

## **Exploring Vietnamese EFL Teacher Educators' Professional Development in the Context of the National Foreign Language Policy**

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### **Abstract**

Teachers' professional development (PD) is viewed as the centre of educational reforms in many countries. As key agents in EFL education in the current foreign language policy initiated by the National Foreign Languages 2020 Project (Project 2020), Vietnamese EFL teacher educators have undertaken a wide range of PD activities to meet the top-down requirements of both Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and their teacher education institutions (TEIs). However, teacher educators tended to receive insufficient guidelines and support, regarding alignment of their PD practice and policy requirements at both system levels. This paper outlines an empirical research on Vietnamese teacher educators' perceptions of professional development alignment in the eight largest public tertiary teacher education institutions across Vietnam. Findings from a survey on 144 teacher educators indicate coherence between institutional and Ministry of Education and Training (MOET)'s requirements, and between institutional requirements and teacher educators' PD. Yet teacher educators perceived a less effective connect between their PD practice and MOET's policies. This calls for strategic plans to empower teacher educators' PD and promote PD alignment, regarding policy innovation and provision of support. Given the centrality of effective EFL instruction to many contexts, and the important role PD plays in teacher development and student outcomes, this research offers significant insights for a range of stakeholders such as EFL researchers, policy-makers, tertiary governance, EFL institutions and educators across all educational levels.

Keywords: Professional Development, Teacher Education, EFL Teacher Educators, Language Policy, Policy Alignment

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## Introduction

Professional development (PD) of teachers being well acknowledged in recent research (Desimone, 2009). International studies cover conceptualisation of PD, features of a quality PD activity, models and stages of teachers' on-going development, etc. in different contexts (Borko, 2004; Broad & Evans, 2006; Caena, 2011; Casale, 2011; Combs, 1965; Darling-Hammond, 2005; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Day & Sachs, 2005; Fraser, Kennedy, Reid, & Mckinney, 2007; Ganser, 2000; Guskey, 2002; Hustler, 2003; Kennedy, 2005; Offices of Development Effectiveness, 2015; Villegas-Reimers, 2003). However, there is little information on how teacher educators develop professionally and how they perceived PD alignment at different system levels. Recently this topic has become a focus of interest (Korthagen, 2000; Koster & Degerink, 2001) and call for research and documentation in the field (Loughran, 2014; Smith, 2003).

In Vietnam, education and teacher education are experiencing a rapid transformation, with current language policy directly impacting EFL educators and their PD. In order to increase the quality of foreign language education, particularly English language teaching (ELT), The National Foreign Languages 2020 Project (also known as Project 2020) involves massive innovation and expertise from an array of authorities and institutions (Government of Vietnam, 2008). Both MOET and a number of qualified EFL teacher education institutions (TEIs) have been deemed responsible for providing strategic PD programs for over 86,000 educators across education levels. This newly-assigned top-down task has created pressure for EFL teacher educators at TEIs, who directly engage in training high quality pre-service EFL teachers and evaluating current in-service EFL teachers' language competencies (Nguyen, 2010). Teacher educators needed to grow professionally for both their own sake and for their impacts on EFL teacher education. However, these EFL teacher educators tended to receive insufficient guidelines and provision. They seemed confused about their PD practice in association with policy alignment at both MOET and institutional levels.

Drawing on survey data of 144 Vietnamese EFL teacher educators (coded as R001 – R144) across the eight largest public TEIs in eight different sub-regions in Vietnam, this paper highlights teacher educators' perceptions of PD alignment in the transformation contexts. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the survey data address the multi-dimensional relation of teacher educators' PD, institutional PD requirements, and MOET's PD requirements, which is under-researched in Vietnamese contexts.

Vietnamese EFL Teacher educators' perceptions of PD alignment were examined via their degree of agreement with five statements about PD alignment at both institutional and ministerial levels, as well as their further comments and/or explanations. Participants revealed positive responses to all the statements, with the mean scores ranging between 2.69 and 3.11. While participants' PD aligned with both their institution's and MOET's PD requirements, their PD complied more with institutional PD ( $N = 114$ ,  $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = .486$ ) than with MOET's PD requirements ( $N = 113$ ,  $M = 2.96$ ,  $SD = .573$ ). A detailed description of participants' explanations for their perceptions of PD alignment and provision is presented in the sections that follow.

### **Teacher educators' perceptions of PD alignment at institutional levels**

A major finding was that teacher educators' PD was perceived to be closely associated with institutional requirements. Participants confirmed that as a teacher educator at their institution, they had to be qualified for the teaching profession and fully understand their professional roles. For this reason, all the PD programs participants had undertaken by far aimed to facilitate their own development as well as meeting the institutional requirements for staff development.

The alignment originated from teacher educators' activism in undertaking PD to meet the institution's requirements. Participants had an understanding of institutional requirements (66.67%) and their own PD needs (17.78%), as well as actively engaging in PD programs delivered by their institution (28.89%). Participants were self-aware of developing their professional practices, skills and knowledge (R017, R023 & R138) via workshop and training programs (R118). Their PD awareness was also emphasised when participant R14 stated: "I always make every single attempt to undertake PD, learn from colleagues and seriously participate in all institutional activities." Participant R144 believed that PD facilitated her to improve instructional quality and content knowledge; as a result, she could continuously learn to meet the institutional standards.

Most of participants understood that their institution required them to develop professionally, with the inclusion of teacher educators' PD in institutional development strategies. Their institution also required teacher educators' "research capacity enhancement" (R067), "degree accreditation" (R066), and "adaptation to institutional innovation" (R125). Approximately 18 % of participants indicated that the institution was deemed to offer most PD programs for teacher educators. These programs were evaluated to be "diverse", "context-based" and "relevant" to both the institution's objectives and teacher educators' needs (R026, R101, R122 & R143).

### **Teacher educators' perceptions of PD alignment at ministerial levels**

Teacher educators also tended to agree that their PD aligned with MOET's PD requirements for EFL teacher educators. Explanations for this alignment varied, yet focused on teacher educators' understanding of MOET's PD requirements (72.73%) and their attendance to MOET's PD programs (15.15%). Other responses addressed participants' engagement in Project 2020 or participants' self-training to improve instruction quality and research capacity as part of PD at the ministerial levels. Participants also perceived "degree accreditation" as both evidence of PD alignment with MOET's requirements and great pressure to meet these requirements. A small number of participants showed their uncertainty about MOET's requirements for teacher educators (e.g. R015, R060, R071 & R088) or had not attended any of MOET's PD programs (R013). They stated that MOET's PD programs were not relevant to their needs and MOET's PD policies were "not always consistent and supportive."

### **Institutional PD requirements versus MOET's PD requirements**

The investigation into alignment between the institution's and MOET's PD requirements for EFL teacher educators indicated participants' high level of both

agreement and strong agreement. Participants commented that their institution followed MOET's guidelines; thus, institutional requirements had to align with MOET's, particularly since the implementation of Project 2020 (N = 17). Their institutions used MOET's support – especially in terms of state budget distribution – to offer institutional PD programs for teacher educators.

Participants also raised concerns about the coherence between MOET's and institution's PD requirements. They argued that both MOET's and institution's requirements were top-down, and that teacher educators themselves had “no voice in responding to the requirements” (e.g. R094). In other cases, participants felt their institution's requirements more comprehensible, more detailed and better targeted than MOET's. Participants R085 and R044, despite their overall agreement, insisted that the institutions “re-consider several of MOET's PD programs”, indicating that MOET's requirements lacked systematic development and relevance to institutional contexts. To exemplify, one participant stated: “They [MOET] require teachers of English to have a certificate of another language [other than English] and an IT certificate called IC3. It [this policy] is totally a waste of time and only puts more pressure on teachers” (R044).

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, using descriptive analysis of participants' survey responses, I have provided an overview of Vietnamese EFL teacher educators' perceptions of PD. In light of the discussion of PD policy alignment, I have analysed a triangular relation among participants' PD, institutional PD requirements and MOET's PD requirements, from participants' perspectives. My preliminary findings address (i) teacher educators' PD aligned with both institutional and MOET's requirements; (ii) teacher educators' PD alignment with institutional requirements was greater than with MOET's; and (iii) institutional PD requirements aligned with MOET's.

The above findings called for effective strategies to improve policy alignment. From teacher educators' perspective, there was an urgent need for major innovations in PD policies at both institutional and MOET levels, the need for high quality PD provision, as well as teacher educators' PD autonomy in the transformation process. In other words, these recommendations reflected teacher educators' needs for on-going and systemic PD. There should also be considerations from other stakeholders such as the institutions and MOET as mainstream PD providers for teacher educators in Vietnam. These will be addressed in the coming analysis phase of the current project and updated in the journals that follow.

This descriptive paper provides understanding of teacher educators' PD in the innovation context of EFL education and teacher education in Vietnam. Though the discussions limit to the initial findings, the implications of the research can be viewed in broader contexts of EFL countries in Asia, which may draw attention from policy-makers, tertiary governance and EFL teachers across all educational levels.

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