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Understandings of higher education curriculum in Vietnam

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Abstract

The Vietnamese higher education context is characterised by state control including the state's development of curriculum frameworks and materials. Institutional autonomy has been ratified by the government, however, in practice universities seem to have little control over curriculum. In order for universities to develop more ownership of curriculum, it is necessary to explore the foundational understandings of curriculum held by stakeholders. Thus, this paper explores the understandings of curriculum expressed by a group of senior staff, academics and students at a Vietnamese university. We found a diversity of understandings that tended to be product-focused, teacher-focused and textbook-driven. We propose that our findings can be used as a starting point for developing more innovative and student-focused understandings of curriculum.

Keywords: curriculum, higher education, Vietnam

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Introduction

The range of understandings of curriculum in higher education reflects the expectations of society, governments, employers and accrediting bodies. The concept of curriculum is variously interpreted by different stakeholders within the university including senior administrative staff, teaching academics and students. Theories related to curriculum are "highly contested and in a state of flux" (Marsh, 2004, p. 199), reflecting social, cultural, economic and political forces (Breault & Marshall, 2010; Pinar, 2012; Ratcliff, 1997). As such, curriculum cannot be isolated from its context, and research about curriculum understandings needs to acknowledge contextual settings. This paper explores the understandings of curriculum expressed by senior staff, academics and students at a Vietnamese university.

This study is particularly important in Vietnam which has been undergoing a process of transition from a tightly managed centralised socialist economy to a more globally oriented market economy. Vietnamese higher education has struggled to overcome a "crisis" due to lack of autonomy and academic freedom (Vallely & Wilkinson, 2008, p. 1). The Vietnamese Higher Education Law, which took effect in January 2013, ratified institutional autonomy including curriculum development for colleges and universities. However, universities are still transitioning from the pre-autonomy era. This study, conducted in this transition period, may provide the basis for supporting staff to take more agency in curriculum development.

Understandings of curriculum in higher education

Previous research investigating understandings of higher education curriculum has mapped a range of conceptions, perspectives, approaches, beliefs and values (Marsh & Willis, 2007). An analysis of the literature derived from theoretical and empirical research reveals that the

curriculum is seen variously as the set of units/courses and programs, the syllabus, the content to be delivered, the set of student experiences, and the holistic experiential process of teaching and learning (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006; Ratcliff, 1997; Stark & Lattuca, 1997). Of particular relevance to our investigation is Fraser and Bosanquet's (2006) study of academics' conceptions of curriculum. Below we have taken the four categories mapped by Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) and used them as an organising framework to explore related literature describing understandings of curriculum.

The curriculum is the structure and content of a unit (subject): In this conceptualisation, the curriculum is seen as what is taught in an individual unit or subject. The curriculum is fixed and ready-made prior to students' learning, and the content is clearly specified in the unit outline. Academics and students' roles are somewhat narrow, and limited to the content to be delivered (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006). This understanding of curriculum is consistent with Ratcliff's (1997) description of undergraduate curriculum, commonly organised into courses, and designated as individual units. It is also related to a discipline-based approach (Toohey, 1999) in which most courses are traditionally designed based on the structure of knowledge in the discipline, and teachers are in charge of choosing teaching content as well as methods to transmit this knowledge to their students.

The curriculum is the structure and content of a programme of study: In this conceptualisation, curriculum is seen as a program of study developed out of the discipline, and may be accredited by external professional organisations (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006). For example, some professional bodies dictate certain criteria to be included in these units. Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) argue that both understandings of curriculum as *the structure and content of a unit (subject)* and *as the structure and content of a program of study* indicate a technical interest. In this sense, curriculum is designed to ensure the reliable delivery of specific products or outcomes which control student learning. Curriculum is designed

beforehand; decisions are made prior to, and independently from student learning needs (Barnett & Coate, 2004). Both curriculum understandings are product-oriented in alignment with Cornbleth's (1988) description:

that ends are set, that means are known or knowable and that the path between them is a direct one. One therefore follows step-by-step procedures to obtain the predetermined end state (i.e. the finished curriculum product). (p. 86)

In this view of curriculum, knowledge exists independently and is conceived as a commodity, a means to an end, and being context-free:

Knowledge is objective, "bounded" and "out there", classroom knowledge is often treated as an external body of information... human knowledge is viewed as being independent of time and place... countable and measurable... discipline-based and... compartmentalized. (Giroux, 1981, pp. 52-53)

The curriculum is the students' experience of learning: In this conceptualisation, the curriculum is seen as the process and structure of learning (Fraser & Bonsaquet, 2006). The focus is shifted from teaching content to the student learning process. Students can negotiate and discuss with their teachers their needs, interests, and expectations. A responsive curriculum process means "learning is effective and relevant to the needs of the students, the needs of the discipline and the society into which students will emerge" (Fraser & Bonsaquet, 2006, p. 275).

The curriculum as a dynamic process: In this conceptualisation the emphasis is on the interaction of teachers, students and knowledge (Fraser & Bonsaquet, 2006). Curriculum, in this sense, is totally different from curriculum conceived as a product, a document such as a unit outline, or a degree programme description. The emphasis of this curriculum is consistent with Toohey's (1999, p. 60) "experiential or personal relevance approach", which is "characterised by mutual respect between teacher and students, with encouragement for collaboration and support among students".

According to Stenhouse (1975), curriculum as a process also exemplifies a practical interest since "it is a way of translating any educational idea into a hypothesis, testable in practice" (p. 142). Stenhouse (1975) argues practice in the classroom context is the ground for any change and justification:

A curriculum, like the recipe for a dish, is first imagined as a possibility, then the subject of experiment. The recipe offered publicly is in a sense a report on the experiment. Similarly, a curriculum should be grounded in practice. It is an attempt to describe the work observed in classrooms that it is adequately communicated to teachers and others. Finally, within limits, a recipe can varied according to taste. So can a curriculum. (pp. 4-5)

With a focus on student learning, students are central to, and a significant part of the curriculum. All the planning, therefore, should concentrate on creating an environment productive to learning, because "those processes will vary somewhat depending on what is to be learnt and by whom" (Knight, 2001, p. 375). As such, student learning, not teaching, is the main agenda of teachers. All necessary steps are undertaken to ensure the purpose of assisting "meaning making and interpretation, and it is likely to be holistically oriented and integrated" (Grundy, 1987, p. 76).

Curriculum as a process is also aligned with a critical approach where knowledge is critically challenged and constructed in particular historical and social frameworks (Toohey, 1999). This enables student learning to take place within a community of scholars, with the ultimate aim of empowering them to be effective as individuals and members of society (Knight, 2001). This is consistent with the transformational curriculum as proposed by Parker (2003) where knowledge is co-constructed via a critically reflective process.

As a result of their findings, Fraser and Bonsaquet (2006) recommend developing "a shared language and understanding of curriculum" (p. 283), to enhance discussion between stakeholders. Such shared language and understanding is considered to be a foundation for

"channels of communication" (Sng, 2008, p. 101) between academics about curriculum change, and also for recognition of "the interdependence of the elements within the complex phenomenon we call curriculum" (Lattuca & Stark, 2009, p. 40). In order to make such communications possible, the first step is to recognise the variety of ways in which academics conceptualise the curriculum (Fraser & Bonaquet, 2006). Thus, this current study has been designed to investigate administrators', academics', and students' understandings of curriculum at a Vietnamese university. Analysing these understandings in order to implement change can be seen as an initial step in achieving more autonomy in the development and implementation of curricula. This study helps to address the lack of research on curriculum and curriculum development in the Vietnamese context. It also addresses the need to investigate Vietnamese curriculum development by an insider (first author). As such, Vietnamese stakeholders' voices of curriculum understandings can be heard.

Vietnamese context

The higher education system in Vietnam has traditionally been highly centralised. The Ministry of Education and Training controlled a range of areas from academic affairs to financial matters, for example, quotas for access to higher education, the annual entrance examination to university, the maximum level of tuition fees that higher education institutions may charge, and curriculum frameworks for different disciplines (Fry, 2009; Hayden & Lam, 2010). The Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) was not only responsible for managing and directing Vietnam's system of education and training, but also for developing curriculum and producing materials (Hoat et al., 2009). All courses (programs) and course structures delivered by higher education institutions had to follow the curriculum frameworks prescribed by MoET (Dao & Hayden, 2010). These frameworks were prescribed for all programs of study across the system. In terms of designing the frameworks, MoET was responsible for choosing committees for the development of curricula in different

disciplines. These committees consisted of scholars and experts in the relevant fields. Each curriculum framework necessarily comprised objectives, the knowledge required, the duration, and the portion of different subjects in a course. Higher education institutions then developed a detailed version based on these frameworks, their own mission, and their competence (Hayden & Lam, 2010). By prescribing the same frameworks, MoET aimed to ensure consistency in the quality in different institutions offering the same degree programmes (Tran, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2011). Educational institutions thus had very little control over what they wished to offer their students.

Decentralisation was considered as a solution to encourage innovative processes and management of higher education in Vietnam, (Dao & Hayden, 2010; Hayden & Lam, 2007; 2010). Autonomy was an important aspect of a decentralised system. As mentioned previously, university autonomy was ratified by law in 2013. However, since then the problems of realising institutional autonomy have included the interpretation of what constitutes institutional autonomy and of institutions "lacking experience and understanding of how decentralization might work" (Tran, 2014, p. 80).

Institutional autonomy should enable institutions to decide on both their own academic goals and programs, and how they should make use of their resources (Berdahl, 1990). Legislated autonomy should mean that universities and colleges can make their own decisions on curriculum, research plans, facilities, recruitment of staff, finances and resources (Dao & Hayden, 2010). However, post 2013, autonomy seems to be tenuous. For instance, recently Dao (2015), in a case study of a public university in Vietnam observed that:

It was also argued that any autonomy provided by the Ministry of Education and Training seemed always to be conditional... The University was also able to exercise discretion in terms of how it delivered approved training programs [curricula], but all new programs had to be approved by a Ministry panel, the members of which often had no relevant disciplinary expertise. There was also frustration expressed about the

extent to which Marxist–Leninist studies, undertaken as part of the foundation-year undergraduate studies, and then again before the final examination for graduation, were privileged in the curriculum, and about the restricted ability of members of staff to have much influence over senior management appointments. (p. 751)

Our study was conducted post-2013, when universities in Vietnam were transitioning towards autonomy. As will be seen, the legacy of the pre-2103 era was still apparent in the ways that curriculum was understood by the participants in our study.

Research design

The research question for this study was "What are the understandings of curriculum expressed by senior administrators, academics and students at a Vietnamese university?" The research was conducted using a qualitative, interpretive approach. Data were gathered via interviews and focus groups, and the analysis was undertaken using thematic analysis. This study was conducted in a Vietnamese university, which will be addressed as *the University* for ethical reasons. The University is very similar to many other universities and colleges in Vietnam in being a medium-sized institution with about 10,000 students, under the control of MoET.

The study participants were senior administrators (N=3), academics (N=15) and students (N=21). The senior administrators held key positions in management related to curriculum development at the University. They were the Rector, the Head of Academic Affairs Department, and a faculty Dean. The academics had lecturer and senior lecturer positions teaching English as a Second Language (EFL) with a range of teaching experience and responsibilities. The academic participants comprised about 70 per cent of the EFL faculty as a whole. The students ranged from first year to fourth year, undertaking EFL courses with different majors, and from three-year courses to four-year courses. The chief

investigator (first author) for this study is an ‘insider’ who teaches (EFL) at the University. It should be noted that even though the participants in the study were mainly drawn from an ELF context, the study aimed at eliciting understandings of curriculum generally, rather than EFL curriculum specifically. Recognising that small number of participants was involved, this study does not mean to generalise from one context to another, but to draw theoretical generalisations for others to apply these findings to their contexts (Yin, 2014).

The interviews, which were conducted in Vietnamese, consisted of one-to-one interviews for staff and focus group interviews for students (5-6 students in each group). The participants were asked to describe their understanding of the curriculum, with academics specifically being asked to describe a typical curriculum they had developed and the students being asked to describe a curriculum that they had undertaken. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the analysis undertaken in Vietnamese. Excerpts from the interviews used as quotations in this paper, were translated into English and back translated by an independent translator to check for accuracy. Thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the transcripts. We followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) process that consisted of an iterative strategy of generating codes, then identifying and refining themes.

Diversity of Understandings of Curriculum

The findings (see Table 1) show that the understandings of curriculum among the three groups are multifarious and sometimes contradictory. Curriculum is viewed as being a unit outline or a course structure; as a plan for either teachers or students, or a design for the whole University; from a set of pre-specified objectives to a set of regulations; from teaching experience to learning experience; from knowledge and skills to an open pathway in which students can make their own choices.

Table 1. Diversity of understandings of curriculum held by the stakeholders

Participants	Understandings of curriculum
	Curriculum as...
Senior Administrators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a plan or a design - a set of objectives - a set of regulations
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the structure and content of a course - the structure and content of a unit (or a subject) - textbooks and the content of textbooks - teaching experience - learning experience
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the content and structure of a course - knowledge and skills - a plan - a pathway

Among these understandings, *curriculum as the structure and content of a course* and *curriculum as the structure and content of a unit/ subject* are dominant. Curriculum is interpreted as the structure and content of a course, and/ or a unit/ subject in both Teacher group and Student group. Amongst the teachers, Xuân, for example, simply considered curriculum was "all the units in a course", while Thắm stated "all the units and what is related from the first year to graduation". Similarly, Tiến defined curriculum as "what is designed to teach in 4 years". For these teachers, curriculum was seen essentially as a document that specified the scope and sequence of what needed to be learnt and taught.

Amongst the students, Cẩm defined curriculum as "all units, content that students have to take". Similarly, Hung specified curriculum as "a system of units that students have to take in a course". Lam used the same term, "a system of units", to describe curriculum. Conceived

as *the structure and content of a course*, curriculum was secondly viewed as a pattern of content and temporal aspects in a course. For example, Hoa noted, "the curriculum informs how many semesters, and how many units, how many credit points in each semester".

Amongst the teachers, the curriculum sometimes simply meant "what to teach and what students are supposed to achieve in a unit" (Yến). For other teachers, curriculum meant more than content and objectives, and was presented briefly in a unit outline. A unit outline normally consisted of content, objectives, teaching methods and assessment, and the most important thing was the content to be taught (Quỳnh). Hồng described a unit outline in full as follows:

... It [a unit outline] comprises the name and the code of that unit, time allocation, the number of teaching periods for theoretical knowledge and for practice, how many lessons, how many chapters of the textbooks, how many teaching periods for each lesson, each chapter. In a more detailed unit outline, there are teacher's activities, and students' activities, that is, what teacher does and what students are supposed to do, ways of assessment including mid-term assessment, end-of-term assessment, compulsory materials, and materials for reference.

The second most frequently expressed understanding of curriculum is curriculum as a *plan or a design*. According to Nhân, a senior administrator, curriculum was considered as "a design or a plan of the entire process which reflects the university's philosophy, objectives, and the recently added term of meeting social needs" (Nhân). The design, as Nhân explained further, included several units of a training major. The units, in his opinion, were divided into two categories: those of general knowledge that were compulsory such as *Politics* and *National Defence*, and those units of professional knowledge.

Curriculum was also viewed as *a plan for the course* among the teachers. Thùy defined a curriculum as "a foundation of what units to be taught, how those units are taught, and what skills and knowledge are required". Other teachers such as Tú, Minh, and Yến had similar ideas about curriculum as a plan consisting of what to teach (units), how to teach (methods),

what objectives, and for how long. Nhàn was more specific: "curriculum is a written plan of activities, materials, skills and knowledge to be transmitted to target students". Minh, despite her background as a very young teacher, offered an understanding of curriculum with various elements:

In my opinion, curriculum is a general plan for a course. Thus, it comprises all teaching and learning activities organised by the university for students to participate, to achieve the university's educational objectives.

Students also viewed curriculum *as a plan*, comprised more than just *what* and *when*, but also *how*. Châu, for example, added: "curriculum is a system with very clearly-identified objectives at the introduction, and the measures in which teachers interact with learners to reach those objectives". Meanwhile, Đông seemed to focus more on 'how' rather than 'what' in his understanding of curriculum, because, in his opinion, curriculum consisted of "specified objectives and time frame for implementation". Thus, in curriculum *as a plan*, the measures or methods were added as new elements for implementing the curriculum, or enabling teachers and students to achieve the specified objectives.

Whether curriculum is viewed as *the structure and content of a course*, of *a unit/subject*, or as *a plan*, it is closely related to textbooks and the content of textbooks. The concepts of *textbooks* and *content of textbooks* are distinguished because most language textbooks being used at the University offer not only the information and skills, but also objectives, procedures, activities including how the information should be taught and how the skills are developed. The findings indicate that the existing curriculum was textbook-based: textbooks were selected beforehand and the curriculum was developed accordingly (Hoàng, Hồng). Hồng (teacher) revealed that since the chosen textbooks comprised all necessary elements (objectives, procedures, content, and assessment), these textbooks became compulsory. As an unwritten rule, teachers had to follow all the steps proposed, and to cover

all the content presented in these textbooks. Likewise, Tién used *curriculum* and *textbooks* interchangeably:

The Dean will approve teaching curriculum as usual, then hand over the curriculum to Academic Heads. My Academic Head nominates me to teach a certain unit using a specific textbook. Teachers are required to follow that specified textbook. Though I wanted to use another textbook which is more suitable and updated, I was not allowed to do so.

The curriculum was also understood as the *teaching experience*. This comprised various elements such as the content of teaching (what), teaching methods (how), time (how long), teaching purposes, and professional judgements for changes made to curriculum. For instance, Trung considered curriculum as "teaching content, meeting students' needs and training objectives, graded from low to high levels, subjected to specialisation" [as students progressed through their programs]. Teaching experiences were highlighted and approaches were adapted during planning and implementing the curriculum, as Yén explained:

It [curriculum] is connected to teaching procedures, and ways of planning lessons. Sometimes I realised some inappropriateness and changes were made. First of all, when planning a lesson I would imagine how all activities were going on if I delivered the lesson in such an order. I anticipated the problems and made changes then. Secondly, when I was delivering the lesson if I discovered something wrong, I would change right away.

This understanding of curriculum can be seen as teacher-centred, although teachers claimed that curriculum was based on students' needs and the changes they made being for the sake of students. The majority revealed that they made changes to improve teaching, as Minh confirmed:

I think teachers can sometimes make changes to teaching content and time allocation... All the feedback and comments I receive are used for my own teaching, for example, as an experience to adapt any teaching content or methods for next lessons.

Teachers also viewed curriculum as the *learning experience*. Tú, for example, offered his students opportunities to make decisions on the curriculum. For him, curriculum referred to "learning content that is useful to students and what students want to learn". Hoàng stated that curriculum was "how students perceived learning and teaching methods". He explained further:

In my class, normally the teacher raises an issue, and students raise their hands to answer. At times, I ask students to raise the issue they are concerned about and the whole class discuss the answer. That means parts of the curriculum were decided by my students.

In the student group, curriculum was seen as *knowledge and skills*. Curriculum as *knowledge and skills* sometimes overlapped with that of *curriculum as the units in a course* that was meant to provide students with certain knowledge and skills. However, *knowledge and skills* went beyond the units offered in a course because students could obtain these knowledge and skills from other activities rather than taking those units. *Knowledge and skills*, therefore, could be seen as a result of students' entire learning experience during their college life. Tuấn, for example, simply stated, "in my opinion, curriculum is the knowledge obtained during my college life", Tuyết noted that curriculum was "a system of knowledge offered by the university". Here, we can see students differentiate between the knowledge they believe the university plans and the knowledge they actually acquire over the course of their study.

Other understandings of curriculum are less frequently mentioned in the responses, but are just as important. One typical example is that curriculum was viewed as a *set of regulations* by a senior administrator. For instance, Đãng stated "curriculum is understood as regulations to be about the content of a training curriculum, consisting of training objectives; training plans, methods, and forms; ways of assessment, and conditions to implement the curriculum". In this way, curriculum served as a guidance to implement the content; or the rules that teaching staff were obliged to follow. This understanding seemed to be more

focused on how to conduct the curriculum, and as a device for administrators to control implementation of the curriculum.

Another distinctive understanding of curriculum as a *pathway* was offered by a student (Phước). In this sense, students were given autonomy for making decisions on what to study, and whether to stop or continue their learning journey based on their own interests, competencies, and expectations. Curriculum as a *pathway* also offered many opportunities for life-long learning, and shortcuts for different purposes. Compared with *curriculum as a plan*, some plans were fixed and designed by teachers, whereas the pathway notion implied some possibility for flexibility where students played an important role in making decisions. However, only one of 21 students mentioned this as a definition of curriculum. Phước noted:

Curriculum is like a pathway which has been built for us. There are many shops on the road. When going along the road, one can select what he or she likes and goes ahead. The road is a non-stop one. When tired, one can take a rest. One can also take a turn (to another road) if he or she likes. When achieving their objectives, the walker can stop. Those who walk along make their own decisions when to stop. The pathway designer should know how to extend the road, not only with sample shops displayed, but also with many optional (selective) turns available.

In summary, each understanding comprises particular elements that sometimes overlap. For example, curriculum was at times seen as the structure and content of a course comprising different units/subjects. At other times, it was considered as the structure or content of an individual unit/subject. Certain elements of curriculum repeatedly appear in different understandings. The most common elements were objectives, learning outcomes, content, textbooks, teaching methods, and time. These elements can be considered key features of a curriculum since they appear in different curriculum understandings.

Differences are also found in the understandings of curriculum among groups, and within these groups. Curriculum understandings from administrators' perspectives are more holistic while those from teachers and students are more specific. The administrators'

understandings of curriculum focus more on the curriculum at the university level while most teachers and students refer to those at faculty and/or classroom level. If administrators describe curriculum as a tree with many branches, academics and students tend to describe curriculum as one of those branches. Furthermore, the least frequently expressed understandings were curriculum as *a set of regulations* for the management of curriculum implementation, and curriculum as *a pathway*, which highlights the freedom for students to make their own decisions. Those varied understandings reveal very different, sometimes even opposing perspectives and underpinning assumptions from which the views are formed.

Towards a process-oriented curriculum

Our findings indicate that the dominant understandings in our study were product-oriented while research from Western literature incorporates process-oriented understandings (Fraser & Bosanquet 2006). As Cornbleth (1988) argues, curriculum as product covers only "one aspect of the context that shapes curriculum in use" (p. 89). Moreover, Barnett, Parry, and Coate (2001) call for more emphasis on the processes rather than the output-driven system of higher education.

Curriculum, in this study, was mostly considered as referring to the course (program) while it was seen as a unit or as a unit outline controlled by an individual lecturer in a Western context (Fraser & Bosanquet 2006). This might be because the faculty and student participants were all from the same discipline, and, as such may have seen curriculum as encapsulating the suite of courses within EFL. The faculty is a professional faculty with a sole purpose of producing competent foreign language speakers. Thus, courses or units are closely aligned and goal directed. A contrasting understanding might be found in other disciplines.

Even though some participants in our study understood curriculum as teaching and learning experiences, the impact of students on the curriculum was limited. Fraser and Bosanquet (2006) stress the collaboration between teachers and students, as "the structure of the learning experience is not predetermined or defined; rather, it emerges from the needs of the students and the interactions between students, teachers and colleagues" (p. 275). Such collaboration enables students to negotiate the knowledge they want to include in the curriculum (Fraser, 2006). However, in our study the emphasis on textbooks necessarily resulted in a predetermined curriculum. Furthermore, communication between the stakeholders seemed to be absent. This finding reflects the top-down approach to higher education curriculum development in Vietnam in which objectives were set, contents were chosen, and curriculum framework were prescribed from the top (Hayden & Lam, 2010; Hoat et al., 2009).

One noticeable understanding contributed by a student was curriculum *as a pathway* which concentrated more on process and decision making. This view shares something in common with curriculum as *a recipe* described by Stenhouse (1975) as he argues "a curriculum should be grounded in practice" (p. 4), and subject to change to suit different students' needs. Likewise, Knight (2001) suggests that it is "better to concentrate on the process that might lead to the sorts of outcomes that are wanted, to provide ingredients from which a meal can be created, rather than to insist on cooking to a recipe" (p. 275). Curriculum, in this sense, is not only the process but also a description of classroom happenings, which can be adjusted to suit new needs. In *curriculum as a pathway*, the student stresses student autonomy in making decisions to suit their needs, interests, and abilities. Curriculum *as a pathway*, hence, seems to align more with more holistic understandings of curriculum. This understanding is totally different from how a curriculum has been constructed in the Vietnamese context since universities and colleges in Vietnam have to

deliver the MoET- approved curricula (Dao, 2015). In such a process, students' roles were largely ignored, with their voices seemingly unheard.

Conclusion

The findings from this study have indicated that the understandings of curriculum vary from one group to another within a single disciplinary department. In addition, the dominant understandings of curriculum revealed by this study are product-focused, teacher-focused and textbook-driven. Some innovative ideas are expressed from the grassroots including teachers and students while most of the product-oriented and teacher-focused curriculum understandings come from senior administrators.

Despite the move to autonomy, the understandings of curriculum in this study reflect a curriculum that is still regarded as being prescribed and controlled by MoET. Hence, this paper argues for more institutional autonomy including academic freedom and curriculum development to be realised. In order for Vietnamese higher education to achieve initial steps towards autonomy in curriculum, all the stakeholders' voices and understandings should be valued. As such, better engagement and participation of stakeholders of different levels is a crucial factor to facilitate innovation to take place. Acknowledging the various views and conceptions of curriculum in the Vietnamese higher education context, Fraser and Bonaquet (2006) suggest that academic community "develop a shared language and understanding of curriculum" (pp. 282-3). This research calls for establishing a platform or a forum for professional dialogues and conversations about curriculum, and for adequate training for those who are involved.

This study represents a story of constraints being encountered in one Vietnamese higher education institution trying to align with the reform agenda. Drivers for curriculum innovation, such as quality control (Tran, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2011, Do & Do 2014), and

political influences on curriculum (Dao, 2015), have been a big challenge for Vietnamese universities and colleges. We propose that our findings can be used as a starting point for developing more innovative and student-focused understandings of curriculum, and enabling institutions to approach the reform agenda effectively.

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