

## Exploring New Horizons in Professional Development: Teachers' Shifting Perspectives on Postgraduate Education

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### Abstract

*The recent massive education disruptions post the pandemic have led to a significant shift on postgraduate education endeavours. Obtaining a postgraduate qualification as a form of professional development is not new. However today, it is seen in a different light. As such, this qualitative study was designed to provide a fuller narrative of 11 teachers' views of postgraduate education as a form of their professional development post-pandemic. Findings suggest that teachers' reasons for undertaking postgraduate education was very much tied to their self-gains rather than becoming research and empirical-driven professionals. Such a finding seemed contradictory to the theories of teacher professional development that emphasize the outcomes of effective professional development on teacher effectiveness. The findings also imply a notable shift in teachers' preferred mode of learning post-pandemic, with online study emerging the most preferred option. The implications drawn from this research accentuate the necessity for policymakers and educational leaders to implement a more nuanced and flexible approach to teacher professional development.*

**Keywords:** Teachers, Professional Development, Postgraduate Education, Shifting Preferences, Post Pandemic Era.

### Introduction

Teacher professional development or known with its abbreviation as 'TPD' are systematic efforts that bring about changes in the teachers' classroom practices, beliefs, attitudes, and pupils' learning outcomes (Guskey, 2000, 2002). The thought of teacher professional development has seen steady growth for many decades. In recent years, TPD has emerged as a crucial global issue that needs to be tackled to enhance the standard of education (OECD, 2009; UNESCO, 2024). It is widely agreed that teachers who have had adequate professional development can influence a positive impact on classroom practices (Guskey, 2002, 2000; Lasley et al. 2006). Empirical findings also has further demonstrated that teachers who have received high-quality education and training positively impact their students' academic accomplishments (Guskey, 2000, 2002; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Ladd & Sorensen, 2017; Papay & Kraft, 2015).

#### *Models of Professional Development Past and Present*

Models of professional development have undergone a drastic change over the years. In the past, where professional development of teachers was inclined towards training of skills rather than qualification, the teaching discourse largely focused on technical and practical aspects, emphasizing the fundamental importance of acquiring skills and techniques to improve students learning (Cameron & Baker, 2004).

Prominent models of professional development from past research have been detailed by Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (1989), Guskey (1998, 2000), Amundsen et al. (2005), OECD (2009), Mayer and Lloyd (2011), Joyce and Calhoun (2010), Pianta (2011) and Linda Darling-Hammond et al. (2017). These models

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primarily centered on workshops, study and discussion groups, problem-based learning, short-term training, and peer mentoring and coaching

During the 1980s, scholars such as Super (1980) and Shulman (1987) challenged the prevailing view of teaching as merely a practical activity. This led to a shift from teacher training to teacher education, a transition from colleges of education to universities, and the evolution of teaching into a degreed profession (Schon, 1987). These discursive shifts transformed teaching from a practical activity to a complex, professional endeavor (Alcorn, 1999). Notably, because teachers were now expected to address practice-related issues reflectively and reflexively, professional expectations for both newly qualified and experienced teachers have evolved. This shift required practicing teachers to develop new professional identities.

With the change in concept from ‘trained teacher’ to ‘degreed teachers, many countries shifted their professional development initiatives requiring more teachers to pursue postgraduate education at private or public institutions (Dixon et al., 2015; Jamil, 2014).

### *Teacher Professional Development in Malaysia*

Teacher Professional Development (TPD) in Malaysia has been a growing and challenging area, especially in the context of global educational reforms (Jamil et al., 2011). Teachers are considered the most significant agents in these reforms, and their professional development is crucial for improving the educational system (Salleh & Hatta, 2020).

To maintain a high-quality standard in teaching, Malaysia has made continuing professional development obligatory for practicing teachers. The Malaysian Education Blueprint (2015-2025), a strategic roadmap for transforming the nation’s education system, upholds teacher quality by sternly emphasizing research-informed professional development (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). Formal academic has been long recognized as a legitimate form of professional development to ensure quality (Williams, 2005). In Malaysia, the upgrading of qualifications hence has been an ongoing effort through competitive study awards and postgraduate grants, such as MyBrain 15 and the Malaysia International Postgraduate Scholarship (MIS). The government has also promised systematic changes to provide incentives for teachers to engage in lifelong learning. Teachers with high levels of graduate degrees and various competencies will be granted higher pay and better positions.

As a result, there has been a surge in teachers working to achieve high-level graduate degrees from both national and private universities (Sekaran, 2023). Historically, most universities offered traditional face-to-face learning, valued for immediate feedback, personalized guidance, structured environments, and better peer interaction. However, the mandatory lockdown during COVID-19 forced a shift to fully online classes, changing perceptions of education. Three years post-pandemic, online education has become the preferred mode of learning for many teachers and students, reflecting a significant shift from traditional to digital education (Bakar, 2022; Jeevita, 2024; Tee, 2023). This transition indicates a broader acceptance of flexible, borderless education that meets contemporary needs and preferences.

### *Purpose of the Study*

In Malaysia, since gaining an advanced education can lead to greater career advancement opportunities, postgraduate programs have always been a preferred form of professional development. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers witnessed a significant transformation in education, prompting a shift towards greater flexibility in teaching and learning. While it appears agreed that Covid-19 pandemic has changed how teachers’ view teaching and learning and given that there has been a shift in the discourse from teaching as a practical activity to one that is a degreed activity, little attention has been paid to the type and mode of postgraduate education teachers themselves prefer as part of their professional development post the pandemic. To bridge this gap, this study explored the following research questions:

- What postgraduate programs do teachers prefer pursuing as part of their professional development?

- What motivates teachers to obtain a postgraduate education?
- What are teachers' preferred mode of study for a postgraduate education post-pandemic?
- What factors influence teachers' decisions on their preferred mode of study?

## Methodology

### *Research Method and Approach*

The study reported in this paper is part of a larger study that examined the effectiveness of professional development in teachers. Situated with the interpretive paradigm (Neuman, 2003), the current study attempted to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' preferences of postgraduate education in the era of post pandemic through a qualitative method. The choice of conducting qualitative research for this study was due to its nature of providing rich narratives towards the phenomena being studied. In addition, the qualitative study allowed researchers to apply iterative approaches that focused on in-depth feedback and sub-sequent questioning (Bowen, 2008, 2009; Creswell, 2014; Nelson, 2016; Yin, 2017). The Iterative approach allowed researchers to expand interview questions to new areas of interest, and revise or drop interview questions due to new information (Le et al., 2019). The unpredictable nature of qualitative data feeds the iterative process. Unexpected information that emerges during data collection can be used to better capture and explore further insights, hence eliciting a rich response.

### *Research Instrument*

To conduct effective research, the researcher must outline the procedure or different stages of the study (Herrington et al., 2007). For this study, the research instrument was designed based on the gap in the literature review bordering the research objectives. Since the questions were self-designed, two subject-matter experts (SMEs) were invited to conduct an inter-rater reliability test. A Kappa score of 0.78 which indicated substantial agreement further strengthened instrument reliability for the study (Kumar, 2022).

### *Sampling and Data Collection*

Good qualitative research aims for sample appropriateness and adequacy rather than a specific sample size (Bowen, 2008; Nhu Le, 2019). Appropriateness involves selecting respondents who best represent or have knowledge of the research topic, while adequacy relates to the depth of understanding a phenomenon, which is partially determined by the respondents' characteristics and the information they provide during data collection (Bowen, 2008; Creswell, 2007). Data was collected from 11 teachers (TEs) through semi-structured interviews. Participants were purposefully selected based on the following criteria:

*employed as a school-teacher*

*interested in pursuing a postgraduate degree program*

*experienced with more than one form of learning (online, face-to-face, or hybrid)*

Initially, 30 TEs from a private high school volunteered to participate, but only 11 met the specific criteria required for this study. Qualitative research interviews typically range from 30 minutes to two hours, depending on the depth of exploration, complexity of the topic, and practical constraints such as time and resources (Creswell, 2007). In this study, most interviews lasted between 30 and 35 minutes to maintain the participants' attention span (George, 2022). After each interview, verbatim transcription was performed, followed by content analysis where data was coded, and themes relevant to the research questions were identified and discussed.

*Data Analysis*

To ensure validity and add credibility, member checking was conducted. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe member checking as a crucial technique for establishing credibility, requiring the researcher to seek participants' input on the data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions. Ethical standards were maintained by assigning pseudonyms (TE1 to TE11) to all participants.

**Findings and Discussion**

The subsequent section presents the findings obtained from the interviews, followed by a discussion of each theme that emerged from the data analysis.

*Participants' Demographic Details*

Among the 11 participants interviewed, 54.5% were aged 24 to 29, 36.4% were aged 30 to 39,

and 9.1% were aged between 40 and 49. In terms of teaching experience, all teachers were currently employed at a private high school. Of these, 63.6% had between 1 and 5 years of experience, 27.3% had between 10 and 15 years of experience, and 9.1% had 22 years of experience (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Age Group and Teaching Experiences

Teacher (TE)	Age	Percentage (5%)	Teaching experience	Percentage (5%)
TE1	24	54.5	1	63.6%
TE2	25		2	
TE3	25		1	
TE4	27		3	
TE5	28		4	
TE6	29		5	
TE7	30		36.4	
TE8	38	11		
TE9	39	10		
TE10	39	15		
TE11	46	9.1	22	9.1

Of the 11 teachers interviewed, 63.6% (7 teachers) expressed interest in pursuing postgraduate education, while 36.4% (4 teachers) indicated they were enrolled for the upcoming semester at a private university. Notably, all participating teachers had experience with multiple learning modalities (Table 2), with 63.7% reported having experienced all three teaching modes: face-to-face, online, and hybrid.

**Table 2.** Criteria Requirement of Participants

Criteria for this study	Participants (n)	Percentage (%)
<b><i>Employment at Schools</i></b>		
Currently teaching in a school	11	100
<b><i>Interest in Postgraduate Studies</i></b>		
Registered for a Postgraduate degree	4	36.4%
Intend to register for postgraduate study	7	63.6%
<b><i>Experienced More Than One Form of Learning</i></b>		
Traditional setting (Face-to-face) and online	3	27.3
Traditional setting (Face-to-face) and hybrid	1	9.1
Traditional setting (Face-to-face), online and hybrid	7	63.6%

Recognizing the importance of capturing the participants' demographic interpretations was considered essential for the study (Delamont & Jones, 2012). From the demographic data, several valuable findings emerged. Firstly, it was observed that most teachers intending to pursue postgraduate studies were early-career teachers. This aligns with Trainin's (2017) as-assertion that undertaking postgraduate studies early in a teacher's career helps them become better educators who remain in the profession longer. It encourages the creation of a Community of Learning (CoL) with other teachers to share practices, issues, and challenges, enriching those in the initial phase of their career (Garcia & Weiss, 2019).

Secondly, it was noted that even teachers with over 10 years of experience still showed intent to pursue higher-level degrees. This finding supports the claim that senior teachers seek higher postgraduate qualifications as a pathway to transfer to higher-quality schools with better working conditions and salaries, rather than solely to improve teaching skills (Ash-worth, 2014; Lad & Sorenson, 2015).

#### *Teachers Preferred Postgraduate Program*

Analysis of data indicated 8 participants (TE1, TE2, TE4, TE5, TE6, TE7, TE10, TE11) preferring a master's degree programme while 3 (TE3, TE8, TE9) preferred taking up a post-graduate diploma in education.

TE3, TE8 and TE9 indicated an interest in taking a postgraduate diploma in education rather than a master's degree due to pedagogical competency. All three teachers teaching at the schools did not have a basic degree in education, instead they graduated as an engineer (TE3), a chemist (TE8) and TE9 graduated as an agriculturist.

*I have been teaching in this school for a year now and because my basic degree was in agriculture, there are many teaching methodologies and latest trends in teaching sciences that I believe I can learn if I pursue a Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching rather than a master's in education.*

-TE9

*Having an engineering background is great. I can bring industry to the classroom, but I still don't have the teaching competencies to cope with every issue of teaching and learning. Therefore, I think a PGD will be rather suitable for me.*

-TE3

In Malaysia, although many teachers especially in private schools may not have an educational qualification, they can still pursue a teaching career but will eventually need to comply to the Malaysian Education Act 1996 to receive a registered teacher status (Laws of Malaysia, 2006). This phenomenon is not new to the education system in many countries. Weldon (2015) in a previous study on teachers' issues in Australia reported that 26% of teachers teaching for 7-10 years are outside their major field while in Washington, Bayani & Guhao (2017) similarly observed that some teachers taught in schools without any basic training in education, although all were holders of a bachelor's degree qualifications.

#### *Specialization In ~~Master's in~~ Education*

Among 62.5% (8 teachers) preferring a master's degree program, all stated interest to pursue a master's in education with each having certain specialization as preference. 4 teachers (50%) indicated interest specializing in leadership and management, while the other 4 preferred either instructional technology, special needs education, mathematics or teaching English as a second language.

*I am specialising in TESL because I feel it will help me understand the latest pedagogies and methodologies of teaching students in that area. I believe that my attainment in my master's degree in TESL will have positive impact on my 21<sup>st</sup> century student's English language achievement.*

-TE11

Ladd and Sorenson (2015) in a previous study of whether a master's degree matters stated that getting an advanced degree is important but getting one which provides a certain specialisation is a way to invest in the knowledge and skills that might improve their teaching in a specific area. This was further affirmed by Horn and Jang (2017) stating that the effect of master's degree attainment will only yield a positive effect on student achievement if the teacher majors in the area they are teaching during their master's degree program. Apart from pursuing specializations for gaining better students' achievements, Ladd and Sorenson (2015) also stated that specialisation also give teachers opportunities to venture into areas they want to pursue as future careers.

*I believe that by specialising in leadership and management, I can source new career pathways, if not at least, a higher administrative position in the school I am currently.*

- TE10

### *Teachers' Motivation to Pursue a Postgraduate Education*

Table 3 outlines the reasons cited by teachers for obtaining a postgraduate qualification. Interestingly, most teachers (54.5%) pursuing a master's in education expressed a desire to advance their education primarily to facilitate a career change, with factors such as mental health and low salaries being significant motivators. Additionally, 18.2% of teachers cited the pursuit of promotions, while others emphasized the importance of staying relevant in the industry.

The findings of this study challenge the conventional reasoning behind why many teachers pursue postgraduate studies as a form of professional development. Traditionally, teacher professional development (TPD) has been viewed as essential for educators to excel in their profession, enhancing their classroom impact, fostering a growth mindset, increasing their knowledge, and keeping them current with the latest research, trends, and best practices in education (Adey et al., 2004; Guskey, 2002). In Malaysia, the pursuit of postgraduate qualifications as part of TPD is mandated by the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015-2025 to ensure quality (Ministry of Education, 2015). Additionally, teachers receive higher pay and promotions upon obtaining advanced degrees (Sekaran, 2023). However, this study reveals a different motivation among many teachers, particularly those with less than five years of experience. These teachers pursue postgraduate programs not to excel in their current profession but to seek a change in career.

**Table 3.** Teachers' Motivation to Pursue a Postgraduate Education

Teacher Educator (TE)	Postgraduate Programme	Specialization	Data mining on reasons for pursuing a postgraduate education
TE1	Master's in education	Leadership and Management	'change of career due to family balance', 'mental health', 'low salary'
TE2	Master's in education	Instructional Technology	change of career due to mental health & low salary
TE3	Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching (PGD)	-	promotion
TE4	Master's in education	Leadership and Management	change of career due to low salary, family balance
TE5	Master's in education	Special Needs Education	change of career due to mental health, family importance
TE6	Master's in education	Mathematics	being relevant
TE7	Master's in education	Leadership and Management	change of career due to mental health & low salary
TE8	Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching (PGD)	-	change of career due to health & low salary, family
TE9	Postgraduate Diploma in Teaching (PGD)	-	being relevant

TE10	Master's in education	Leadership and Management	change of career due to mental health & low salary
TE11	Master's in education	Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL)	being relevant

*I am feeling burned out and my mental well-being is becoming poorer. I thought that teaching will be a pleasant career choice, but I was wrong and so are many of my other peers. Some has left the job and many of us are planning too.*

-TE7

Despite the growing expectation for teachers to pursue postgraduate education to deepen their teaching knowledge (Dixon & Ward, 2015, Guskey 2000), not all participants in this study embraced this identity. Result from this study showed that many early-career teachers interested in postgraduate studies were driven by personal career goals rather than a commitment to their teaching profession. These teachers often viewed postgraduate education as a pathway to better career opportunities. This finding aligns with Betz (2024) and Davies (2021), who noted that turnover is particularly high among new teachers, with over 40 to 50 percent leaving the profession within five years due to burnout, low salaries, mental well-being concerns, and the need for flexibility. While the primary objective of teacher professional development is to improve student learning outcomes (Guskey, 2000, 2002), Eacersall et al. (2021) argue that postgraduate qualifications should also be considered as a means for teachers to explore alternative career options and achieve greater career advancement, rather than solely fulfilling professional development requirements.

### ***3.4 Teachers preferred mode of pursuing a postgraduate education and the factors influencing their choice***

Among the 11 participants interviewed, 5 (45.5%) preferred fully online postgraduate education, while 4 (36.4%) favoured a hybrid mode. Only 2 participants (18.1%) opted for a fully physical approach. The specific reasons influencing their preferences for each mode of learning are detailed in Table 4 below.

**Table 4.** Preferred Mode of Learning and Factors Influencing Their Choice

Mode of Learning	Percentage (%)	Data mining on reasons for preferred choice	Rank by preference
Fully Online	45.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Have gotten comfortable with online</li> <li>➤ its more convenient in every aspect</li> <li>➤ no travel time to attend classes</li> <li>➤ convenience of being home with family</li> <li>➤ zero trouble of shifting modes of learning in case pandemic outbreaks again</li> <li>➤ economical as no travel cost and tuition fee is much cheaper than physical classroom</li> <li>➤ online allows freedom of speech and learning as it accommodates various learning styles and intelligence</li> <li>➤ missed classes can be reviewed through recordings</li> <li>➤ teachings can be reviewed multiple times</li> </ul>	1
Hybrid/Blended	36.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ opportunity to socialise with peers and lecturer</li> <li>➤ face-to-face can help to gain clearer information</li> </ul>	2

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ some cost and time saving when classes switch from physical to online</li> <li>➤ have learned to adapt the changes that occurred during lockdown from physical to online and then back to physical again, so either mode is okay</li> </ul>	
Face-to-face	18.1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ provides direct instructions and guided learning</li> <li>➤ no hassle with digital technologies</li> <li>➤ don't need to troubleshoot technologies</li> <li>➤ save cost from buying latest digital tools to do online classes and assessments</li> </ul>	3

Historically, education in Malaysia was predominantly pursued in traditional settings. However, post-COVID, perceptions of learning have significantly shifted (Amini, Ravindran, & Lee, 2024). The pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital technologies and flexible learning modalities, reshaping the educational landscape. Schools and higher education institutions transitioned to online and hybrid models, illuminating the potential for increased accessibility and personalized learning experiences. Subsequently, educationalists and students have begun to recognize the benefits of these innovative approaches.

Amini, Ravindran, and Lee (2024) through a study on adapting education shifts in Malaysia after COVID-19 proclaimed that this shift has led to broader acceptance of diverse learning trajectories and lifelong learning initiatives, highlighting the importance of adapting to new educational paradigms. This development mirrors a global trend towards more flexible and resilient education systems capable of withstanding future disruptions and serving to the varied needs of learners. This indirectly also aligns with Gardner's (2000) theory of multiple intelligences, which underscores the necessity of diverse and adaptable educational approaches for 21st-century learners.

Findings in this study also confirms past studies incriminating that COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the weaknesses in traditional education systems and showcased the capacity of digital platforms, flexible assessments, and flexible learning paths to enhance the educational landscape (Nordin & Nordin, 2020). Today, digital platforms are more widely acknowledged for facilitating flexible learning, fostering innovative abilities, and enabling personalized learning regardless of time and space limitations. Previous study also significantly noted that personalized learning environments that allow students to learn at their own pace and schedule yield noteworthy outcomes (Ahmad & Chua, 2015; Annamalai et al., 2022; Sirat et al., 2020).

## Conclusion

This study motions significant insights into the motivations behind teachers pursuing postgraduate education, challenging traditional assumptions about professional development in education. Contrary to the principles of effective professional development proposed by Linda Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) and Guskey (2000, 2002), which focus on enhancing knowledge, skills, and professional practice, the findings in this study reveal alternative motivations among teachers. Firstly, many teachers regard postgraduate education predominantly to pursue alternative or advanced career opportunities. This indicates that career mobility and progression are now significant drivers for teachers' professional development. Rather than pursuing postgraduate studies to improve teaching practices and impact student's outcome (Guskey, 2000), teachers are viewing professional development efforts as a career change strategy. Additionally, the desire for a more balanced family-work lifestyle with higher salaries and better mental health also critically influences teachers' decisions to pursue postgraduate studies. This suggests that educational institutions and policymakers need to consider the holistic well-being of teachers, not just their professional capabilities. The findings also suggest a re-evaluation of existing professional development models. Programs should not only focus on enhancing professional skills but also consider the personal aspirations and life circumstances of teachers. These insights can inform policymakers and educational



leaders about the need to create supportive environments that address the diverse motivations of teachers, including opportunities for career advancement, mental health support, and work-life balance. By uncovering the real reasons behind teachers' pursuit of postgraduate education, this study contributes to a more nuanced interpretation of professional development. It highlights the need for more flexible and supportive approaches that align with teachers' personal and professional goals.

### Conflict of Interest

*The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*

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