Logics and Politics of Professionalism
The case of university English language teachers in Vietnam

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Akademisk avhandling

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Abstract
Set against a changing backdrop of reforms in higher education and English language teaching (ELT), the thesis explores the notion of professionalism for university English teachers in Vietnam: What is defined as professionalism in this particular period of time? How is professionalism constructed in this context?

The research approaches professionalism as a critical concept: A list of aspired traits and features are always value-laden and concern the question of power. From this premise, the thesis discusses a “kaleidoscope” relationship between different actors in the making of professionalism. Using Freidson’s (2001) ideas on the contingencies of professionalism, the study views the notion as a process rather than a product. Professionalism has its own logic that needs to be respected, but this logic is also incidental to other logics for its establishment and development.

The study uses embedded case study to address its research questions. Defining the case as professionalism for university ELT teachers in contemporary Vietnam higher education, the thesis studies the notion as articulated at national, institutional, and individual levels. The primary data sources include five national policies, institutional policies and management practices at a university and its foreign languages department, and interviews with six academic managers and eleven ELT lecturers. The data were analysed using thematic analysis approach within constructivist, interpretive traditions.

The results show that professionalism for ELT lecturers in Vietnam can largely be characterised as a professionalism of entrepreneurship, measurability and functionality. ELT is largely considered as a tool for international integration. Each type of professionalism project involves several actors (the state, expert groups, the institution, and ELT academics) with their own logic, but they interrelate in responding to the imperatives of the knowledge-based economy and globalisation. How the meaning of professionalism is established and argued for by the different actors in this study reveals that it is not easy to conceptualise the notion in a binary system of “from above” professionalism versus “from within” professionalism; and “organisational” professionalism versus “occupational” professionalism. The complexities of the logics of professionalism – with an “s”, affect whether a professionalisation project can be perceived as being positive or negative – Is it professionalisation or is it deprofessionalisation? The relativity of “from above” and “from within” reflects the contingencies of professionalism, and also suggests authority power is plural, shifting, and fluid, rather than single, normative, and static. Meanwhile, it means human’s individual power is not of an ultimate freedom but dependent on external conditions. With these considerations, the study proposes interpreting professionalism as a "social contract”. This helps not only recognise a mutual relationship between the state, the institution, and academics, but also illuminate how each party enables, maintains, and contributes to this relationship.

Keywords
professionalism, professionalisation, university English language teachers, higher education management, policy, embedded case study, Vietnam