

CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS IN CHINESE VOCATIONAL UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of vocational undergraduate education has created new demands for teacher professional competence, institutional governance, and educational quality. However, existing studies primarily focus on vocational university positioning, curriculum reform, industry–education integration, digital transformation, and high-quality institutional development, while systematic research on continuing professional development management for teachers remains limited. This study aims to develop a Continuing Professional Development management model for teachers in vocational universities. Drawing upon recent research on vocational undergraduate education, teacher development, organized research, digital empowerment, curriculum reconstruction, and collaborative governance, the study identifies key factors influencing teachers' professional growth, including organizational support, industry collaboration, digital competence, competency development, evaluation mechanisms, and continuous improvement. A conceptual CPD management framework is proposed to integrate institutional governance, teacher competency development, industry engagement, digital technologies, and quality assurance into a coherent management system. The proposed model emphasizes systematic planning, multi-stakeholder collaboration, dynamic evaluation, and sustainable professional learning to enhance teachers' teaching, research, innovation, and industry practice capabilities. The study contributes to the theoretical development of teacher professional development in vocational universities and provides practical guidance for improving teacher quality and supporting the high-quality development of vocational undergraduate education. The findings are expected to offer valuable implications for educational policymakers, vocational university administrators, and researchers interested in sustainable teacher development and institutional capacity building.

Keywords: Continuing Professional Development, Vocational Universities, Teacher Professional Development, Digital Transformation

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INTRODUCTION: IMPORTANCE OF CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) has become a strategic necessity for teachers in China's vocational universities because economic restructuring, technological advancement, and industrial transformation are continually redefining the knowledge and competencies required of technical and skilled graduates. Unlike teachers in general higher education, vocational university teachers must integrate disciplinary knowledge, pedagogical competence, occupational expertise, practical industry experience, and an understanding of emerging workplace technologies. They are therefore expected to perform a dual professional role as both educators and industry-related practitioners. Initial teacher education or professional qualifications alone cannot adequately prepare teachers to fulfil these complex responsibilities throughout their careers. Research on vocational teacher education in Mainland China indicates that teacher quality is a fundamental component of an effective vocational education system and that teacher training must respond to changing labor-market demands, curriculum reforms, and the evolving relationship between educational institutions and industry (Pavlova & Chen, 2022). Furthermore, a large-scale study involving 9,259 professional development texts from 500 Chinese vocational colleges identified insufficient institutional support, gaps in teachers' professional capacity, and weaknesses in evaluation and incentive mechanisms. These findings demonstrate the need to establish a lifelong professional development system that systematically strengthens the professional capacities of vocational teachers (Liu et al., 2025). CPD should therefore be viewed not merely as optional training but as an essential mechanism for maintaining teacher quality and supporting the sustainable development of vocational universities in China. The importance of CPD is also evident in the changing nature of teaching, learning, and professional practice within Chinese vocational universities. Contemporary vocational education increasingly requires teachers to employ learner-centered teaching, integrate theory with authentic workplace practice, develop industry-responsive curricula, conduct applied research, and use digital technologies to support instruction and assessment. These responsibilities require continuous improvement in pedagogical knowledge, research capability, curriculum innovation, digital competence, and industry-related skills. A nationwide study of 6,087 teachers from 219 higher vocational colleges in 28 Chinese provinces found that teachers' use of information and communication technology was significantly influenced by professional development support, technological infrastructure, institutional innovation climate, and teacher performance assessment mechanisms (Yang et al., 2023). This finding confirms that digital competence cannot be developed solely through individual effort but requires systematic and sustained institutional support. Similarly, a study of novice vocational teachers in China found that a structured teacher development programme produced significant improvements in aspects of teacher efficacy and professional engagement, demonstrating that well-designed development activities can strengthen teachers' confidence and professional commitment (Jin et al., 2023). Effective CPD should therefore extend beyond occasional workshops and operate as a continuous cycle of needs assessment, professional learning, practical application, reflection, feedback, and evaluation. At the institutional level, CPD is important because the professional competence of teachers directly affects teaching quality, student employability, curriculum relevance, educational innovation, and the overall performance of vocational universities. However, teachers' willingness to develop themselves is insufficient if universities do not provide appropriate policies, leadership, resources, time, incentives, and opportunities for professional learning. Evidence from a Chinese university indicates that clear institutional policies, motivational strategies, academic conferences, mentoring, collaboration, and leadership support are essential for sustaining teacher professional development. Mentorship and professional collaboration are particularly important for strengthening teachers' research capability, while systematic supervision and evaluation help ensure that CPD activities achieve their intended outcomes (Adarkwah et al., 2021).

Consequently, vocational universities should integrate CPD into their strategic human-resource management by providing professional learning communities, industry placements, collaborative research opportunities, digital learning platforms, curriculum-development projects, career incentives, and continuous performance feedback. Such an integrated approach can strengthen teachers' professional identity, improve the connection between education and industry, enhance their capacity to respond to technological and curriculum changes, and ultimately contribute to the development of highly competent graduates who can support China's economic and social development.

CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS OF CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) refers to a systematically planned, continuous, and lifelong professional learning process through which vocational university teachers develop and update their knowledge, skills, competencies, and professional attributes throughout their careers (OECD, 2019). It encompasses the improvement of teaching competence, research capability, industry-related expertise, digital literacy, curriculum innovation, and professional identity to ensure that teachers remain responsive to changes in education, technology, and the labor market (Cedefop, 2022; Subrahmanyam, 2022).

CPD includes formal, non-formal, informal, and workplace-based learning activities, such as training, mentoring, reflective practice, professional learning communities, collaborative learning, industry engagement, digital learning, and knowledge exchange. These activities require organizational support, transformative leadership, relevant resources, and continuous evaluation (Siliņa-Jasjukeviča et al., 2025; Ventista & Brown, 2023). Ultimately, CPD enables vocational university teachers to transfer newly acquired knowledge and competencies into teaching, research, curriculum development, and professional practice, thereby improving teacher performance, student learning, and institutional quality.

Continuing Professional Development to a systematic, continuous, and lifelong process through which vocational university teachers enhance their knowledge, skills, and professional competencies. It encompasses teaching, research, industry experience, digital technology, curriculum development, and professional identity. CPD is supported by the organization, collaborative learning, industry engagement, and continuous evaluation to improve the quality of teachers, students, and educational institutions.

KEY DIMENSIONS OF CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR VOCATIONAL UNIVERSITY TEACHERS

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for vocational university teachers is a multidimensional process that extends beyond traditional teacher training. Because vocational universities operate at the intersection of higher education and industrial development, teachers are expected to simultaneously perform the roles of educators, researchers, innovators, and industry practitioners. Consequently, effective CPD should encompass multiple interrelated dimensions that collectively strengthen teachers' professional competence and support institutional quality improvement. Based on recent international and Chinese studies, six key dimensions can be identified.

The first dimension is professional competency development. The primary objective of CPD is to enhance teachers' professional competencies throughout their careers. This includes pedagogical knowledge, subject expertise, assessment literacy, research capability, communication skills, innovation capacity, and professional ethics. For vocational university teachers, competency development also involves strengthening practical occupational skills and maintaining up-to-date industry knowledge. Continuous competency enhancement enables teachers to respond effectively to curriculum reforms, technological innovation, and changing workforce demands. Research consistently indicates that competency development forms the

foundation of teacher effectiveness and educational quality (OECD, 2019; Pavlova & Chen, 2022).

The second dimension is industry engagement and practical experience. Unlike teachers in traditional academic universities, vocational university teachers are required to integrate theoretical instruction with authentic workplace practice. Regular participation in enterprise placements, industry projects, professional certification, collaborative research with enterprises, and work-integrated learning activities allows teachers to update their technical expertise and better understand current industrial practices. Such engagement strengthens the alignment between teaching content and labor market needs while enhancing students' employability and practical competence. Industry collaboration is therefore regarded as a defining characteristic of CPD in vocational education.

The third dimension is digital competence and educational innovation. Digital transformation has fundamentally changed teaching, learning, assessment, and institutional management. Vocational university teachers are increasingly expected to integrate digital technologies, artificial intelligence, online learning platforms, learning analytics, and digital assessment tools into their instructional practice. Developing digital competence requires not only technological skills but also the ability to redesign curricula, create interactive learning environments, and improve student engagement through innovative pedagogical approaches. Evidence from large-scale studies of Chinese vocational colleges demonstrates that institutional support, technological infrastructure, and innovation climate significantly influence teachers' adoption of digital technologies (Yang et al., 2023).

The fourth dimension is organizational support and professional learning culture. Effective CPD cannot rely solely on individual motivation but requires supportive institutional environments. Universities play a critical role by establishing strategic policies, providing leadership support, allocating professional development resources, creating mentoring systems, encouraging collaborative learning, and recognizing teachers' professional achievements. Professional learning communities, interdisciplinary collaboration, coaching, peer observation, and academic networking foster continuous knowledge sharing and reflective practice. Research suggests that organizational support significantly enhances teacher engagement, professional identity, and long-term professional growth (Adarkwah et al., 2021).

The fifth dimension is performance evaluation and continuous feedback. Sustainable professional development requires systematic evaluation mechanisms that assess not only teachers' participation in CPD activities but also the impact of professional learning on teaching quality, research productivity, curriculum innovation, student outcomes, and institutional performance. Continuous feedback enables teachers to identify professional strengths and development needs while allowing universities to improve CPD programmes through evidence-based decision making. Evaluation should therefore function as a developmental rather than purely accountability-oriented process.

The sixth dimension is continuous improvement and lifelong professional learning. CPD should not be regarded as a series of isolated training activities but as a lifelong learning cycle consisting of needs assessment, planning, implementation, reflection, evaluation, and continuous improvement. Teachers continuously adapt their professional competencies in response to technological innovation, educational reform, industrial transformation, and societal change. This cyclical perspective reflects contemporary views of CPD as an ongoing process of professional learning rather than a collection of occasional development programmes (Ventista & Brown, 2023; Siliņa-Jasjukeviča et al., 2025).

Taken together, these six dimensions are highly interconnected rather than independent. Professional competency development represents the core objective of CPD, while industry engagement, digital competence, organizational support, performance evaluation, and continuous improvement provide the mechanisms through which professional learning is sustained and

translated into educational practice. Collectively, these dimensions establish a comprehensive conceptual framework for managing Continuing Professional Development in vocational universities and provide the theoretical foundation for the management strategies discussed in the following section.

MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Effective Continuing Professional Development (CPD) requires more than the provision of isolated training programmes. Contemporary research increasingly recognizes CPD as a systematic management process involving strategic planning, institutional leadership, organizational support, collaborative learning, industry engagement, digital transformation, and continuous evaluation. For vocational universities, where teachers are expected to integrate teaching, research, technological innovation, and industrial practice, CPD should be embedded within institutional governance rather than treated as an individual responsibility. Based on recent studies, several management strategies can facilitate sustainable teacher professional development.

The first strategy is the establishment of a strategic institutional CPD policy. Universities should integrate CPD into their long-term strategic planning and human resource management systems by clearly defining professional development objectives, competency standards, career pathways, and performance expectations. Institutional policies should ensure that professional learning becomes a continuous organizational responsibility supported by adequate funding, workload allocation, and administrative commitment. According to the OECD (2019) TALIS 2018 Results: Teachers and School Leaders as Lifelong Learners, successful professional development is characterized by systematic institutional planning rather than sporadic training activities. Likewise, Pavlova and Chen (2022), Improving the Effectiveness of Teacher Training for the Vocational Education and Training (VET) Sector in China, emphasized that vocational teacher development should be aligned with national educational reforms and industrial transformation. The second strategy is to strengthen instructional leadership and organizational support. Educational leaders play a critical role in creating a professional learning culture by providing mentoring systems, coaching, peer observation, collaborative research opportunities, and supportive supervision. School leaders should encourage teachers to participate in professional learning communities while recognizing professional achievements through promotion systems and incentive mechanisms. Leadership support also includes allocating sufficient time and resources for professional learning rather than expecting teachers to undertake CPD solely during their personal time. Adarkwah et al. (2021), Teacher Professional Development as a Catalyst for Faculty Development: The Case of a University in China, demonstrated that leadership commitment, mentoring, academic collaboration, and organizational encouragement significantly improve teachers' research capacity and professional engagement. Similarly, Ventista and Brown (2023), Teachers' Professional Learning and Its Impact on Students' Learning Outcomes: Findings from a Systematic Review, concluded that collaborative and school-supported professional learning generates greater improvements in teaching quality than individual workshops.

The third strategy is to promote industry–education collaboration as the core mechanism for vocational teacher development. Since vocational university teachers must maintain both academic competence and occupational expertise, universities should establish long-term partnerships with enterprises, industrial associations, and professional organizations. These partnerships can provide teachers with opportunities for enterprise attachment, industrial internships, joint curriculum development, collaborative applied research, and participation in technological innovation projects. Such collaboration enables teachers to continuously update their professional knowledge while ensuring that teaching content reflects current industrial practices. Cedefop (2022), Teachers and Trainers in a Changing World: Building Up Competences for Inclusive, Green and Digitalised Vocational Education and Training (VET),

highlighted that strong cooperation between educational institutions and industry is essential for maintaining the relevance and quality of vocational education. Furthermore, Liu, Jin, and Cai (2025), *How to Be “Double-qualified” Teachers: A Qualitative Study on Professional Ability Construction of Higher Vocational Colleges Based on a Large-scale Corpus*, emphasized that enterprise practice is fundamental to developing the dual-professional competencies required of vocational teachers.

The fourth strategy involves digital empowerment of professional development. Digital transformation has expanded opportunities for flexible, personalized, and collaborative professional learning. Universities should establish digital learning platforms that integrate online training, virtual communities of practice, AI-assisted teaching support, learning analytics, and digital resource sharing. Digital technologies enable teachers to engage in continuous learning regardless of geographical or time constraints while facilitating cross-institutional collaboration. However, successful digital CPD requires not only technological infrastructure but also supportive organizational policies and continuous technical assistance. Yang, Guo, and Cui (2023), *What Affects Vocational Teachers' Acceptance and Use of ICT in Teaching? A Large-scale Survey of Higher Vocational College Teachers in China*, found that institutional innovation climate, technological infrastructure, and performance evaluation significantly influence teachers' digital competence and ICT adoption. Similarly, Subrahmanyam (2022), *Trends Mapping Study: Digital Skills Development in TVET Teacher Training*, argued that digital competence has become a core professional requirement for vocational educators worldwide.

The fifth strategy is the establishment of continuous performance evaluation and feedback mechanisms. Effective CPD management requires universities to evaluate both teachers' participation in professional development activities and the educational outcomes resulting from those activities. Evaluation indicators should extend beyond attendance records to include teaching effectiveness, research productivity, curriculum innovation, industry engagement, student learning outcomes, and professional competence improvement. Feedback mechanisms should encourage reflection and continuous improvement rather than focusing solely on accountability. According to Siliņa-Jasjukeviča et al. (2025), *Promoting Effective Vocational Education and Training Teacher's Professional Development and Its Transfer to Practice: A Systematic Review*, continuous evaluation and knowledge transfer are essential conditions for transforming professional learning into sustainable improvements in teaching practice. Likewise, Ventista and Brown (2023) emphasized that ongoing reflection and evidence-based feedback significantly increase the long-term effectiveness of CPD.

The sixth strategy is to cultivate professional learning communities and collaborative knowledge sharing. Contemporary theories of teacher professional development emphasize that professional learning is fundamentally a social process rather than an individual activity. Universities should encourage interdisciplinary collaboration, action research, lesson study, peer mentoring, research teams, and cross-institutional academic networks. Professional learning communities facilitate reflective practice, collective problem solving, innovation, and the dissemination of good teaching practices. Such collaborative learning environments also strengthen teachers' professional identity and organizational commitment, thereby promoting sustainable professional growth. Jin et al. (2023), *The Effects of a Teacher Development Programme in Chinese Vocational Education on the Efficacy and Professional Engagement of Novice Teachers*, demonstrated that structured collaborative development programmes significantly improve teachers' professional efficacy and engagement, supporting the value of collective professional learning.

Overall, these management strategies demonstrate that effective CPD should be understood as an integrated organizational system rather than a collection of independent training activities. Strategic policy, instructional leadership, industry collaboration, digital transformation, collaborative learning, and continuous evaluation function as complementary components within

a comprehensive CPD management framework. Their interaction creates a sustainable professional learning ecosystem that continuously enhances teachers' competencies, strengthens institutional capacity, improves educational quality, and supports the long-term development of vocational universities in response to rapidly changing technological, economic, and social environments.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the concept, key dimensions, and management strategies of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for teachers in Chinese vocational universities within the context of rapid educational reform, industrial transformation, and digital innovation. As vocational universities increasingly serve as important institutions for cultivating high-level technical and skilled professionals, teachers are expected to continuously develop their pedagogical competence, professional expertise, research capability, digital literacy, and industry-related knowledge. Consequently, CPD should no longer be regarded as a series of isolated training activities but rather as a systematic and lifelong management process that supports teachers' sustainable professional growth and institutional development. The literature reviewed in this study indicates that effective CPD requires coordinated efforts among universities, government agencies, industries, and teachers themselves, highlighting the importance of organizational governance and collaborative professional learning.

Based on the synthesis of recent international and Chinese research, this study identified six interrelated dimensions of CPD: professional competency development, industry engagement, digital competence, organizational support, performance evaluation, and continuous improvement. These dimensions collectively provide a conceptual framework for understanding how vocational university teachers can continuously enhance their professional capabilities throughout their careers. Furthermore, the study proposed a CPD management framework that emphasizes strategic planning, leadership support, collaborative learning, digital empowerment, industry–education integration, and evidence-based evaluation. Rather than functioning independently, these management components interact to create an organizational ecosystem that promotes sustainable teacher development and institutional quality enhancement. The study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. First, it extends current discussions of teacher professional development by integrating educational management, vocational education, and organizational development perspectives into a unified conceptual framework specifically designed for vocational universities. Second, it highlights the distinctive characteristics of vocational university teachers, whose professional responsibilities require balancing teaching, research, technological innovation, and industry practice. Third, the proposed management framework offers a systematic perspective that links individual teacher development with institutional governance, thereby enriching the theoretical understanding of CPD in vocational higher education. From a practical perspective, several recommendations can be proposed. Universities should formulate long-term CPD strategies that are integrated into institutional development plans and human resource management policies. Educational leaders should strengthen organizational support by providing mentoring systems, professional learning communities, collaborative research opportunities, and adequate professional development resources. Vocational universities should also deepen cooperation with enterprises to expand opportunities for industrial attachment, applied research, and curriculum co-development. In addition, digital technologies, including online learning platforms, artificial intelligence, and learning analytics, should be utilized to provide flexible and personalized professional learning opportunities. Finally, comprehensive evaluation systems should be established to assess not only teachers' participation in CPD activities but also the impact of professional development on teaching effectiveness, research productivity, student learning, and institutional performance.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. As a conceptual study based primarily on literature analysis, the proposed framework has not yet been empirically validated. Future research should employ quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method approaches to examine the relationships among the identified CPD dimensions and evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed management framework in different institutional contexts. Comparative studies involving vocational universities across different provinces of China or across different countries would further enhance the generalizability of the findings. In addition, future research should investigate the emerging roles of artificial intelligence, digital ecosystems, and sustainable educational leadership in supporting teachers' continuing professional development. In conclusion, Continuing Professional Development should be recognized as a strategic component of educational governance rather than merely a teacher training activity. Establishing a systematic, collaborative, digitally supported, and industry-oriented CPD management system will not only strengthen teachers' professional competencies but also improve institutional quality, enhance graduate employability, and support the sustainable development of vocational universities. As vocational higher education continues to evolve in response to technological innovation and socioeconomic transformation, effective CPD management will remain a critical driver of educational excellence and long-term institutional competitiveness.

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