

# Exploring the Reality of Organization of Pedagogical Courses and Practicums for Pre-Service Teachers under the New Model of Initial Teacher Education in Vietnam through A Case Study

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## Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of pedagogical courses and practicums in the A+B teacher education model at the University of Education, Vietnam National University, Hanoi. Most of the participants in the study said that they were implemented effectively, helping to equip students with what they need to become high school teachers. However, the practicums at the University of Education are still in need of innovation when compared to the corresponding programs in many other countries. The implementation time of the A+B teacher education model has only been around a decade, so it is necessary to make continuous adjustments for the betterment of this model. The research results not only help stakeholders in the reform of teacher education at the University of Education, but also serve as reference information for other institutions in the process of innovating teacher education programs and models, particularly when it comes to pedagogical courses as well as practicums.

**Keywords:** Initial teacher education, A+B model, Vietnamese universities, practicums, pedagogy, pedagogical courses.

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## INTRODUCTION

Teacher education is one of the most important aspects in improving the quality of education in general because educational innovations that do not take teacher education programs into account will be seen as ineffective (OECD, 2005). Initial teacher education programs represent the input to the teaching profession, and the organization of teacher education plays an important role in determining the quality and quantity of teachers (Musset, 2010).

With regard to teacher education, the education model is seen as a framework upon which one can carry out activities according to what has been oriented. In education, the concept of model was initiated by Shullman (1986, cited in Loukomies *et al.*, 2018) to refer to the necessary elements to educate a future teacher. In this understanding, the teacher education model is a way of organizing courses of pedagogy, subject content and practicums in a certain sequence to help learners effectively acquire the competencies and qualities needed to become teachers. Understanding teacher education models, therefore, will help teacher

education institutions and countries in re-evaluating the effectiveness of their teacher education.

In general, there are two main models of teacher education in the world. The first is the concurrent model. Basically, this model is how an institution educates student teachers in the direction of combining teaching of academic knowledge/disciplinary content knowledge and educational/pedagogical knowledge for 4 to 5 academic years. For the consecutive model, there is a division between academic knowledge/disciplinary content knowledge and educational/pedagogical knowledge. Students study courses related to academic knowledge/disciplinary content knowledge in an institution and receive a bachelor's degree in their field. They will then study educational/pedagogical courses to obtain a certificate or degree in the field of teacher education at an authorized institution (Ingvarson *et al.*, 2013; Zhang *et al.*, 2018).

In addition, in some countries, there exists a model of teacher education that is not exactly concurrent or consecutive, but rather a combined one.

The United States is one of such countries. This may be due to the fact that many American universities are liberal arts-oriented, allowing students to study a wide variety of subjects during the first two years, many of which are chosen by students themselves based on their desire to discover their interests and orientation towards professional development. Then students choose a major for the last two years. Take the state of Texas as an example. In Texas the most popular high school teacher education program is the four-year bachelor's degree program. Learners take courses in a range of subjects during their first two years with a focus on the subject they will eventually be certified in. At the end of the second year, students apply to a teacher education program at a College of Education. Students accepted into the program must enroll in pedagogical courses for the next two years. During these two years, students spend a semester familiarizing themselves with the high school environment and observing educational activities at these schools. Then, in their final semester, students have to practice teaching (Ries *et al.*, 2016).

In Vietnam, besides the two models of teacher education commonly implemented in the world, the concurrent model and the consecutive model, there is also a combined model similar to that in the United States. This model is mainly implemented at the University of Education, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, where it is currently known as the A+B model. Compared with the traditional concurrent teacher education model in Vietnam, there have not been many studies on the implementation of the A+B model having been applied at the University of Education. The implementation time of the A+B teacher education model has only been around a decade, so it is necessary to have information facilitating continuous adjustments for the betterment of this model. Therefore, the research aims to help stakeholders in the reform of teacher education at the University of Education, and it also hopes to serve as reference information for other units in the process of reforming teacher education programs and models, particularly when it comes to pedagogical courses as well as practicums.

There are many aspects of the A+B teacher education model which are in need of examination. However, this study only focuses on the contents related to the implementation of pedagogical courses and practicums because these are typical contents for a teacher education program. The study of these contents will specifically highlight the following aspects: management and organization of teaching pedagogical courses, arrangement of pedagogical courses, duration/rate of pedagogical courses, the arrangement of practicums, the duration of practicums, and matters related to the schools that receive students for their practicums.

### **The Vietnamese context – A case study**

The University of Education is an institution directly under the management of Vietnam National University, Hanoi. In its vision and mission statement, the university has affirmed itself as “a high-quality teaching and research institution in the fields of educational sciences and technology, applied to educating teachers, administrators and other human resource groups in the field of education. With the University's philosophy of education highlighting humanitarian and liberal values, the educational goal is to train learners with mature personality, solid knowledge and good skills in their profession” (University of Education, 2020). This philosophy is also the guideline for the formulation of the teacher education programs at the University. As a member university of one among two national universities in Vietnam, the University of Education has taken advantage of the strengths and characteristics of a unit specializing in teacher education along with the strengths of other member universities to reform its teacher education model.

Specifically, in the University's A+B model, student teachers are educated about academic knowledge/disciplinary content knowledge at other member universities of Vietnam National University, Hanoi such as the University of Natural Sciences and the University of Social Sciences and Humanities. This area of knowledge is part A in the model. Students will be trained about educational/ pedagogical knowledge at the University of Education, which is part B in the model. The design of this A+B model is to effectively exploit a team of lecturers who have considerable teaching experience and expertise in basic sciences at the member universities of Vietnam National University, Hanoi (University of Education, 2020, 2022).

Compared with the consecutive model of teacher education being implemented in many countries around the world, the model of the University of Education has both similarities and differences. The similarity is that both at the University of Education and institutions in other countries following the consecutive model, students get academic knowledge/disciplinary content knowledge in phase 1 and educational/ pedagogical knowledge in phase 2, which is rather separate. A noticeable difference is that in the consecutive model in many countries such as in France, England, Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Australia, Hong Kong, Korea and Israel, students are first educated at a university to earn a bachelor's degree in social sciences/natural sciences and then trained in pedagogy to obtain a teaching certificate, or a master's degree in education at a school/faculty specializing in teacher education. But at the University of Education both phases take place within a bachelor's program and students receive only a bachelor's degree in education/teaching.

This model is built based on the training philosophy which aims at educating student teachers who are competent at basic sciences, skilled at pedagogy and good at educational management (University of Education, 2020). The bachelor's program designed by the University of Education has connection and connectivity with respective basic science programs of the University of Natural Sciences and the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (University of Education, 2020).

Through studying the program specifications, it can be seen that the number of credits of a teacher education program ranges from 138 to 140, divided into 5 modules, including: General, field-based, sectors of disciplines-based, groups of disciplines-based, and discipline-based modules. The teacher education programs have the same general, field-based, and sectors of disciplines-based modules (with 16, 22 and 16 credits respectively) and differ in the number of credits and the number of courses in groups of disciplines-based and discipline-based modules.

The general module includes the following courses: Marxist-Leninist Philosophy, Political Economy of Marxism and Leninism, Scientific Socialism, Ho Chi Minh Thought, History of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Foreign Language B1 (English, Russian, French, Chinese), Physical Education, and National Defense – Security Education.

The field-based module includes Introduction to Educational Technology, Application of ICT in Education, Educational Psychology, Introduction to Educational Sciences, Scientific Research Methodology in Education, Introduction to Management Sciences in Education, Introduction to Applied Statistics in Education, and Introduction to Measurement and Assessment in Education.

The disciplines-based module includes Code of Professional Ethics in Education, Teaching theory, State Administrative Management and Management of Education and Training, and Assessment in the Classroom/Assessment of Learners' Competences.

The University of Education is the unit that manages the programs and students, grants degrees, and organizes the education of courses about educational sciences – teacher education while other member universities of Vietnam National University, Hanoi are the coordinating units, in charge of providing courses about general knowledge and academic knowledge/disciplinary content knowledge. When it comes to practicums, which account for 9 credits, there is practicum 1 (in the second year), practicum 2 (in the third year), and practicum 3 (in the last year). Students mainly observe classes as well as teachers' teaching and class management activities during practicum 1 and practicum 2 while they are required to practice teaching during practicum 4.

## RESEARCH METHODS

In the past 5 years, the University of Education has enrolled students in three groups of disciplines, namely Math teacher education and Natural sciences teacher education (GD1), Literature teacher education, History teacher education, History and geography teacher education (GD2), and Educational sciences and others (GD3). The university has also enrolled students for Primary education (GD4) and Early education (GD5) (University of Education, 2022). This research focuses on the education of subject teachers for high schools according to the new model, A+B. Therefore, the study interviewed different individuals who are studying and working at the University of Education as well as alumni of the university related to two groups: GD1 and GD2. The interview participants include leaders at departmental level, lecturers, final-year students and former students. Basic information on the participants is shown in the table below.

**Table 1: Some information of the research participants**

No.	Codes	Units/Disciplines	Other information
01	CBQL1	Academic department	leader
02	CBQL2	Administrative department	leader
03	CBQL3	Administrative department	leader
04	GV1	Natural sciences	lecturer
05	GV2	Natural sciences	lecturer
06	GV3	Natural sciences	lecturer
07	GV4	Social sciences	lecturer
08	GV5	Social sciences	lecturer
09	GV6	Social sciences	lecturer
10	GV7	Social sciences	lecturer
11	GV8	Social sciences	lecturer
12	SV1	Math teacher education	4th year student
13	SV2	Math teacher education	4th year student
14	SV3	Physics teacher education	4th year student

No.	Codes	Units/Disciplines	Other information
15	SV4	Physics teacher education	4th year student
16	SV5	Chemistry teacher education	4th year student
17	SV6	Chemistry teacher education	4th year student
18	SV7	Biology teacher education	4th year student
19	SV8	Biology teacher education	4th year student
20	SV9	Literature teacher education	4th year student
21	SV10	Literature teacher education	4th year student
22	SV11	History teacher education	4th year student
23	SV12	History teacher education	4th year student
24	CSV1	Literature teacher education	Former student
25	CSV2	Literature teacher education	Former student

Due to the impact of Covid-19, all of the interviews were done online, and all interviews were recorded as permitted by the interviewees. The interview data was then transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The results of the analysis are presented in the following section.

### Pedagogical Courses

#### *The management and organization of teaching pedagogical courses*

Departments such as the Department of Education Technology, the Department of Quality Management, the Department of Educational Sciences, and the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Education are responsible for training courses in pedagogy, psychology, and teaching methodology for students. Courses on pedagogy and on teaching methods for a specific discipline will be in charge of the Department of Teacher Education (University of Education, 2022).

In addition to the official courses related to pedagogy, the University also organizes competitions and activities concerning pedagogy for students so that they have more opportunities to practice their pedagogical skills. With the current implementation, most of the interview participants thought that the advantage is that students have a good learning environment where the lecturers are dedicated and qualified and plenty of practice opportunities are given to students.

- The advantage is that the number of students in the class for each program is not too large and is divided into different classes for practice sessions. The lecturers help us a lot. (CSV1)
- Most of the lecturers are very enthusiastic and share a lot of knowledge with us. (SV3)
- The advantage is my university has good facilities with a wide range of modern equipment, even a studio. Also, the lecturers are very skilled and have many years of experience. Many of them have studied abroad and have high qualifications and academic titles. They give us a lot of advice. (SV5)
- The lecturers really pay attention to each of us and we have a lot of time for teaching practice. For

example, in the Teaching Methodology course, each of us has 45 minutes or even two periods for teaching practice. (SV8)

- However, some argued that any teaching model has certain limitations. As for the University of Education, the drawbacks are related to the history of the University and the quality of student input.
- As for disadvantages, I see that my University is still new, so the question regarding if the current model is suitable cannot be fully answered now. (SV5)
- The quality of the input is not high due to the low cut-off scores. (SV4), (GV1)

#### *The arrangement of pedagogical courses*

With the characteristics of the A+B model, most of the courses related to pedagogy are taught at phase B, at the University of Education. Most alumni and students thought that the current way of arranging courses and organizing teaching plans for pedagogical courses is reasonable.

- Basically, it makes sense. In my program, I first got all the knowledge about literature, and in the last year, the program focused on providing courses on professional development, psychology, and pedagogy. (CSV1)
- The arrangement of pedagogical courses in the program is reasonable. In my opinion, it is good to be equipped with knowledge of literature and then to be provided with courses related to pedagogy. (SV1)
- I think it is reasonable. In the 2nd semester of the 2nd year, we start our first practicum, then we already have a lot of knowledge of the subject, which helps us be able to share with the students. Unlike other universities where 1st year students have to take pedagogical courses, our university gives us enough time to get used to the university environment before we start pedagogical courses. (SV4)

The opinions of administrators and lecturers also show that the duration and arrangement of courses in the program are relatively reasonable, ensuring that the learners are equipped with the necessary knowledge

and skills. In addition, the emphasis in the teacher education programs at the University is to give students more opportunities to practice in each specific course.

- Basically, when formulating the teacher education programs, the university has referred to other programs. Therefore, courses related to pedagogical sciences and educational sciences are designed to ensure that students are sufficiently equipped with the system of theoretical foundations as well as opportunities for experience and practice. (GV4)

#### ***Duration/Rate of pedagogical courses***

With the question related to the ratio of courses in their programs, the students participating in the research believed that the current program provides relatively sufficient knowledge to help students become teachers.

- Right now, I think I have 90% confidence about my knowledge. (SV1)
- I think it is enough for pedagogical knowledge. On the one hand, we can study courses such as developing a general education program with students majoring in Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry. On the other hand, every program has its own courses about teaching methodology for a specific subject. (SV4)
- I find it satisfactory because I have been equipped with professional content knowledge, and then through pedagogical courses, I can learn how to teach this academic knowledge. (SV8).

With this length of time, the lecturers and administrators joining this research also felt confident in the knowledge and expertise of students at the University of Education (which can be ranked as equivalent to another long-established key teacher education university) and even believed that when it comes to ICT competences, the university's students are superior to students at other teacher education institutions.

- The skills of using technology of the University of Education's students are better because in the learning process, all students have to use technology in various courses and activities. Some courses are offered both in face-to-face and online forms. (CBQL3).

#### **Practicums**

##### ***The arrangement of practicums***

According to an administrator, currently, the practicums at the university have changed, in which, students can go to high schools from the second year to observe classes and then they will continue their practicum 2 in their 3rd year (CBQL1).

- This is to make sure that there is an interaction between the practice of teaching at high schools and teaching in the lecture hall and that students can experience this interaction (CBQL1)

There are also some suggestions on a more reasonable adjustment of the time of practicums in the direction that these three practicums need to be organized further away from each other so that students have time to prepare and practice. This is because students need time to adjust their shortcomings after practicum 1.

As for the administrators and the lecturers joining in the research, all of them thought that the arrangement of the practicums as present is very reasonable. This is believed to contribute to "producing" pre-service teachers who are highly appreciated by employers.

- The arrangement of the practicums at my university is very logical. Students are sufficiently equipped with necessary knowledge and skills before their practicum periods. The lecturers at the university and high school teachers will directly guide groups of students at high schools (...) Thus, students graduating from my university are always highly appreciated (GV2).

##### ***The duration of practicums***

Regarding practicums, they include practicum 1, practicum 2, and practicum 3. As for practicum 1 and practicum 2, students mainly observe classes as well as teachers' teaching and class management activities. As shared by the research participants, they expected a further increase in the duration but also expressed some concern for several reasons.

- It is difficult to adjust the budget allocated for practicums. Also, high school teachers cannot spend much time on guiding and supervising students. Besides, the current number of credits, about 139 credits, are also overloaded, so it is difficult to increase. However, I want to prolong the practicum time. A few periods do not really help a person to understand such a demanding profession as teaching. (CBQL1)

Concerning practicum 3, there is a dispersion of opinions. About half of the students thought that the program met their needs. Specifically, they shared the idea that thanks to having time to familiarize themselves with the high school environment through practicum 1 and practicum 2, it is not difficult for students to practice teaching in practicum 3 with the allotted amount of time. Nonetheless, the rest said that the practicum duration is not enough. The lecturers participating in the research also had different opinions regarding practicum 3.

##### ***The schools receiving students for their practicums (teacher training schools/practice schools)***

Regarding aspects related to high schools which receive students for practicums, the administrators and lecturers participating in this research shared the idea that the time for students to

practice at high schools is still not flexible, depending on decisions from high schools and having to be organized in groups. Accordingly, the lecturers also wanted the organization of practicums with high schools to be more flexible. In sharing their expectations, the lecturers also pointed out the obstacles to improvement in this aspect as they are related to many issues such as the way schools work, teachers' schedules and funding for practicums. In addition, arranging a flexible schedule for students' practicums may also face some other difficulties such as the overlap between students' learning schedules and the practicum time (GV6). At the same time, some students have to do part-time jobs to make a living, so it is hard for them to make arrangements for more practicums (GV7).

The university may face some obstacles when changes are made to practicums. The problem is that high schools may not arrange their schedules to meet the needs of the university and students. They might say that they are used to receiving students in groups. We want practicums to be as flexible as ones at medical universities, for example. Students at medical universities can go to hospitals many times to do their job. We also hope this can be applied to our university. However, it is very difficult. We want and hope it to be like that, but it is very difficult (GV5).

## CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

From the research results, it can be seen that about pedagogical courses, specifically the management and organization of these courses, the majority of the individuals participating in the interview appreciated their effectiveness and quality. Students are guided carefully by qualified and enthusiastic lecturers and have plenty of opportunities to practice. The main difficulty is believed to come from the fact that the university is newly established, so it is difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the new model. In addition, the input is not high, so it affects the quality of training. Regarding the arrangement of practicums, the opinion of the lecturers shows that the duration and arrangement are quite reasonable, ensuring students are equipped with necessary knowledge and skills. With the matter related to the proportion of pedagogical courses and practicums in the program, the interviewees said that the current programs, organized according to the A+B model, provides enough of what is needed for students to become teachers.

Regarding the arrangement of practicums, the majority of participants believed that the current implementation is effective. With the A+B model, the students are believed to be equipped with enough professional knowledge and can confidently practice teaching. However, there are also some students thinking that they need time to adjust to their shortcomings after the first practicum. Regarding the duration of the practicums, both lecturers and students expected a further increase in the amount of time, but

they were also concerned about obstacles to the adjustments. High schools have had certain support for the practicums of the University of Education's students, but there still needs more extensive cooperation so that students have more opportunities to get used to the high school environment. Strengthening this relationship also has many problems that need to be solved such as fees for supervisors and the arrangement of students' learning schedules and teachers' teaching plans.

Despite the fact that the A+B model has been improved since it was implemented, the problem concerning practicums of the University of Education is currently still not really flexible and diverse as in many other countries. In the United Kingdom, France and Sweden, for example, students participate not only in observing classes and practicing teaching at high schools, but also in the development of policies for schools. Another disparity is that the consecutive model in developed countries requires students to spend a great amount of time on practicums/professional experiences, for example, in the Netherlands (48 weeks minimum, 72 weeks maximum), in the United Kingdom (24 weeks minimum), and in Australia (16 weeks minimum) (Educational Testing Service, 2003). In Finland alone, the amount of time for teaching practice at high schools in a subject teacher education program accounts for about one-third of the program. The Finnish teacher education program is designed to systematically integrate teaching practice into theoretical courses and teaching practice is usually divided into three phases in a 5-year program, including basic practice (orientation), advanced practice (for the second subject), final practice (specialist) (Tran & Cegla, 2016; Sahlberg, 2015).

The implementation time of the A+B teacher education model has only been around a decade, so it is necessary to make continuous adjustments to better this model. The research results not only help stakeholders in the reform of teacher education at the University of Education, but also serve as reference information for other units in the process of reforming their teacher education programs and models, particularly in terms of courses on pedagogy and practicums. Accordingly, the practicums should receive more consideration regarding duration and arrangement so that students have the opportunity to timely supplement what they are lacking or weak in the previous practicum. The connection with high schools also needs to be focused so that students have more opportunities for professional practice, with support and supervision from universities and high schools.

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