



## Chapter 8

# Conducting Webinars on Professional Development for Teacher Educators: Connecting the University of Malawi and the University of Zambia with Universities in Southeast Asian Countries

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### 8.1 Introduction

After laying the groundwork in the initial four chapters, which looked at the unique higher education landscapes and societal contexts of Japan and South Africa, as well as outlined the potential for collaboration between universities of the two nations, Chapter 5 highlighted a specific partnership programme between Japan and Zambia. This case study serves as both an example and a valuable lesson for South Africa. In Chapter 6, a second case study was presented, focusing on the engagement of Japanese universities across the African continent. This case serves as an instructive model for exploring potential partnerships between South African and Japanese universities. Chapter 7 complemented Chapter 6 by providing the firsthand account of a Malawian student involved in the collaboration case

discussed in Chapter 6. This chapter offers another case study, this time regarding webinars on professional development for teacher educators, connecting the University of Malawi and the University of Zambia with universities in Southeast Asian countries.

It is increasingly accepted that teachers' abilities are impacted on by the quality of teacher educators (Cochran-Smith 2003; InFo-TED 2019; Lunenberg, Dengerink & Korthagen 2014). However, two main questions arise: "What does the quality of teacher educators depend on?" and "Who can support teacher educators' quality and professional development (PD)?" Regarding the first question, one of the main factors affecting the quality of teacher educators is the PD they pursue and the provision of rich opportunities for their sustained professional growth. PD is viewed as an unending process that teacher educators must engage in as long as they are performing the role of teacher educators (Smith 2003). Hence, it is crucial for teacher educators to continuously upgrade their knowledge and skills.

Regarding the second question, due to the unavailability of programmes that prepare prospective teacher educators and the inadequacy of the support provided for their continuing PD (European Commission 2013; InFo-TED 2019), collaborative learning with peer teacher educators has emerged as one of the best sources of their professional learning for teacher educators' PD (see Kosnik, Menna, Dharamshi, Miyata, Cleovoulou & Beck 2015; Smith 2017; Van der Klink, Kools, Avissar, White & Sakata 2017). This is especially true because team-based learning produces a significant impact on the PD of teacher educators (Barak, Gidron & Turniansky 2010). Meaningful interactions and engagement with each other in a learning community stimulate their intellectual curiosity, have a direct impact on their productive learning and contribute to effective teaching practices of the educators (Woo & Reeves 2007). Further, through collaborative learning, educators can improve communication with their colleagues, expand their network and gain support for their PD (DuFour 2004; Frady 2012). However, despite the potential of learning

communities for enhancing teacher educators' PD, arranging in-person group meetings in a global pandemic era is a formidable challenge.

Furthermore, due to advancements in information technology, the modern world has contracted in space and time, and all parts of the globe are connected through the Internet. Increasingly, people are using the Internet and related technological devices in all aspects of their lives. According to the Internet World Stats, a total of 5,168,780,607 (65.6%) out of the global population of 7,875,765,587 are using the Internet, and the growth rate of Internet usage from 2000 to 2021 was reported to be 1,331.9%.<sup>11</sup> Responding to the needs of the changing world due to the rapid improvement in information technology and addressing the challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis, online learning platforms facilitate teacher educators' pursuit of PD, because they are created as "critical spaces designed for critical times" (Albers, Cho, Shin, Pang, Angay-Crowder, Jung, Pace, Sena & Turnbull 2015:48). Online learning platforms are more accessible to people in remote locations, economical in terms of money and time and more convenient to use as they do not involve travel. As such, online learning platforms can serve as a potential means for providing PD to teaching professionals, especially in the era of a global pandemic.

This chapter describes how a PD activity, namely, the "Webinar Series on Teacher Educators' Professional Development" connected teacher educators from different countries, mainly from Africa and Asia. It provides a detailed description of how each webinar was organised and also discusses the issue of partnership in teacher educators' professional learning. Finally, the chapter presents a discussion of the advantages and challenges of the webinar series.

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1 <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>

## **8.2 PD of Teacher Educators: A Learning Community Including the Online Community**

Various PD activities are available for teachers and teacher educators that provide implicit ways of learning or intentional actions for up-skilling them in their professional lives, through formal or informal means and individual or group activities (Kosnik et al. 2015; Lunenberg et al. 2014). Formal PD activities are often presented in a well-structured format and attendance may be mandatory. For example, attending academic seminars and conferences, capacity-building programmes, short-term and long-term training and engaging in self-study or action research). Conversely, informal PD is not entirely compulsory and can be pursued individually or in groups, for example, reading literature, reflection, team planning and team teaching (Kosnik et al. 2015). During individual PD activities, teachers and teacher educators engage in reading literature, reflection, and self-studies without the need to interact with others (Lunenberg et al. 2014). Collaborative PD activities, which have been identified by Kosnik et al. (2015:56) as “communities of practice”, are likely to be formalised with a fixed structure, but are not compulsory. In such communities of practice, those belonging to the same field and having shared interests assemble and collaborate to learn together, with mutual sharing of experiences and finding solutions for common issues existing in their field (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002).

Participating in PD courses and programmes is popular and widely pursued by teacher educators (Lunenberg et al., 2014) and are considered to be traditional PD activities (Wambugu 2018). In such traditional PD activities, teachers and teacher educators attend in-person courses requiring them to leave their workplaces in most cases. Consequently, such activities involve time and additional budget for coaching, equipment, facilities and travel. Although some school-based PD programmes exist, it remains difficult to meet experts and other professionals in the field. Moreover, conducting these traditional PD programmes almost seems to be impossible in

this COVID-19 global pandemic era, which requires everybody to stay at home and observe preventive measures.

To overcome the challenges mentioned above, online learning platforms are an innovative means through which teaching professionals can pursue PD. In an online learning community, a group of individuals with shared interests and concerns related to a particular topic or field gather and collaborate for a common purpose via online communication networks. The only difference between the learning community and online learning community is that communication occurs in the traditional face-to-face manner in the former and through technology-aided materials in the latter (Bostancioğlu 2016). Online learning communities as virtual learning environments employ technology-aided materials and enable participating members to meet conveniently with experts and colleagues, which is very economical in terms of time and money (Bostancioğlu 2016; Vanderlinde, Bain, Lunenberg, Meijer, Murray, O'Sullivan & Walraven 2017). Unlike in-person conferences or seminars, online conferences can be attended by participants and educators from anywhere in the world and allow them to engage in professional learning entirely by using technology-aided materials, without any need for face-to-face interactions. Instead, their interaction and learning take place online, for example, through video conferencing via the web (Bostancioğlu 2016; Johnson 2001). Therefore, online learning communities, which are more flexible and accessible, pave the way for distance learning and the extension of networks for further collaboration (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson & Orphanos 2009; Lay, Allman, Cutri & Kimmons 2020).

The development of online platforms for PD has been possible with the advancement of information technology. Online learning environments with an on-demand nature have become popular among teaching professionals as an alternative way for pursuing their PD (Donavant 2009). Within the last few decades, online learning environments have experienced massive growth due to rapid advancements in technology. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted

the need for design and participation in online courses and programmes (Lay et al. 2020), and online learning platforms developed for educational purposes have become more prevalent than ever. Indeed, participation in online learning is no longer a trend or an option, but a part of mainstream education and a necessity in this COVID-19 global crisis.

Learning communities, including online learning communities, originated from the social learning theory (Vygotsky 1978) and situated learning (Lave & Wenger 1991), which commonly highlight the crucial role of social interactions in people's learning and the development of insights. According to the social learning theory, learning starts with the establishment of interpersonal relationships that later on are helpful for intra-personal development (Vygotsky 1978). The four main components of social learning theory include:

1. A "community" that focuses on learning as belonging;
2. An "identity" that considers learning as becoming;
3. A "meaning" that refers to learning through our experiences of the social world and
4. A "practice" that can be viewed as learning while participating in an activity. (Bostancıoğlu 2016:23)

From the perspective of social learning theory, there is a connection between external support (i.e., the zone of proximal development [ZPD]) and individual development, and scaffolding is crucial for ZPD (Vygotsky 1978). In professional learning communities, regardless of the learning modes (e.g., face-to-face or online), participants are supported by 'vertical scaffolding' from experts and facilitators and 'horizontal scaffolding' through collaboration with peers (Dille & Røkenes 2021).

Based on social learning theory, Lave and Wenger developed the situated learning framework in the 1990s. The key idea is that learning occurs through social interactions among individuals in a social world. Communities of practices, which are often synonymously described as learning communities (Frady 2012), including online

learning communities, can be described as “a group of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger 2006:1). Such communities can also be characterised by ‘mutual engagement’ which engenders meaningful interactions among the members, binds them together as a professional group (Wenger et al. 2002), and builds a sense of belongingness to a social community (Bostancıoğlu 2016). According to Wenger et al. (2002), interactions among members having common interests and purposes are regarded as a community of practice, where community members engage in doing something together (e.g., studying together and exchanging ideas with each other) and pursuing certain outcomes together (through the use of articles, documents, tools, etc.). In this article, the use of social learning theory and situated learning framework for the educators’ PD suggests that teacher educators, through participation in the webinar series on teacher educators’ PD, have rich opportunities to benefit from vertical scaffolding from experts and facilitators and horizontal scaffolding by learning from their peers. The scaffolding not only helps in upgrading their ZPD but also enhances their professional knowledge and skills.

### **8.3 Webinar Series as Online Professional Learning Communities**

The webinar has distinctive virtual interaction features and is convenient for building social networks (Smirnova, Kamenez, Vaganova, Kutepova & Vezetiu 2019), and it is a kind of online learning platform that is not only progressive but also promising for professional learning. In the past two years, the popularity of webinars has increased because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and these online seminars have become a staple in the area of education. Online learning platforms such as webinars are created as critical spaces for critical times (Albers et al. 2015) and they not only provide open access to scholarship but also help the participants update their knowledge with respect to the use of information technology for professional learning.

Considering that the quality of teacher educators is a contributing factor in providing quality education, the webinar series on teacher educators' PD was organised by a group of scholars of different nationalities from Asia and Africa. The webinars were hosted by the Human Resource Development for Education Research Lab, the Asia Pacific and Africa Teacher Education Cooperation Centre, Graduate School of Humanities and Social Science, Hiroshima University (Japan) and the Education Foundations Department at the University of Malawi (Malawi). The objectives of the webinar series are to build a cross-border self-study community of teacher educators and to facilitate collaboration among teacher educators in terms of conducting collaborative research and further professional learning activities in Africa and Asia.

Launched in September 2020, a series of open-access webinars were live-streamed via the Zoom platform. Zoom, one of the most popular online platforms for meetings, can host participants synchronously in each webinar and allow smooth communication among the participants through the chat features, which enables them to be more interactive. Additionally, emoticons such as hand-raising or clapping symbols can be used for active participation, such as for asking questions, raising comments and contributing to a discussion. The medium of communication for all the webinars was English and among the international participants. Time and budget restrictions deter teacher educators from attending international conferences and seminars for scholarship and in pursuance of PD, whereas these open-access webinars do not require any registration or enrolment fees, and are designed to overcome these challenges. Led by teacher education experts, the webinars are organised quarterly every year. At the time of writing, four webinars had successfully been organised one year and two months after the series was initiated, and 14 presentations were delivered in total. Invitations seeking participation are sent by the organisers of the webinars to experienced teacher educators, including Africans and Asians, who are willing to make presentations. Calls for participation are announced by circulating flyers on social media platforms,

such as Facebook, one month before each webinar. Those who are interested can easily and freely register by sending emails to the moderators or via a registration link. Although the webinars mainly focus on the PD of teacher educators in Africa and Asia, participants from other parts of the world are also welcome. Participants from 14 countries (Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malawi, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Africa, United States of America (USA), Vietnam, Zambia and Zimbabwe) joined in all four webinars.

In this webinar series, which attempted to facilitate teacher educators' professional learning and to build further networks among African and Asian teacher educators, Dr Takayoshi Maki, professor of Human Resource Development for Education at Hiroshima University, Japan and the director of the Asia Pacific and Africa Teacher Education Cooperation Centre, continuously contributed. As the leader of a current research project on the comparative study of teacher educators' identity and professional lives in Asia and Africa and as 'a third-order practitioner' providing education to teacher educators who are 'second-order practitioners' in the teaching profession (Murray & Male 2005), he provides continuous support both academically and technically for conducting the webinar series. Furthermore, two outstanding scholars in the teacher education field from Africa, namely Mr Foster Gondwe<sup>22</sup> (Lecturer, Educational Foundations Department, School of Education, University of Malawi, Malawi) and Ms Mercy Mushani (Coordinator, District Resource Centre, Ministry of General Education, Zambia), served as moderators in all the webinars. The two moderators are doctoral students at Hiroshima University, and their research mainly focuses on teacher educators' PD and science education. According to Gikandi and Morrow (2016), the role of an expert teacher educator and moderator is to provide vertical support for the progress of teacher educators'

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2 Dr Foster Gondwe completed his PhD in Education in September 2021. He is currently working as a lecturer in the Education Foundations Department, School of Education, University of Malawi, Malawi.

professional learning, motivating them, facilitating interactive discussions among the participants and providing relevant and constructive feedback wherever necessary.

Generally, webinars have the same format, comprising four main sessions. At the beginning of every webinar, an introductory speech is delivered by the moderators, which is followed by presentations by each of the presenters. The next session is the question-and-answer session, which is open for the participants to raise questions, give comments and engage in discussions. However, participants are also encouraged to ask questions and share their views with each presenter using the Zoom chat box at any time. Finally, one of the moderators briefly highlights the main points of the webinar before proposing a vote of thanks. After each webinar, the participants are asked to respond to a follow-up survey, seeking suggestions for further improvements in future webinars. Specifically, feedback is obtained from the participants through questions such as:

- What were your expectations from the webinar?
- Did the webinar meet your expectations?
- What would you recommend us to change in the next webinar?
- Would you like to present in the next webinar? and
- How can other researchers connect with you? (e.g., through Facebook, LinkedIn, email or any other mode of communication).

These questions are asked so that future webinars can be improved based on the feedback. Furthermore, upon successful completion of the webinars, certificates of participation are awarded to those who request them. The following subsections provide a detailed account of each webinar.

### **8.3.1 First Webinar**

The first webinar on the PD of teacher educators was held on 10 September 2020 with the theme “Trends in the Professional Development of Teacher Educators: Activities, Contents,

and Potential”. It included five presentations contributed by teacher educators from different countries. Although it was the first webinar, it succeeded in drawing the attention of an international audience, and participants from nine countries, namely, Cambodia, Indonesia, Japan, Malawi, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nigeria, Vietnam and Zambia.

At the beginning of the webinar, Prof. Takayoshi Maki (Hiroshima University, Japan) delivered a keynote speech titled “Who are We? How Do We Want to Be? A Japanese Teacher Educator’s Perspective” and introduced key concepts related to the PD of teacher educators. The key concepts, including ‘teacher educator’ and ‘roles and identity of a teacher educator’ were clarified through reflections on the following key questions: “How did I become a teacher educator?”, “What do I know?” and “What are my strengths?”. Moreover, by presenting a list of knowledge domains and learning opportunities to the teacher educators, the keynote helped the audience reflect on what teacher educators know and how they are able to pursue PD. Further, by posing the key questions for the way forward, such as “How do we want to be?” and “What are proper knowledge and skills (competency)?”, the keynote speech guided the audience to reflect on the goal they would want to achieve as teacher educators. The keynote speech and the key questions raised at the very outset seemed to be critically important for moving forward not only in the webinar but also in our professional lives as teacher educators. The keynote address was followed by presentations on the following titles:

- **Presentation 1:** Implementation of continuing professional development for primary school teachers in Malawi (presented by a senior research fellow and acting director, Centre for Education Research and Training, University of Malawi, Malawi)
- **Presentation 2:** The rapidly changing curriculum landscape in Zambia and implications for teacher educators (presented by a senior lecturer, School of Education, University of Zambia, Zambia)

- **Presentation 3:** Teacher Education Institutions reforms in Cambodia (presented by an associate lecturer, Phnom Penh Teacher Education College, Cambodia)
- **Presentation 4:** Work and professional development of teacher educators in the context of education colleges: Reforms in Myanmar (presented by two assistant lecturers, Lashio Education Degree College and Hakha Education Degree College, Myanmar)
- **Presentation 5:** Nurturing science, technology, and mathematics education (presented by a senior lecturer and education technology specialist, Osun State University, Nigeria)

### 8.3.2 Second Webinar

The second webinar held on 17 December 2020 on the theme “Professional Development Challenges Facing Teacher Educators” was attended by 33 participants from Cambodia, Indonesia, Japan, Malawi, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Africa, USA, Vietnam, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Interestingly, in addition to scholars from Asia and Africa, a professor from the USA also made a presentation. The presentations revealed that there are challenges associated with teacher educators, which stem either from the teacher education system or from practical problems, irrespective of the location. Some common challenges discussed in this webinar included how to balance teacher educators’ professional roles as teachers and researchers, no confidence due to a lack of preparation to be a university teacher, how to integrate technology in the teaching-learning process and how to balance what teacher educators want to teach and what they are supposed to teach because of state control or standards. The three main presentations made by scholars were:

- **Presentation 1:** Professional development of Japanese teacher educators (presented by an assistant professor in the International Education Development Program at the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Hiroshima University, Japan)

- **Presentation 2:** Standardising productive teaching practices: Malawi mathematics curriculum content analysis (presented by an associate professor and a specialist in mathematics education, assessment, and instructional technology, Alma College, USA)
- **Presentation 3:** Challenges in teacher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (presented by an Associate Professor, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa)

### **8.3.3 Third Webinar**

The third webinar was held on 25 March 2021 with the theme “Professional Development of Medical and Teacher Education Professionals”. The webinar’s scope was extended to professionals in the field of medical education, and featured presentations and discussions related to the two main fields: medical and teacher education. Participants from Cambodia, Japan, Malawi, Mongolia, Myanmar, Vietnam, Zambia and Zimbabwe attended the webinar. In the webinar, conflicts and challenges for twenty-first-century teacher educators, experiences of preparing university teachers and ways to enhance PD were discussed. The list of presentations was:

- **Presentation 1:** Dilemmas of a 21<sup>st</sup>-century teacher educator in the light of the constructivists’ approaches in teaching: A case of Zambia (presented by a lecturer and coordinator, School of Education, University of Zambia, Zambia)
- **Presentation 2:** Experience of Preparing Future Faculty Program in Education at Hiroshima University (presented by an Associate Professor, Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Hiroshima University, Japan)
- **Presentation 3:**<sup>33</sup> Challenges in teacher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (presented by an Associate Professor, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa)

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3 Unfortunately, this presentation could not be implemented due to the presenter’s personal reasons, although planned in the schedule. Instead, the conversation between the webinar organiser and this presenter about challenges faced

#### 8.3.4 Fourth Webinar

The fourth webinar was held on 10 June 2021 and it focused on “Issues and Solutions of Teacher Educators’ Teaching about Teaching” to address the teaching aspect of teacher educators’ roles and their identities. A professor from Zambia, who was also a speaker at the third webinar, took the stage. Moreover, for this webinar, the speakers were chosen to provide a deeper, three-dimensional understanding of the issues being faced by teacher educators. This was achieved by pairing the teacher educators and their supervisory students to take the stage, and a total of four presentations were made by the contributors. Attendees were from Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Mongolia, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The main features of the webinar were detailed illustrations of principles in teaching a particular subject, such as physics. Some of the interesting points of discussion in the webinar were how to integrate research and teaching, specifically teaching through action research and science education research. The titles of the presentations were

- **Presentation 1:** Science teacher educators’ experiences of challenges and solutions for teaching about teaching in pre-service teacher education: A case of Zambia (presented by a lecturer and coordinator, School of Education, University of Zambia, Zambia)
- **Presentation 2:** Existence and application of the principles of teaching Physics in Physics lessons (presented by a senior lecturer, Physics Education at Mufulira College of Education, Zambia)
- **Presentation 3:** How do I teach pre-service teachers about teaching through classroom action research? (presented by an associate professor, Faculty of Education, Kasetsart University, Thailand)
- **Presentation 4:** Science education research to practices (presented by a PhD student, Science Education, Faculty of Education, Kasetsart University, Thailand)

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by teacher educators in Japan and Zambia took place as a contribution to this webinar.

## **8.4. Advantages and Challenges of the Webinar Series**

### **8.4.1 Advantages**

Through the webinar series, designed to respond to the call of the modern world and to address the challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis, participants could join an international education forum and engage in informal and/or formal collaboration. By participating in programmes organised on such online platforms, one can learn very conveniently in the comfort of one's home or workplace or from anywhere, right at their fingertips, coupled with affordability.

Through this web-based series of seminars for online learning, teacher educators can find adequate space to interact with more collaborative communities and pursue PD activities. Due to the network extended by this webinar series, teacher educators from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology in South Africa and Hiroshima University, who were introduced to each other during the webinar, later applied for a joint research grant for a comparative study to explore ICT-based teacher preparation in the two countries. Additionally, as a means of two-way communication among the participants, these synchronous live-streamed webinars via Zoom create actual and concurrent interactivity, where attendees can share their queries, get immediate responses and feedback and engage in interactive discussions, which are not feasible with other asynchronous online learning platforms. The professional relationship and the will to work together on academic assignments, brought about by the dynamic interactions, can be strengthened through these webinars. They also help in the development of a sense of belongingness to the teacher educators' community, as elaborated by scholars (see Bostancıoğlu 2016; Carpenter & Munshower 2020).

One of the best parts of these webinars is the engaging and interactive discussions that can be conducted among the teacher educators. The attendees freely expressed the

challenges they faced and their concerns regarding their PD and those pertaining to teacher education in their work institution and country contexts. In the second, third, and fourth webinars, presenters illustrated their struggles in their professional lives as teacher educators and how they tried to tackle those issues, for example, a lack of teaching experience at the university level, and dilemmas pertaining to research and teaching. An example of such an interactive discussion is that of the presenter of 'Challenges in teacher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century' in the second webinar. An attendee raised a pertinent and practical question: "How can we control or handle the unintended consequences of integrating technology to our teaching?". The presenter shared her experiences and insights as follows: "It's all about the teacher educator's creativity and pedagogy used in the lesson. We need to think about the difference between technology integration and using technology in the classroom properly". One valuable merit of the webinars is that the answer or response is not limited only to the presenter, but is open to everyone who wishes to contribute. Another participant observed, "We also need to understand the available technology and consider learner autonomy. It is important to carefully choose materials that meet learners' needs". The scholars further agreed that teacher education needs to move its focus from pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) to technological PCK. Hence, the webinars, through deep reflections, dynamic interactions and constructive communication among the participants, paved the way for teacher educators to share their experiences and expertise, and collaborate in solving real-world issues within the field, as described by Albers, Pace and Brown (2013).

In addition to providing greater opportunities for free learning by interacting with the experts in the field and the seniors, the participants in these webinars are acknowledged as experienced educators, allowing them to share their experiences, insights and perspectives as reported by Albers et al. (2015) that positioning participants as knowledgeable professionals is an effective means for PD activities. As such, these online seminars are customised to include not

only vertical support from experts and facilitators but also horizontal support from peers, and position teacher educators as experienced and learned people, taking account of their opinions, and participants can benefit from the effective professional learning (Bayer 2014; Dille & Røkenes 2021). In this sense, these online seminars prove to be an effective means through which professional learning can be pursued by teacher educators.

The webinars also facilitate the engagement of the teacher educators in autonomous learning, and hence, they actively pursue PD with increased interest and motivation. As claimed by Albers et al. (2015), willingness is a prerequisite for them to learn both cognitively and emotionally, and voluntary participation in the webinar series offers great opportunities for their cognitive and emotional learning. Additionally, this virtual learning environment, using technological materials, helps to reduce the ICT phobia in those who are not familiar with ICT tools. Carpenter and Munshower (2020) reported that participation in an online learning programme resulted in increased satisfaction with the use of online learning platforms and a decrease in fear of technology among the participants. Therefore, this webinar series also served as a catalyst for upgrading teacher educators' ICT skills, which is a requirement to survive as an academician nowadays. What is more intriguing is that through inspiration and encouragement provided by the experts and instrumental support by the facilitators, teacher educators' zone of proximal development could be enhanced, as suggested by Vygotsky (1978).

#### **8.4.2 Challenges**

Although the webinar series brought forth the potential advantages and progress in teacher educators' PD, certain challenges are also present. One of the biggest challenges pertains to the Internet and information technology infrastructure, which greatly impacts the quality of online learning. Although a stable Internet connection is crucial for online learning, not all countries can ensure its availability.

This issue is more prominent in developing countries, where several participants were from. Another challenge related to this unequal distribution of Internet infrastructure is the digital divide and diverse levels of digital literacy, which might widen the inequality gap among participants from different countries. Although the webinars are affordable and convenient, electronic material resources are basic needs for attendees to join the webinars and may have been unavailable in some cases

The second challenge concerns the online learning environment. As Gunawardena, Ortegano-Layne, Carabajal, Frechette, Lindemann and Jennings (2006) pointed out the superficial nature of the online learning environment, communication through this webinar series might not go in-depth because it naturally requires some time to establish rapport and trust among participants, so that opinions can be shared without any hesitation within the online learning communities. Consequently, the participants mostly gave consensus-driven rather than critical comments. Moreover, despite active participation by many of the participants, others hardly showed their faces throughout the webinars. This might further affect trust building among group members, which is a vital factor in learning communities. In an unfamiliar setting, participants tend to hide their actual feelings because they fear humiliation and the judgmental attitudes of others (MacPhail, Ulvik, Guberman, Czerniawski, Oolbekkink-Marchand & Bain, 2019). Additionally, participants might have a shorter attention span in virtual learning environments compared to traditional face-to-face learning situations. In such cases, we are not sure whether all participants were fully attentive.

The third challenge is related to the use of Zoom, in which sudden noises and disturbances from some unmuted participants were observed. Additionally, since the webinar series are live-streamed, time differences between countries are unavoidable. For example, it is morning in Michigan, USA (early morning at 3:00 am) and in Cape Town, South Africa (10:00 am), while it is evening in Hiroshima, Japan (17:00 pm). Lastly, as COVID-19 poses challenges in many aspects of our

lives, it also impacted this webinar series. The fifth webinar, which was initially scheduled for September 2021, had to be postponed to December 2021 because of the severe outbreak of COVID-19.

## **8.5 Conclusion**

The webinar series served as a package for the PD of teacher educators: it explored the trends and policies of teacher education and teacher educators' PD in the first webinar, the challenges of teacher educators' PD in the second, the PD of medical and teacher education professionals in the third and issues and solutions of teacher educators' teaching in the fourth. To sum up, the webinar series ultimately contributed to addressing the two main professional learning needs of teacher educators identified by Vanderlinde et al. (2017:6): "pedagogic", practical-based or related to day-to-day tasks and "academic" or learning-based (i.e., how to progress in one's academic career with a strong focus on research). By facilitating teacher educators' professional learning and establishing connections for further networks, this webinar series for teacher educators' PD provides a solution to the global issue (i.e., the need for support for teacher educators' PD). As a means of providing continued support to the teacher educators' PD, the fifth webinar of the ongoing series was scheduled for December 2021 with the theme "Teacher Educators' Professional Development: A Comparative Study on Teacher Educators' Expected Roles in Africa and Southeast Asia". More active discussions are expected based on the case reports and comparative analysis of the five countries namely, Zambia, Malawi, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam.

Undoubtedly, teacher educators have a crucial role in providing quality education at all levels, and the importance of their PD cannot be exaggerated. Therefore, fulfilling one's intellectual curiosity and the wish to engage in continuous professional learning must be an essential feature of teacher educators' responsibilities (Kosnik et al. 2015). Moreover, as identified by Lunnenberg et al. (2014), "developmental

and personal growth” is one of the main competencies required by teacher educators. PD should not be treated as a plug-in, optional or supplement. Rather, it should be regarded as a fundamental prerequisite to survive as a teacher educator. With the rapid advancements in technology, online programmes for PD of teaching professionals are inevitable, and such online programmes will certainly establish a new form of professional learning communities for educators.

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## Conducting Webinars on Professional Development

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