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Understanding Professional Development Policies for Novice Lecturers: Perspectives from the University Management

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Abstract

Professional development policy is an initiative intended to up-skill novice lecturers, and in so doing improve university education. This qualitative case study was conducted to explore the understanding of university management on professional development policies. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and documents. The participants were twelve university management at two selected public universities in China including vice-chancellors, directors of the Academic Affairs Office, deputy deans, and administrators in the Academic Affairs Office. Data from documents supplied the data obtained from interviews. Then, using thematic analysis to identify the themes that emerged from the data obtained. The findings of this study indicated that the university management has a comprehensive and deep understanding of professional development policies. As policymakers, they are aware of what the policy contains, which includes the policy target group, policy goals, guiding principles, and fields covered in policies. The university management should take and enact their role of lecturer professional development seriously, and provide useful activities and programs for novice lecturers to help them.

Keywords: Understanding, Professional Development, Policies, University Management, Novice Lecturer

Introduction

Over the past years, there has been an increased demand for the development of novice educators in the teaching profession (Rohman, 2020; Sachs, 2016; Makoa & Segalo, 2021). Aside from providing general orientation and introduction to various aspects of university administration, teaching, and research, the goal of professional development policies is to provide an environment in which novice lecturers can gain professional socialization in the academic context, as well as to create, nurture, and sustain professional relationships (Fredericks, 2017). These policies are also the first step toward self-improvement or professionalization through lifelong learning.

In recent years, China has given a high priority to the development and growth of university lecturers. The government plays a significant role in lecturer professional development through policies and incentives to attract lecturers and increase their participation in programs and activities (OECD, 2016; Adarkwah et al., 2021). National-level plans on the professional development of teachers, such as the *Opinions on Comprehensively Deepening the Reform of the Teaching Staff Development in a New Era* and the *Guiding Opinions on Strengthening the Reform of the Teaching Staff Development in Universities in a New Era*, both suggest that the professional development of university lecturers, especially young lecturers, should be given importance. However, it is not enough to rely on national policies alone. The target of the national policies and plans can only be truly effective if they are implemented through the formulation of appropriate policies on the professional development of lecturers in each university. By its nature, professional development policies are public policies that promote the professional growth of lecturers. It includes both the national and the university levels.

These national policies reflect not only the high value placed on the quality of lecturers but also the current need to improve the quality of higher education in China. Based on this, the Ministry of Education encourages universities to develop their own policies and programs to assist lecturers in developing professional skills. The eternal mission of higher education is to teach (Lehmann et al., 2020), and lecturers are central to determining teaching quality (Mahmud et al., 2014). The university-level policy on the professional development of lecturers is a university policy on induction, promotion, and exchange for the professional development of young and novice lecturers.

Professional development, whether for teachers or lecturers, is an important reform process in classroom teaching in the twenty-first century (Walker & Dimmock, 2002). Principals are goalkeepers in the field of elementary education, and it is their responsibility to create a positive professional climate (Fullan, 2002; Payne & Wolfson, 2000). In the field of higher education, the leaders in charge of academic affairs and human resources, such as vice-chancellors and deputy deans, or any other administrative staff, should be responsible for the professional development of university lecturers (Fahimirad, 2016); they are the university management. It is their responsibility to ensure that lecturers have the necessary skills to deal with the challenges of the modern classroom, as well as to provide meaningful opportunities for effective professional development (Payne & Wolfson, 2000). By providing the necessary support, the university management encourages lecturers to develop novel teaching methods and enhance their ability to instruct (More, 2016).

Therefore, it is necessary to carry out relevant policies and plans through research. How to help them grow up quickly and improve the overall education and teaching of universities is the key to improving the quality of higher education. Conducting relevant studies and enriching theoretical achievements with the support of current policies is an unavoidable trend.

Literature Review

Professional development policy cannot be discussed without leadership, both of which are areas of educational administration. The management is critical in assisting teachers in identifying their development needs and motivating them to participate in professional

development programs (Kendall et al., 2017). To assist in teacher development, the management design relevant policies and conduct professional development activities. They should serve as facilitators of professional development activities and prioritize the creation of a conducive environment for professional development initiatives (Robinson & Timperley, 2007). Because the purpose of educational institutions is to teach and train students, management is responsible for assisting teachers and ensuring a positive school climate (Alsaleh, 2021; Naidoo, 2019). That is, the role of management in a school or university is to create the necessary conditions for change to occur (Kalkan et al., 2021).

According to research reported by Bernauer (2002), leaders' leadership is a requirement for effective professional development in schools. Heaney (2004) expressed a similar viewpoint, stating that effective leadership entails being directly involved in the educational process of their staff and having proof that teachers' professional development has taken place. Gumus (2013) also noted that those in positions of leadership in the field of education can assist teachers in enhancing their culture within the organization. In fact, it is not difficult to note from these studies that providing professional development for teachers is one of the responsibilities of the management team, which is also the practice of instructional leadership (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

Instructional leadership means leaders show deep involvement in curriculum and teaching issues and several activities aimed at improving teaching and learning in educational institutions (Hallinger, 2019; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Mestry, 2017). Hallinger and Murphy (1985) created a framework of instructional management with three dimensions, which are defining the mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school climate. Promoting professional development is one of the elements of promoting a positive school climate. Sirat (2010) conducted a study on the aspects of focus in instructional leadership in the academic field. Some of these aspects include policymaking, managing problematic staff, relationship management, and participation in various planning aspects. Thus, instructional leadership could be used as a theory to guild this study. The researcher brought instructional leadership to the field of higher education to explore the role of university management in the professional development of novice lecturers. Professional development policies formulated by university management are to help and support novice lecturers. The purpose is to improve their teaching ability.

Different countries and universities such as the United States (Fredericks, 2017), Durham University in the UK (Turner et al., 2013), the University of Melbourne in Australia (Fredericks, 2017), and Peking University in China (PKU, 2016) have also developed policies and programs related to the promotion of the professional competence of teaching staff. These policies are not perfect and have some shortcomings, which then need to be modified and improved by the management. According to Hardy (2012), many professional development policies and plans do not directly meet the needs of teachers. Only during implementation does the need for this become clearer (Fullan, 2007). Some researchers, such as Singh (2011); Geldenhuys and Oosthuizen (2015), have discovered that many developmental topics do not address the needs of teachers, and that funding and resources play an important role in implementing policies and plans for professional development.

A closer look at teaching staff training around the world revealed that almost every national level and educational institution has some professional development policies, plans, and programs. These are prepared for educator professionalization and provide ongoing support for teaching and research in subsequent practice (Lindbegr-sand & Sonesson, 2008; Fredericks, 2017). Policies and plans have progressed from a one-time event to a continuous activity. Furthermore, the specific approaches and strategies for novice lecturers are becoming increasingly diverse (Fredericks, 2017).

Research Purpose

Professional development has become increasingly important in Chinese universities (Wang, 2011) and lecturer training and professional development are viewed as necessary additions for lecturers to improve their knowledge and teaching practices to display high standards (El Afi, 2019; Alruqi & Alharbi, 2022). One reason for the unsatisfactory situation of the professional development of novice lecturers in universities is the lack of appropriate policy support or the lack of rationality in policy formulation. However, only a small portion of the existing policy research on the topic of the professional development of university lecturers has been conducted. Most of these studies focus on lecturers' development experiences and lack in-depth discussions on policy goals and policy contents of professional development of university lecturers from the perspective of university management. For this reason, this study described policy characteristics in general and explains policy contents.

- The main purpose is to explore the understanding of university management on professional development policies for novice lecturers. Thus, the specific research question in this study is what is the understanding of the university management on the professional development policy for novice lecturers?

Methodology

Inquiry-based qualitative research develops a comprehensive, multifaceted picture through word analysis, reports in-depth perspectives from informants, and takes place in a natural environment (Fraenkel et al., 2019). The suitability of a qualitative method was further underscored by the purpose of this study which seeks to primarily explore the understanding of professional development policies by university management. According to Yin (2018), case studies provide a deep understanding of a specific issue. A case can be defined as a group of individuals who are bounded in time and space. For this study, a case study approach is preferable. The researcher was interested in one phenomenon, which is professional development policies. It was chosen so that university management could understand its significance and impact. In this regard, a case study is considered appropriate for this study because it provided insight into a specific issue (Thomas & Myers, 2015). In this study, the researcher selected two universities as two cases and then designed an interview protocol. The data collected from the two universities are analyzed together so that similarities and differences can be compared. Finally, the researcher came up with the final report (Mahmud et al., 2014).

Based on the time, money, location, and availability of sites. This study was conducted at University A (GSTNU) and University B (GMNU) in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of China. These two universities are public universities, which in China are better than private ones because they have a long history and a good academic climate, and lecturers have more

development opportunities (Yu et al., 2021). Thus, selecting public universities was more applicable to this study.

Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research to identify participants who meet the criteria. The sample size is relevant to the purpose of the study, according to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), and the main factor is not the number of participants, but each participant's ability to contribute to the study. They advise sampling until saturation is reached (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Therefore, twelve university management, including two vice-chancellors, two directors in the Academic Affairs Office, four deputy deans, and four administrators in the Academic Affairs Office, participated in this study. They were selected on the criteria that they are currently responsible for work related to the professional development of lecturers and that they all have some experience, which includes policy making and implementation.

For data collection, the researcher adopted semi-structured interviews and documents. The interview protocol for the university management mainly focused on ideas and views of the professional development policy. These questions are open-ended questions, which enable them to express their opinions freely and without the influence of the researcher. In addition to this, the data was also derived from documents. Documents generated in this study include policies and plans of professional development in these two universities, and news or image records about professional development activities.

Data analysis and data collection were carried out together. After each interview, the researcher transcribed it into a file for analysis. Hence, thematic analysis was used in this study to analyze data, which is a qualitative analytic method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The researcher broke narrative data to produce categories, next looked for themes across all data, understand the phenomena, and compare it in different settings. This process mainly includes familiarizing the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes, and finally writing up. Trustworthiness is approached by paying close attention to how research is conceptualized, how data is collected, analyzed, and interpreted, and how findings are presented (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this study, the researcher used member checks and peer review to increase the trustworthiness.

Findings

Twelve participants from these two selected public universities including two vice-chancellors, two directors in the Academic Affairs Office, four deputy deans, and four administrators in the Academic Affairs Office. For the protection of participants' privacy, the researcher used pseudonyms instead of their real names. Their information is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Basic information of participants

No.	Name	Gender	Professional Title	Years' experience in current position
1	Liang	Female	Professor	7
2	Lin	Female	Associate professor	8
3	Wei	Male	Associate professor	8
4	Pan	Male	Professor	6
5	Dai	Female	Lecturer	7
6	Zhang	Female	Lecturer	7
7	Ma	Male	Professor	8
8	Peng	Female	Professor	6
9	Lei	Male	Associate professor	5
10	Wang	Female	Associate professor	6
11	Huang	Male	Associate professor	6
12	Lan	Female	Lecturer	5

In these selected universities, the department responsible for the work related to lecturer professional development is the Teaching Development Center, which is managed by the Academic Affairs Office. The Academic Affairs Office of the University has been actively exploring and reforming to better serve novice lecturers by formulating relevant policies and programs.

The findings for the research question were grouped into four themes, namely policy target group, policy goals, guiding principles, and fields covered in policies.

Policy Target Group

Through the interviews with the university management and the documents collected by the researcher, it is clear that the professional development policies are targeted at lecturers, especially novice lecturers, in the two universities. The topic of this study is the university management's understanding of the professional development policy for novice lecturers; therefore, it is evident that novice lecturers are the policy recipients. The researcher collected six policy documents on lecturer professional development from the two universities, and all six documents included novice lecturers as the target of the policy recipients. These can also be found in the interviews with the management.

"The policy we made is mainly for young lecturers, and novice lecturers belong to young lecturers. So, there is no doubt about them as the recipients of the policy."
(Liang)

"Due to the requirements of the Ministry of Education's evaluation, our university has imported many novice lecturers in the past three years. Most of them are inexperienced, so we have developed many plans and programs. These are all for novice lecturers." (Peng)

It is noted from the statements of these two participants that the university management is aware of the targeting of the professional development policy for novice lecturers. As

policymakers, they usually conduct surveys before drafting, so they are aware of the target group of the policy.

Policy Goals

Meeting the needs of novice lecturers, helping them adapt to university work, and improving their professional competence are important practices of instructional leadership for university management. According to Hallinger & Murphy (1985), promoting professional development is one of the three dimensions of instructional leadership. Policy as a tool is important for promoting lecturers' professional development. The researcher found the discussion of improving teaching competencies appeared more frequently in these policy documents. When lecturers improve their teaching competencies, then their overall quality is improved. Two university management expressed their views.

"These policies we have made are to promote their development and improve the quality. That's exactly why we made the policies in the first place." (Wei)

"The improvement of the quality of lecturers is not only beneficial to the cultivation of students but also optimizes the teaching staff of our university." (Wang)

In addition to improving the quality of lecturers, promoting university development is another goal of the policies developed by the two universities. The quality of lecturers is related to the quality of education at the universities, and the quality of education at the universities is reflected in the students they educate. The education of students, as a function of higher education, is inseparable from the level of lecturers. Therefore, these policies include the promotion of university development as one of their goals.

"There is no doubt that the lecturer's professional development policy is definitely aimed at improving the professional competence of lecturers. However, what is the ultimate purpose of lecturer development? It is still to promote university development. I think there is no contradiction between these two points." (Huang)

Apart from the statements made by the participant above, the researcher also found this in the policy documents. Promoting university development is also one of the goals of these policies. Both universities are newly built undergraduate institutions in China and their purpose is to focus on teaching and learning, and the development of the universities can be beneficial in attracting more students.

Guiding Principles

Guiding principles are the basis for policy development. Due to the development of socialism with Chinese characteristics, the professional development policies are based on the Chinese social context. The policies developed by both universities explicitly refer to the policy guided by the educational ideology of the Communist Party of China, which is to insist that education serves the people. In addition, the macro policy plans at the national level are the guiding light for the policies of these two universities. It is based on the national-level guidance that the universities have their own professional development policies.

“Our policies cannot be against the national educational guidelines, and the Ministry of Education encourages universities to develop our own policies for professional development.” (Pan)

“Socialist modernization is inseparable from higher education and our lecturers play an important role in training students. Based on the social context, the policies we develop would be meaningful.” (Lei)

Through interviews with university management, the guiding principles of professional development policies at both universities originated from national-level planning. And the national-level guiding planning is also based on a general context of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Lecturers hold the mission of imparting knowledge and answering questions, and their quality is closely related to students and universities.

Fields Covered in Policies

Based on the content of the policy text and interviews with university management, the researcher briefly divided the fields covered by the policy into three parts. The first is professional skills enhancement. The policy text clearly states that universities should organize various types of training as a way to help novice lecturers grow. For example, conduct seminars and invite experts to give speeches on campus. Although these are only general requirements, it is up to the Academic Affairs Office to organize and conduct the activities. The enhancement of professional skills is the main content of the policy, and there is no doubt about it. This is evidenced by the statements of the participants.

“The policy is a general direction in which we will make it clear that we want to improve the professional skills of lecturers and list a series of measures and methods to help them.” (Dai)

“Improving their professional skills is the top priority, and it is clear in the policy.” (Lan)

Another field covered in policies is morality formation. In the teaching process lecturers are the imparters of scientific knowledge and the educators of communist ethics. The professional skills of lecturers are the elements to improve the quality of teaching, while morality is the guarantee of proper teaching methods. The moral character of lecturers in their teaching work will have a direct impact on students and is related to the high quality of teaching. The professional development policy covers the formation of morality to help novice lecturers clarify their responsibilities and better perform their roles as educators. All these universities value teacher ethics and have organized for lecturers to study morality-related documents.

“Teacher morality is one of the criteria we evaluate lecturers. So, whether in our policy or our daily work, we will ask lecturers to strengthen the development of good moral qualities.” (Zhang)

In addition to morality, the development of political literacy is one of the specific fields of policies. Both universities emphasize in their policies the in-depth realization of the thought

of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era and the strengthening of political theory learning and situation education. This promotes lecturers to deepen their ideological, theoretical, and emotional identification with socialism with Chinese characteristics.

“Strengthening political literacy is what we always emphasized. Novice lecturers as educators should adhere to the leadership of the Communist Party of China. It is even more important for them to learn the new ideas of the Party if they are party member lecturers to serve students for the university.” (Liang)

Policies contain three fields that promote the professional development of novice lecturers. While the improvement of professional skills is the most direct help to them, the formation of morality and the development of political literacy could not be considered. Because professional development is a multi-field enhancement and long-term continuous process, the university management is the leader, organizer, and coordinator in this process.

Discussion

The findings revealed that university management interprets novice lecturer professional development policies comprehensively in terms of the target group of policies being novice lecturers, policy goals are to promote lecturers and university development, guiding principles are based on social context, and fields covered by policies are diverse. These findings are in line with Geletu (2022), who presented those Ethiopian policies on professional development and training placed a strong emphasis on enhancing and improving the availability, applicability, equity, and quality of education and training. And the content of policies is related to professional ethics, counseling, and mentoring by using active learning methodology. Owens et al (2016) also supported that professional development policies were made to improve the practice of all staff in educational institutions to promote a more holistic approach to improving school effectiveness and student learning opportunities.

Yet, in Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin’s (1995) research, they have made curriculum reform an important cornerstone of teacher professional development. With the active involvement of school leaders, teachers are given an active role in curriculum design, thereby enhancing their professional competence. This differs from the findings of this study. The policies in this study were intended to improve the quality of lecturers, while those for curriculum reform had other policies. Curriculum reform is more focused on the effectiveness of student learning (Luke & McArdle, 2009). In this study, management develops policies to improve the quality of lecturers, then understanding these policies is necessarily clear. Whether it is to enhance their professional competence or curriculum reform, the ultimate goal is to promote lecturer growth. Both leaders at the national level and administrators of institutions play an important role in professional development (Phorabatho, 2013). Therefore, the understanding of the policy is to be addressed from the perspective of the policymakers. The university management develops policies based on surveys, and through communication and interaction with novice lecturers during the implementation process.

Conclusion

This study concluded that policies related to the professional development of novice lecturers play an important role in Chinese universities. The management of the two universities was aware of what the policy contained and had a comprehensive and deep understanding of the

policies, which covered specific aspects of professional skills, moral enhancement, and politics. As policymakers, the university management took the Chinese social context and the national macro-level plans as a framework to develop policies that are relevant to the universities and primarily aimed at enhancing the professional development of lecturers.

Contribution

This study explored the perceptions of university management on professional development policies at selected public universities in China, which not only enriches the theoretical research on the development of novice lecturers but also has practical significance for the management of novice lecturers in higher education institutions. For theoretical contribution, this study highlights some professional development concepts and instructional leadership theory. The findings make an important contribution to the field by adding insights into the policy-making and implementation of professional development policies among novice lecturers. In this respect, this study has extended and enriched theoretical knowledge of policy research. On the other hand, the findings of this study could also contribute to the context. The findings helped policymakers make research-based decisions and develop constructive strategies necessary for novice lecturers. In other words, the findings offered necessary grounds for proper judgments on the strengths the novice lecturers bring in professional development and weak points which could be corrected for better practices.

Recommendations

This study recommended that university management should take and enact their role of lecturer professional development seriously. The university management aims to provide lecturers in gaining knowledge, training, and expertise to improve their abilities. For future research, it is recommended that wider research in terms of both setting and population be conducted to determine whether or not similar conclusions would emerge. This case study was limited to two universities in China. Further investigation of professional development policies may be conducted in private universities or other countries or focus on the perception of lecturers.

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