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A Critical Review of Neoliberalism and Teacher Precarity in Vietnamese Higher Education: Implications for ELT

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Abstract

This critical interpretive synthesis examines how neoliberal higher education (HE) governance reforms have shaped teacher precarity, as a justice rather than an employment issue, among Vietnamese HE lecturers, including English Language Teaching (ELT) lecturers, between 2015 and 2025. Drawing on Fraser's framework of participatory parity and three-dimensional justice, the review conceptualises teacher precarity as a multidimensional condition shaped by material insecurity, status subordination, and constrained institutional voice. The synthesis brings together ELT studies, broader Vietnamese HE scholarship, and policy/legal documents to examine how autonomy, quality assurance, internationalisation, and metric-based accountability bring about teacher precarity. The analysis suggests that university autonomy may operate as a cost-shifting mechanism that likely transforms the redistribution of teachers' resources, lowers their institutional recognition, and depletes their institutional representation. The paper argues that sustainable reform requires closer alignment between autonomy and labour justice through redistributive protections, decent recognition of teaching work, and meaningful lecturer participation in institutional governance.

Keywords ELT lecturers, neoliberal governance, participatory parity, structural injustice, teacher precarity, three-dimensional justice, Vietnamese higher education

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INTRODUCTION

The transformation of Vietnamese higher education (HE) during the last decade (2015-2025) can be considered one of the most drastic reorganisations of the academic governance in the country (Parajuli et al., 2020). The sector has become decentralised and market-oriented to satisfy both the twin engines of the Doi Moi (Renovation) economic reforms and the need to integrate itself into the global community (Dinh & Nguyen, 2025). The concept of neoliberal governance in this review is operationalised as a set of policy technologies and governing rationalities that restructure the institutions of higher learning under the guise of New Public Management-style accountability (Deem et al., 2007; Hood, 1991; Shore & Wright, 1999), marketisation and competition (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Marginson, 2004; Sauder & Espeland, 2009), and autonomy-as-responsibilisation (Shore & Wright, 1999; Strathern, 2000).

The dominant discourse surrounding these reforms in policy texts and mainstream scholarship surrounds the concepts of empowerment, quality assurance (QA), internationalisation, and efficiency to describe the new landscape while presenting autonomy and performance metrics

as natural and inevitable (Felix, 2021). In this scenario, the English Language Teaching (ELT) industry is presented as the mediator of its connection between Vietnam and the global knowledge economy, as well as between Vietnam and international rankings (Phan et al., 2021). The review does not claim that ELT lecturers are uniquely more vulnerable than other academic groups, since the available corpus does not support such a comparison. Rather, it examines their specific exposure to reform pressures because their work is closely connected to internationalisation, English proficiency agendas, EAP/ESP provision, and EMI-related language support (Basturkmen, 2010; Pham et al., 2022). These roles may make ELT work institutionally visible but still teaching-intensive and support-oriented, creating conditions in which precarity is shaped by workload, employment arrangements, the valuation of language work, and lecturers' limited voice in curriculum, evaluation, and professional-development decisions (Fraser, 2005; Standing, 2011).

This review identifies a consequential gap in the current scholarship. While the systemic benefits of autonomy are frequently documented, the precarious condition of the ELT workforce, manifested through intensified labour, professional insecurity, and epistemic marginalisation has not been comprehensively synthesised into an explanatory account of how governance reforms produce uneven professional lives. In this review, teacher precarity is treated not merely as employment instability, but as a broader condition of governance-contingent vulnerability: expanded workload demands, heightened exposure to metric judgement, and stratified access to recognition and voice.

Drawing on Fraser's (2005) concept of participatory parity, this review synthesises a decade of research (2015-2025) to examine how Vietnamese higher education governance reforms shape teacher precarity in ELT-related academic work. The study aims to provide a critical baseline of the Vietnamese HE, including the ELT landscape, by mapping the broad dimensions of teacher precarity under neoliberalism. This analysis serves as a necessary foundation for future research into specific mechanisms of inequality, such as the tension between research productivity and teaching loads. Finally, this study can identify what the current evidence base can and cannot support regarding ELT lecturer precarity in Vietnam. In order to fulfill these aims, the study will answer the following research questions:

RQ1: *How has neoliberal governance reshaped the working conditions and precarity of Vietnamese HE lecturers, including ELT lecturers, from 2015 to 2025?*
RQ2: *To what extent do these working conditions constitute structural injustice to Vietnamese HE lecturers, including ELT lecturers?*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teacher Precarity

In this review, teacher precarity is conceptualised not simply as contractual insecurity but as a condition of governance-contingent vulnerability. Teacher precarity is produced through the reorganisation of academic work under neoliberal reform. Drawing on critical scholarship on precarious labour and higher education transformation (Ivancheva et al., 2019; Lorey & Derieg, 2015; Standing, 2011), precarity refers to structurally patterned exposure to intensified workload demands, metricised evaluation, unstable professional status, and constrained participation in institutional decision-making. Thus, precarity is treated as multidimensional,

encompassing material conditions of work, symbolic valuation of professional contribution, and opportunities for institutional voice.

Theoretical Framework: Fraser's (2005) Participatory Parity and Three-Dimensional Justice

Fraser in educational and higher education research

Fraser's work has been used in HE research not only as a normative theory of justice but also as an analytic framework for examining how inequality is produced and sustained. Morrison (2015) demonstrates that Fraser's model can be operationalised to empirically examine how unequal participation is shaped by both distributive conditions and status orders rather than by either domain alone. Across educational research more broadly, Fraser's triad has also informed analyses of pedagogy and institutional inequality, including work that connects redistribution, recognition, and representation to the reproduction of indifference and unequal educational participation (Lingard & Keddie, 2013).

Participatory parity as the normative standard

According to Fraser (2005), justice is understood in terms of whether institutional arrangements enable affected actors to participate as peers in social life. Participatory parity therefore serves as the overarching normative standard of the review. It shifts the analysis away from individual dissatisfaction, resilience, or managerial efficiency and toward the structural conditions that make equal participation more or less possible. Fraser is particularly appropriate for this study because the precarity under review is simultaneously material, status-based, and political. To avoid treating Fraser's (2005) triad as purely conceptual, the framework is translated into observable indicators and evidence types relevant to Vietnamese higher education labour governance. The synthesis therefore treats redistribution, recognition, and representation as empirically traceable dimensions of parity that can be evidenced through policy instruments and documented institutional/occupational consequences.

Redistribution: The political economic conditions of participation

Fraser's (1995) first dimension is redistribution, which concerns the political economic structures that secure or deny the material preconditions of parity, including income, time, security, and access to resources needed to function as a peer with equal footing with others. In the context of academic labour, redistribution directs attention to mechanisms such as cost-shifting, workload expansion, and income volatility. This dimension is directly relevant to language education. Colliander and Nordmark's (2023) study of second language education for adult migrants draws explicitly on Fraser to analyse social inclusion in terms that include redistribution, showing that participation in language education depends not only on recognition or belonging but also on access to enabling conditions and resources (Colliander & Nordmark, 2023). For ELT and EAP specifically, redistributive concerns are especially visible in studies of precarious language-teacher work. Kouritzin et al. (2023) showed how ESL and EAP work in higher education can be "gigified" through precarious contracts, surveillance, and the normalisation of uncompensated "magic time." These studies make clear that redistribution is not peripheral to ELT as it is central to understanding how English language teachers' participation is shaped by the political economy of academic labour.

Recognition: The status conditions of participation

Redistribution includes the wider organisation of labour, time, security, and access to resources that enable actors to participate as peers rather than under conditions of structural disadvantage (Fraser, 1995, 2005). Within higher education, this dimension directs attention to whether academic work is supported by the material conditions necessary for sustained and equitable participation. This dimension is particularly important in TESOL and applied linguistics. Research on English language teachers in higher education has shown that language teachers often occupy an ambiguous institutional position. Although their work is necessary to universities, especially under conditions of internationalisation and growing English-medium provision, yet their professional standing may remain lower than that of disciplinary academics.

Recognition in this study also has an epistemic dimension. Kerfoot and Bello-Nonjengele (2023), for example, show how multilingual classroom practices can create new relations of knowing by treating diverse linguistic resources as legitimate epistemic resources. Similarly, Ennser-Kananen et al. (2024) argue that applied language studies must attend more directly to epistemic oppression and justice. This literature is useful for the present review because it sharpens the recognitional dimension beyond prestige alone that ELT lecturers may be misrecognised not only in terms of professional esteem but also in terms of epistemic standing.

Representation: The political conditions of participation and "framing"

Fraser's later work adds representation as a third dimension of justice, arguing that injustice also occurs when affected groups are politically marginalised (Fraser, 2005, 2008). Representation therefore shifts attention from what is distributed or valued to who is authorised to participate in shaping the rules themselves. This dimension is especially relevant to ELT because language policy research shows that teachers are not simply policy implementers, but policy actors whose participation may be enabled or constrained by institutional arrangements. Studies in China and Vietnam show that English teachers often mediate, reinterpret, and adapt policy in practice, yet their role in formal decision-making remains limited (Le et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020). In higher education language support contexts, precarity can further weaken practitioners' institutional voice and sense of legitimacy (Corcoran et al., 2023; Joubert & Clarence, 2024). For this review, representation is therefore operationalised through evidence of lecturers' voice, standing, and influence in institutional governance, including decisions related to workload, KPIs, evaluation, employment conditions, and policy implementation.

Strengths and limitations of Fraser's framework

Fraser's framework is a strong lens for this review because it allows Vietnamese ELT lecturer precarity to be analysed as a multidimensional injustice rather than as a narrow problem of workload, morale, or contractual insecurity. Its central strength lies in making visible the interdependence of material arrangements, status hierarchies, and political voice. The framework therefore helps move the review beyond descriptive accounts of teacher pressure toward a more explicitly structural account of (in)justice. At the same time, Fraser's framework is not without limitations. Morrison (2015) notes that Fraser's work has attracted critique concerning the analytical distinction between redistribution and recognition, especially where these are lived as deeply entangled in practice. In addition, Fraser's triadic model does not by itself fully capture affective, relational, gendered, or care-related dimensions of inequality.

Lynch (2020), for example, argues that affective relations and care constitute a distinct justice domain that cannot be reduced fully to redistribution, recognition, or representation.

METHODOLOGY

Review Type and Rationale

This study is a critical review. Rather than estimating causal effects, the review prioritises critical explanation by tracing underlying mechanisms, contradictions, and power relations across diverse bodies of evidence. This aligns with review typologies in which critical reviews aim at conceptual development and interpretive synthesis (Grant & Booth, 2009). The review follows a Critical Interpretive Synthesis (CIS) by seeking the conceptual explanation rather than the effect estimation. Traditional systematic reviews assume methodological comparability and standardised outcomes, whereas CIS enables interpretive synthesis across diverse evidence types by treating sources as contributions to theory development (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005; Perlman et al., 2026). CIS is therefore appropriate for this study because it supports the analysis of policy and empirical materials as complementary data and facilitates mechanism tracing and conceptual development, allowing the review to explain how redistribution, recognition, and representation interact to shape structural injustice in Vietnamese higher education.

Search Strategy and Sources

The review followed an iterative search process consistent with CIS (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005). First, an initial mapping phase was conducted to identify core concepts and Vietnam-relevant anchor texts. Second, the search was expanded to include empirical studies and sector analyses that elaborated key mechanisms such as workload intensification, contracting, performance management, publication demands, and mobility/attrition. Third, theoretical sampling was undertaken to address interpretive gaps and strengthen the explanatory adequacy of the synthesis. The primary evidence window for empirical studies and policy documents spanned 2015–2025. Foundational theoretical works were included irrespective of date because they function as analytic framing rather than contemporaneous evidence. Sources were identified through bibliographic databases and scholarly search engines (e.g., ProQuest, ERIC, Google Scholar), targeted publisher searches, and backward/forward citation chaining. Policy and legal instruments were retrieved from Vietnamese official portals and legal repositories. Searches were conducted in both English and Vietnamese. English terms included combinations such as: Vietnam AND higher education AND (neoliberalism OR marketisation OR New Public Management OR autonomy) AND (lecturers OR faculty OR academics). Vietnamese terms included *giang vien*, *dai hoc*, *tu chu*, *hop dong lao dong*, *dinh muc*, *che do lam viec*, and *kiem dinh*. Search logs (dates, terms, databases, and key decisions) were maintained to support transparency.

Eligibility Criteria

Sources were included if they (a) focused on Vietnam and addressed higher education lecturers' employment conditions, workload/evaluation regimes, or career mobility/attrition; and (b) either examined ELT/EFL/EMI lecturers directly or analysed higher education governance and labour mechanisms (e.g., autonomy finance, workload norms, QA, performance management)

that are explicitly documented as shaping lecturers' working conditions across faculties, including language units.

Screening, Selection, and Corpus Definition

Screening and selection followed an iterative process consistent with CIS. The review was conducted by three researchers, who collaboratively undertook all stages of the review process. The process proceeded in three stages: title/abstract screening, full-text eligibility assessment, and CIS-informed theoretical sampling for explanatory adequacy (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005). PRISMA 2020 guidelines were used as a reporting and transparency framework rather than as the methodological logic of the review (Page et al., 2021). Because this study follows a CIS approach, searching, screening, and inclusion were iterative and conceptually driven rather than a fixed protocol. Therefore, PRISMA procedures were applied selectively to support transparent reporting without implying a fully protocolised systematic review design (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005). The final analytic corpus comprised 18 sources: 14 peer-reviewed research publications and four policy/legal documents (Government of Vietnam, 2021; Ministry of Education and Training, 2020; Government of Vietnam, 2022; National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2025). Searching and selection ceased when explanatory adequacy was reached.

Quality Appraisal

Consistent with CIS, studies were not subjected to a formal checklist-based quality appraisal because the purpose of the review was conceptual explanation rather than effect estimation or methodological ranking (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005). Instead, inclusion and analytic use of sources were guided by conceptual relevance and credibility. Quality considerations were applied iteratively during screening and synthesis. Policy texts were evaluated based on authenticity, institutional authority, and relevance to governance processes (Bowen, 2009). Analytic memos documented evaluative judgments throughout the review, creating an audit trail that supported transparency and interpretive rigor.

Data Extraction and Analytic Synthesis

A structured extraction matrix recorded bibliographic details, sector setting including public or private; region, focal mechanisms including autonomy or finance, contracting, performance management, publication expectations, QA, study design, methods, and key findings. This matrix enabled comparison across heterogeneous evidence sources and supported transparency in analytic decisions. Analysis proceeded in two cycles:

- Cycle 1 (deductive coding): evidence from policy and empirical sources was coded according to Fraser's (2005, 2008) redistribution–recognition–representation domains and to the participatory parity test.
- Cycle 2 (inductive development): themes were refined through constant comparison across studies and texts, using a hybrid deductive–inductive logic (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) and thematic analysis principles (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Transparency, Reflexivity, and Limitations

Table 1. *List of Included Papers*

Fraser's (2005) dimensions	What is foregrounded in the corpus	Key contributing sources
Redistribution	Workload intensification, cost recovery, income recomposition/volatility, contractual insecurity	**Policy/legal texts:** Decree 60/2021/ND-CP; Circular 20/2020/TT-BGDĐT; Decree 111/2022/ND-CP; Law on Educators No. 73/2025/QH15. **Peer-reviewed studies:** Tran and Moskovsky (2024); Nguyen et al. (2023); Nguyen et al. (2022); Nguyen et al. (2016); Nguyen (2016); Nguyen et al. (2021); Nguyen and Ta (2018); Pham (2018).
Recognition	Metric "quality" regimes, devaluation of teaching, stratified prestige (ELT/EMI), psychosocial consequences	**Peer-reviewed studies:** Phan et al. (2021); Nguyen et al. (2021); Tran et al. (2024); Sahan et al. (2025); Tran and Moskovsky (2022); Nguyen and Ta (2018); Pham (2018); Vu (2019).
Representation	Limited participation in governance, compliance-heavy accountability, "exit" as a structural signal	**Policy/legal texts:** Decree 60/2021/ND-CP; Circular 20/2020/TT-BGDĐT. **Peer-reviewed studies:** Tran et al. (2024); Tran and Moskovsky (2024); Lê (2023); Vu (2019); Nguyen and Ta (2018); Pham (2018).

Transparency, Reflexivity, and Limitations

A key limitation of this review is the uneven ELT-specific evidence base. Although the review is framed around Vietnamese ELT lecturers, only part of the corpus examines ELT, EFL, or EMI lecturers directly, while several included studies address broader higher-education issues. Therefore, ELT-specific claims in the synthesis are made only where the ELT/EMI sub-corpus provides direct support. Broader higher-education studies are used more cautiously to identify system-level governance mechanisms that plausibly shape ELT work.

FINDINGS

Redistribution: Autonomy as Cost-Shifting, Intensified Work, and Volatile Livelihoods

Across the corpus, autonomy is most consistently evidenced not as expanded professional discretion but as a fiscal architecture that reassigns financial responsibility to institutions and, indirectly, to staff through intensified revenue/efficiency pressures. Decree 60/2021/ND-CP stipulates that where public-service activities not funded by the state budget run a deficit, the unit must cover the shortfall from its lawful funds and the state budget does not compensate (Art. 6(4)). Read as a governing rationality, this clause institutionalises solvency as an

institutional obligation, legitimating cost-shifting and efficiency pressures that are subsequently translated into intensified and reallocated academic labour.

A second redistributive mechanism concerns time as a material resource. Circular 20/2020/TT-BGDDT specifies an annual teaching norm of 200-350 standard teaching hours (Art. 3(4)), enabling the managerial calculability of labour inputs and thereby facilitating intensification when research, service, and QA demands expand without commensurate workload relief. As a result, the significance is not the existence of norms per se, but their role in rendering time allocable, auditable, and intensifiable particularly when research, service, and QA demands expand without commensurate workload relief (Tran & Moskovsky, 2022; Tran et al., 2024). In this setting, expanded demands are frequently absorbed as additional time beyond formal allocations, rather than being offset through workload reduction or resourcing (Tran & Moskovsky, 2022; Tran et al., 2024). Accreditation-oriented governance also produces substantial often-invisible compliance labour including documentation, evidence production, audit preparation, which expands workload without commensurate relief or resourcing (Nguyen & Ta, 2018; Pham, 2018).

This time pressure is compounded by research governance arrangements that differentially allocate support, incentives, and protected time for research. Empirical work in Vietnamese universities shows that academics' engagement in research is structured by institutional affordances and constraints such as workload, resources, and incentives, rather than being reducible to individual motivation alone (Nguyen et al., 2016; Nguyen, 2016). In a metric-sensitive environment, such uneven access to research conditions becomes a redistributive issue because it shapes who can realistically meet performance expectations alongside heavy teaching allocations (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Redistributive insecurity is further visible in how earnings are described as increasingly composite and performance-contingent. Nguyen et al. (2023) using survey data from financially autonomous public universities report that lecturer income is structured through multiple components rather than a single stable wage. This redistributive pattern becomes analytically sharper when read against the Law on Educators (National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2025). Article 23 introduces a clear redistributive promise: salaries of educators in public institutions are to be ranked highest within the administrative/public service salary scale system. In short, the evidence points to a structural tension that the policy horizon promises improved pay status, while the autonomy framework places the material burden of funding and implementing compensation and related cost pressures within institutional budgets and market-facing revenue conditions.

The current corpus does not support a firm claim that ELT lecturers carry heavier teaching loads than academics in all other disciplines. What it does show is that Vietnamese university EFL/ELT teachers experience workload pressure, demotivation, role strain, and attrition-related concerns, while broader higher-education studies show that intensified teaching, research expectations, and uneven institutional support are wider features of the reform environment. These findings suggest that such pressures may be especially consequential for teaching-intensive language roles, but stronger comparative evidence is needed before making discipline-wide claims about heavier workload or weaker status.

The redistributive pattern is not uniform across the sector. Within the current corpus, the clearest evidence comes from financially autonomous public universities in relation to income

recomposition, and from research-oriented or science-and-technology universities in relation to uneven research conditions and productivity pressures. By contrast, the corpus contains much less direct evidence on private institutions, non-autonomous institutions, or regional variation. The findings should therefore be read as showing differentiated governance effects across institutional settings rather than a single identical experience across all universities.

Recognition: Audit Value Regimes, Stratified Prestige, and Psychosocial Costs

A recurring recognition problem concerns how "quality" is defined and authorised. Within the corpus, internationalisation functions as a valuation regime in which credibility, advancement, and institutional legitimacy are increasingly indexed to measurable outputs and globally legible indicators. Phan et al. (2021) analyse the policy drive toward international publishing and the regulatory/policy environment through which publishing expectations become institutionalised. However, recognition in the reformed sector is not only organised through publishing metrics, but also through externally legible standards and evidence requirements (Nguyen & Ta, 2018; Pham, 2018) and managerial expectations of performativity and measurable outputs (Vu, 2019). Read through Fraser (2005), these governance-linked value orders can produce misrecognition when teaching-intensive and locally oriented contributions remain necessary yet structurally undervalued. This is confirmed by Nguyen et al. (2022) who made visible how publication output becomes a central sign of academic worth within policy-mediated modernisation projects. In Fraser's (2005) terms, this constitutes mis-recognition when the institutional order confers full standing primarily upon those who can translate their work into the authorised metric language, while routine teaching and localised pedagogical labour remain structurally undervalued.

Across studies and policy readings, the corpus supports an interpretive claim that teaching-intensive roles, especially within ELT, are vulnerable to being constructed as lower-status contributions when promotion and legitimacy are anchored to research metrics. Research governance studies reinforce that the ability to accrue recognised "merit" is structurally conditioned. Where institutional supports and incentives are uneven, recognition becomes stratified that some academics can convert labour into metricised outputs more readily than others, deepening status hierarchies that appear meritocratic but are organisationally produced (Nguyen et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2016; Nguyen et al., 2023).

Recognition issues can also be seen in the symbolic place of EMI within university internationalisation. Here, the available evidence more securely demonstrates the expansion of EMI and the growing authority of English-medium, internationally legible programs as markers of institutional modernisation and prestige than it does a settled hierarchy of ELT devaluation across the sector. Sahan et al. (2025) suggest that English-only EMI can function as a value regime that heightens lecturers' visibility and evaluability, while Nguyen et al. (2017) show that EMI programs in a Vietnamese university are shaped by significant language, pedagogy, and policy pressures. Consequently, these studies support a cautious recognitional claim that EMI in Vietnam is not merely a pedagogic arrangement, but a symbolically charged pathway of internationalisation that may reconfigure how language-related work is valued. However, stronger Vietnam-specific evidence is still needed before concluding that EMI systematically produces ELT devaluation or recognition stratification across the sector.

Representation: Constrained Voice, Compliance-Heavy Governance, and "Exit" as a Political Signal

A representation lens foregrounds who has standing to shape the rules that govern academic work. Vietnamese HE emphasises that market-oriented reforms can be advanced within a socialist governance frame in ways that preserve hierarchical decision structures and limit meaningful participation from rank-and-file academics (Lê, 2023). This helps explain why representational deficits may persist even as autonomy and quality rhetoric expands. While the corpus is richer on redistribution and recognition than on formal governance participation, it nonetheless supports a consistent interpretive pattern as reforms are operationalised through managerial and policy technologies that require compliance, documentation, and output alignment, yet provide limited evidence of meaningful lecturer co-determination in setting the rules.

In fact, evidence for representation is comparatively indirect that it is primarily inferred from documentation- and audit-centred QA governance (Nguyen & Ta, 2018; Pham, 2018), professionalism management under entrepreneurial logics (Vu, 2019), and ELT-focused well-being/attrition studies that index constrained agency (Tran & Moskovsky, 2022; Tran et al., 2024). Therefore, the claims advanced here should be read as cautious interpretive propositions rather than as definitive descriptions of governance participation across the sector.

The governance architecture implied by Decree 60/2021 and the quantification logic operationalised through Circular 20/2020 reinforce a managerial environment in which decisions about resources and evaluation are centralised and routinised. Vietnam's accreditation literature suggests that quality governance is often enacted through standards, audits, and internal compliance chains. These mechanisms privilege traceability and evidence over deliberative co-determination (Nguyen & Ta, 2018; Pham, 2018). In this sense, QA can function as a representational substitute that lecturers are rendered "accountable" through documentation while remaining marginal to the design of evaluative criteria. Tran et al. (2024) illustrate how QA demands are experienced at the level of teachers' well-being, indicating that accountability structures reshape daily work without necessarily expanding teachers' voice in the governance of those structures.

In this dimension, attrition becomes analytically significant not only as a human resources outcome but as an indicator of constrained parity in representation. When voice, understood as institutionalised and decision-shaping channels, is limited and working conditions deteriorate, "exit" can become the primary available response. Tran and Moskovsky (2024) support this framing by documenting how working conditions and institutional factors figure centrally in decisions to stay or leave the university ELT sector.

DISCUSSION

It is apparent that the neoliberal reform of Vietnamese higher education is a structurally ambivalent initiative, because it has brought about both significant achievements and serious yet hidden consequences. This critical interpretive synthesis positions precarity among Vietnamese HE lecturers, including ELT lecturers, not as an incidental by-product of reform, but as an outcome of governance arrangements that reorganise the conditions of participation materially, symbolically, and politically in ways that undermine Fraser's (2008) principle of participatory parity.

The reviewed corpus indicates that autonomy functions as a reallocation device, shifting responsibility from the state to institutions and finally to lecturers, affecting their workload,

income security, employment stability, and academic precarity (Do & Mai, 2022; Tran & Marginson, 2018). What matters is the structural logic these instruments enable, particularly the conversion of academic work into auditable units that can be intensified when demands expand faster than institutional resourcing (Shore & Wright, 2015).

Interpreted through Fraser's (2005) framework, the review suggests that precarity is produced through the mutually reinforcing interaction of redistributive pressures, recognition regimes, and representational constraints, rather than through any single dimension alone. The implication is a compounded parity deficit that reduced material slack (redistribution) constrains lecturers' capacity to meet metricised standards (recognition), while diminished professional standing further weakens their ability to contest workload norms and evaluative criteria (representation), deepening conditions of precarity.

To connect these justice dynamics to teachers' professional work, the synthesis unfolds a practice-and-development ecology shaped by auditability. At the level of everyday teaching, increased documentation and compliance labour competes with time for designing tasks, providing feedback, and experimenting with pedagogy, encouraging risk-averse choices when innovation is costly but not reliably recognised (Tran et al., 2024). At the level of professional development, the same conditions tend to instrumentalise learning as metric literacy and portfolio production, often shifting the costs and responsibility for upskilling onto individuals (Vo et al., 2024; Vu, 2019). At the level of professional identity and knowledge, what counts as professionalism becomes increasingly defined by what is legible to evaluation systems, intensifying tensions for teaching-intensive ELT lecturers whose work is locally grounded and relational (Shore & Wright, 2015).

A key contribution of this critical review is to theorise representation as a governance mechanism that produces and stabilises teacher precarity. When lecturers' participation is procedural rather than decision-shaping, claims for redistribution and recognition are filtered through audit logics that render intensification non-negotiable and shift risk onto individuals (Fraser, 2005; Shore & Wright, 2015; Strathern, 2000). Under conditions where value is increasingly tied to metric legibility, lecturers' responses are plausibly channelled toward adaptive compliance such as strategic documentation and metric work that secures visibility but displaces pedagogical and developmental priorities (Espeland & Sauder, 2007; Sauder & Espeland, 2009). In this way, attrition is not merely a human resources outcome but a downstream symptom of constrained political capacity (Le, 2025; Tran et al., 2024).

A number of recommendations are made based on this review. First of all, while KPI systems are essential for QA at institutional level, they should be developed not only by senior management and external bodies, but also by early-career and/or ELT lecturers, whose involvement can only increase their agency and efficiency in the long run. Second, the institutional frame of evaluation is set not only based on global research criteria, but also based on local teaching quality evaluation. This is especially meaningful for ELT lecturers, who are characterised by heavy teaching load compared with counterparts in other disciplines. Third, student evaluation should not be counted as the sole reliable data source for lecturer evaluation because lecturer voices should also be taken into serious account—at least as a strategy for triangulation. Finally, audit practices should be streamlined through "light-touch" reporting and periodic review cycles to reduce administrative burden and reserve time for meaningful academic work, such as planning lessons, giving feedback, or coming up with innovative

pedagogical ideas. With a teaching-intensive field like ELT, these tasks are of great significance for quality teaching.

Altogether, the review indicates that higher education reforms in Vietnam are not merely implemented but operationalised through audit, measurement, and accountability practices that quietly redefine what counts as legitimate academic labour and whose interests can shape the evaluative frame (Dinh & Nguyen, 2025; Ngo & Le, 2024; Pham et al., 2022). As these audit-mediated accountability practices become the default language of governance, they also become a structural pathway through which teacher precarity is continuously reproduced.

CONCLUSION

This review demonstrates that the post-2015 autonomy and accountability discourses reshape working conditions of Vietnamese HE lecturers, including ELT lecturers, through interlocking mechanisms that produce and sustain teacher precarity. These mechanisms include intensified and reallocated labour and risk (redistribution), metricised status orders that stratify professional worth (recognition), and constrained participation in defining the rules of evaluation and workload (representation). These conditions are best understood as structural injustice because they systematically limit the preconditions for participatory parity, not merely job satisfaction or efficiency.

A central implication is that policy evaluation should not treat autonomy, QA, and internationalisation as technocratic improvements detached from labour justice. Without explicit attention to precarity, reforms risk reproducing inequality through redistribution, mis-recognition, and limited representation. When participation is reduced to audit-compliant documentation rather than co-determination, adaptive compliance and, in some cases, exit become increasingly rational responses. These dynamics institutionalise precarity as a routine condition of ELT academic work.

A forward-looking implication concerns an emerging policy conjunction beyond the review window. The conjunction between the educators' reformed pay scale (National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2025) and the financial autonomy regime in Decree 60/2021/ND-CP (Government of Vietnam, 2021) introduces a structural risk of precarity displacement. While the salary mandate constitutes a recognition gain, the absence of aligned fiscal support and governance recalibration may incentivise institutions to offset costs through intensified workloads, expanded use of contingent contracts, or cost transfer to students. From a participatory parity perspective, this misalignment illustrates how recognition-oriented reforms can unintentionally intensify precarity when redistribution and representation are not aligned. Therefore, these are analytically grounded risks for post-2026 implementation research, rather than established effects within the reviewed corpus.

A limitation of the study is that it is not primarily grounded in specific ELT evidence, but on broader HE evidence, which to some extent weakens the argument's rigor. Future research can build directly from the gap of the current study. Specifically, empirical studies of representation in ELT settings can be conducted to find out how workload/KPI decisions are negotiated, and which actors shape the frame, or comparative analyses of precarity across public, private and autonomy groups, and finally longitudinal tracking of how the 2026 salary mandate is implemented in relation to institutional finance and contracting practices, and the lived experience of ELT lecturer precarity.

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