ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Investigating Professional Development Policy and Practice for Educational Policy-Makers in Vietnam: An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT
There has been plenty of studies concerning professional development at the micro level. However, little research has been particularly conducted to investigate professional development at the macro level. This study aims to explore professional development policies and practices in a Vietnamese government department. Using a qualitative method with two focus group discussions involving 11 participants and semi-structured interviews with 14 people, the study investigates professional development for state policy-makers in testing and quality assurance in Vietnam. The results show that these government officials themselves actively looked for professional development programmes along with receiving support from their organisational leaders. The research findings also reveal that top-down and bottom-up professional development mechanisms are being implemented. However, professional development policies have not been documented in this government agency. It is suggested that professional development policies aligned with best practices should be discussed, developed and evaluated by agency members and soon approved by the agency's leaders.

1. INTRODUCTION

Professional development is the strategy educational institutions use to ensure that their teaching and managerial staff continue to strengthen their competence throughout their career (Mizell, 2010). It is argued that "professional development improves university teaching" (Cannon, 1983, p. 21). There has been a significant increase in the number of studies in professional development in the past few decades (Hallinger & Kulophas, 2020; Sutrisno & Carter, 2016). Many attempts (see Chai, 2019; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Karlberg & Bezzina, 2022; Kao et al., 2020, for example) have been made to identify elements that contribute to the effectiveness of professional development at the micro level, or in the higher education institutions and schools context. However, only few studies have investigated policy-makers that develop the professional development programmes implemented at universities and schools. In other words, there is a lack of research focusing on professional development at the macro level (the national level) (Nguyen, 2019).

To address part of this knowledge gap, the current study was undertaken to comprehend the professional development policy and practice in a Vietnamese governmental department. This organisation is responsible for policy-making and state management of testing and quality assurance. Specifically, its missions are developing regulations and guidelines in testing and quality assurance for different levels of the Vietnamese education system. As of the end of 2018, this agency employed approximately 50 staff members. The organisational structure includes the board of directors (one director general and three deputy directors general) and seven divisions. Each division had one head, one or two deputy heads and from six to ten staff members. Generally, the division head or deputy head (called middle level management officials in this study) is in charge of developing policies in testing or quality

assurance with the assistance of the division staff members. The director general or deputy director general is responsible for approving those policies.

To investigate the professional development policy and practice in this Vietnamese government department, two following questions are addressed in this paper:

Question 1. What are the employee' perceptions of the implementation of professional development activities in a Vietnamese government organisation specialising in testing and quality assurance?

Question 2. What are the organisation's professional development policies?

The article contributes to understanding the professional development policies and activities for policy-makers in the field of testing and quality assurance in a government agency in Vietnam.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Concepts of Professional Development

Relevant literature provides various conceptions of professional development. Robinson and Carrington (2002) outline conventional models of professional development and define them as brief workshops, conferences or courses (usually with no follow-up), and long-term feedback. However, they point out this model is ineffective and merits replacement. Garavan (1998) argues that professional development has many purposes, including updating employee skills and knowledge, improving qualifications and positions and preparing for new roles. Mitchell (2013) defines professional development as "the process whereby an individual acquires or enhances the skills, knowledge and/or attitudes for improved practices" (p. 390). Bezzina and Camilleri (2010, p. 158) state that "the concept of professional development equates with the ongoing learning opportunities that all educators pursue in order to grow personally and collectively." In summary, professional development refers to any activity or process that improves present or future skills, attitudes, knowledge or performance.

2.2. Principles of Professional Development

Researchers have identified many professional development principles; the majority elaborate on the success and effectiveness of professional development programmes and activities. According to Moore (2000), professional development is the most fruitful when it takes the form of an ongoing process that includes appropriate well-thought-out training and individual follow-up through supportive observations, feedback, staff dialogues and peer coaching. Little (cited in Robinson & Carrington, 2002) states professional development is the most influential when long enough and often sufficient to facilitate progressive gains in confidence, knowledge and skills.

Additionally, Eun (2011) emphasises professional development is more productive when it includes opportunities to collaborate with professional peers, both within and outside an employee's institution, along with access to the expertise of external researchers and programme developers. Similarly, Young (2007) stresses that the development of organisation employees and officials should be an ongoing process and considers both individuals' immediate and advanced career stages and needs. Specifically, professional development calls for interrelationships among individual, organisational and systemic goals and is implicated in the design and application of development programmes.

To sum up, Guskey (2002) suggests three principles required to implement professional development effectively in educational institutions:

- Recognising that change is a gradual and difficult process for teachers;
- Ensuring that teachers receive regular feedback on student learning progress; and
- Providing continued follow-up, support and pressures.

2.3. Professional Development Policy

To implement professional development programmes effectively in the educational context, professional development policies must be developed, and it must be drawn from the discourse of school effectiveness. The policy should indicate a 'problem-solution' relation and is offered as a recommended solution. Moreover, professional development policies should endorse core competencies including professional knowledge and understanding, essential skills, values and attitudes (Akalu, 2016). In addition, Owens et al. (2016) analyses a professional development policy that consists of four sections including: Introduction, Mission and Definition of Professional Learning, Roles and Responsibilities for Designing, Implementation and Evaluation, and Resources. The first section

outlines the purpose of the professional development guidelines, the scope and organisation of the document. The second section includes a mission and the definition of professional learning that the stakeholders used to guide their thinking. The third section highlights the roles and responsibilities for designing, implementing and evaluating the program. The Resources section focuses on the anticipated support envisioned to create a sustainable culture of job-embedded professional learning.

Higher education institutions are typically quite clear about professional development policies. For example, OCAD University, Canada has adhered to their professional development policy for staff and managers since January 2011 (approved by the Vice-President in Finance and Administration). This policy documents the purpose, scope, policy and procedure for allocation of professional development funds (OCAD University, 2011). Similarly, the Professional Development Policy of Western Sydney University, Australia consists of five sections: purpose and context, definitions, policy statement, procedures, and guidelines. The procedures section is the primary focus of the policy, and it is divided into twelve parts: (a) internal university professional development providers, (b) individual development plans, (c) allocation of salaries budget to meet professional development, (d) induction, (e) continuing professional development, (f) short courses and conferences, (g) academic development programme, (h) education support, (i) higher duties, (j) internal secondment, and (l) external secondment or external exchange (WSU, 2017).

Obviously, professional development policies for educational policy-makers, institutional leaders and teachers should be developed to facilitate professional development programmes and activities be implemented systematically and effectively (Nguyen, 2019). In order to have good policies, it should be aligned with best practices and its content should also be discussed and evaluated by staff members who are directly involved in the policy (Owens et al., 2016).

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach to better understand how people construct meaning and make sense of their world and experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The qualitative methods used in this study are semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions as they are strong and powerful research instruments in qualitative research (Creswell, 2018; Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999; Patton, 2015). Specifically, semi-structured interviews and focus groups discussion were employed in the current study to investigate professional development policies and practice at the government organisation specialising in policy-making in testing and quality assurance in Vietnam.

Additionally, this study was undertaken with purposeful sampling, which is arguably the most common form of non-probabilistic sampling and the most appropriate sampling strategy in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Purposeful sampling was employed to select information-rich cases for in-depth studies. Specifically, the research data for the current study were collected from Vietnam's national quality assurance organisation, accrediting agencies and universities. Notably, the data collection procedure began with focus group discussions and were followed by semi-structured interviews.

Regarding the data collection from the focus group, two focus group discussions were conducted. Focus group 1 consisted of five middle level management officials. They were division heads or deputy heads. In fact, six people had agreed to participate in the discussion; however, one could not attend because he was overseas for business. Focus group 2 included six staff members who specialised in supporting educational institutions in testing and/or quality assurance activity implementation. Information related to focus group participants is specified in Table 1. The focus group discussions were conducted in the office building of the researched agency according to a discussion guide and each discussion lasted around two hours.

Table 1. A summary of informants participating in focus group discussions

Focus Group Number	Participants	Responsibilities	Number of Participants
Focus group 1	Middle level management officials	- Policy-making in testing and/or quality assurance - Designing professional development programmes	5

Focus group 2	Staff members	- Supporting educational institutions to conduct testing and/or quality assurance activities	6
		- Implementing professional development activities	

As for the data collection from semi-structured interviews, the current study employed personal interviews with 14 participants sorted into three groups: the organisational leaders or formal leaders, middle level management officials and division staff members. The position, responsibility and number of each type are presented in Table 2. Semi-structured interviews were conducted after all focus group discussions. Based on the insights collected from the focus group, the researchers restructured the interview guides and focused on several interview questions designed to explore in-depth information and clarify issues that had arisen in the focus group discussions. All of the interviews were conducted at the participants' offices during office hours, and each interview lasted between 30 minutes to 40 minutes.

Table 2. A summary of informants participating in interviews

Position	Responsibilities	Number
Organisation leaders	- Approving testing and quality assurance policies - Approving professional development programmes	3
Middle level management officials	- Policy-making in testing or quality assurance - Designing professional development programmes	6
Staff members	- Assisting in testing or quality assurance policy-making - Implementing professional development activities	6
Total:		14

It is important to note that all focus group discussions and interviews were undertaken in Vietnamese, the native language of both the researcher and participants. With permission from the informants, the researcher took notes and used a small dedicated digital audio recorder and a smartphone to record each discussion and interview. Consent forms were signed by all informants prior to focus group discussions and interviews.

The current study employed a thematic approach in the analysis of the qualitative data. All recorded focus group discussions and interviews were fully transcribed in Vietnamese and then thoroughly analysed. It is important to note that each transcript was assigned a filename. The two focus groups were labelled from FG-1 and FG-2, and the 14 personal interviews from PI-1 to PI-14. During this analysis, key themes and sub-themes emerged. Important information shared by the leaders, middle level management officials and staff members of the national quality assurance organisation of Vietnam regarding the professional development policy and practice was highlighted.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results

Through thematic analysis, key themes related to professional development policies and practices observed at the selected government department were revealed through the lens of informant responses. The staff members were encouraged to look for professional development programmes. They also mentioned a professional development policy; however, this policy has not yet been documented.

4.1.1. Individuals Actively Look for Professional Development Programmes

The participants in interviews and focus group discussions claimed that they found most of their professional development programmes themselves. For example, one official said:

"*I looked for my own postgraduate programmes. I was aware of the importance of gaining a master's and PhD degree for my job. The organisation didn't have any project to support these kinds of professional development programmes. To cover the study costs, I got a scholarship from a foreign country for my master's study overseas. I managed to fund myself throughout my PhD programme. I did not ask for any financial support from my agency.*" (PI-6)

This informant continued:

"*Although I decided to further my education, I needed approval from the organisation's leaders. I participated in the doctoral study with my own money; however, I told the leaders. They encouraged me to complete the postgraduate programmes because they were necessary for my job.*" (PI-6)

Another official shared her experience with her postgraduate studies. This informant said that when she came across information regarding scholarships for overseas master's programmes online, she found the criteria suited her. Thus, she applied and won the scholarship. She asked for and received leaders' approval of her overseas study. (PI-7)

The staff members also actively looked for short courses, conferences and workshops to develop their profession. In one focus group discussion, one participant stated:

"*I usually surf the Internet to search for conferences and workshops on assessment, evaluation, quality assurance and accreditation. When I found a suitable one, I shared the information with my colleagues. We then requested the support from the Director General. If he agreed, we would be funded to attend the event.*" (FG-2)

4.1.2. Staff Members are Encouraged to Attend Professional Development Activities

All informants, as policy-makers and officials in the field of testing and quality assurance, stated they were encouraged to look for and participate in professional development programmes, particularly postgraduate ones. One senior official stated:

"*Our organisation has strategic plans to train staff capacity of quality assurance. Specifically, we approved some officials' undertaking master's and PhD programmes in Australia, master's programmes in Japan, and master's and PhD programmes in Vietnam.*" (PI-8)

Another senior official shared similar views:

"*Not only our agency's officials but also those of other departments should and need to enhance their professional competencies through short training courses or qualification programmes run by local or overseas institutions.*" (PI-2)

Most staff members agreed that, in general, their leaders supported their pursuit of professional development programmes. They reported that up until then, four officials had been awarded PhD degrees and more than ten officials had earned master's degrees. Currently, two people are undertaking doctoral studies and four are enrolled in master's courses locally or overseas.

4.1.3. Organisational Leaders' Support of Professional Development Activities

The officials in this organisation are encouraged to participate in professional development programmes. The Director General and Deputy Directors General claimed to support professional development activities for their staff. One expressed:

"*I often tell my staff that I will fully facilitate their professional development and capacity building in quality assurance, accreditation and assessment. They can participate in overseas study visits, conferences, workshops and seminars. These activities provide them with further knowledge, skills and experience. However, sometimes I think they have not grabbed all the opportunities.*" (PI-1)

Another leader shared similar points:

"*We generally encourage them [staff members] to participate in professional development activities to improve their professional capacities. They can participate in short courses of some weeks or months, or long-term courses such as master's or PhD programmes. However, it's important to maintain the balance of human resources. Not all of them can pursue these opportunities at the same time. They need to take turns.*" (PI-3)

In general, most staff members agreed that organisational leaders were very supportive. However, agency human resources proved limited. As a result, the staff could only select the most appropriate professional development programmes. When they decided to participate in a programme, they usually received organisational support in the form of time allocation or a grant.

4.1.4. Top-down and Bottom-up Mechanisms

In response to the question, "*Who proposes the professional development programmes: organisation's leaders or staff members?*", the informants claimed both, depending on specific programmes. For example, one official shared:

"*If I find a conference or workshop with relevant content to my field, I will ask for the organisation's leaders' permission to participate. Normally, they agree. For example, there were five overseas workshops last year, and we all got approval from the leaders.*" (PI-7)

This informant continued:

"*Sometimes, there were some conferences or workshops that sent announcements or invitations to our organisation. The Director General or Deputy Director General then forwarded these to us or decided who would attend those events. For such programmes, the leader decides who participates. For the programmes I mentioned previously, we proposed them, and the leader approved.*" (PI-7)

In addition, another official stated:

"*I came across some professional development activities by chance; for example, my colleague introduced them to me. I found some by myself, and the others were assigned to me by the organisation's leaders.*" (PI-5)

The mechanism present here in professional development is not clear. Does it mix both top-down and bottom-up alignments? A top-down mechanism occurs when leaders dictate professional development programmes to their staff, while a bottom-up mechanism occurs when staff members propose professional development activities and obtain approval from leaders. One informant confided:

"*I think in order to improve our knowledge and skills in quality assurance and accreditation, we need to find professional development programmes by ourselves and then get the approval from the organisation's leaders. There are only a few programmes planned at the beginning of the calendar year.*" (PI-4)

4.1.5. Professional Development Policy has not been Documented

Professional development policy plays a vital role in guiding every step and process of each of an institution or organisation's professional development activities. When discussing this matter, most informants stated they either were unsure of such a policy or thought the organisation had such a policy but had not seen it or were not familiar with the details. For instance, one informant pointed out:

"*I am only aware of the organisation's regulations, which focus on working relationships among divisions and individuals and daily task performance procedures. The organisation's leaders are supportive of professional development. However, I don't think we have a professional development policy. I have no idea.*" (PI-5)

This informant went on to elaborate that:

"*In fact, I wish we had a professional development policy like higher education institutions or other government departments. In order to enhance the quality of the human resources, they have documents stating conditions, policies and support for staff members or lecturers undertaking professional development programmes. For example, if they participate in a master's or PhD course, a policy dictates how they will be supported. In our agency, I'm not sure whether we have documents like these. However, our leaders usually support us if we propose a programme for further education.*" (PI-5)

Another official responded to this matter:

"*I don't think our organisation has a professional development policy, and in my opinion, we should have a detailed one. This policy would be used to develop strategies or plans for capacity building among our organisation's staff members. In addition, the policy can also present professional development methods such as short courses, conferences or workshops.*" (PI-6)

Other informants explained there was no specific document regulating professional development policies for the organisation's staff members. Nevertheless, there seems to be something similar to such a document - the words of organisation's leaders. These words are considered the leaders' commitment for professional development programmes.

One official noted:

"*I don't think we have a clear policy for professional development, but in terms of supportiveness from organisation's leaders, we have that. They have approved most regional and international conferences or workshops.*" (PI-7)

This official continued to justify:

"*As there is no clear professional development policy, the financial support for professional development programmes, particularly postgraduate courses, is also not clear. I was lucky to receive a scholarship for my study overseas. However, many people in our agency must fund their studies themselves. I don't know whether they asked for tuition fees support from our organisation or not. I don't think tuition fees for local programmes are much, and the agency should support them fully or partially. It would be much better if we had a policy in this regard.*" (PI-7)

4.2. Discussion

The first research finding shows that the officials of the national policy-making organisation in testing and quality assurance in Vietnam managed to self-develop their professional knowledge and skills by actively searching for professional development programmes. This is consistent with professional development practices in the school context as teacher professional development is greatly based on self-directed learning (Dayoub & Bashiruddin, 2012; Zhang, Shi, & Lin, 2020) or school principals mostly depend on their own efforts to develop themselves professionally (Blaik Hourani & Stringer, 2015). Another finding highlights that the organisational leaders generally supported staff development and that staff members were encouraged to participate in professional development programmes. This is crucial for professional development as institutional leaders play a key role in supporting their staff's learning. Encouraging and supportive leadership are significant for staff members' professional development (Dayoub & Bashiruddin, 2012). Furthermore, the informants of the current study mentioned both bottom-up and top-down professional development models in their organisation. This finding is quite different from that of Dehghan (2022) where most teacher professional development activities are bottom-up. According to Fullan (2002), it is necessary to adopt both bottom-up and top-down mechanisms in structuring effective and sustainable professional development programmes.

Commitments to professional development by organisational leaders also received attention from the staff members working at the government agency in testing and quality assurance policy-making. For them, a professional development policy documenting and allocating a budget for professional development programmes constitutes the strongest commitment from the leaders. This finding is consistent with professional development policies developed by higher education institutions. For example, Federation University, Australia implemented a professional development policy in 2009 and revised it in 2010. The policy clarifies the purpose, scope, definitions, policy statement, responsibility, legislative context, associated documents, and implementation (Federation University, 2010). One key part of this document is the policy statement, which highlights the institution's commitments to supporting its staff's professional development: "*professional development is an integral part of the University's strategic planning*" (Federation University, 2010, p. 2).

Additionally, Australian Catholic University (ACU) recently updated its 'Professional Development for Professional Staff Policy' (on June 20th, 2023). This document focuses on background information, policy statement, policy purpose, application of policy, responsibilities, professional development opportunities, policy review and further assistance (ACU, 2023). The key points of this policy are responsibilities (of managers and nominated supervisors, human resources directorate, and staff members) and professional development opportunities (coaching, mentoring, on-the-job training, off-the-job courses, and conferences/seminars). ACU's professional development policy echoes the opinions of the present study's informants, outlining the responsibilities of different stakeholders in their organisation in the planning and implementation of professional development programmes. The participants suggested that every staff member should develop their own professional development programme. Division heads should then review these programmes and forward them to organisation leaders for approval. The quality assurance officials are only familiar with certain types of professional development mediums, including short courses, conferences and workshops. Other strategies, such as coaching, mentoring or on-the-job training seemed strange to them.

Organisations and institutions must set forth a clear professional development policy for staff and managers. The main purpose of a professional development policy is to encourage and support employees as they actively pursue professional and career development to fulfil integral elements of their employment within their institution. By approving a professional development policy, an institution acknowledges that professional development contributes to personal job satisfaction, workplace productivity, reward and recognition (WSU, 2017). According to Blandford (2000), the effective educational institution has a professional development policy generated by a team that represents the views of staff members at all levels. The policy's major parts must highlight professional development processes that focus on monitoring, evaluating and reviewing activities to ensure each target is properly addressed. Moreover, such policies should be documented via specific or general regulations. The findings of the current study show that Vietnam's national quality assurance organisation has not developed or formalised a documented professional development policy. The informants from this agency mentioned a few policies, like general staff development government regulations or the encouragement and support of organisation leaders regarding further study. Still, they wished the organisation would had a detailed professional development policy approved by the Director General to guide the planning and implementation of professional development activities.

Quality assurance agencies across the world also emphasise the importance of professional development policies. For example, the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) includes professional development in 'Guidelines to good practices: academic staff'. This document's professional development policy focuses on the professional development's importance, professional development mechanisms and agency/institutional roles (MQA, 2014). The current study found that, as an emerging quality assurance system in Southeast Asia, Vietnam's national organisation in quality assurance can learn a lot from other quality assurance agencies in the region, including MQA, when crafting their own professional development policy.

5. CONCLUSION

This qualitative study demonstrates that Vietnamese policy-makers in testing and quality assurance have actively looked for professional development programmes for themselves. Furthermore, they have received certain support from the organisational leaders to participate in several professional development activities. However, the professional development mechanism in this government department is not clear; it is a mixture of top-down and bottom-up policy. In spite of the fact that many higher education institutions and organisations have documented professional development policies that support their staff members' careers and professional development, the professional development policy of this Vietnamese government department has not been clearly documented. Informants from this agency expressed their desire for a developed and documented professional development policy approved by leadership as soon as possible. They suggested the policy should focus on professional development's purpose, scope, policy statement, responsibilities and strategies. In addition, they proposed procedures for the approval of individual professional development programmes and allocation of funds for these programmes.

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