

Initial Teacher Education at A Key Teacher Education University In Vietnam: Students' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In response to the requirements of the resolution for the fundamental and comprehensive innovation of education and training to serve the national educational reforms, HoChiMinhCity University of Education has been making great efforts in various aspects. In order to innovate initial teacher education program design and development as demanded by the Ministry of Education and Training as well as to meet the needs of students, this research was conducted to examine the learning needs of student teachers at the institution. The results of the study show that student teachers believed that most of the aspects in the training programs are in need of being learned more, especially soft skills. Besides, they reported that they need more time for clinical experiences. The results should be seriously considered to review the current programs.

Keywords: learning needs, initial teacher education, student teachers, HoChiMinh City University of Education, soft skills, practicum

Date of Submission: 06-01-2021

Date of Acceptance: 21-01-2021

I. INTRODUCTION

Teacher education and effectiveness have been always top of education policy agenda. Almost all governments across the world are convinced that the quality of teachers and teaching are of the most important factors in student achievement (OECD, 2011). Teacher preparation and development are key and perhaps the first building block in developing effective teachers Darling-Hammond (2017). Teachers need to be well trained and prepared to become experts (Mohamed, 2011). In order to reform general education, Vietnam has revised and issued a new national K12 curriculum together with many comprehensive measures to train and retrain teachers so that they are able to teach the new curriculum. Another attempt regarding this education reform in Vietnam is the issuance of teacher professional standards in 2018.

Teachers professional standards

In 2018, the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET, 2018) issued a set of teacher professional standards covering the following four areas:

- *Teachers attributes:* teachers ethics and teachers identity.
- *Teachers professional development:* teachers are required to develop continuously their expertise, develop competency-based teaching and educational plans, including teaching approaches, methods and assessment, as well as be able to counsel and support students.
- *Creating educational environment:* Teachers are also required to be able to create a school culture that exercises democratic rights, a school environment that is safe for students and is able to control violence.
- *Developing relationships between the school, family and society:* Teachers are required to build a cooperative relationship with the student's parents or guardians and other school stakeholders, to coordinate between the school, home, and society to implement teaching activities, ethical and lifestyle education for students.
- *Using foreign languages or ethnic languages, applying information technology, exploiting and using technological equipment in teaching and education:* Teachers are required to be able to use foreign languages or ethnic languages to improve their teaching. They are also required to be able to apply information technology, exploit and use technology in teaching and education (MoET, 2018).

These standards are gradually shaping ways to design undergraduate curriculum at universities for teacher education in Vietnam, including developing intended learning outcomes for initial teachers education as well as a strategy for profession-building.

Based on this set of standards and the context of the university, including the current undergraduate programs being delivered at the university, a questionnaire was developed to survey junior and senior students of how they perceived of the level they can achieve some standards. The questionnaire covers four areas: teachers' attributes (political qualities, citizen's responsibilities); transferable competencies or soft skills (communication, critical thinking, creativity and problem-solving, start-up); knowledge of subjects that will be taught; and pedagogical competencies (understanding of learners, curriculum development, research, lesson plans and implementation, understanding of educational environment and able to create a cooperative school environment, use of foreign languages and information technology in teaching).

This article reports on how junior and senior students at one key university for teacher education in Vietnam perceived the level of mastering some areas as required in the teachers professional standards.

Initial teachers preparation in the world

Darling-Hammond (2017) reviews and summarises initial teacher education around the world and figures out some leading practices regarding initial preparation. Darling-Hammond (2017) believes that "connecting theory and practice through both the design of thoughtful coursework and the integration of high-quality clinical work in settings where good practice is supported" is very important. Study programs in Finland and also in Canada, Australia and the United States, "have created new models for student-teaching, often in 'training schools' or professional development schools" (Darling-Hammond, 2017, p. 306). Another leading practice for initial preparation is that professional teaching standards can be used "to focus attention on the learning and evaluation of critical knowledge, skills and dispositions" (Darling-Hammond, 2017, p. 306). In particular, the practices of initially preparing teachers in four countries were shared, including Finland, Canada, Australia, Singapore and the United States. Finland is well-known for its common and uniformly high-quality preparation for teachers. While all teachers in Finland are required to complete masters' degree for the career, the other three countries offer some combination of undergraduate and graduate-level programs for candidates who enter at different junctures in their studies. In Canada, Australia and the United States, professional teacher standards are used to govern certification or registration for teachers, as well as accreditation for programs, create some regularities across university-based pre-service programs. In Singapore, only one institution is responsible for offering teacher education – the National Institute of Education at Nanyang University at all levels, guided by the same set of competencies.

Despite various types and formats as well as "diversified" quality of preparation across the world, the four countries under the review are believed to have some excellent and innovating programs for teacher preparation. All these countries are improving their programs to train teachers by strengthening connections between theory and practice and developing teachers' capacities to teach diverse learners. In Finland, teachers are trained to develop both personally and professionally in a balanced way with particular focus on pedagogical thinking skills so that teachers are able to manage the teaching process diagnostically, can use research as a base and conduct action research as a guide. In addition to studying child development, learning and pedagogy in the content areas, student teachers have to complete a master's thesis in which they choose a problem of practice and studies it in a rigorous way. Student teachers in Finland also learn how to teach students who struggle to learn. Practicum takes place in special Teacher Training Schools, run by universities, which have the same curriculum and practice as mainstream schools, but are committed to training beginning teachers and staffed by teachers who are specially selected for their teaching skills. These teachers are well prepared in supervision and teacher professional development and assessment strategies. These schools are also expected to pursue research and development roles in collaboration with the Department of Teacher Education and, sometimes, with the academic faculties who participate in teacher education. These schools may, therefore, introduce alternative student-teacher curriculum designs. There are also several regular public schools serving the same purpose. These schools also have higher professional staffing requirements and teacher supervision must demonstrate that they are competent to work with teacher-students.

Learning from the Finnish approach, the University of Toronto in Ontario, Canada has recently created a master's degree program significantly extending the teaching experience for candidates and deepening their coursework to teach diverse learners. With these changes, teachers feel much better prepared for the challenges they face in the classroom. As a result, Ontario has increased requirements for teacher education to require the equivalent of a two-year graduate program that are expected to reflect current research in teacher education and to integrate theory and practice. Also in Canada, Alberta institutions offer either two year post-baccalaureate programs or five-year dual-degree programs in education plus a content area. The emphasis is on ensuring that the programs are aligned with the knowledge, skills, and attributes that are outlined in the professional Teaching Quality Standards.

Some universities in Australia have also recently reformed their teacher education programs by creating two-year clinical masters' degrees for student teachers at all levels. The two-year master of teaching program offered at the University of Melbourne has been designed as a research-based clinical program that integrates

academic study with practical work via schools-university collaboration. More than 90% of these graduates were found to feel well prepared for teaching, as compared to other beginning teachers trained elsewhere nationwide. Some major initiatives have been also believed to be under way in Victoria emphasising partnerships between universities and schools.

Singapore is also famous for teacher education with national commitment to high-quality education for prospective teachers, preparing student teachers to master both content and content pedagogy with academic subjects and curriculum studies courses. They are not only aligned, but taken concurrently and designed to be mutually reinforcing. Another significance in teacher education in Singapore is that teachers are required to be able to deliver a 21st century curriculum that infuses technology and favor project-based learning and collaboration. Therefore, all student teachers must take a course 'Interactive computer technology for meaningful learning' and complete the Group Endeavors in Service Learning Project working collaboratively with peers. The project demands 20 hours of direct service in the community, beyond project design, planning, and presentation. School-university collaboration also takes place through shared decision-making about student-teachers.

The current practices of innovating teacher education at these countries suggest that student teachers now spend more time in schools during their initial teacher preparation programs than they did a decade or two ago. The quality of these practical experiences is also seriously considered, including the quality of the cooperating teachers selected and their training for the role. It seems that something has been created to resemble a clinical curriculum— an intentional set of experiences and learning during the clinical part of the program (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

In the United States, for accreditation of teacher training programs, more attention is being paid to the development and assessment of practicum. Many universities have developed year-long practical experiences and partnerships with schools. Both the government actions and the development of structured performance assessments for novice teachers have been shaped this trend in the US. As regards professional standards, they are being used in a growing number of states as a means for leveraging both individual candidate learning and institutional learning for teacher education programs.

Hardly could anyone deny that the greater attention to practicum has been a net benefit to teacher preparation. However, Darling-Hammond (2017) believes that there is a long way to go to spread these innovating and leading practices to most programs in these countries (except Singapore) and other countries. It is believed that how to balance between theory and practice, how to create integrated forms of preparation and to ensure adequate resources for these changes to happen will continue to be a challenge in many programs (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

II. METHOD

Ho Chi Minh City University of Education is a key educational university in Vietnam. The university has 20 teacher education programs divided into four groups: Natural science education, social science education, Foreign language education and a group of some other programs such as Primary Education, Early Childhood Education, Special Education, Educational Studies and Physical Education. The study was conducted on junior and senior students enrolled in four teacher education programs representing these four groups: Chemistry Teacher Education, History Teacher Education, Teaching Russian as a Foreign language, and Special Education.

Surveys

The surveys investigate student responses to a training program's response to student needs in terms of knowledge of subjects, teachers' attributes, transferable competencies, and pedagogical competencies. The surveys also seek to find out what students want to add in their training programs to better meet their needs. The total number of students responding to the surveys was 194 (N = 194). However, there were two responses providing no information on the program. Overall, all four programs had a relatively similar number of students taking part in the surveys. The numbers of participants from Special Education program and Teaching Russian as a Foreign language program were the highest, with 53 and 50 respectively, while the lowest number of students was in the History education program, with 42 participants.

In addition, all participants in the surveys were in their third year or fourth year at the university. This is one of the criteria established by the study to ensure the reliability of the data collected. This is because the students in these groups have spent quite a long time at the university, it is highly likely that they have a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of their training programs, compared to freshmen and sophomore students. The percentage of third year students was higher than that of fourth year ones. Probably some fourth year students did not want to answer the questionnaire about students' evaluation of their level of mastery of some aspects in their training programs including ones related to knowledge of subjects, teachers' attributes, transferable competencies, and pedagogical competencies as well as their expected levels to be learned more due to their concentrating on preparing for the graduation exams or their thesis.

Interviews

In order to collect junior and senior students' in-depth opinions on how well the current curriculum meets their needs for knowledge of subjects, teachers' attributes, transferable competencies, and pedagogical competencies and other suggestions related to the learning needs of students at the university, the research team also undertook interviews with 10 students selected from those who had participated in the surveys. The research team contacted students in a variety of ways including phoning and emailing, based on the information provided in the survey answers. The information on the participants were coded to ensure the confidentiality.

III. FINDINGS

The following section reports on how students evaluate the extent to which they mastered the surveyed aspects and their learning needs to respective aspects.

Knowledge of subjects

For the levels of mastery, among the five aspects of knowledge surveyed, three types of knowledge were evaluated to be mastered the highest are: "Subject knowledge" (M: 3.81), "Knowledge of the Vietnam new general education curriculum" (M: 3.54), and "Knowledge of psychology of learners" (M: 3.52). These three types of knowledge were perceived to be fully equipped for the students in this study.

"Knowledge of economy, politics and society" and "Foreign languages" are the two types of knowledge students were not confident that they were well-trained. However, the expected levels of being trained more do not always respond to their reported levels of mastery. For example, "Knowledge of economy, politics and society" was believed to be least equipped to the students, but it was least expected to have supplements. Nonetheless, in general, the mean score of "expected levels to be learned more" is higher than that in "evaluation of students' level of mastery", 3.52 compared to 4.18.

Table 1. Students' opinions of knowledge aspects in training programs

No	Aspects	Evaluation of their level of mastery			Expected levels to be learned more		
		N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
1	Subject knowledge	194	3.81	0.85	193	4.00	1.13
2	Knowledge of economy, politics and society	194	3.34	0.98	190	3.86	1.10
3	Knowledge of the Vietnam new general education curriculum	193	3.54	0.99	191	4.26	0.99
4	Foreign languages	190	3.39	1.04	194	4.34	0.93
5	Knowledge of psychology of learners	191	3.52	0.96	193	4.45	3.78
Mean			3.52			4.18	

The interview information helps partly explain why the students surveyed expected to be learned more for all aspects of knowledge, "I find it too theoretical, while there are few opportunities for students to practice." (SV1GDDDB)

The data gathered from other interviewees also reveal similar information. Specifically, a senior student, majoring in Teaching Russian as a Foreign language and another one majoring in Special Education also assessed that the training program, in terms of knowledge, meets the needs of learners.

As for knowledge, it is fully equipped for us. Basic courses such as educational studies and student psychology are all included. In addition, our own compulsory courses such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and teaching methodologies have also helped us to have skills needed to teach Russian and English. (SV1Nga)

In general, the training program has provided all the necessary knowledge for students. (SV1GDDDB)

Pedagogical competencies

Regarding the levels of mastery, among the five aspects of pedagogical competencies surveyed, the three types were evaluated to be mastered the highest are: "Using IT and teaching equipment to improve teaching efficiency" (M: 4.08), "Lecture design" (3.88), and "Organizing teaching activities" (M: 3.85). These three types of pedagogical competencies were perceived to be fully equipped for the students in this research.

"Interdisciplinary and integrated teaching" (M: 2.92) and "Ability to use foreign languages for teaching" (M: 3.06) are the two types of pedagogical competencies students were not confident that they were well-trained. Besides, the second least effective aspect trained for students is the one expected to be learned more the second highest (M: 4.28). However, many aspects expected of being trained more in this content do not

respond to their reported levels of mastery. “Interdisciplinary and integrated teaching” is least equipped to the students, but the aspect most expected for being trained more is “Dealing with educational situations” (M: 4.41), for instance. Surprisingly, although the aspect of “Interdisciplinary and integrated teaching” was believed to be least equipped for the students surveyed, it was one of two aspects least expected to be learned more (M: 4.12).

Table 2. Students' opinions of pedagogical competencies in training programs

No	Aspects	Evaluation of their level of mastery			Expected levels to be learned more		
		N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
1. 1	Active teaching methods	169	3.74	0.96	167	4.20	1.02
2. 2	Lecture design	167	3.88	0.83	166	4.20	0.96
3. 3	Organizing teaching activities	169	3.85	0.93	169	4.17	1.02
4. 4	Selection and use of teaching materials	168	3.77	0.83	169	4.06	1.06
5. 5	Developing teaching and education plans towards the development of students' qualities and abilities	169	3.53	0.98	168	4.27	0.91
6. 6	Organizing extra-curricular activities	169	3.24	1.07	167	4.19	1.08
7. 7	Interdisciplinary and integrated teaching	168	2.92	1.02	168	4.12	1.02
8. 8	Dealing with educational situations	169	3.40	0.99	169	4.41	0.86
9. 9	Using IT and teaching equipment to improve teaching efficiency	167	4.08	2.50	168	4.24	1.02
10. 10	Ability to use foreign languages for teaching	169	3.06	1.16	169	4.28	0.96
Mean		3.55			4.20		

The interview results also showed similar information. Specifically, the majority of students were generally quite satisfied with their training programs, but they still hoped to learn more about the aspects related to pedagogical competencies.

Basically, we have learnt various theories. There was also time for us to practice teaching. However, I see it was not enough due to the limited time of the courses. I know that I have to practice by myself as well, so I do not require too much from the department. (SV1Nga)

Regarding teaching methodologies, my lecturers are quite good at them. They always look for ways to help students to understand their lectures. My lecturers have already provided what knowledge which has been considered important for students,. (SV1GDDB)

However, most students need to have the contents trained more because:

Lack of practical skills. In the classroom contexts, the environment is perfect for practice. However, realities are completely different, making students confused during their internship. (SV1GDDB)

The courses on teaching methodologies are mainly provided at a basic level. (SV1LS)

The courses on teaching methodologies are still somewhat theoretical. The university needs to increase more teaching practice time. (SV3LS)

Teachers' attributes

When it comes to the levels of mastery, among the eight aspects of teachers' attributes surveyed, three types of teachers' attributes were evaluated to be mastered the highest include "The basics of teacher style" (M: 4.40), "The code of ethics for teachers" (M: 4.28), and "Love and pride in the profession" (M: 4.08). These three types of teachers' attributes were believed to be fully equipped for the students in this study. "Developing relationships between schools, families and society" (M: 3.55) and "Professional development and lifelong learning" (M: 3.59) are the two types the students in the survey were not confident that they were well-trained.

"Developing relationships between schools, families and society", which is said to be least equipped, is also the one which is expected for being trained more the most (M: 4.19). However, generally the expected levels of being trained more do not always respond to their reported levels of mastery. For example, "Professionalism in teaching" is one of the aspects the students in the survey considered lack of being trained (M: 3.76), but it is expected to be provided more the least (M: 4.04). However, the mean scores of the expected levels to be taught more of all aspects in the area of teachers' attributes are higher than 4.00.

Table 3. Students' opinions of teachers' attributes in training programs

No	Aspects	Evaluation of their level of mastery			Expected levels to be learned more		
		N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
1	Professionalism in teaching	193	3.76	0.96	191	4.04	1.04
2	Collaboration in teaching	192	3.79	0.88	189	4.17	0.93
3	Professional development and lifelong learning	193	3.59	1.04	188	4.09	1.08
4	The code of ethics for teachers	190	4.28	0.88	191	4.17	1.21
5	The basics of teacher style	193	4.40	3.64	191	4.05	1.28
6	Developing relationships between schools, families and society	192	3.55	1.08	193	4.19	1.08
7	Love and pride in the profession	191	4.08	1.01	192	4.13	1.23
8	Cultural values	192	3.98	1.04	191	4.05	1.20
Mean			3.93			4.11	

When interviewed, students also showed their satisfaction with this aspect in the training programs. A student whose major is Teaching Russian as a Foreign language shared the idea that "I think that it is good and satisfactory" (SV1Nga). Similarly, two students, majoring in Special Education, stated, "It is very good. The lecturers shared everything important about teachers' attributes." (SV1GDDB), and "I see that the lecturers provided it to the fullest extent." (SV2GDDB) Two students, majoring in History Teacher Education, shared similar opinions, "I think this aspect has met my needs," (SV2LS) and "It is good." (SV3LS)

Soft skills

When it comes to the levels of mastery, among the five aspects of soft skills surveyed, three kinds of soft skills were evaluated to be mastered the highest are: "Communication skills and pedagogical behavior" (M: 3.69), "Problem solving skills" (M: 3.55), and "Creative skills" (M: 3.53). These three types of soft skills were believed to be fully equipped for the students in this study. "Start-up skills" (M: 2.93) and "Critical thinking skills" (M: 3.45) are the two types of soft skills the students in the survey were not confident that they were well-trained.

"Creative skills" and "Critical thinking skills" (M: 4.41) are two aspects which were needed to be learned the most. Although generally the expected levels of being trained more do not always respond to their reported levels of mastery, it can be seen that the area of soft skills is the one said to be least equipped (M: 3.43) and to be most expected for more training (M: 4.37) among the four areas surveyed.

Table 4. Students' opinions of soft skills in training programs

No	Aspects	Opinions of current teacher training programs			The needs for intensifying current teacher training programs		
		N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
1	Problem solving skills	193	3.55	0.93	191	4.34	0.96
2	Critical thinking skills	189	3.45	0.94	191	4.41	0.94
3	Communication skills and pedagogical behavior	190	3.69	0.93	191	4.36	1.01
4	Creative skills	193	3.53	0.92	190	4.41	0.84
5	Start-up skills	193	2.93	1.08	191	4.34	0.97
Mean			3.43			4.37	

Similar to the survey results, which showed that the mean score of soft skills is lower than that in other areas, the interview results also revealed that this is an area which students considered least equipped and expected a lot of improvement, as shared below.

Not very good. Why are more courses for soft skills not provided? We may know some of these skills, but we have not practiced them well. (SV1GDDB)

Lecturers, in the teaching process, have integrated teaching soft skills into their lectures, but it is not enough. Most students are weak in soft skills. (SV2GDDB)

I find teamwork skills are necessary because most of us are given group assignments, but only a few can do well (...) There are no courses about classroom management skills, presentation skills, and communication skills (not talk like giving presentations or memorizing). Some of us never have a chance to give a presentation. (SV1LS)

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Results in the surveys showed that all of five aspects of knowledge in the teacher education training programs were necessary to be trained more. In other words, students in the surveys had a higher expectation of the contents of the training programs. Among those five aspects of knowledge, the aspect of soft skills that met students' needs were lowest and this aspect also should be trained the most. On the contrary, the aspects related to teachers' attributes were considered to meet most of students' needs.

The aspects of pedagogical competencies in the training programs have been also compatible with aspects of professional development of teachers mentioned in Standard 2 and Standard 5 in professional standards of Vietnamese school teachers (Ministry of Education, Vietnam, 2021b). Students' desire for the need to add more in some contents as organizing extra-curricular activities; ability to use foreign languages in teaching; interdisciplinary and integrated teaching was also completely suitable for innovation in new general education curriculum in Vietnam (Ministry of Education, Vietnam, 2021a).

The code of ethics for teachers and teacher style were considered compatible with Standard 1 in the Vietnamese professional standards for teachers (Ministry of Education, Vietnam, 2021b) which should have more training. In addition, it has been interesting that while the training programs of the university have been not paid attention much about in the aspect of developing relationships between schools, families and society, students surveyed have been emphasized that the training programs should spare spaces for this aspect. These opinions of students have been quite reasonable, especially in the context that complex issues as school violence, psychological instability of students has been emerged considerably in Vietnamese schools that require more close cooperation among three stakeholders.

Students' assessment of the aspects related to soft skills in the current teacher education training programs at the university and the opinions on the extent of intensifying more in these aspects has been understandable. For example, the contents of start-up skills has been included in the latest versions of training programs, these only have been implemented in some extra-curricular activities as seminars, start-up and career fairs for students at the university. Although according to Vietnamese National Qualification Framework (Vietnamese Government, 2021), the contents of start-up skills has been regulated as learning outcomes of skills that graduate university in various disciplines at Vietnamese universities should be obtained, these skills may not be critical for teacher students because these teacher education training programs have different mission with other ones in which creating teachers who can teach well in general schools.

Students hope to be trained more about soft skills such as problem solving skills, critical thinking skills, pedagogical communication skills, and creative skills. They are quite appropriate for requirements of labour market as well as of requirements of the learning outcomes of skills for university graduates in the Vietnamese National Qualification Framework (specified at level 6) (Vietnamese Government, 2021).

The way of designing the training programs in which main contents has been aligned with the professional teacher standards that are quite similar to that at Alberta institutions, Canada. As mentioned by Darling-Hammond (2017), close connection between theory and practice through building in-depth contents of subjects, and integrating of effective clinical work in settings which has been very crucial in teacher education programs. Therefore, the intensification of five aspects of knowledge in the programs in general and the aspect of soft skills including problem solving skills; critical thinking skills; pedagogical communication skills and creativity skills; the aspect of developing relationships between schools, families and society, students in particular which may be integrated in subjects with practical work via schools-university collaboration as proposed in a model of training teachers at University of Melbourne, Australia.

The results presented in the article show the evaluation opinions of student teachers in 4 representative departments on their learning needs of training programs at the university. These evaluation opinions of students about teacher education training programs have been examined and compared with the aspects of the contemporary teacher education training programs of the university; requirements of the Vietnamese professional standards for school teachers; the State's regulations on the orientation of basic and comprehensive education innovation (The Central Executive Committee, 2021), learning outcomes of skills for higher education programs as stated in the Vietnamese National Qualifications Framework and other requirements of practices. Some limitations of the research, such as the in-depth analysis of the students' learning needs in specific disciplines and the level of need for additional content in the training programs would be further exploited in next studies.

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Duong Thi Hong Hieu, et. al. "Initial Teacher Education at A Key Teacher Education University In Vietnam: Students' Perspective." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 26(01), 2021, pp. 15-22.