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'Decent work' as a higher education policy myopia: an ecosystem framework for policy-making

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ABSTRACT

Globally, higher education policy is typically framed in terms of the technical employability capabilities to advance the economic productivity of nations, and as such, can be myopic to the wider sustainable development challenge of 'Decent Work' (a form of employment with good working conditions). This form of myopia can fail to materially change the sociocultural conditions in local contexts of learning and work and ultimately perpetuate structural disadvantage. This article draws from policy participation conducted over 4 years which included (i) longitudinal focus group dialogue involving educational policy makers, implementers and students ($n = 102$) and (ii) document analysis of formal policy and evaluation reports. The study is conducted in one of the fastest growing economies which is rapidly developing its policy frameworks (Vietnam) to enhance the employability of ethnic minority students. Findings highlight the need for (i) a meta-perspective which encompasses the multiple stakeholders involved in enabling students to access and engage in decent work, (ii) building the capacity of students to actively change and improve their situations and (iii) awareness of the ways in which governments, educational institutions and employers can value the diversity of students and their circumstances. In contrast to the dominant institutional perspective, this article conceptualises the *counter-active effects* across education-work ecosystems which mediate policy efficacy and advances an alternative conceptual framework that integrates *ecosystems*, *empowerment* and *recognition* theory to inform policy formulation and assessment . This article advocates *expansive* rather than *myopic* policy to drive participation in Decent Work.

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Introduction

Educational policy and reform are typically framed through a neo-liberal ideology which encapsulates the view that 'free from government interference, a flexible, privatised market can resolve almost all social, economic and political problems' (Leach 2017, 222). This neo-liberal ideology is now omnipresent and naturalised in policy instruments around the world, especially in education policy and reform which strives towards a much closer link between citizens and markets (e.g. education to meet employer needs) or through markets (e.g. private education providers) (Smolentseva

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2023; Wall and Perrin 2015). Here, policy is often primarily framed and understood in terms of *economic productivity*, that is, in terms of the *skills and capabilities that industry* want *or need* to essentially produce more with less. Importantly, this is not just related to vocational and technical education policy to deliver the skills needs of an economy, but an underlying ideological imperative. For example, the productivity drive is inherent in the 'no child left behind' commitment; paradoxically and controversially, it simultaneously embodies a norm that everyone should *benefit* from economic and social productivity, but precisely by doing so, can *contribute* to that productivity (Hursh 2007).

Contrary to the neo-liberal ideological ambition that free markets and enterprise will deliver what is needed in an economy, there remain significant global challenges in relation to the work opportunities that are provided in practice. It was the recognition of these conditions and their damaging effects on individuals, families, societies and ultimately economies, that drove the International Labour Organization (ILO) to establish the 'Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work' two decades ago. As a global governance instrument to promote normative standards of work, 'Decent Work', according to the International Labour Organization (2020, np):

> sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.

The significance of Decent Work was further amplified when it was embraced by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 8 where it is described as 'sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all' (UN 2020, np). Empirical work, however, has argued that there continues to be governance gaps which render such governance ineffectual (Alzola 2018). Specifically, Thomas and Turnbull (2018, 537) have criticised the reliance of global governance on 'compliance by business (rather than governments) via the market mechanism (rather than hierarchical authority)'. In particular, this evidence suggests that such systems evidently fail to materially change the cultural norms which shape the contexts and circumstances of work, including the non-recognition of local cultural practices of work and employability (Duffy et al. 2020) and ethnic minority groups with the least social, cultural or economic capital including language and communication capabilities (e.g. Bhopal 2020; O'Farrell, Hassan, and Hoole 2022).

This perpetual marginalisation ultimately maintains the structural status quo and can undermine educational and employability policy initiatives even when highly targeted (e.g. enabling ethnic minority students to improve their employability) (Ball 2020). As such, this study argues that higher education policy work can be seriously myopic to the sustainable development challenge of 'Decent Work'. Vietnam, as one of the fastest growing economies and educational reforms contexts in the world (Truong and Tuong 2023), provides the focal country for this study. Evidence highlights that 60% of graduates in Vietnam are unemployed or have insecure employment (Tran 2018), and common issues for students include poor working conditions, job instability, low wages and job informality (OECD 2017; VietnamNet 2019). Here, a complex mix of structural inequalities negatively implicate a diverse ethnic minority composition (Karlidag-Dennis, Hazenberg, and Dinh 2020), in terms of their perceived and actual language and technical capabilities (e.g. Fujii, Nakajima, and Xu 2023; Nguyen and Nguyen 2019) and aspirations over time (Bui Tu 2019). As such, access to Decent Work opportunities in Vietnam for students can be highly challenging.

This paper finds that this is partly due to the typically narrow focus on higher education practices and processes rather than a broader perspective to challenge such sociocultural structures (Guan and Abbas 2022; O'Farrell, Hassan, and Hoole 2022; Smolentseva 2023), despite an awareness that wider sociocultural influences impact higher education policy implementation (Godonoga and Sporn 2023) and an ongoing need to empower students (following Kudo 2023; O'Farrell, Hassan, and Hoole 2022). This context frames the driving research question for this study: *how can higher education policy facilitate participation in Decent Work?*

This article is organised as follows. The next section identifies the rich, longitudinal methods (focus groups and document analyses) that were deployed in the study. The findings are then outlined with reference to illustrative governmental policies that led to the identification of theoretical apparatus to help understand the complexities of policy effectiveness. The discussion synthesises the findings and proposes an alternative conceptual framework for policy analysis and design which combines ecosystem theory (to provide a meta-perspective), empowerment theory (to indicate the ways in which students can actively change and improve their situations) and recognition theory (to indicate the ways in which governments, training institutions, and employers can value the diversity of its students and their circumstances in policy work).

Methods

This article draws from longitudinal policy participation and implementation in Vietnam conducted over a 4-year period by the authors, as part of ongoing attempts to address the significant and ongoing sustainable development challenge of Decent Work in Vietnam. Vietnam, as one of the fastest growing economies in the world, has continued to rapidly develop its policy frameworks particularly to enhance the employability of ethnic minority students. Although specific policy measures differ across countries, evidence repeatedly suggests that governance instruments have failed to systemically deliver work which is characterised by indicators of Decent Work across developed and emerging economies. Indicators include, for example, as fair income, job security, personal and professional development, freedom to express concerns, and equality, in developed as well as developing countries (Alzola 2018; Thomas and Turnbull 2018). In the UK, for example, '56% of people in poverty are in a working family' (JRF 2020, 5).

Driven by the research question, *how can higher education policy facilitate participation of ethnic minority students in Decent Work?,* the research methods were underpinned by policy participation including: (i) longitudinal focus group dialogue and (ii) document analysis of formal policy and evaluation reports. The ethics of the study were approved by a University Ethics Committee University of Chester Faculty of Business prior to the study, requiring informed consent, right to withdraw from the study and anonymity (identities and organisations are not revealed in this study). The research team was transparently positioned as the research team involved in researching the above research question, using the first 2 years to build trust with policy stakeholders to then be able to engage in dialogue and collect data pertinent to the research question. This enabled access and facilitated dialogue given that the discussion of minority ethnic groups in Vietnam, and especially for governmental officials, is politically sensitive (Truong and Tuong 2023). Whilst generating this trust with participants has the benefit of access and greater ability to contextualise and interpret data from their perspective, it also requires strict adherence to analytical procedures as outlined below (Morgan 2022).

Focus groups. Six focus groups (each lasting 3–4 h) were characterised by open questioning to explore the research question, and adopted an appreciative frame and prompting questions to enable deep exploration (Cooperrider and Whitney 2011). They were conducted in the last 2 years of the project, after the first 2 years of building trust. This included framing and the use of prompts around the dimensions of Decent Work (e.g. ILO 2020 and Duffy et al. 2020) to explore and deepen dialogue around the research question, rather than to prescriptively apply or test the existence of Decent Work. This also enabled a more inductively generated exploration around the circumstances of Vietnam rather than a Western centric imposition of the concept (Doan, Le, and Tran 2018). There were 102 participants, involving: educational policy makers ($n = 12$), educational policy implementers ($n = 9$), employers ($n = 12$), minority ethnic students ($n = 64$) and minority ethnic graduates ($n = 5$). Participants represented >20 ethnic groups across the main three regions of the Northwest and Northeast, Central Vietnam, and Red River Delta regions of Vietnam, and across multiple subject areas. Following best practice to counterbalance the power relations within participatory policy-development focus groups (Wall, Russell & Moore 2017), the data

collection was organised as follows: (a) focus groups were organised into smaller groups (4–6) around tables to respond to the open ended questions, (b) each table was allocated a facilitator to encourage participation and voicing in relation to the research question, (c) individuals were asked to write on 'tablecloths' initially, and then the smaller groups would agree their collective responses on flip charts, followed by wider plenary discussions (this captured both individual and group based responses). The focus groups involved a mix of different types of stakeholders who moved around the smaller groups (around tables) to optimise the exposure of students to stakeholders (and vice versa) and to manage the possible power dynamics of particular stakeholders group (Wall, Russell & Moore 2017).

Document analysis. Documents were collated in relation to their relevance to the research question but also informed by the policy dialogue through the focus groups (e.g. because of their reference to specific policies and their effectiveness). The documents identified had expert credibility given the governmental officials involved in the focus groups (Rapley 2018; Tight 2019) including, for example, representatives from the Ministry of Education and Training, Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, and the Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs, and university leaders who were responsible for implementing these at provincial level. For data presentation in this article, governmental policies that had analytical poignancy were selected (Tight 2019). Given the policy implementation context, there was a focus on policies that were enhancing the employability of ethnic minority students which have ultimately not done (according to reports or expert opinion in the focus groups).

Analysis. A reflexive, inductive approach was used to analyse the data generated from both the focus groups and document analyses (Morgan 2022). The research question framed the analytical process, and the dimensions of Decent Work (e.g. ILO 2020) provided a conceptual lens to explore the research question. However, the findings (the codes and relevant theories pertaining to those codes) emerged through the analytical process. Transcriptions and coding were originally in Vietnamese and were back-translated to avoid the loss of meaning (Boussebaa and Brown 2017; Brislin 1986). Bilingual scholars were involved in checking the English/Vietnamese back translation to reinforce validity and quality. The data were analysed using NVivo and involved intensive reading/re-reading of the data by the research team to identify broad themes, followed by reflexive discussion amongst the research team (Morgan 2022). These procedures provided an empirical platform to then identify relevant theoretical constructs to help underpin and address the research question. The presentation of data, below, prioritised focal policy intervention cases which demonstrated the most significant analytical poignancy (Tight 2019) to illustrate and animate the themes found.

Findings

Three core findings were derived from the analyses: the need to take a meta-perspective of the education-work landscape which shapes the local conditions in which work and opportunities for work manifest; building the capacity of citizens to challenge or change that landscape or parts of it over time and the need for institutional 'recognition' of citizen diversity in policy work. These are now outlined.

Ecosystem as a meta-view of influences on work and employability

The first theme highlighted the scenario of policies being siloed for particular policy periods or geographies which invertedly miss key influences on students and graduates and therefore do not impact participation in employment as well as Decent Work. Often expressed as the '*lack of joined-up policy*' through the study, this issue was understood as the need for an ecosystem as a meta-view of influences on work and employability (Kudo 2023). For example, a university representative at a focus group emphasised the need for skills development across sites, where they said that 'society, universities *and* (original emphasis) related workplaces need to support youth skills in

parallel with supporting policies for recruitment'. Similarly, another university representative said 'the government, administrators, and organisations should have supporting policies, providing projects for minority youths to approach projects for the development of themselves, family *and* (original emphasis) society'. An employer said the students 'need to have a network to support to approach job opportunities from workplaces, employment supporting centres, Department of Labour and Social Affairs, *and* (original emphasis) Youth Union'. A minority ethnic student also explained how by actively working across community, professional or policy professionals, enabled her to 'seek relevant employment opportunities … [and that this] enabled me to orient my aspired work and identify what I need for achieving it'.

'Project 1956' in Vietnam was often a reference point in the data, so was selected as an exemplar case to illuminate the issues. 'Project 1956' was established in 2009 to provide vocational training for rural labourers to enhance the quality of the rural workforce so as to meet the demands of industrialisation, agricultural and rural modernisation, as well as to ensure the equalisation of access to training programmes for all rural workers. It aimed to provide vocational training for 1 million rural labourers annually for the duration of the project and placed particular priority on war veterans, poor and near-poor households, ethnic minority people, disabled people and displaced farmers. Project 1956 placed explicit targets on non-agriculture training in relation to agricultural training with the proportion of non-agricultural training expected to increase from approximately 65% of the total training provided during the period 2011–2015 to about 75% for the period from 2016 to 2020. Though vocational, it is a higher education policy implemented by higher education institutions, both universities and tertiary level colleges (including both types of institution which deliver technical and vocational education at tertiary level).

After 10 years of implementation, Project 1956 has achieved important results. According to the Ministry of Labour – Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA 2019), by the end of 2019, around 9.6 million rural labourers had received short-term training, achieving 85.7% of the target of 11.2 million trained labourers by 2020. After the training, the proportion of trainees obtaining new jobs, or continuing with previous jobs but with higher productivity and income, was above 80%. Almost 65% rural labourers were trained in non-agricultural jobs for job transfer while about 35% were trained in agricultural jobs to continue with employment in the agricultural field but with higher productivity and income.

Project 1956 promoted its activities to young people in mountainous areas (which are where most ethnic minority people live), raised their awareness and linked related ministries in their activities such (Thu tuong chinh phu 2009). However, only 6.2% of ethnic minority participants who participated in Project 1956 received job training, whereas the national number of the same age group was more than triple this (CEMA 2015). By 2019, the percentage of ethnic minorities who received job training increased from 6.2% to around 10% (CEMA 2020) with a similar disparity outside of the policy initiative.

Theoretically, this issue was understood in the study as an issue related to the importance of participating in wider sociocultural systems for learning and development has been recognised for some time (Billett, Cain, and Le 2018; Mishra and Müller 2022), but it was Bronfenbrenner (1999) who articulated how micro, meso, exo and macro systems can each influence access to, and participation in, circumstances which can affect human development. In terms of scope, micro-systems refer to the activities, roles and interpersonal relationships at the interactional level in particular fields (such as at home or in school); the meso-system involves those linkages (or lack of) which connect two or more of these settings to enable (or hinder) cross-fertilisation of resources across fields (e.g. family, education, and livelihood contexts); exo-systems refer to the wider events and policies which impact the conditions and resources within those family and education fields; and the macro-system refers to the wider cultural values, beliefs and customs, and the broad cultural, political, social and economic climate which set the scene for those fields and how they interact. Bronfenbrenner's (1999) definitions are used here as they are the theoretically and empirically the most established in terms of itemising and outlining sociocultural dimensions which influence human development from an ecosystem perspective (see Gessler et al. 2021; Liu et al. 2022; Luo et al.

2022). To illustrate the significance of taking such a meta-perspective, an educational policy from Vietnam to enhance the employability of ethnic minority workers is examined.

Empirical evidence suggests a number of reasons for the limited impact of Project 1956, spanning the ecosystem. At the *micro* system level, for example, the participation of ethnic minorities in high school through to completion has been significantly lower compared to other groups, and this negatively impacts continuation through to other opportunities (GSO 2018). At the *meso* system level, there are limited employment opportunities particularly in the local communities because of a weak linkage between vocational training and labour market demands, poor quality training, lack of career orientation and employment services, especially in relation to attaining higher skill jobs, forcing ethnic minority youths returning to low-skill ones that do not require post-secondary education (Bui Tu 2019; Oxfam 2017; 2018; Tran et al. 2011). For example, more than 30 women in Nong Cong, a village in Thanh Hoa, Vietnam, were trained to make bamboo products but had to return to farm work due to the shortage of the demand for these low quality products (Phuong 2020). Such factors coalesce to create a chronic oversupply of poor quality skills which ultimately restricts growth (Doan, Le, and Tran 2018). Similarly, empirical work continues to highlight the ongoing issues around how dominant identities and languages are positioned and privileged in educational settings from primary, through secondary, and within higher education (e.g. Fujii, Nakajima, and Xu 2023; Nguyen and Nguyen 2019).

At the *exo*-system level, access to loans from the National Employment Fund is still limited for rural labourers in training and post-graduation, limiting the impact of vocational training (Le Bao 2017; Trong Hung 2019), while the administration of the funding system was operationally complex and difficult (Le Bao 2017). And finally, at the *macro*-system level, the perceptions of education and the employability of ethnic minority labourers can be negative and prevent access to decent work (Hao 2020a). So despite the positive employability outcomes for the dominant ethnic groups in this policy initiative, not tackling wider systemic issues rendered the policy ineffectual for those belonging to ethnic minority groups.

Empowerment towards longer-term change and development

The second theme highlighted the scenario of policies being short-term, skill focused, and therefore not considering the wider emancipatory capabilities which might enable students to change their employability circumstances and change their participation in Decent Work. Such capabilities were seen to need to challenge the structures which marginalise and undermine the availability of and participation in Decent Work which are perpetuated for as long as (marginalised) participation is performed in and through practice (Bhopal 2020; Billett, Cain, and Le 2018). Often expressed as the need to develop students' '*inner confidence and proactivity*' through the study, this issue was understood as the need for empowerment towards longer-term change and development. For example, university one university leader explained how 'a group of minority students set up a network with an international youth organisation … through that network, they had information' about employment and professional development opportunities. Similarly, one minority ethnic student at the focus group talked about his sense of agency to change societal structures 'It's up to me. If I try hard, I can see for myself that I'm just like people from Kinh [the majority group]. If I still have low self-esteem about my ethnicity and I don't interact with people outside, then people will think that I am not equal to them'. Another minority ethnic student talked of the encouragement from professional digital networks which enabled her to get an internship, which in turn helped her 'acquire a good and solid knowledge in this area. After two years, I was offered a good job … I now can support my family and afford my three siblings' schooling. This job opportunity really changes our life'.

Theoretically, a broad conceptualisation of empowerment was needed to tackle these issues, moving beyond the 'power over' model where policy instruments dominate its citizens into new behaviours (Rowlands 1997). This is a typical view of power used to express how hegemonic

institutions or elites mobilise their power, and there are other forms which have been used in policy development and participation (Pettit 2013). The other expressions of power are: *power-within* (a person having the self-awareness, self-esteem and confidence to believe they can change a situation), *power-with* (a person being able to contribute to collective action to change a situation) and *power-to* (a person being able to deliver effective individual action to learn how to change a situation) (VeneKlasen and Miller 2002). As such, the four expressions of empowerment provide a more holistic approach to describing how power is enacted in policy development and participation work and which are therefore relevant to systemic change over the medium to long term.

Multiple policies in Vietnam were identified as exemplar cases to illuminate the issues relevant to this theme. Among these policies was Decree No.141/2020/NĐ-CP which (1) provides financial support to ethnic minority people under 22 years old living in areas with especially difficult conditions and those from smaller ethnic minority groups, (2) enables them to be admitted to vocational or higher education institutions without an entry exam after completing upper secondary school and (3) requires that the provincial people's committee to secure a relevant job for the graduates when they come back the localities. As such, this policy targets key factors which are often associated with ethnic minority groups in Vietnam: low confidence from problematic participation in high school, the financial barriers to access and sustain engagement in higher education, the low levels of social capital and poor trust in formal employment to enable work and employment after graduation (Karlidag-Dennis, Hazenberg, and Dinh 2020).

Some evaluation work argues that the policy significantly improves the readiness of ethnic minority youth to 'catch up' with the learning capability of their peers from the dominant group (the Kinh) (Hong Phuc 2021; Nguyen 2020). However other reports highlight ongoing challenges in securing jobs for ethnic minority youth after their graduation, including specific schemes to target employment of minority ethnic graduates (ibid). For example, since 2010, Lang Son government province recruited only 84 out of the 231 available for ethnic minority youth (36.4%) (Hoang Tung 2021). On the one hand, this policy might provide the 'power-to' access new skills, knowledge and qualification, through financial resources, evidence also points to the ongoing 'power-within' challenges which make it very difficult to maintain such participation. These include, for example, the potential of continued low confidence because of challenges in communicating or relating to teachers and other students in higher education, and because of this, unchanged or low aspirations for jobs which are not characteristically decent (Bui et al. 2019).

Similarly, the policy does not explicitly enable ethnic minority youth to learn how to change their livelihood, work or employment situation, for example through additional employability training (another form of 'power-to') or through learning how to contribute to collective action ('power with'). Evidence continues to suggest that individual empowerment in this context is insufficient to materially change practice, and policy needs to drive new socio-cultural norms that otherwise hinder education uptake and achievement (Jones, Presler-Marshall, and Van Anh 2015; Kudo 2023). In this way, whereas the policy may promote *access* to higher education (through 'power-to'), the policy does not account for *participation and success* in relation to ethnic minority students (e.g. through 'power within' or 'power with'), and as such, broaden the employment gap between majority and minority groups (Fujii 2017).

(Institutional)#recognition of individuals as valid human beings

The final theme highlighted the scenario of policies not reflecting the specific needs of the minority ethnic students. This was often referred to as the need to '*to reflect the positive aspirations and abilities in policy*' of the students and graduates, this issue was understood as the need for institutional recognition of individuals as valid human beings with specific needs. For example, a representative of Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs explained the need for specific policy to understand minority students with 'abilities and aspirations … vocational training models need to be suitable to the natural conditions and customs of mountainous ethnic minority areas'. Another explained

that 'ethnic minority youth have more priorities than the Kinh [majority group] … [there needs to be] direct support policies for people in poor households, policies to support the preservation and development of ethnic minority cultures'. Similarly, an employer says the minority groups are often skilled in technical areas and policy needs to have them 'consult' because 'the way they express is easy for local people to understand … I set up a plan to have 20% of minority staff well'.

Theoretically, 'recognition' here reflects 'practical attitudes whose primary intention consists in a particular act of affirming another person or group' in a way which 'permit the addressee to identify with his or her own qualities and thus to achieve a greater degree of autonomy' (Honneth 2012, 80). It is a sense of reciprocity which underpins a sense of esteem, confidence, agency and ultimately wellbeing as part of a society (Honneth 2012) or a workplace more specifically (Tweedie et al. 2019). In this sense, then, recognition involves the affirmation of the diversity of citizens and their circumstances through policy instruments and decisions which asserts what it means to be a valid human being in society or the workplace (and by implication, what is not) (Marvell 2022). This includes the recognition of local cultural norms, customs, traditions, values and practices.

The conceptualisation of students in Vietnamese law was selected as an exemplar case to illuminate the issues. A significant, illustrative example of a policy instrument affecting the general classification of human 'young people' in Vietnam is the Youth Law, which came into effect in 2005 and was revised recently in 2020 (Chairman of the National Assembly of Vietnam 2020). The Youth Law specifies the legal framework and policies for education, job training and employment for ethnic minority students, such as access to funding, loans, equipment and career development support to enhance employability and self-employability (ibid). It articulates this through a systemic understanding, enactment and adoption of policies to ensure the engagement and commitment of all stakeholders including the government, training institutions and employer decisions in supporting ethnic minority students to improve their livelihood situation through work, employment or self-employment (ibid). It is in this sense that policy *acknowledges* the difficult socio-economic conditions ethnic minority students experience in accessing the governmental initiatives – but this does not necessarily equate to *recognition* of the individuals it refers to.

Despite a wide range of policies and programmes to support ethnic minority students' access to employment, evidence suggests there should be more guidelines and practical methods to improve job training and access to the job market (Hoang Thanh & Thanh Huyen 2020; Nguyen 2017). Specifically, the policy and guidance provided is too general and there are operational difficulties for local authorities, educational institutions and companies, to implement in practice, and as a consequence, many ethnic minority students do not *effectively* receive the benefits from these policies and programmes – and as such are not *recognised* by the governing system. For example, around 70% of students completing the 'Cu tuyen' programme could not find a job (CEMA 2018).

Evidence suggests there are two main reasons for this. The first can be understood in terms of the non- or mis-*recognition* of the particular learning and development needs of the specific candidates; the job or vocational training provided to ethnic minorities is insufficient in terms of developing practical knowledge and skills as well as developing effective language abilities to engage and therefore be *recognised* in the workplace (Hoang Uyen 2019; Nguyen 2017; Nguyen and Truong 2020). This is particularly pertinent given that candidates starting the programme had a poor level of secondary education, which is typical from disadvantaged areas (Van Hung 2018).

The second reason relates to the non- or mis-*recognition* of the particular human resource planning needs of businesses or sectors in particular geographic areas which may be predominantly ethnic minority workers (Hong Phuc 2020; Nguyen 2017). This relates to a wider lack of recognition of particular groups who occupy certain geographic or sectoral areas through the lack of resources and investment in industrialising or modernising sectors across the country (Hoang Uyen 2019, Nguyen and Truong 2020). Such education and work investment profiles lead to a situation where although there are skilled, young workers available, they continue to work in the agriculture sectors which are more available than other forms of work.

The non- or mis-recognition of ethnic minority students, their assets and their geographic/sectoral work circumstances, stifles significant and material change in the *effective* opportunities to engage in any form of work, including opportunities which might be described as decent work. This reflects a deeper, longer-term structural lack of recognition in policy work, driven through a mismatch of supply and demand of workers, where some sectors experience oversupply and others experience undersupply, but where the structural disadvantages experienced by ethnic minority students are perpetuated over time.

Discussion: empowering decent work through higher education policy

The ongoing governance required to enable ethnic minority students to access and participate in decent work is complex and multifaceted. This study finds that understanding the dynamics of these issues needs a meta-perspective to understand the multiple factors in the education-work ecosystem which shape the conditions in which work and opportunities for work manifest, and that there also needs to be cultural renewal which enables the ethnic minority students to change their situation through various expressions of power. Underpinning such understandings and perspectives in governmental policy work, there needs to be recognition of citizen diversity, enabling ethnic minority students (and others) to feel that those in power think they are valid human beings who can positively contribute to society (Honneth 2012). Together, these findings underpin the conceptualisation of the *counter-active* effects in policy formulation in the context of Decent Work which necessarily cross education-work policy spheres. In particular, the findings highlight the counter-active effects of policy which are adopt narrow systems levels and forms of empowerment, and which do not recognise the aspirations and needs of particular groups. This is represented in Figure 1.

In addition, the logic of the mediating influence of *counter-active* factors underpins the integration of the theoretical apparatus presented in Figure 2. Vertically, the figure presents the different dimensions of an ecosystem, including micro, meso, exo and macro systems (Bronfenbrenner 1999), and horizontally, the figure presents the different forms of power, including power-within, power-with, power-to and power-over (VeneKlasen and Miller 2002). These concepts have been translated into the specific context of this study in Figure 2, so are applied to broad notions of employment, work or livelihood. The two concepts interact to create 16 conceptual spaces where

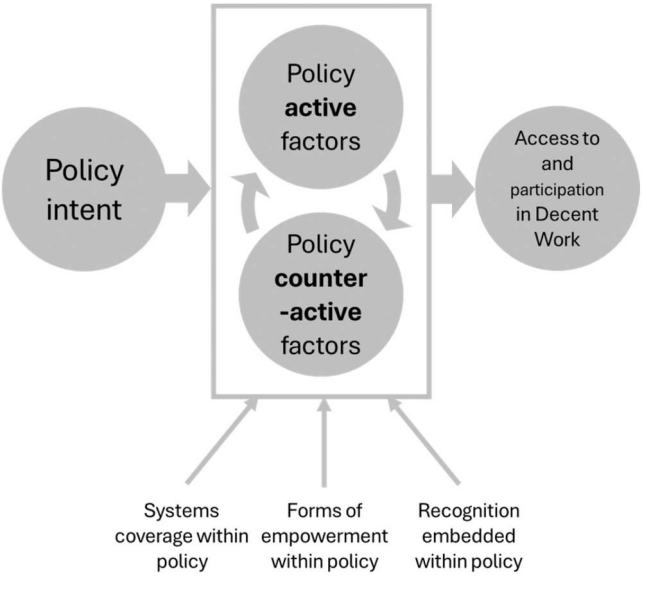

Figure 1. *Counter-active* factors mediating policy intent and participation in Decent Work.

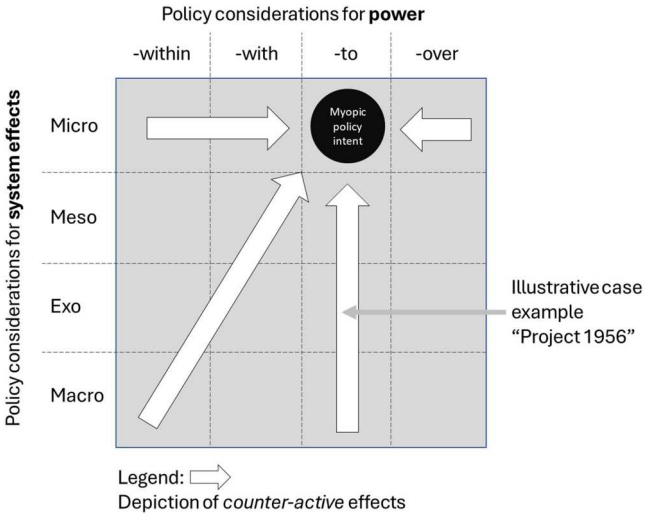

Figure 2. Decent Work policy considerations to recognise and empower minority ethnic groups across an ecosystem.

the underpinning theory of *recognition* manifests, i.e. the dimensions of how citizens can be empowered through the institutional policy work of government, educational and training institutes, and employing companies (Honneth 2012). In turn, given the particular area of application in the context of this study, these become the 16 dimensions of how higher education policy can empower ethnic minority students to participate in Decent Work. Conceptualised in this way, it is possible to highlight *myopic* policy intent (Figure 3), where there are significant counter-active effects because of narrowly conceived system effects and power (as discussed in detail above).

Such findings challenge contemporary analyses and perspectives which focus on analysing the work of institutions (Guan and Abbas 2022; O'Farrell, Hassan, and Hoole 2022; Smolentseva 2023), to look beyond institutional boundaries to the wider sociocultural influences that impact higher education policy implementation (Godonoga and Sporn 2023). The findings also call for more explicit in

Policy considerations of system effects	Policy considerations for power: -within	-with	-to	-over
Micro	...activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships that enable sense of self-awareness, confidence, and belief.	...activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships that enable people to contribute to collective action.	...activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships that develop skills to change own situation.	...activities, roles, and interpersonal relationships that enable ability to influence others.
Meso	...linkages between fields that enable sense of self-awareness, confidence, and belief.	...linkages between fields that enable people to contribute to collective action.	...linkages between fields that develop skills to change own situation.	...linkages between fields that enable ability to influence others.
Exo	...conditions and resources within settings that enable sense of self-awareness, confidence, and belief.	...conditions and resources within settings that enable people to contribute to collective action.	...conditions and resources within settings that develop skills to change own situation.	...conditions and resources within settings that enable ability to influence others.
Macro	...the culture and customs that enable sense of self-awareness, confidence, and belief.	...the culture and customs that enable people to contribute to collective action.	...the culture and customs that develop skills to change their own situation.	...the culture and customs that enable ability to influence others.

Figure 3. *Myopic* policy intent and examples of mediating *counter-active* effects.

the theorisation of how higher education policy can target empowerment and agency (following Kudo 2023; O'Farrell, Hassan, and Hoole 2022).

Implications

The governance of decent work remains a significant, global challenge, partly because of the complexities involved in changing national systems and cultural practices in relation to work, how it is designed, and the damaging impacts it can have on individuals, families, organisations and sectors. Policy apparatus needs a meta-perspective of the education-work ecosystem and a commitment to cultural renewal which enables the ethnic minority students to change their situation through various expressions of power, and underpinned by recognition of citizen recognition. The 16 dimensions offer researchers, analysts and researchers a policy design and evaluation tool which is normatively holistic and emancipatory. Whilst the framework was devised in relation to minority ethnic groups, the theoretical and empirical dynamics (Bronfenbrenner 1999; Honneth 2012; Kudo 2023) propose that there are sociocultural dynamics which have more or less material influence on perceptions, motivations, confidence and network access of all students who participate in the social system. This means that although the 16 dimensions can be *particularly* useful to think through those with least resources in the system, it can also be used to consider dominant groups and how a policy intervention might disempower in relation to accessing Decent Work. Indeed, this may raise tensions in policy making, as a way to inform and negotiate policy design. The first function is analytical; it provides a structure to conceptualise and understand the impact of actual or planned policies, and the dynamics which might be limiting or accelerating the impact of policy decisions. The second function extends this analytical use in to practice and enables policy or practice practitioners in research, analysis, policy or human resource planning and development, to consider decisions and map the additional requirements of those decisions. For example, in revising a policy intervention, how is the implementation of the policy impacting the supply of skills in an area, and where are the gaps at the local (rather than national) level? Is wider investment needed to realise the utilisation of those skills in particular areas, which in turn drive employment and overall productivity? For employing or training organisations, what relationships can they set up to enable ethnic minority students to feel part of a team, to release their creativity, commitment and productivity for the organisation? This means thinking beyond particular cells within the framework when designing and implementing policy, to consider the impacts on other cells, or to change the design of a policy formulation to increase the chances of it addressing wider structures in society which impact Decent Work. With a meta perspective, to encompass the multiple stakeholders involved in enabling students to access and engage in decent work, what co-operations and/or collaborations between government departments, student unions and specialist agencies (such as agriculture, culture or economic/trade) might deliver an alternative way forward? Notably, a human resource forecast by sector and area, and particularly in ethnic minority regions, could be undertaken to mobilise graduates from training institutions to relevant jobs or employments. Such questions may guide future practice development, but may also drive it forward. These analytical functions, overall, suggest the normative expectation that, in contrast to a *myopic* policy stance, an *expansive* policy intent considers more of the potential counter-active effects to enable participation in the complexities of Decent Work (see Figure 4).

Future directions of research would usefully examine the materialisation of Decent Work and the multi-layered governance of such, using the framework as a mapping schematic to examine effective policies as well as those which may need revision or deletion. This research will not only need to be sensitive to cultural circumstances of work (Duffy et al. 2020), but in some cases radically different conceptions of livelihood, for example, where a worker works in exchange for food and shelter rather than money (Hagedoorn et al. 2020). Similarly, research would usefully consider how, and the extent to which, educational and work systems can develop capacities for empowerment, particularly those with least economic and social capital in society. This is likely to be linked to countries

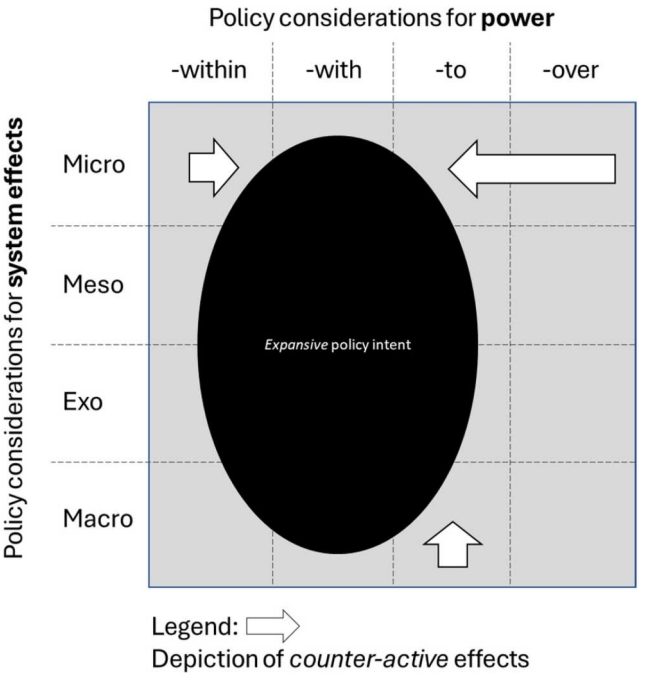

Figure 4. *Expansive* policy intent and examples of (reduced) *counter-active* effects.

which continue their investment in general as well as vocational and technical education reform. How this manifests in countries where there are dominant government parties is likely to be very different to settings where neo-liberal ideologies encourage individuals to take individual action as an investment in one's future (Chan and Mak 2020). As policy work develops in line with sustainable development, it is important to understand how future leaders, including those identifying as from ethnic minorities, can change the structural norms which are currently prohibiting so many from engaging in decent work around the globe.

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