

Higher graduate diploma programs: Institutional responses to teacher qualification reform in Thailand

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Abstract

Teacher education reform and professional qualification standards have influenced curriculum adaptation and academic workforce development in higher education, prompting universities to establish alternative professional learning pathways to support instructional competency and accreditation requirements. This study aimed to investigate the institutional background underlying the development of Higher Graduate Diploma Programs in Thailand, examine participants’ professional expectations and needs, explore instructional and curriculum management approaches, and investigate future sustainability perspectives regarding the programs. The study employed a qualitative descriptive research design. The participants consisted of 25 informants selected through purposive sampling, including university lecturers enrolled in Higher Graduate Diploma Programs, program administrators, and educational experts. The research instrument was a semi-structured interview protocol developed from the research objectives and relevant literature. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic content analysis with the support of ATLAS.ti software. The results revealed that Higher Graduate Diploma Programs functioned as institutional mechanisms for responding to teacher qualification reforms introduced by the Teachers’ Council of Thailand. Participants perceived the programs as important pathways for professional reskilling, pedagogical development, technological competency enhancement, curriculum compliance, and career advancement within teacher education contexts. The findings also emphasized the importance of flexible learning management, technology-integrated instruction, learner-centered curriculum approaches, and practical learning experiences.

Keywords: Curriculum adaptation, Higher education, Higher graduate diploma programs, Professional reskilling, Teacher education reform, Teacher qualification policy.

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Contribution of this paper to the literature

The study contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence on how universities adapt to policy-driven qualification reforms through curriculum innovation and professional development pathways, offering implications for higher education institutions and policymakers seeking to strengthen teacher education systems in changing educational environments.

1. Introduction

The rapid transformation of higher education systems in the 21st century has intensified the demand for academic professionals who possess interdisciplinary competencies (Gümüş, 2022; Rivas, Bernardo, Casanova, & Saiz, 2025), pedagogical expertise (Vošnjak & Vogrinc, 2025), and the ability to adapt to evolving educational standards (Robertson, 2021; Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). Universities worldwide are increasingly expected to produce graduates equipped with higher-order thinking skills, technological literacy, and lifelong learning competencies suitable for rapidly changing social and professional contexts. Consequently, higher education institutions have undertaken substantial curriculum reform and professional development initiatives to enhance teaching quality and align educational practices with national and international standards (Patfield, Gore, Prieto, Fray, & Sincock, 2025).

Within the field of teacher education, professional qualification frameworks and accreditation policies have become important mechanisms driving curriculum adaptation and academic workforce development (OECD, 2017). Many countries have implemented competency-based professional standards to ensure that university lecturers and teacher educators possess appropriate pedagogical knowledge and instructional competencies (Education International & UNESCO, 2019). These reforms have increased the demand for reskilling and upskilling among academic staff, particularly lecturers whose disciplinary backgrounds are unrelated to education. In response, universities have developed alternative professional learning pathways and postgraduate certification programs to strengthen instructional competencies and maintain accreditation standards.

In Thailand, The Teachers' Council of Thailand (2024) concerning the accreditation of educational degrees and professional certificates for professional practice. The policy requires teacher education programs to employ curriculum administrators and academic staff holding qualifications in education or related educational fields (The Teachers' Council of Thailand, 2024). As a result, lecturers from non-education backgrounds who teach in faculties of education may no longer meet the professional qualification requirements necessary for curriculum administration and teacher education programs. This issue is particularly significant because graduates from non-compliant teacher education programs may become ineligible for professional teaching licenses required for government teaching positions in Thailand.

The development of Higher Graduate Diploma Programs in Thailand was influenced by multiple higher education reforms, professional standards, and national educational policies aimed at improving educational quality and academic workforce competency. At the national level, the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation emphasized lifelong learning, professional reskilling, competency-based education, and human capacity development as important strategies for strengthening higher education and preparing educational personnel for rapidly changing social and technological contexts (Ministry of Higher Education Science Research and Innovation, 2022). The establishment of the programs was further accelerated by the Higher Education Standards Committee (2022) and The Teachers' Council of Thailand (2024), which introduced stricter qualification requirements for curriculum administrators, instructors, and teaching supervisors in teacher education programs. Consequently, many university lecturers working in faculties of education who graduated from non-education disciplines are no longer fully satisfied with the professional qualification standards required for teacher education accreditation.

In response, Thai universities rapidly established Higher Graduate Diploma Programs as professional qualification pathways designed to develop pedagogical knowledge, curriculum competency, and educational qualifications for lecturers from non-education backgrounds. Positioned between the master's and doctoral levels within the Thai higher education system, these programs provide professional preparation for lecturers who possess expertise in specialized disciplines but lack formal qualifications in education. For example, a lecturer holding a doctoral degree in Applied Linguistics may possess strong disciplinary expertise yet remain unqualified to serve in a teacher education program without additional educational credentials in curriculum, pedagogy, or teacher education. Therefore, Higher Graduate Diploma Programs have emerged as institutional mechanisms for professional reskilling, curriculum compliance, and academic workforce development in Thai higher education.

Previous studies have demonstrated that teacher education reform has become a global response to rapidly changing social, technological, and policy environments. Across different national contexts, reforms have commonly focused on strengthening professional standards, enhancing teacher competencies, and aligning teacher preparation programs with evolving educational expectations. Although specific reform strategies vary across countries, a shared objective has been the improvement of educational quality through stronger accreditation systems, competency-based frameworks, and continuous professional development opportunities for educational personnel.

For example, reforms in Japan emphasized professional teaching standards and the restructuring of teacher preparation systems to address workforce and educational challenges (Fujimura & Sato, 2022). Similarly, reforms in Norway highlighted the growing importance of digital competence and technology integration within teacher education programs (Andreasen, Tømte, Bergan, & Kovac, 2022). In Kazakhstan, educational reforms reshaped pedagogical practices and strengthened teachers' professional agency in responding to changing educational demands (Yakavets, Winter, Malone, Zhontayeva, & Khamidulina, 2023). Likewise, reforms in the Philippines emphasized the role of accreditation standards and quality assurance mechanisms in strengthening teacher preparation and professional qualifications (Generalao, Ducanes, Yee, & David, 2022). Collectively, these studies suggest that teacher education institutions worldwide are increasingly required to adapt curriculum structures, professional standards, and academic personnel qualifications to ensure responsiveness to evolving educational contexts.

These international developments also indicate that teacher education reform extends beyond curriculum revision and increasingly influences academic workforce development. As qualification requirements become more rigorous, universities are required to provide opportunities for professional reskilling and upskilling among academic

personnel, particularly lecturers whose disciplinary backgrounds differ from the professional requirements of teacher education programs. However, while previous studies have extensively examined teacher education reform, professional standards, and continuing professional development, limited attention has been given to how universities establish alternative qualification pathways to support academic staff in meeting newly introduced accreditation requirements. This gap is particularly evident in the context of Higher Graduate Diploma Programs, which have emerged as institutional responses to policy-driven qualification reforms in Thailand.

The present study was conceptually grounded in three interrelated perspectives: lifelong learning, professional reskilling and upskilling, and curriculum adaptation in higher education. Lifelong learning emphasizes the continuous development of knowledge and professional competencies throughout an individual's career. Professional reskilling and upskilling frameworks explain how higher education institutions respond to changing professional standards by enhancing the competencies of academic personnel. Curriculum adaptation perspectives further explain how universities redesign learning structures, instructional approaches, and program delivery models to address policy changes, technological transformation, and learner needs. These perspectives collectively guided the investigation of participant expectations, institutional responses, instructional approaches, and future trends related to Higher Graduate Diploma Programs in Thailand.

Based on these conceptual perspectives, the study proposes that professional qualification reforms function as external policy drivers influencing institutional curriculum adaptation. Universities subsequently develop flexible learning models, technology-integrated instruction, and competency-oriented professional development programs to support lecturers' professional qualifications and career advancement. At the learner level, participants seek professional legitimacy, pedagogical expertise, research competencies, and academic networking opportunities through enrollment in Higher Graduate Diploma Programs. However, the rapid expansion of such programs may also create sustainability challenges associated with declining enrollment and long-term institutional viability.

Therefore, this study aimed to investigate.

1. The institutional background underlying the development of Higher Graduate Diploma Programs in Thai universities.
2. The expectations and professional needs of participants enrolled in these programs.
3. Instructional and curriculum management approaches adopted by universities.
4. Future trends and sustainability perspectives regarding Higher Graduate Diploma Programs in Thailand.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate institutional responses to teacher qualification reform and the implementation of Higher Graduate Diploma Programs in Thailand. The study aimed to explore the background underlying the development of these programs, the expectations and professional needs of participants, instructional and curriculum management approaches, and future trends related to program sustainability. The study also examined how universities adapted curriculum structures and professional development pathways in response to new qualification requirements introduced by the Teachers' Council of Thailand.

2.2. Participants

The participants consisted of 25 informants selected through purposive sampling. They were divided into three groups: 17 university lecturers currently enrolled in Higher Graduate Diploma Programs, four program chairpersons and lecturers responsible for the programs, and four educational experts working in faculties of education. All participants possessed direct experience related to teacher education reform, curriculum administration, or professional qualification development in higher education. The participants were affiliated with public and private higher education institutions offering teacher education programs in different regions of Thailand. To protect institutional confidentiality and comply with ethical research requirements, the names of the participating institutions are not reported. Nevertheless, the participants represented diverse institutional contexts, including faculties of education and teacher education programs involved in curriculum administration, accreditation processes, and professional qualification development. This diversity enabled the study to capture a broad range of perspectives regarding the implementation and future development of Higher Graduate Diploma Programs. The participants were selected because they could provide in-depth information regarding the implementation, expectations, and future directions of Higher Graduate Diploma Programs in Thailand.

2.3. Research Instruments

The primary research instrument was a semi-structured interview protocol designed to explore participants' perceptions, experiences, and expectations regarding Higher Graduate Diploma Programs. The interview questions focused on four major areas: 1) the institutional background and rationale for establishing the programs, 2) participants' professional needs and expectations, 3) instructional and curriculum management approaches, and 4) future trends and sustainability perspectives concerning the programs. The semi-structured format allowed participants to provide detailed explanations and share experiences related to policy reform, professional qualification development, and higher education adaptation. The interview protocol was developed from the research objectives and relevant literature. The questions were reviewed and revised by experts in educational research and higher education to ensure content appropriateness and research credibility before data collection. The study received ethical approval from Nakhon Ratchasima Rajabhat University under research ethics approval number HE-RDI-NRRU.222/2025.

2.4. Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with all participants. The interviews were conducted individually to allow participants to express their experiences and perspectives regarding teacher qualification reform and Higher Graduate Diploma Programs in detail. The researchers contacted participants

directly and arranged interview sessions based on participant availability. During the interviews, participants were encouraged to discuss their motivations for enrolling in or administering the programs, perceptions of curriculum and instructional approaches, professional development experiences, and views concerning the future sustainability of the programs. Interview data were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

2.5. Data Analysis

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with the participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed for analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic content analysis with the support of Atlas.ti software. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation was conducted across participant groups and different periods of data collection.

3. Results

The findings were organized into five major themes reflecting institutional responses, participant expectations, curriculum and instructional management approaches, and future sustainability perspectives concerning Higher Graduate Diploma Programs in Thailand. The themes emerged from thematic analysis of interview data obtained from university lecturers, program administrators, and educational experts involved in teacher education reform and professional qualification development.

3.1. Theme 1: Policy-Driven Professional Qualification Needs

The findings revealed that Higher Graduate Diploma Programs in Thailand were primarily established in response to the qualification requirements introduced by The Teachers' Council of Thailand (2024). Participants consistently perceived the programs as institutional mechanisms for ensuring compliance with professional standards in teacher education programs. Universities were required to employ curriculum administrators and academic staff holding qualifications in education or related fields, resulting in significant pressure on faculties employing lecturers from non-education disciplinary backgrounds. The findings further indicated that both institutions and lecturers viewed the programs as essential for maintaining curriculum accreditation, supporting professional legitimacy, and ensuring that graduates remained eligible for professional teaching licenses and government teaching positions.

One participant explained that the program was developed "to ensure that university lecturers meet the qualification criteria required by the Teachers' Council" (Participant 01). Another participant emphasized that lecturers from non-education backgrounds required additional qualifications to continue working within teacher education programs effectively (Participant 07). The findings suggest that policy reform functioned as a major institutional driver influencing curriculum adaptation and professional reskilling initiatives in Thai higher education.

3.2. Theme 2: Professional Reskilling and Pedagogical Development

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of strengthening pedagogical knowledge, curriculum expertise, and instructional competencies through enrollment in Higher Graduate Diploma Programs. Many participants viewed the programs as opportunities for professional development, academic legitimacy, and continuous self-improvement within teacher education contexts. The findings indicated that participants expected to gain deeper understanding of curriculum and instruction, educational research, assessment practices, and innovative teaching approaches that could be applied to their professional responsibilities.

One participant stated that the program helped enhance "knowledge and understanding related to curriculum and instruction" (Participant 04), while another participant explained that the program supported continuous professional development and improved confidence in educational practice (Participant 03). Several participants also emphasized the importance of developing research competencies and educational innovation skills to support instructional improvement and academic career advancement. The findings suggest that the programs were perceived not only as qualification pathways but also as mechanisms for long-term professional growth in higher education. This perception appears to be closely associated with recent policy reforms that have increased expectations regarding pedagogical expertise and professional qualifications among university lecturers. Consequently, participants viewed professional reskilling as both a compliance requirement and an opportunity for career advancement within teacher education contexts.

3.3. Theme 3: Flexible and Technology-Integrated Learning Expectations

The findings demonstrated that participants expected Higher Graduate Diploma Programs to incorporate flexible learning management and technology-integrated instructional approaches suitable for working professionals. Participants emphasized the importance of hybrid learning environments, digital learning platforms, and instructional technologies that could support learning flexibility and contemporary educational practices. In particular, many participants highlighted the increasing importance of artificial intelligence (AI), digital tools, and emerging technologies within teacher education and instructional management.

One participant expressed expectations regarding the integration of "digital tools, AI, and new technologies such as Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality in instructional management" (Participant 17). Another participant emphasized the need for modern learning management approaches that aligned with changing technological and educational contexts (Participant 18).

These findings indicate that participants perceived technological competence as an increasingly important component of professional identity and instructional effectiveness in contemporary teacher education. The emphasis on technology integration may also reflect broader transformations in higher education, where digital literacy and technology-enhanced learning have become essential expectations for both educators and institutions.

3.4. Theme 4: Learner-Centered Curriculum and Instructional Management

Participants emphasized the importance of learner-centered instructional approaches that encouraged active participation, practical learning experiences, and collaborative knowledge construction. The findings revealed

expectations for curriculum management approaches that integrated workshops, field trips, mentoring, reflective learning, group activities, and practical teaching experiences. Participants also expected learning activities to connect theoretical knowledge with real educational practice and contemporary classroom challenges.

Several participants highlighted the importance of practical learning experiences and instructional examples that could be directly applied to professional contexts. One participant stated that instructors should provide “real examples and practical explanations” to support understanding (Participant 18). Another participant emphasized the importance of active learning approaches and collaborative learning activities that encouraged interaction and knowledge sharing among learners (Participant 02).

The findings suggest that participants preferred instructional approaches that combined theoretical knowledge with experiential and practice-oriented learning. This preference may be influenced by the professional backgrounds of the participants, who sought immediately applicable knowledge and skills that could support both compliance with professional standards and improvement of teaching practice.

3.5. Theme 5: Future Trends and Sustainability Concerns

The findings revealed both optimism and concern regarding the future sustainability of Higher Graduate Diploma Programs in Thailand. Participants believed that the programs would continue to play an important role in developing professional competencies and supporting teacher education standards in the short term. However, several participants and educational experts expressed concerns regarding long-term sustainability, particularly the possibility of declining enrollment after universities and academic staff successfully adjusted to the new qualification requirements.

Participants also emphasized that future teacher education programs would likely require stronger integration of digital competencies, research skills, educational innovation, and flexible learning approaches to remain relevant within changing higher education contexts. One expert explained that the long-term sustainability of the programs would depend on effective curriculum management and the ability to respond to future educational trends (Participant 21). Another participant noted that the demand for the programs might decline once institutions fully complied with professional qualification requirements (Participant 23). The findings suggest that while Higher Graduate Diploma Programs currently serve as important mechanisms for institutional adaptation and professional qualification development, their long-term sustainability may depend on continued curriculum innovation and responsiveness to emerging educational needs.

Figure 1 summarizes the thematic relationships among institutional background, participant expectations, curriculum and instructional management approaches, and future sustainability perspectives concerning Higher Graduate Diploma Programs in Thailand. The figure illustrates how professional qualification reforms influenced institutional adaptation, professional reskilling, and curriculum development within teacher education contexts.

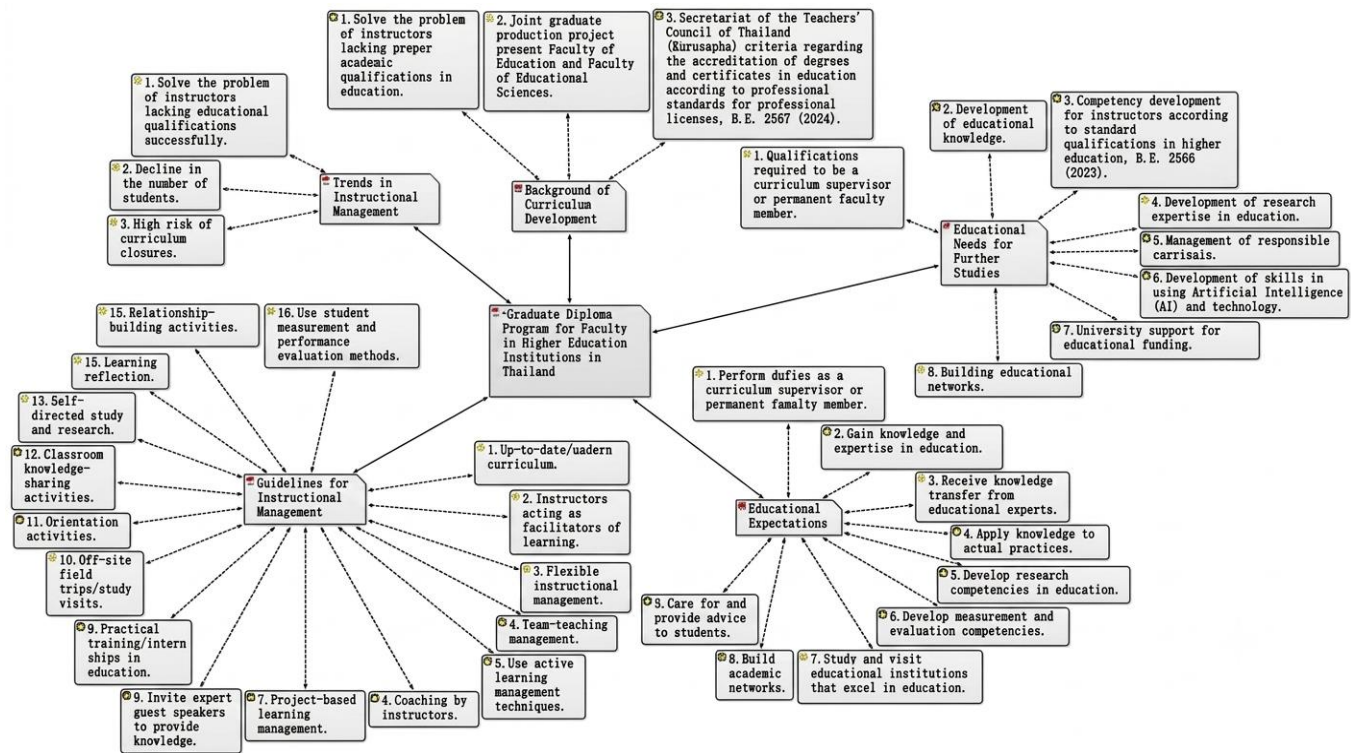


Figure 1. Thematic Relationships Among Institutional Responses, Learner Expectations, Curriculum Management, and Future Trends of Higher Graduate Diploma Programs in Thailand.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that Higher Graduate Diploma Programs in Thailand emerged primarily as institutional responses to the professional qualification reforms introduced by the Teachers’ Council of Thailand. Universities rapidly adapted curriculum structures and professional development pathways to ensure compliance with teacher education accreditation standards and maintain the professional eligibility of graduates within teacher education programs. These findings reflect broader global trends in teacher education reform, in which higher education institutions increasingly adjust curriculum policies, professional standards, and qualification systems in response to changing educational demands and policy requirements. Similar developments were reported in Japan, where teacher education reforms emphasized professional teaching standards and the restructuring of teacher preparation systems to address workforce and educational challenges (Fujimura & Sato, 2022). The findings also support the view that policy reform functions as a major institutional driver influencing curriculum adaptation and academic workforce development in higher education contexts.

The study further revealed that participants perceived Higher Graduate Diploma Programs as important mechanisms for professional reskilling and pedagogical development. Participants are expected to strengthen competencies related to curriculum and instruction, educational research, assessment, and innovative teaching practices in order to improve professional performance and academic legitimacy within teacher education programs. These findings are consistent with previous studies emphasizing the growing importance of continuing professional development and competency enhancement in teacher education reform. Andreassen et al. (2022) similarly found that teacher education reform in Norway increased the importance of professional digital competence and technological integration in teacher preparation programs. The present findings suggest that university lecturers increasingly recognize the need to continuously update pedagogical and technological competencies to remain professionally relevant within rapidly changing educational environments.

The findings also demonstrated that participants expected flexible and technology-integrated learning approaches appropriate for adult learners and working professionals. Participants emphasized the importance of hybrid learning environments, AI integration, digital learning tools, and emerging instructional technologies for improving learning flexibility and instructional effectiveness. This reflects contemporary transformations in higher education, where technological competence (Instefjord & Munthe, 2017) and digital learning management (Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia, & Koole, 2020) have become increasingly central to teacher education and professional development (OECD, 2026). The findings further suggest that participants perceived technological competence as part of professional identity and instructional legitimacy within modern teacher education contexts.

In terms of curriculum and instructional management, participants emphasized learner-centered approaches that integrated practical experiences, collaborative learning, reflective activities, and authentic instructional applications. The findings suggest that adult learners in Higher Graduate Diploma Programs preferred instructional approaches connecting theoretical knowledge with real educational practice and contemporary classroom challenges. This finding is consistent with Yakavets et al. (2023), who reported that educational reform influenced teachers' pedagogical beliefs, collaborative practices, and professional agency in Kazakhstan. The present study similarly demonstrates that professional qualification reform influences not only institutional structures but also expectations regarding teaching approaches, learning experiences, and professional development practices in higher education.

Finally, the findings revealed concerns regarding the long-term sustainability of Higher Graduate Diploma Programs in Thailand. Although participants viewed the programs as necessary mechanisms for responding to current qualification requirements, several participants expressed concerns that enrollment demand may decline once universities and academic staff successfully adapt to the new regulations. This reflects the dynamic nature of policy-driven educational reform and highlights the challenges associated with sustaining short-term professional qualification pathways in rapidly changing higher education systems. Similar concerns regarding educational quality, accreditation standards, and institutional sustainability were discussed in studies conducted in the Philippines and African educational contexts, where educational reforms created continuing pressure for institutional adaptation and quality improvement (Adeniyi et al., 2024; Generalao et al., 2022). The present study therefore, suggests that the future sustainability of Higher Graduate Diploma Programs may depend on continuous curriculum innovation, flexible learning management, and the ability of universities to respond to evolving professional and technological demands in teacher education.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated institutional responses to teacher qualification reform and the implementation of Higher Graduate Diploma Programs in Thailand. The study explored the institutional background underlying program development, participants' professional expectations and needs, instructional and curriculum management approaches, and future sustainability perspectives within the context of changing higher education policies.

The findings revealed that Higher Graduate Diploma Programs emerged as institutional mechanisms for responding to professional qualification reforms introduced by the Teachers' Council of Thailand. Participants perceived the programs as important pathways for professional reskilling, pedagogical development, and technological competency enhancement, while flexible and learner-centered instructional approaches were viewed as essential components of program management. The findings also indicated concerns regarding the long-term sustainability of the programs after universities fully adapt to qualification requirements.

This study contributes to the literature on teacher education reform and higher education adaptation by demonstrating how universities respond rapidly to policy-driven qualification requirements through professional development pathways.

The findings suggest that universities should develop flexible and technology-integrated learning environments that support adult learners and contemporary professional standards in teacher education. However, the study was limited to participants from a small number of universities involved in Higher Graduate Diploma Programs in Thailand, which may not fully represent all teacher education institutions or higher education contexts across the country. Future studies may examine the long-term effectiveness of Higher Graduate Diploma Programs and compare similar qualification systems across different countries or educational contexts.

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