

Professional development for educational policy-makers: Relating to university quality assurance in Vietnam

Cuong Huu Nguyen

Van Lang University, Vietnam

Professional development plays an important part in enhancing knowledge, skills and expertise for teachers, institutional leaders and educators. While studies on professional development for teachers and school principals have been abundant, little information regarding professional development at the government level has been recorded. This study aims to investigate professional development for policy-makers in higher education quality assurance in Vietnam. A qualitative approach with focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews was employed. Data collection was conducted with officials working at the government department responsible for policy-making in quality assurance, staff members of accrediting agencies and institutional leaders, quality assurance staff members and lecturers of higher education institutions. Results show that policy-makers in Vietnamese higher education quality assurance are using traditional professional development strategies including workshops, short courses, study visits, postgraduate programs and learning by doing. It is suggested that alternative professional development approaches should be implemented in the Vietnamese national quality assurance organisation.

Introduction

Professional development has emerged as a key part of human resources development in education and educational leadership and management. Well-prepared and well-implemented professional development programs and activities benefit individuals, institutions, and education systems. There has been a number of studies on professional development for teachers (see Karlberg & Bezzina, 2020; O'Brien, McNamara, O'Hara, & Brown, 2020, for example). Research into professional development among institutional leaders has also been abundant (see, Louie, Pughe, Kuo, & Björling, 2019; Sofu & Abonyi, 2018, for example). There are a variety of professional development strategies implemented for teachers and school leaders including short courses, workshops and seminars, coaching, mentoring, study visits, web-based learning, collaborative learning, network meetings, informal discussions, reading research studies, reading newspapers and magazines, peer observation, action learning, and problem-based learning (Karlberg & Bezzina, 2020; Sofu & Abonyi, 2018).

It can be seen that these above studies are all in school contexts, which means professional development at the institutional level. In most education systems, teachers and school leaders' daily activities including professional development implementation should be consistent with government educational policies developed by educational policy-makers (Nudzor, 2014). As policy-making is an important aspect of education and it is demanding work, educational policy-makers must possess deep knowledge, skills and expertise in their field to develop effective policies (Kovačević, Rahimić & Šehić, 2018). Educational policy-makers rely on professional development programs to gain knowledge

and skills necessary for their work. However, there seem to be a lack of research focusing on professional development among educational policy-makers or professional development at the national level (Nguyen, 2019a). Obviously, research investigating professional development at the government level in general and professional development strategies among policy-makers in education is necessary.

In the context of Vietnam, the higher education quality assurance system, which was established nearly twenty years ago, was considered to be still in the nascent stage (Pham, 2019; Tran & Vu, 2019). Consequently, human resource development in general and professional development in particular for staff members at both the institutional and national levels have been of crucial importance. Thousands of lecturers and quality assurance staff members in higher education institutions have participated in professional development activities (MOET, 2019). Professional development methods including workshops, short courses, study visits and network meetings were reported to be effective at the micro level (Nguyen, 2019b). Nevertheless, there is limited information on how professional development has been implemented at the government level of the Vietnamese quality assurance system; specifically, what professional development approaches have been utilised for quality assurance policy-makers? To fill part of this knowledge gap, this study aims to identify professional development strategies for officials responsible for policy-making in Vietnamese higher education quality assurance, and provide recommendations for improvement. This paper is expected to contribute to the lack of literature concerning professional development at the government level.

Literature review

Concepts and characteristics of professional development

Professional development in education is a broad, multi-faceted concept. As noted by Gordon (2004), definitions of professional development are as many as authors writing about this topic. Generally, professional development focuses on the ideas of change and renewal (Shohel & Banks, 2012). Cribb (2006) pointed out that professional development is part of the larger concept of human resource development. According to Young (2008), professional development includes all activities designed to enhance an employee's ability to work productively in an assigned or expected role. In the education sector, Zepeda, Parylo and Bengtson (2014) defined professional development as any approach taken to transfer knowledge, refine skills or enhance the overall effectiveness of teachers and school leaders. Similarly, according to Jensen and Rasmussen (2019), professional development aims to increase the knowledge and skills of teachers, educational practitioners and professionals. Focusing on teachers, Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner (2017, p. v) defined professional development as "structured professional learning that results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes." Bautista, Wong and Gopinathan (2015) referred professional development to all education and learning, including the formal and informal experiences of teachers in learning environments in complex and positive changing environments.

In addition, according to OECD (2009, p. 49), “professional development is defined as activities that develop an individual’s skills, knowledge, expertise and other characteristics as a teacher.” Professional development brings teachers together and provides them with learning opportunities so that they can learn from each other through more school-based initiatives to meet their needs and responsive to their personal motivations and goals (Bautista et al., 2015; Karlberg & Bezzina, 2020). It can be seen that there are various definitions of professional development; however, they are all concerned about the education and learning of adults, and are designed to produce positive change in beliefs, knowledge, skills or behaviours of participants. By implementing an intentional learning process that addresses specific learning objectives, professional development can result in the intended change in participants’ capabilities (Lauer, Christopher, Firpo-Triplett & Buchting, 2014).

Features of effective professional development

Specific features of effective professional development have been examined by several researchers. To begin with, Luo (2014) pointed out that an effective professional development program should aim to maximise the success of collaborative teaching and help teachers better guide their efforts in the learning process to work together. Similarly, Zepeda et al. (2014) shared that the focus of professional development should be ongoing, job-embedded, active learning, collaboration and student achievement. Furthermore, Owens, Pogodzinski and Hill (2016) emphasised four characteristics of professional development: content based, practice based, evidence based and pedagogically grounded.

More specifically, Fogarty and Pete (2004) suggested five critical qualities of effective professional development, including: (1) *sustained*: training is implemented over time; (2) *job-embedded*: training occurs and/or continues at the work site; (3) *interactive*: training invites, involves and engages participants; (4) *collegial*: training builds and supports a community of learners; and (5) *integrated*: training that is eclectic (web-based, online, text, face to face). In the Singaporean context, Bautista et al. (2015) also identified five characteristics of effective professional development for primary and secondary school teachers. They are: subject-matter specific and connected to classroom practice; intensive and ongoing; providing teachers with opportunities for active learning; promoting collective participation amongst teachers both across and within schools; and coherent with teachers’ needs and interests, and aligned with school and national priorities and goals.

Other studies examined effective professional development in the way that professional development is linked to teaching practices that impact on students’ learning. Professional development practices should be intensive, ongoing and connected to practice; they should also focus on student learning and address the teaching of specific curriculum content (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson & Orphanos, 2009). Benefits of professional development are related to preparing strategic plans, engaging in feedback and writing follow-up reports on students’ progress and achievement (Hourani & Stringer, 2015). The effectiveness of professional development increases when it combines theory,

practical application, feedback and cognitive peer coaching with follow-up (Zepeda et al., 2014).

Overall, through reviewing the associated literature over the last three decades, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) identified seven widely shared features of effective professional development. Such professional development should: be content focused, incorporate active learning, support collaboration, use models of effective practice, provide coaching and expert support, offer feedback and reflection, and be of sustained duration.

Professional development strategies

There are various means of delivering professional development: face-to-face or online courses, in group settings, in the classroom, or one-on-one (Owens et al., 2016). Professional development practices can range from traditional forms (such as *formal* courses, workshop, and postgraduate programs) to reform-based initiatives (such as *informal* sharing sessions, action research, school-university partnerships, or peer observations) (Bautista et al., 2015). In other words, “professional development can take different forms, for example formal and informal training, workshops, consultation and coaching, reflective supervision, or collaborative group work between educators.” (Jensen & Rasmussen, 2019, p. 935).

Besides the traditional professional development approaches related directly to classroom training, there are also several alternative professional development strategies for teachers, school principals and educators, including peer coaching, mentoring, professional development portfolios, dialogue journals, study groups, and participatory practitioner research (Dayoub & Bashiruddin, 2012). Especially, in the Industrial Revolution 4.0, online training is a great option for professional development. According to Abu-Tineh and Sadiq (2018, p. 314) online professional development has several advantages, “it saves time, travel and paper, allows for possible cost savings and offers exposure to technology learning”.

Most recently, according to Karlberg and Bezzina (2020), Swedish teachers from preschools, primary schools, secondary schools and high schools identified university courses, web-based learning, study visits, and collaborative learning as the most popular formal professional development strategies. Whereas, informal discussions, reading research studies, and peer observation were considered the most positively impacted informal forms of professional development. Obviously, professional development can be provided in many approaches, ranging from the formal to the informal. It can be conducted with the support of external experts in the form of formal courses, workshops or qualification programs, within the schools in which teachers work together, or through collaboration between schools or teachers across schools (such as teacher networks or observational visits to other schools). Choosing an appropriate approach of providing professional development for a specific participant, institution or situation has been regarded as an integral part of supporting meaningful and useful professional development to each individual across the system (Owens et al., 2016).

Professional development for key players in education

In education, professional development is generally designed for teachers, school leaders and educators, including policy-makers. Among these key players in education, professional development for teachers is a much researched area of literature (O'Brien et al., 2020). According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2009), professional development is becoming a driving force for improving teachers' instructional practices that can create positive impact on student learning. Furthermore, Fullan (2016) stressed the importance of professional development in schools, observing that it has made great contributions to teacher effectiveness by providing continuous individual and collective improvement, which is necessary to adequately address the heightened expectations for improving student learning.

Professional development for school leaders plays an important part in increasing the effectiveness of teaching and learning. According to Hourani and Stringer (2015), professional development for school leaders achieves three levels of results: obtaining new knowledge and skills, applying new learning to improve teaching and leadership, and improving student learning and achievement. In a broader context, professional development enhances school leaders' skills in setting goals, motivating personnel, and impacting the school environment for the well-being of teachers, learners and their families (Louie et al., 2019). The most frequent professional development forms for school leaders are informal learning approaches such as reading manuals and books, learning from experience on the job, learning from colleagues through meetings, coaching/mentoring from colleagues and supervisors, and visits to other schools (Sofa & Abonyi, 2018).

While professional development programs for teachers and school leaders are abundant, information about professional development for educational policy-makers is limited (Nguyen, 2019a). As Kovačević et al. (2018) observed, many policy-makers from the Ministry of Education in their home country have limited authorities and often limited knowledge on their policy-making area. Consequently, they need professional development and capacity building programs to enhance knowledge and skills. Nevertheless, such programs at the macro level have not been developed and implemented systematically, particularly in developing countries. Professional development methods suggested for policy-makers include postgraduate programs, internships, staff exchange and study visits (Nguyen, 2019a).

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach as it is useful for identifying a society or culture's social or cultural norms, explaining beliefs and behaviours, understanding complex issues, and exploring new topics (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2010). The nature of qualitative research is identified via four characteristics: (1) the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; (2) the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; (3) the process is inductive; and (4) the product is richly descriptive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Obviously, qualitative methods are clearly most appropriate for

this research as it aims to explore professional development strategies; hence, detailed and in-depth data must be collected from participants' points of view. Specifically, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection instruments were utilised. Furthermore, purposeful sampling was also employed. "Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96).

As discussed previously, this study investigated professional development approaches implemented for policy-makers in higher education quality assurance in Vietnam. Obviously, data were collected from these officials. Besides, accreditors, staff members working at accrediting agencies and quality assurance staff working in higher education institutions were also contacted for information as they were directly impacted by regulations and guidelines developed by the policy-makers. The researcher sent emails to leaders and officials of the national quality assurance organization to invite them to participate in the study. When the research was undertaken in 2015, Vietnam had three accrediting agencies. For purposeful sampling, the researcher selected the firstly established agency, which also had the most staff members and was experienced in accrediting activities for data collection. The researcher also selected two universities: one located in the capital city and having a good reputation in quality assurance implementation, and the other located in a medium size city in the central region of Vietnam and being in an initial stage of quality assurance implementation. Letters of invitation were sent to all potential informants. Totally, 20 interview participants and 23 focus group discussion participants (divided in 4 groups), took part in this study. These numbers were representative and suitable for a qualitative research study. All focus group discussions and interviews were held in October 2015.

Data collection procedures began with focus group discussions and were followed by semi-structured interviews. Four focus group discussions were conducted as part of this study; each group consisted of 5-6 participants. Group 1 was held with five quality assurance policy-makers. They were division heads and deputy division heads of the national quality assurance organisation. Group 2 consisted of six other quality assurance policy-makers who were officials of the national quality assurance organisation. Group 3 included six staff members of the accrediting agency. Group 4 hosted six quality assurance staff members of the selected higher education institution. Information related to focus group participants is given in Table 1. All the focus group discussions were undertaken in the offices of the researched agency/institution in Vietnamese, the native language of both the researcher and participants. Discussions lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. With permission from informants, each discussion was recorded using a small dedicated digital audio recorder. The researcher participated in all focus groups and facilitated the discussions as a moderator. The researcher also took note of important comments and responses of participants as discussions unfolded. All discussions were conducted in accordance with a discussion guide to lead the discussions on specific topics of interest (Hennink, 2013).

Table 1: A summary of informants participating in focus group discussions (N=23)

Focus group no.	Participants	Responsibilities	No. of participants
Group 1	Division heads or deputy heads	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Designing testing and/or quality assurance policy-making plans - Policy-making in testing and/or quality assurance 	5
Group 2	Quality assurance officials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Policy-making in quality assurance - Supporting higher education institutions to implement quality assurance activities 	6
Group 3	Staff members of accrediting agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Managing logistics for external quality assurance teams - Receiving support from quality assurance officials 	6
Group 4	Quality assurance staff of university	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Implementing quality assurance in their institutions - Receiving support from quality assurance officials 	6

Interviews were undertaken after the focus discussion data collection process. The current study employed one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with 20 participants sorted into four groups: top quality assurance policy-makers, quality assurance officials, accreditors, and university leaders, staff and lecturers. The position, responsibility and number of each type of participants are outlined in Table 2. Seven of the 20 interviewees had also participated in focus groups. Interviews were lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Nineteen interviews were conducted at participants' offices during office hours. One interview was conducted in a quiet café corner near the participant's house at his request. As with the focus group discussions, all interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, the native language of both the researcher and informants. With permission from the interviewees, the interviewer took notes and used a small dedicated digital audio recorder to record each interview. All interviews followed the interview guide as suggested by Hennink et al., (2010).

Table 2: A summary of informants participating in semi-structured interviews (N=20)

Position	Responsibilities	No.
Top policy-makers in quality assurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Supervising quality assurance policy-making procedure - Approving quality assurance policies 	3
Quality assurance officials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Policy-making in quality assurance - Supporting higher education institutions to implement quality assurance activities 	5
Accreditors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Externally evaluating higher education institutions and/or programs - Following regulations and guidelines developed by quality assurance policy-makers 	4
University leaders, staff, lecturers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Designing and implementing quality assurance activities at the institutional level - Receiving support from quality assurance policy-makers 	8

Analysing qualitative data proved challenging. The data analysis process involved several steps: organising data, conducting a preliminary database read-through, coding and organising themes, representing the data, and forming and interpreting data (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This study's data analysis procedure began with the transcription of all recorded personal interviews and focus group discussions. Specifically, the researchers followed the verbatim transcription process suggested by Hennink et al. (2010). Each recorded interview and focus group discussion was transcribed into the original language (Vietnamese) that "captures information in participants' own words, phrases and expressions, allowing researchers to uncover cultural meanings. These words also reflect participants' emphasis and emotions relating to the issues discussed, and provide the rich detail that is also valuable in qualitative research" (Hennink et al., 2010, p. 211). As the researcher is fluent in both Vietnamese and English, the Vietnamese transcripts were used for data analysis processes, as suggested by Hennink et al. (2010, p. 214) "translation may not always be necessary. If you are bilingual you can simply analyse data in the original language". Each transcript was assigned a filename. The four focus groups were labelled from FG-1 to FG-4, and the 20 personal interviews were labelled from PI-1 to PI-20. After this transcript labelling stage, data were anonymised by "removing any identifiers from the transcript to preserve the participant's anonymity" (Hennink et al., 2010, p. 215). This step ensured ethical principles are maintained during data analysis.

In the next step, thematic analysis was employed to analyse interview and focus group discussion data. An initial sorting stage helped identify the emerging key points. The researcher also returned to focus group discussion guide and interview guide to identify common themes and corresponding sub-themes in interview and focus group data. The creation of a themes and sub-themes system made the data sorting manageable. Key issues also emerged from the analysis process. Important factors pertaining to professional development strategies for quality assurance policy-makers, as reported by Vietnamese policy-makers, quality assurance officials, accreditors and institutional administrators, staff and lecturers, were also highlighted. When themes and sub-themes were identified, important quotes from interview and focus discussion transcripts were selected to illustrate them. At this stage, the quotes, which had been selected in Vietnamese, were carefully translated into English to facilitate a discussion of the findings.

Research findings

Informants in focus group discussions and personal interviews alluded to several professional development strategies implemented for officials working at the Vietnamese government organisation specialising in higher education quality assurance policy-making (the national quality assurance agency). These strategies include short courses, conferences and workshops, study visits, postgraduate programs, participation in external evaluation teams, and learning by doing.

Workshops and conferences

Conference and workshop participation is a common activity staff members employ to develop their professional quality assurance and accreditation skills. For example, one senior official stated:

During the first days of our higher education quality assurance system, the World Bank supported many staff members in attending local and international conferences and workshops to learn about the concepts, processes, standards and quality assurance and accreditation criteria. (PI-3)

One staff member mentioned conferences and workshops organised and funded by international agencies or projects. This informant noted:

From 2006 to 2008, I attended many workshops and conferences organised by UNESCO, the Vietnam-Netherlands Higher Education Project, and the Higher Education Project. You know that during that time, higher education and accreditation in Vietnam was supported by several projects. (PI-6)

This informant also pointed out he had participated in a workshop on quality assurance for distance programs organised by the Australian Embassy in Vietnam. He had also participated in workshops organised by international networks of which his organisation is a full member. For example, he had recently attended an APQN (Asia-Pacific Quality Network) annual conference in China. However, he also mentioned he had never had the chance to attend any INQAAHE (International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education) conference.

Another official related a similar experience:

Another channel for me to gain knowledge in quality assurance is through participation in workshops and conferences organised by regional or international quality assurance networks of which our agency is a member. I learned about principles and trends in higher education quality assurance in the region and in the world. (PI-5)

It is important to note that the Vietnamese national quality assurance organisation is a full member of INQAAHE, APQN and AQAN (ASEAN Quality Assurance Network). These regional and international quality assurance networks organise annual conferences, forums and workshops. Vietnamese quality assurance policy-makers take turns attending these events. Below, two interviewees share their experience with these events:

I also learned about quality assurance by attending regional and international conferences and workshops such as AQAN annual workshops, APQN annual conferences, and INQAAHE biannual forums and conferences. For example, I participated in the 2015 INQAAHE conference held in the USA. I learned about good regional practices, particularly those of the developed countries. (PI-4)

I usually attend conferences and workshops organised by APQN and AQAN. APQN conferences normally focus on sharing member experience. AQAN workshops highlight connection and collaboration among members. (PI-7)

Short courses

Many quality assurance policy-makers reported they had participated in a number of short courses for professional development purposes. One educational manager confirmed that his organisation had sent many staff members to attend short quality assurance courses organised by local and foreign institutions (PI-2). Similarly, another top policy-maker stressed:

Besides attending conferences and workshops, at short courses, our staff gained knowledge and skills in assessment and evaluation. They needed to have enough knowledge and skills to act as experts in quality assurance. (PI-3)

Most officials' backgrounds were not in quality assurance and accreditation, and they need to apprise themselves with the knowledge and skills necessary to perform their tasks well. One admitted:

I myself had not been trained academically in assessment or quality assurance. Therefore, the knowledge I have for my current job was gained through local and overseas short courses which were organised or supported by our agency. (PI-8)

Another official shared the same point:

Since I worked for this organisation, my main professional development programs have been through short courses held by Vietnamese universities. I not only gained knowledge, but also shared experience and challenges of quality assurance activities with presenters and other participants. Last year I had a good opportunity to attend a six-week training course at an Australian university. (PI-5)

Some officials mentioned courses run or funded by overseas agencies. One of them shared:

I was sent by the organisation leader to participate in training courses in developed countries. For example, in 2011, I joined a short course organised by APQN in Japan with the support of UNESCO. Prior to this, I also attended a course in Germany in 2010 with the support of the High School and Professional Secondary School Teacher Development Project. (PI-4)

This informant continued:

Most recently, I had chance to participate in the EU-SHARE Project, which supports ASEAN higher education. In this program, I was informed of the quality assurance systems of several countries in Europe, particularly the principles, objectives and procedures of quality assurance. (PI-4)

Another official also shared that she developed professionally through short courses overseas:

I participated in a course titled “Improvement of Quality of Education” organised by Harvard University, in the USA. This is a special priority of MOET leaders for capacity building in quality assurance for our agency. I also joined an assessment training course on the Ivory Coast organised and funded by the International Organisation of La Francophonie. (PI-7)

Study visits

Some officials and leaders of the Vietnamese government department in charge of quality assurance policy-making reported that they had taken part in study visits to foreign countries to learn about quality assurance and accreditation. For example, one top policy-maker shared:

I led a group of about 30 people, consisting of university leaders and lecturers, and some staff members from our organisation in visits to universities and quality assurance agencies in the Republic of Korea and Hong Kong to learn about internal quality assurance. (PI-3)

A young official who also joined this program noted:

I had a visit to Hong Kong and South Korea after working in accreditation for a few months. I was aware of what universities did to assure and enhance quality. I was also impressed by the knowledge, confidence and professionalism of young staff members working at Hong Kong’s external quality assurance agency. (FG-1)

Normally, the Vietnamese national quality assurance agency organised visits to countries with outstanding experience and good quality assurance and accreditation practices. For example, one informant pointed out:

With the support of HEP2 [Higher Education Project No. 2], we had a study visit to America which lasted for ten days. It was a good trip, and we learned a lot, as accreditation has been conducted in this country for more than 100 years. (PI-5)

In addition, a participant of a group discussion shared that he and a leader of his organisation took a one-week trip to Australia to learn from Australia’s higher education quality assurance and assessment. This program was funded by the Australian Government. They visited universities, the country’s assessment organisation, and the quality assurance agency.

Postgraduate programs

To improve their knowledge and skills, several officials enrolled in postgraduate programs in educational management, assessment and evaluation. One informant said:

I was awarded a scholarship to study in a Master of Educational Management program in Australia. This course did not cover much about quality assurance or evaluation; however, I think it was useful for my job. (PI-7)

Another official also shared her postgraduate studies. She earned her masters degree in Japan by specialising in higher education development. Her work there was related, in small part, to quality assurance, and the program helped her build her professional capacity. This informant noted:

In order to perform my duties effectively, I think I need to study further. At present, I'm undertaking my doctoral study in educational assessment and measurement at the Vietnam National University Hanoi. This is the only PhD course in Vietnam that specialises in assessment and measurement. I enrolled in this program because, in my opinion, it is very important for my job. I'm now in [the program's] first year. (PI-6)

Focus group discussion participants also discussed their postgraduate courses. For example, one shared:

I earned my Bachelor of English Teaching, and when I transitioned to work in quality assurance, I thought I needed to undertake postgraduate programs in areas relating to quality assurance and evaluation. With some effort, I completed my masters degree specialising in assessment and evaluation in 2011, and I'm now completing my PhD in education with a research topic focusing on quality assurance and accreditation. (FG-4)

Learning by doing

Officials of the national quality assurance agency in Vietnam stated that they gained knowledge and skills in quality assurance and accreditation through involvement in quality assurance practices. Several participated in external evaluation teams that accredited higher education institutions and programs. Informants shared:

As an accreditor, I have participated in several external evaluation teams. Through site visits, I have come to understand more about the processes of undertaking accreditation, particularly experience in preparing and welcoming universities' external evaluation teams. (PI-4)

As a member of the external evaluation team, I read and comment on self-evaluation reports, visit higher education institutions, conduct interviews and prepare external evaluation reports. I have learned a lot from these activities. (FG-4)

Officials working in the national quality assurance organisation must instruct institutions in implementing quality assurance activities. For example, one interviewee stated:

One of my main duties is to read self-evaluation reports submitted by universities and provide feedback. I have a deep understanding of self-evaluation report content. Moreover, I have read many legal documents and guidelines pertaining to quality assurance and accreditation. These activities have helped me improve my knowledge and skills in quality assurance. (PI-5)

Several other officials relayed that their professional competencies in quality assurance and accreditation were enhanced when they acted as conference or workshop organisers. For example:

I have been involved in organising many local and international workshops and conferences in assessment, quality assurance and accreditation. Not only my organisational skills, but also my knowledge in the field of quality assurance have been improved as I participated in these events from beginning to end. (PI-4)

Discussion

As discussed in the literature review, professional development activities can be taken in formal forms, such as conferences, workshops, seminars, and meetings, or in informal forms, such as conversations, observations, readings and even feedback (Bautista et al., 2015; Dayoub & Bashiruddin, 2012; Jensen & Rasmussen, 2019). This study found that quality assurance policy-makers in Vietnamese higher education were involved in several popular professional development approaches including workshops and conferences, short courses, study visits, postgraduate programs, and learning by doing. Firstly, workshops are the most common strategy of professional development (Abu-Tineh & Sadiq, 2018; Garet, Porter, Desimone & Birman, 2001). In this section, the term ‘workshop(s)’ refers to professional development mechanisms that take the form of conferences, workshops and seminars. According to Loucks-Horsley, Stiles, Mundry, Love and Hewson (2009), workshops are a traditional approach of professional development that take place outside of the teacher’s school or classroom. Workshops generally involve a leader (or leaders) with special expertise and participants who attend sessions at scheduled times.

The current study shows that all Vietnamese quality assurance policy-makers attended some form of workshops for professional development purposes. This finding supports McDade’s (1987) observation that the vast majority of professional development programs available for academics and administrators at all institutions and across all position levels are seminars, workshops and conferences. Schulte (2016) argued conferences are ideal venues for networking, exchanging ideas and gathering knowledge from colleagues in one’s profession. This predominance toward conferences was also observed among Vietnamese quality assurance officials, who considered conferences good opportunities to broaden their professional networks and share quality assurance information and experiences with colleagues. By attending conferences, participants “develop professional expertise through learning about current and best practice in the sessions, which explicitly or implicitly meets a skills gap” (Jenkins, 2015, p. 157). In addition to benefiting from research by others through presentations, attendees can take part in networking and interactive discussions between audiences and presenters (Jenkins, 2015). In the present study, informants reported they were interested in presentations sharing best practices in policy-making and quality assurance program implementation. Some knowledge and experiences gained from international conferences have been applied to local quality assurance and accreditation.

Apart from workshops, short courses are also one of the most common professional development programs implemented to help staff members stay up-to-date and acquire new, practical knowledge and skills (Lockyer, Ward & Toews, 2005). The main aim of most short courses is “usually to achieve an impact – an improvement or change in some form of previous practice” (Moon, 2001, p. 1). Some identifiable characteristics of short courses are (1) they are usually a few days long (though some are a few weeks); (2) they are usually attended by a group of people brought together by the short course itself; (3) the subject matter is typically concentrated; (4) they usually involve a variety of activities; and (5) the instructor is brought in to work with a group of learners who may or may not initially know each other (Moon, 2001).

The current study found that Vietnam’s national quality assurance officials had participated in short courses to gain and enhance higher education and quality assurance related knowledge and skills. A couple of officials even reported attending several courses a year. Many of these courses were organised by their organisation, while others had been hosted either locally or overseas by higher education institutions or quality assurance agencies/networks. Most courses lasted for three to five days, but some went as long as two weeks and even one month. Informants shared that they benefited most from courses hosting international experts or overseas organisers, as these events provided updated knowledge and information about global trends and best practices. To make professional development most effective, short course participants should actively contribute to the development of improved practices and not merely act as recipients of centrally distributed knowledge (Albion et al., 2015). However, this is not generally the case for Vietnamese quality assurance policy-makers as many of them claimed that sometimes they could not pay full attention to the program as they had to undertake work assigned to them by organisation leaders.

A study visit is a reflection-based professional development strategy essential for both personal and organisational growth. Study visits help staff members understand “how educational dilemmas are tackled in different ways, through observing the work of co-professionals” (Saunders, 2003, p. 40). According to Karlberg and Bezzina (2020), study visits ranked the 4th among the most perceived positive impact professional development methods. The current study discovered that Vietnam’s national quality assurance organisation had organised several study visits using its government budget or funding from higher education projects. Officials from this agency participated in these visits to learn about higher education governance, internal quality assurance and external quality assurance. Although study visits can be undertaken within or outside a nation’s borders, international or overseas study visits are often cited as extremely valuable for participants, because they enhance and broaden educational management and leadership related expertise (Cramp, 2016). Study visits to foreign countries are a powerful learning experience that can transform participants’ thinking by creating cognitive, emotional and existential dissonance (Scoffham & Barnes, 2009).

This study found that the Vietnamese government department responsible for quality assurance policy-making has facilitated visits to countries or territories with well-developed quality assurance systems, including Australia, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea

and the USA. In each country, officials visited and met with the national quality assurance agency and visited universities that exemplified best quality assurance practices. Informants who had participated in these visits shared that their understanding and knowledge of higher education administration and governance and quality assurance had been broadened by observing the quality assurance achievements of other countries with their own eyes. Additionally, an effective study visit generally includes three steps: preparation, the actual visit and follow-up. Study visit preparation is a crucial step, as well-prepared visits ensure a strong focus on the study and learn components of the visit and prevent drift toward 'edu-tourism' (Cramp, 2016).

Once preparation is complete, the study visit can begin. A number of activities can be carried out during a study visit, including learning walks, observations, and meetings and discussions with other staff (Cramp, 2016). Once a study visit has been completed, all participants must reflect on what they learned from the program and how they can implement the knowledge and experience gained from the visit in their daily work processes (Martin & Griffiths, 2012). The present study shows that the first two steps of a study visit – preparation and the actual visit – were implemented quite well by the Vietnamese national quality assurance agency. However, the organisation did encounter problems with the last step – follow-up. While each participant was required to write a report showing what knowledge and expertise they have gained and how they can implement this new information into their working performance, only a few participants followed this requirement. Those who did not argued the reports were worthless because no one read them and it would have been difficult to persuade organisation leaders to implement the reports' proposals.

Qualification programs ranked last among nine professional development methods for teachers (OECD, 2009). In professional development, an institution or organisation provides support to staff enrolled in further education or qualification programs by enabling staff to access time off work to attend classes or exams and providing financial assistance to defray the costs associated with formal study programs (ACU, 2019). In this regard, WSU (2020) stated that staff members must enrol in approved formal award courses that lead to a national qualification issued in the higher education sector and recognised by the national qualifications framework. Crucially, approved formal award courses must relate to an employee's current position or career and contribute significant value to both the individual and institution. Staff members with bachelor degrees can enrol in postgraduate university courses that issue graduate certificates, postgraduate diplomas, masters degrees or doctoral degrees (McDonald, 2010). The present study demonstrates that, since the establishment (in 2003), the Vietnamese national quality assurance organisation had four quality assurance officials who have enrolled in masters courses, and three officials have undertaken PhD courses in local or foreign universities.

Officials who attended overseas courses won scholarships, while those who studied in local universities funded themselves. Only one official enrolled in a program directly related to quality assurance (evaluation and assessment); four others studied courses in educational management, and two pursued professional courses (in literature and biology). Officials' enrolments in postgraduate programs not related to quality assurance or

educational management were argued to be unbeneficial to the organisation. This finding echoes Coombs and Sorensen's (2010) study that people have raised questions about the purpose of postgraduate professional development and the impact upon staff members and the institution. Consequently, though leaders of the researched organisation generally encouraged staff members to undertake qualifications programs, they strongly supported those who intended to enrol in programs relevant to their current position (evaluation, assessment and quality assurance).

As a professional development strategy, learning by doing allows employees to learn from each other's separate professional observations, to reflect, and to develop a shared perspective (Brennan, Olds, Dolansky, Estrada & Patrician, 2014). The current study found that several external quality assurance practitioners got knowledge, skills and experience through undertaking site visits as external assessment team members. The opportunity to interact with their peers enabled professionals to learn from each other and to develop a network of colleagues as they worked alongside others and discussed and shared ideas and experiences (Trodd & Dickerson, 2019). Furthermore, officials from Vietnam's national quality assurance organisation shared that they learned a lot from undertaking practical work including commenting on self-assessment reports, conducting interviews and preparing external assessment reports. This finding echoes that of Carte, Dharmasiri and Perera's (2011) study on building IT capabilities for government ministry officials in Sri Lanka. Their observation with 150 participants revealed that these officials developed IT awareness and improved IT skills not via the direct instruction in technology but instead via a "learning by doing" approach of a real world working environment.

Additionally, this study's participants noted that by direct involvement in organising local and international workshops in quality assurance, their organisational skills and knowledge in the field were improved. This activity is termed 'on-the-job skills acquisition' (Aslam & Lehrer, 2014) that can help enhance an individual's personal and professional capacity for work-related activity, or 'project-based learning' (Dickerson, Jarvis & Levy, 2014) that working in a project gives opportunities for team working, networking and learning more from colleagues.

Conclusion

Professional development is undoubtedly significant for all staff members of the higher education system, including government ministry officials. However, limited information or research has been published regarding professional development at the government level. This study found that several professional development activities were implemented in a Vietnamese government organisation in charge of state management in higher education quality assurance. Nevertheless, only traditional professional development mediums were observed, including short courses, workshops and conferences, study visits, postgraduate programs and learning by doing. It is recommended that typical professional development strategies for government officials such as coaching, mentoring, collaborative research should be implemented. These strategies were argued to be effective to enhance knowledge and skills of policy-makers who have been transferred to

work in new areas. Moreover, professional development for educational policy-makers could be supported by having a small team of research assistants in their office. This team could attend workshops and conferences as well as keep up with the contemporary research literature. Consequently, further research may investigate the support of research assistants to educational senior officials in professional development.

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Appendix 1: Questions for focus group discussions

Broad question

What do you think about the higher education quality assurance (QA) and accreditation activities recently?

Transition questions

1. Can you tell me what policy-makers in higher education QA and accreditation in Vietnam are responsible for?
2. What challenges are QA policy-makers facing when undertaking your daily working performance?
3. What kinds of professional development practices related to higher education QA policy-making do you know? What are the main contents of those professional development programs? Do you think they are useful for QA policy-making?
4. Among the professional development practices, what percentage was organised by your agency/institution and what percentage was offered by external agencies?
5. Which do you find more useful, professional development practices organised by your agency/institution or those offered by external agencies?
6. What policies should be implemented to improve the quality of professional development practices for policy-makers in higher education quality assurance and accreditation?
7. What are the roles of your agency/institution's staff and leaders in deciding professional development practices?

Appendix 2: Questions for semi-structured interviews

1. What is your current position in your organisation?
2. How does your job relate to higher education quality assurance and accreditation?
3. Have you taken any professional development activities in higher education quality assurance (QA) and accreditation?
4. What challenges are you facing when you undertake the daily working performance related to QA?

5. What kinds of professional development practices have you ever taken part in? What were the main contents of these professional development programs? What are the most useful and what are the least useful?
6. Besides the professional development practices organised by your agency, have you looked for others? If Yes, can you specify them?
7. Can you tell me some impacts of those professional development practices on your working tasks?
8. How is your role in your organisation's professional development practices? Have you decided the activities yourself or have they been decided by your organisation/leader?
9. Does your organisation have policies for professional development for the staff, particularly those working in the field of higher education quality assurance and accreditation? If Yes, can you give some examples? And are they documented?
10. Can you tell me some of the supports from your organisation leaders' support for the professional development activities in your organisation?
11. Do you think that your organisation should have a new professional development program? If Yes, what should it be designed, how should it be implemented to achieve maximum success, and how should the agency's policy to the professional development be adjusted?
12. In your opinion, what other things should be done to improve the quality of professional development activities in higher education quality assurance and accreditation in your organisation?

Dr Cuong Huu Nguyen is the Manager of the Quality Assurance Department and Head of the Education Research Group, Van Lang University, Vietnam. Dr Nguyen was awarded his PhD in Education from The University of New South Wales and Master of Assessment and Evaluation from The University of Melbourne, Australia. His research interests include assessment, quality assurance, accreditation, higher education policy, leadership and management.

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6627-3824>

Email: cuong.nguyenhuu@vlu.edu.vn

Please cite as: Nguyen, C. H. (2022). Professional development for educational policy-makers: Relating to university quality assurance in Vietnam. *Issues in Educational Research*, 32(3), 1045-1066. <http://www.iier.org.au/iier32/nguyen-ch.pdf>