

THF POLICY BRIEF NO. 9

# Implementing Vietnam's School Renovations' Policy

Developing Teachers and School Leaders



The  
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Human Capital & Education for Asian Development

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## SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION, RESEARCH METHODS AND FINDINGS

### Introduction

The 2013 policy of ‘fundamental and comprehensive’ renovations introduced by the Vietnam Government is an ambitious programme to modernise all aspects of Vietnam school education – the curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, professional development, and school leadership and management, as well as secure greater equity.

In 2013, then-Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung requested the Ministry of Education and Training to work out plans to:

- promote universal education and illiteracy alleviation
- solidify schools and teachers’ working offices from 2013 to 2015 and renew educational programmes and textbooks after 2015
- strengthen inspection and supervision in education and training
- promote teaching and learning of foreign languages and information technology development in the national education system.

These reforms are “multiple, complex, connected and simultaneous” (Dimmock, 2016, 2017), presenting schools with major challenges of implementation. Significantly, never before have Vietnam principals and teachers been challenged to undertake such wholesale change in their practices, roles and relationships. Renovations on such a scale also present new experiences and challenges to the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), the central government department whose responsibility it is to oversee system transformation.

It is therefore hardly surprising that school teachers complain about the absence of clear target goals and timelines for implementation, and the lack of supportive implementation guidelines for schools – eg. whether the multiple renovations should be adopted simultaneously, sequenced or phased. Schools find difficulty in visualising the integrated nature of the

renovations, and in forming a future vision of what their schools will look like during and after the multiple changes are implemented. This bold programme of renovation is bound to take a decade or more, and will probably be open-ended and on-going. For some schools – especially those poorly resourced schools in rural communities – the challenges are even greater, threatening to widen the equity gap which, paradoxically, the renovations’ policy is intended to close.



*Image 1: A student teaching her peers - new student-centred pedagogy*

This Policy Brief recognises the importance for both the Vietnam Government and schools of establishing momentum behind the renovations in the first few years, enabling some measure of success to be claimed in implementation of new practices, roles and relationships in order to maintain initiative and impetus for long term sustainability.

Based on our research evidence, this Policy Brief strongly argues that to achieve such momentum and drive, there is an urgent need for high quality and relevant capacity building of human resources in Vietnam schools, especially focusing on quality professional development of teachers and principals covering the multiple areas of renovation. This claim is highly significant: the future quality of Vietnam schooling depends on building capacity of human resources (talent, skills and expertise) – particularly in teaching and leadership.

### Data Gathering Methods

The project design consisted of three sequential stages. First, starting with the school level, understanding school principals’ and teachers’ perceptions and experiences of the renovations. Second, providing a programme of knowledge exchange and skills development in workshops to build capacity of teachers and principals; and third, conducting interventions in pilot schools to trial and evaluate new renovation practices.

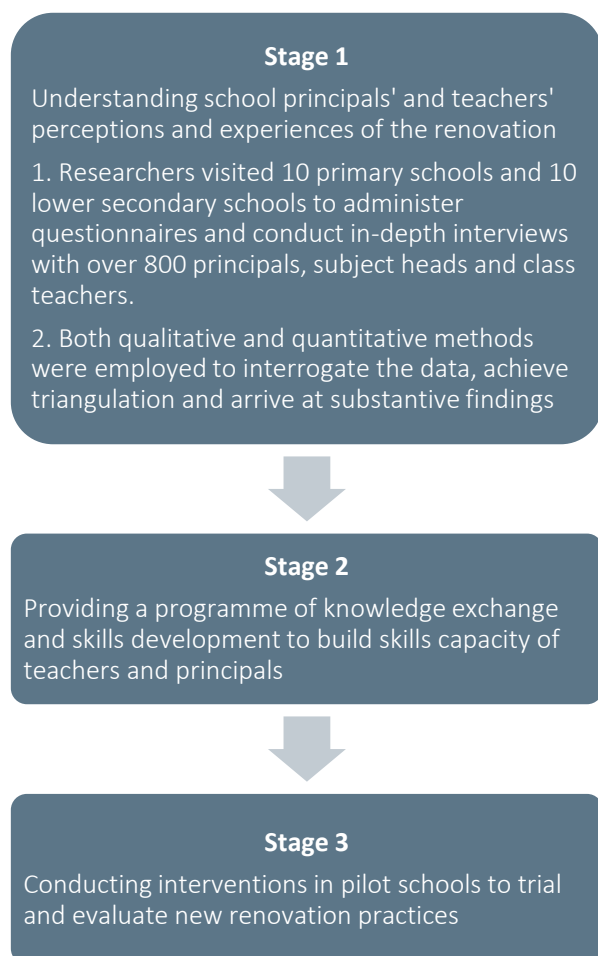


Figure 1: Sequential stages of project design

Data for this Policy Brief was collected from 20 schools (10 primary schools and 10 lower secondary schools) and included more than 800 teachers across all three regions of Vietnam. The research was led by the University of Glasgow, with Vietnam partner universities including – Vietnam National University, Hanoi; Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences; Hue University College of Education; Quang Tri Teacher Training College; Ho Chi Minh City University of Education; University of Social Sciences and Humanities; and Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City.

Researchers collected data in 2016 and 2017 by visiting participant schools to administer questionnaires and conduct in-depth interviews with principals, subject heads and class teachers. Principals and teachers were asked about key aspects of the renovation – eg. the extent to which renovations had already been implemented; factors they thought had influenced the implementation of renovations to date (eg. policy guidance, resources, teacher professional development, management and leadership, school culture); the effectiveness of the renovations to date

in developing students for the 21st century; factors that might help or hinder successful implementation of renovations in the future; and the new skills and knowledge needed for successful implementation going forward.

Both qualitative and quantitative (eg. Rasch analysis, structural equation modelling, hierarchical linear modelling) methods were performed to interrogate the data, achieve triangulation, and arrive at substantive findings that inform this Policy Brief.



Image 2: Vietnamese students doing group work in their classroom.

## Findings

The main findings from the project are as follows:

1. Across the range of renovation areas, we found new practices limited to changes in pedagogy and assessment; they rarely included reforms to professional development and leadership.
2. Initiatives for change are heavily reliant on groups of activist and enthusiastic teachers, rather than proactive leadership from senior school leaders, including principals.
3. Apart from lesson demonstration, there is little evidence of schools institutionalising new practices; thus innovations appear to be piecemeal and experimental rather than scaled up and sustainable.
4. Principals and teachers grouped all of the renovations into one of three categories, namely, changes to
  - school structures
  - school autonomy
  - teaching-learning.

Only **higher levels of teachers' professional development** were positively associated with higher levels of implementation of changes in all three categories; for example, two other enabling factors - policy guidance and school

resources - were not associated with the implementation of changes in these areas.

5. A fundamental purpose of the renovations is educating students in 21st century competencies: of all the variables we tested using SEM (structural equation modelling,) only **teachers' professional development** and **school culture** were positively associated with teachers' emphasis on teaching and learning to implement these competencies.
6. Specifically, in adopting more student-centred pedagogies, teachers felt they needed more support to improve their teaching and learning in the following areas –
  - Differentiating their teaching methods to better cater to differences in student learning needs
  - Having more time to prepare for their teaching
  - Using differentiated textbooks with flexible teaching approaches
  - Teaching with smaller class sizes.
7. In addition, teachers felt that the following would also help them to adopt new renovation practices in teaching, learning and assessment –
  - School leaders assuming greater responsibility for enhancing teaching-learning
  - Teachers being given more support by school leaders and managers to improve teaching-learning (instructional leadership).
8. In general, primary school staff rather than their lower secondary counterparts are more inclined to adopt new pedagogic and assessment practices, and to see the benefits of so doing.

“

Only higher levels of teachers' professional development were positively associated with higher levels of implementation of changes in all three categories of school structures, school autonomy and teaching-learning.

”



Image 3: Teacher collaborative action learning

9. Our findings are well summarised by the following four quotes from different teachers that are representative of the many interviews we conducted:

*“For the past years, we have frequently heard of “renovations”[...]. We have implemented small and piecemeal renovations: adjustments of the curriculum and changes in pedagogy, and some changes in student assessment. However these are not sufficient.”*

*“Indeed we are attitudinally prepared for renovations; however, we are .... not clear about the details on what and how to implement renovations. We also feel confused about some issues and details regarding renovations.”*

*“Students seem more active and engaged, but we teachers lack confidence that adopting the new pedagogies will improve students' academic achievements.”*

*“There is a lot of professional development provided outside the school by MOET (Ministry of Education and Training) and DOETs (District offices of Education and Training), but it is rarely useful in enabling us to gain new pedagogic and assessment skills and techniques.”*

## Insights

These findings lead to the following insights:

1. Of all the enabling variables we tested, only **higher levels of teacher professional development was associated with changes in teaching-learning, institutional structures, and school autonomy** (ie. more school leadership and decision making).
2. **Higher levels of teacher professional development (especially when school-based)** were also associated with building a positive school culture, which in turn was also seen as enabling new improved practices; and both of these led in turn to changes in leadership (rather than vice versa, where it is assumed leadership leads to changes in school culture and professional development).
3. Teachers, rather than school managers and leaders, are currently leading initiatives to implement new pedagogic and assessment methods and techniques.
4. Professional development opportunities are provided outside of schools by MOET and DOETs, but these are seen by teachers to be of little value in equipping them with the skills and techniques needed to meet the 21<sup>st</sup> century competencies and learning needs of students; conversely, within-school professional development (WSPD) is seen as more useful to teachers for imparting soft transversal skills; however, at present WSPD is generally restricted in its scope eg. to lesson demonstrations.
5. Currently, innovative within-school professional development is actively pursued by only a minority of teachers and is failing to be scaled up to have a meaningful effect across all school staff.
6. Where in-school professional development is taking place, it tends to be restricted to practising a limited range of student-centred methods; it largely ignores other areas of renovation, such as formative assessment, new institutionalised forms of professional development, new organisational structures, and new roles and relationships for school principals and senior staff (school autonomy).
7. Providing high quality professional development and building a positive school culture are seen as the two most important capacity builders enabling successful implementation of the renovations to teaching-learning, school structures, and greater school autonomy.
8. Teachers felt that only within-school professional development of high quality and relevance would enable them to gain the specific skills to apply student-centred methods in their mixed ability classes.
9. Teachers expressed a desire for more support from senior school leaders (instructional leadership) in implementing new pedagogies and assessment techniques.
10. Teachers admit to some ambivalence on the new skill sets and practices they should acquire to fulfil the comprehensive renovations.
11. Primary school staff are more inclined to adopt new renovation practices and to see the benefits of such, than are their secondary counterparts; however, they are also more likely to question their ability to acquire the necessary skills.
12. There is considerable variance in the capacity of schools to deliver high quality within-school professional development - which raises serious concerns about the equity gap between schools widening rather than narrowing.

## Implications

The project yielded two main findings:

1. Professional development and re-culturing schools play crucial roles in the implementation of the Vietnam Government's policy of 'fundamental and comprehensive' renovations; and
2. Current patterns, levels and quality (ie relevance, standards and limited adoption of new practices) of professional development are inadequate for delivering successful implementation of the renovations' policy (see Figure 2).

These findings yield serious and major implications as follows:

1. If the current provision of piecemeal professional development is allowed to continue, it is highly probable that a significant proportion of primary and lower secondary students will fail to experience an education fit for citizenship in 21<sup>st</sup> century Vietnam.
2. Professional development that is currently restricted largely to partial understandings of student-centred pedagogies (excluding other renovation areas such

as formative assessment, greater equity, and leadership skills), and is not scaled up to include all teachers and school leaders, will likely fail to deliver its potential impact on the quality and equity of learning experiences for students, thereby failing to develop the potential of Vietnam's future human resources.

3. Professional development that fails to involve all teachers as active learners and evaluators of their own and their colleagues' teaching methods and achievements, is not capitalising on the powerful positive effects of dispersed instructional leadership across the school, involving principals, subject heads and teachers.
4. Principals were found to be mainly reactive rather than proactive in supporting teacher initiatives to improve pedagogy and learning; principals often saw their role as mainly providing resources, or simply 'supporting' by not hindering, rather than adopting a fuller range of proactive instructional and transformational leadership roles.
5. The above implications lead to the conclusion that schools need to formalise their organisation of within-school approaches to teacher and leader professional development to guarantee inclusivity of all staff and all areas of renovation - teaching, learning and assessment, structures, and school-based leadership (more school autonomy). **A formal structure for each school's professional development – notably, professional learning communities (PLCs) – with an agreed methodology for all teachers to collaborate to improve teaching and learning – namely collaborative action learning - is needed for this purpose (see Figure 2).**
6. Positive steps are required to counteract the inherent nature of schools' different capacities to implement renovations whereby the equity gap between advantaged and disadvantaged schools grows wider rather than narrower.

There is a marked urban-rural divide in Vietnam, epitomised by the better endowment of urban schools with more qualified teachers and more resources, and with higher income parents. In contrast, rural communities tend to have higher ethnic minority populations, poorer families, and often a shortage of teachers, some of whom may only speak their own ethnic language. Hence the rural problem of teacher shortage is exacerbated by their generally poorer quality, and denial of opportunities for quality professional development that are more readily available to their urban counterparts.

As elsewhere in Asia, the compounding of rural disadvantage presents a major challenge, the implications of which are hard to escape. Government interventionist and compensatory measures are necessary to a greater extent than exist at present. Teacher recruitment in rural areas needs to be made more attractive than currently – more teachers are needed who are bi-lingual in speaking both their ethnic language and the official Vietnamese language. Measures that improve both the supply of teachers (eg. publicity to raise teacher status, salary and allowances for teachers in disadvantaged communities), and the professional development opportunities afforded them (eg. distance and blended professional learning, networking with partner schools that have better resources to support them, and persuading university schools of education to conduct more of their teaching practice and research activities in rural disadvantaged schools as a way of building their capacity) are needed.

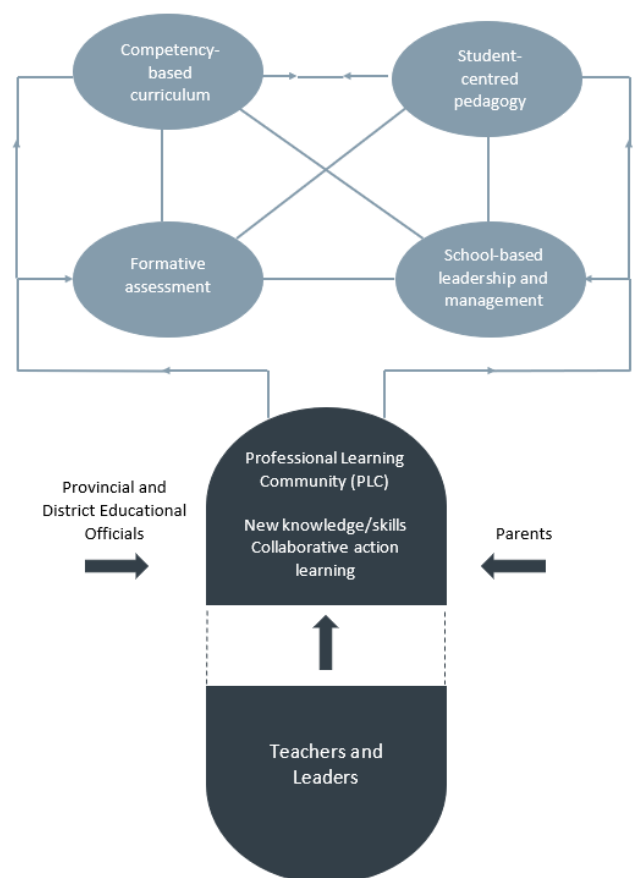


Figure 2: Schools as Professional Learning Communities for Vietnam renovations



Figure 3: Summary of implications from findings

## SECTION 2: RECOMMENDATIONS

### Recommendations

In light of this project's findings, the following recommendations are hugely important:

1. The Vietnam Government has put in place a comprehensive policy of system-wide renovations covering all aspects of schooling. In light of the unique developmental context of Vietnam, **the next phase of development needs to be built on high quality school-based teacher and leader professional development, with resultant positive school cultures that emanate therefrom.**
2. Accordingly, **the Vietnam Government should have - as a long term aim, the establishment of each school as a professional learning community (PLC);** where feasible (eg. geographical proximity and suitability of partnerships) schools should be encouraged and expected to network and support their collective staff development and school improvement efforts (this has been a key feature of success underpinning Singapore's school system, see Hairon and Dimmock, 2012).
3. In the immediate and short term, **it is recommended that since PLCs would be relatively new to Vietnam, they be developed in stages;** the first stage should comprise the following –
  - a. MOET develop a Handbook to guide schools in establishing, maintaining and sustaining schools as PLCs; the Handbook should include - their *aims and purposes* (aligned to the implementation of renovations and school improvement); their *membership* (eg. all teachers and managers/leaders, and parent representatives); *ways of operating* (eg. **teachers working collaboratively in teams to trial and evaluate new pedagogies – called collaborative action learning; leaders/managers trialing new instructional leadership roles** to support teachers); *leaders' roles and responsibilities* in establishing and maintaining PLCs in their schools.
  - b. MOET, with the co-operation of provincial and district governments, should select a small number of pilot schools of different types (according to sector, size, location, intake) to **develop a number of variant PLC models appropriate for diverse school contexts across Vietnam** (eg. urban – city, town, suburban, rural, remote).
  - c. The pilot school staff should be given training in how PLCs best function, and they should be able to draw on advice from outside consultants (from overseas if necessary) with experience in PLCs.
  - d. After evaluating the effectiveness (with subsequent adaptation) of these variant models – there should be a staged roll out to more schools, with the pilot schools acting as 'hubs' to network and scale up the PLC project.

- e. In order to secure greater equity between schools in diverse geographical and environmental contexts, the piloting phase should focus on innovative ways to support teachers and managers/leaders in disadvantaged, rural communities by utilising and harnessing technology in networking with 'hub' schools (schools whose capacities have

been developed to enable them to network new practices of teaching and leadership to lower performing schools in their district/region) in order to experience distance learning and blended learning methods, to overcome the challenges of distance, remoteness and poverty.

The Vietnam government's long-term aim should be the establishment of each school as a Professional Learning Community:



To do so, we need to develop Professional Learning Communities in stages:

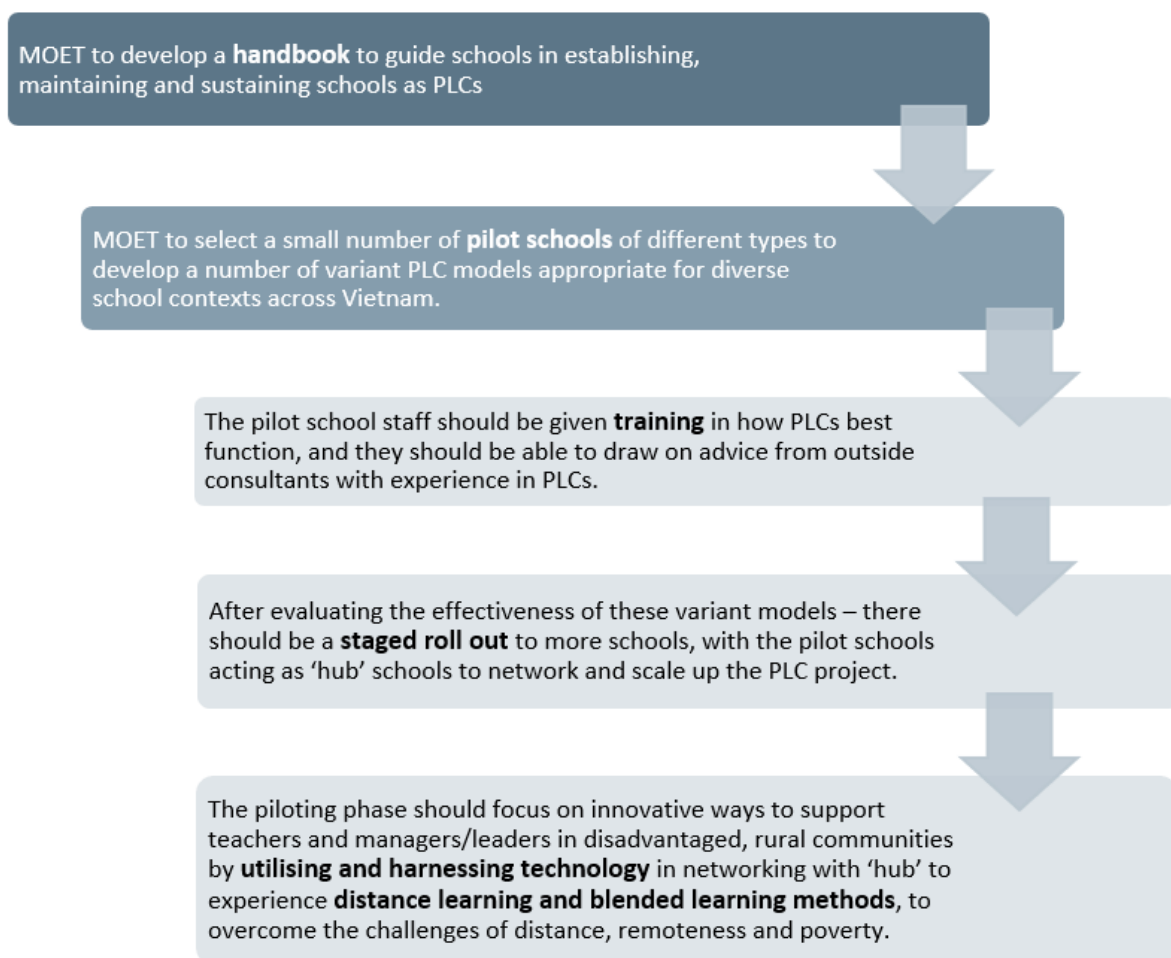


Figure 4: Summary of recommendations

## Conclusion

Although greater equity is a key goal and feature of future Vietnam school reforms, there is real danger that the renovations' policy will widen rather than narrow the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged schools; compensatory teacher and leader professional development can help address this inequity.

Teachers claim they would appreciate greater support from managers and senior staff when trialing new pedagogic practices; principals and senior managers should therefore expand and intensify their involvement in promoting instructional leadership across all levels of the school.

Since high quality professional development of teachers and leaders/managers is crucial in the building of new school cultures that support the Ministry's aims of modernising Vietnam education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is suggested that a more formal and institutionalised structure for professional development be introduced by phases into all schools; such a structure is the Professional Learning Community (PLC), which has been adopted in other successful school systems (eg. Singapore).

The Policy Brief recommends a developmental and phased approach to the adoption of PLCs in Vietnam – including a Handbook produced by the Ministry (MOET) for guiding schools; a staged introduction starting with pilot schools in a number of diverse school settings; and the use of technology and blended distance learning for teachers and principals in remote, rural schools in disadvantaged communities.

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## About This Policy Brief

The Policy Brief was written by Professor Clive Dimmock, Professor of Professional Learning and Leadership, University of Glasgow who was also the Principal Investigator. This document has arisen from a research study on the implementation of educational policy reform in Vietnam led by Prof Clive Dimmock and funded by The HEAD Foundation; the British Council, Vietnam; and The University of Glasgow.

The views expressed are the Principal Investigator's and his team, and do not necessarily represent those of The HEAD Foundation, the University of Glasgow, or the British Council, Vietnam.



20 Upper Circular Road  
The Riverwalk #02-21  
Singapore 058416

[www.headfoundation.org](http://www.headfoundation.org)

E: [info@headfoundation.org](mailto:info@headfoundation.org)

T: +65 6672 6160

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