The implementation of these policies requires close coordination among the Ministry of Education and Training, higher education institutions, and professional associations. This is a long-term process that must be carried out consistently and continuously, aiming not only to enhance faculty motivation but also to build a high-quality, globally integrated, and sustainable Vietnamese higher education system.

Based on the above analysis, three groups of recommendations can be proposed:

- i. Promote robust reform of the salary and bonus system in line with job positions and performance, granting institutions greater autonomy in budget allocation;
- ii. Establish genuine academic autonomy mechanisms accompanied by transparent accountability, empowering faculty in curriculum design and research orientation;
- iii. Invest in improving the academic environment and expanding continuous career development opportunities, with priority given to international collaboration and long-term research support.

Overall, policies to motivate faculty in Vietnam need to transition from an administrative-based approach to one centered on performance and substantive contributions, while selectively adopting international best practices to align with domestic conditions

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### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this study.

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