

A Quest for Qualification Upgrade: The Role of Distance and Flexible Learning (DFL) in Qualification Upgrade for English as Second Language (ESL) Teachers in Secondary Schools in Fiji

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Abstract – In Fiji, there is a growing demand for qualified teachers. Hence, in-service teachers use the DFL mode of studies to upgrade their qualifications. This Case Study was undertaken to examine the perceptions of these teachers regarding the role of DFL in helping them to upgrade their qualifications, the challenges faced by them and ways in which these challenges could be met. A sample size of eighteen participants from six different schools in Fiji was chosen for this study. Data were collected with the use of online semi-qualitative questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The research found that while teachers upgraded their qualification through the DFL mode of study, the real purpose for doing so is for improved chances for career progression and increased pay rather than professional development reasons. Further discussion in these lines are included in this study along with specific strategies on how these problems could be resolved. It was concluded that further investigations be carried out regarding the challenges faced by teachers engaged in DFL mode of studies on a larger scale as this will provide a deeper insight into this issue and findings could be used to design realistic solutions, thus benefitting the teacher education system in Fiji.

Keywords: Teacher Education, Distance Learning, Feedback, Online Learning

I. BACKGROUND

Teachers play a critical role in imparting knowledge to the students and as such, they need to be aptly qualified (Qureshi & Niazi, 2012). In addition to subject knowledge, teachers also need pedagogical knowledge (French, 2005) related to educational theories, child development and psychology, learning strategies, class management, assessment and evaluation methods and other quintessential skills for teachers. Therefore, in order to get this knowledge, a teacher needs to undergo training to seek qualification as a teacher. Lai, Sadoule & De Janvry (2011) suggest that in determining teacher characteristics, teacher qualification plays the most important role.

Studies done by Kissau & Algozzine (2013) found that untrained and inexperienced ESL teachers had detrimental effects on learning. Other similar studies (Eckert, 2013; Stephenson, Carter & Arthur-Kelly, 2011) also mirror the sentiments that teacher qualifications have a positive impact on student learning. Boyd *et al.* (2008) suggest that teachers with teacher training qualification performed better than teachers without training qualification. A similar study by Holtzman *et al.* (2005) also found that teachers' understanding of how children learn

gained through qualification, was reflected directly on how students performed, as students performed better when taught by a certified teacher.

In the context of Fiji, there is an increasing demand for qualified teachers (Mocewai, 2014; Rawalai, 2014; Ratubalavu, 2010) and as such, many teachers are engaging in the DFL mode of study. The 2013 Ministry of Education (MOE) Fiji Annual Report states that out of 4650 secondary school teachers in Fiji, there are 119 teachers with certificate level qualifications and 1791 teachers with Diploma level qualifications (Fiji. Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts, 2013, p.135). For these teachers, Distance and Flexible mode of learning (DFL) acts as a platform to engage in further studies to reach to ED 8G level (level for teachers who has an undergraduate degree) for promotion and salary increment (Fiji. Ministry of Public Service Commission, 2012).

The report also highlights that there are 326 teachers with post-graduate qualifications, 84 teachers with Master's level qualifications and 2 teachers with doctorate level qualifications (Fiji. Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts, 2013, p.135). This suggests that DFL learning is not only limited to teachers who hold certificate and diploma level qualifications but that it also provides opportunities for teachers at ED 8G level who wish to pursue further qualification at postgraduate and graduate level of studies.

Literature reviews suggest that the DFL mode of study in Fiji for teacher education is slightly influenced by ICT (Sharma, 2007). According to Ferrer & Kirsching (2014), the use of technology has allowed education to become more accessible. In the context of Fiji, accessibility to learning via the DFL mode of study is very important because of the far-flung nature of the islands. In addition, according to Sporis, Herteg & Chiorean (2013), the DFL mode of studies also provide opportunities for professional development.

A study by Randler, Horzum & Vollmer (2014) suggests that older students prefer the DFL mode of studies as they are already settled in life and work. Bedrule-Grigoruta & Rusu (2014) also state that DFL mode of study is used for career progression for people already engaged in the workforce. This could be a possible explanation for the 326 secondary school teachers with postgraduate qualifications, 84 teachers with Master's Level Qualification and 2 teachers with doctorates (Fiji, Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts, 2013). This suggests that qualification upgrade was done for a better chance of promotion and salary increment as there were 202 promotions in the secondary section (Fiji, Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts, 2013).

As such, the purpose of this study was to analyse the views of English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers regarding the role of Distance and Flexible education in upgrading their qualifications. In order to analyse the views of the teachers, the following research questions were formulated and incorporated into the study:

1. What are the perceptions of ESL teachers regarding the role of Distance and Flexible learning in upgrading their professional qualifications?
2. What are the challenges faced by ESL teachers in Distance and Flexible learning mode of study?
3. How can these challenges be met?

It was envisaged that the findings from this research would identify solutions to the problems faced by teachers in the DFL mode of studies, thus, benefitting teachers engaged in qualification upgrade via the DFL mode of studies. It was also envisaged that the findings from this research could be used by the universities in Fiji to streamline their services for in-service teachers so that it is easier for in-service teachers to access DFL mode of studies from various universities in Fiji.

II. METHODOLOGY

For this research, a Case Study methodology was used because as stated by Cohen and Manion (1995, cited in Biggam 2008, p.83), a Case Study approach towards research allows the researcher to "... probe deeply and analyse intensively ..." thus giving a deep understanding of the phenomenon being studied. In addition, according to Bell, Case Studies also provide opportunities for "a problem to be studied in some depth" (2010, p.8). Thus, a Case Study approach allowed this study to better understand the perceptions of ESL teachers regarding the use of DFL learning for professional development, examine the problems faced in DFL learning and recommend possible solutions.

The Case Study methodology was also suited to data gathering technique of this study, as the research tools included questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to collect data. Due to the geographical distance between Fiji and Wales, this study was conducted using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and this was another factor in influencing the choice of using Case Study Methodology as opposed to other research methodologies as it was convenient to disseminate the questionnaire via email and conduct semi-structured interviews using *Skype*.

In order to collect data, a questionnaire was designed using *Google Docs*. Denscombe (2007), states that the use of a questionnaire allows information to be collected that later can be analysed and used in the study. The questionnaire contained four sections. The first section sought the biographical information of the research respondents while the other three sections contained a mixture of closed and open-ended questions based on the three initial research questions. The types of questions included in the questionnaire were a mixture of dichotomous questions, Likert scale questions, multiple choice (single response/multi response) questions and rating scale questions.

Open-ended questions were also used because according to Denscombe, open-ended questions "reflect the full richness and complexity of the views held by the respondents" (2007, p.156). The initial questionnaire was piloted by a friend in Fiji to seek feedback on the design of the questionnaire, layout and clarity of language and instructions in the questionnaire. Feedback obtained revealed errors in grammar and layout. This was amended and the edited version of the questionnaire was sent to the research participants.

In addition to using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews were also used for data gathering for this study. The reason for using interviews was that according to Denscombe, "interviews are particularly good at producing data which deal with topics in depth and detail"

(2007, p.202) and that semi-structured interviews allow the respondents to “develop ideas and speak more widely on the issues raised by the researcher” (Denscombe, 2007, p.175).

Semi-structured interview questions were based on the three research questions and it aimed to get a deeper insight into respondents’ views regarding the DFL mode of studies. The interviews were conducted via *Skype* and recorded. It was later transcribed and used to report findings. In using, two different research instruments to gather data, this study also took account of triangulation. Data collection took place over a two-week period in April. All the research respondents were requested to complete the questionnaire while six respondents were chosen to participate in the questionnaire after careful consideration of gender, level of study and school location.

The research participants were selected using the Purposive sampling technique. Denscombe describes purposive sampling as the sample that is handpicked for research “... as the researcher already knows something about the specific people ... and they are seen as instances that are likely to produce the most valuable data” (2007, p.17). The reason behind choosing purposive sampling technique was that the principal researcher was already aware of colleagues in different schools in Fiji undertaking studies via the DFL mode of study. They were at different locations and engaged at different levels of study, thus it was decided that they would provide a rich source of data for this study. As such, the following sample was chosen as described by Table 1.

Table 1: Sample Size

	Rural (Main Land) 6	Urban (Main Land) 6	Outer Islands 6
Gender	3 Males 3 Females	3 Males 3 Females	3 Males 3 Females
Level of Study	4 degree seeking 2 seeking postgraduate certificate in Education	5 degree seeking 1 Masters in Educational leadership and Management	1 diploma seeking 5 degree seeking

n=18

From Table 1, it is apparent that the sample selection had taken into consideration the gender and the geographical location of the research participants as the respondents might have different perceptions based on their gender and their geographical location. Consideration were also made regarding the level of study that the participant was engaged in as individuals might

have different perceptions regarding DFL studies based on their learning experience at different levels of study.

Reliability and Validity were also taken into consideration for this study. According to Bell, reliability is “the extent to which a test of procedure produces similar results under constant conditions on all occasions” (2010, p.117). This study took account of validity by the use of triangulation, sampling technique and the piloting of the questionnaire so that other studies using similar method (as used within this study) could produce similar results.

Denscombe suggests that the notion of validity “hinges around whether or not the data reflect the truth, reflect reality and cover the crucial matters” (2007, p.328). This study ensured to adhere to protocols governing validity by having relevant literature that connected this study with the actual practice in Fiji. Secondly, by following the research conventions as stipulated by the British Education Research Association (BERA) (2011) framework, this study ensured to present information that is factual and accurate, thus ensuring the validity of this study.

This research is based on the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) framework. A written consent was sought from the participants after explaining the following conventions.

- Information about the research: Respondents were made aware of the purpose of this research.
- Right to Withdraw: Participants were explained that they have the right to withdraw at any stage of the research without providing any reason.
- Anonymity: Participants were informed that their identity would not be disclosed to anyone.
- Confidentiality: Participants were informed that information pertaining to them participants will not be disclosed to anyone and that all information gathered through the research will be stored safely.

This research has ensured to adhere by the guidelines as stipulated by the BERA (2011) framework.

III. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Seventeen out of eighteen participants completed the questionnaire, giving a response rate of 94.4%. The findings are discussed thematically using the research questions as subheadings.

RQ1. What are the perceptions of ESL teachers regarding the role of Distance and Flexible learning in upgrading their professional qualifications?

Reason for engaging in DFL mode of learning

The findings suggest that the respondents have different reasons for engaging in DFL mode of learning as described in Figure 1

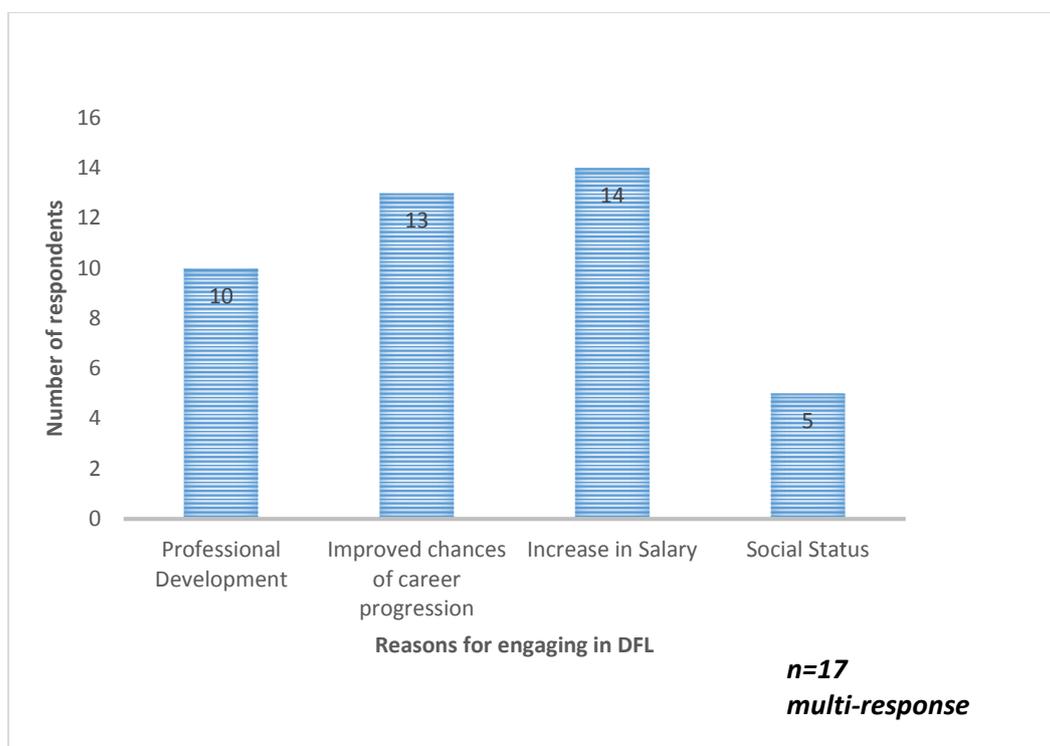


Figure 1: Respondents view of DFL learning

It is apparent from Figure 1 that a clear majority (14 respondents) engaged in DFL learning because upon completion of studies, there will be a salary increment. When asked to indicate the difference between their base salary and the new salary upon graduation, respondents indicated that it is an estimated difference of five thousand dollars for those teachers upgrading their qualification to an undergraduate qualification. However, for those teachers who are studying post-graduate courses, there is no salary increment. An increased chance of promotion based on qualification was what prompted these teachers to continue with their qualification upgrade through the DFL mode of learning.

Ten respondents indicated that they engaged in the DFL mode of studies because of professional development requirements. Respondent 3 said that “teachers in Fiji are required to undergo 20 hours of professional development sessions per year for their teaching license to be renewed for the following year”. Respondents also indicated that they engaged in the DFL mode of learning for social status. When questioned further, Respondent 1 said:

I am 38 years old but I never got an opportunity to act as the head of department because of my qualification. I just have a Diploma in Education. The current head of department is a student whom I had taught eight years ago. While he is a nice person, at times I feel embarrassed in front of my colleagues that I am under qualified and thus, I decided to upgrade my qualifications.

Respondent 2 said:

The principal did not allow me to teach senior forms because I only had a Diploma in Education and he did not believe in my capabilities as a teacher. It is always hard to be the odd one out of the group and the staffroom here could be quite a cruel place as some teachers are very sarcastic. As such, I have now decided to upgrade my qualifications.

This finding reveals that ESL teachers engage in DFL learning for career progression due to low self-esteem. While Naidu (2003) argues that low self-esteem of teachers can be detrimental to the overall learning process for teachers but in this case, his arguments are contradictory as teachers are engaged in DFL learning to upgrade their professional qualification owing to low self-esteem. Thus, low self-esteem of teachers is not retrogressive towards their professional development but instead it acts as self-reinforcement mechanism to motivate teachers to engage in further professional qualification upgrade.

Accessibility

Respondents also cited that they found it easy to engage in DFL learning because the DFL courses were offered via online mode with students only having to go and sit for final examinations at the centres. Respondent 3 said

I am happy because I am able to study at my own pace through the blended learning approach. In the week, I am able to work on my assignments and do the readings and on Saturdays when I get to the mainland, I go and attend tutorials for DFL students.

Respondent 4 also expressed similar sentiments

I am lucky to have my entire Diploma level course completed online. Initially I was worried, as I have heard stories where teachers started online learning but they could not complete their courses because not all units were offered online.

However, this is not the case for all teachers as Respondent 2 said

Not all courses can be completed online, especially if one is doing Bachelor of Education in Literature and Language. One has to go and finish at least one semester at university and it is hard to get leave with pay from the ministry to continue with ones studies. We do not really have a choice but to continue with our studies and hope for the best.

This reflects the resilience of the teachers to engage in further education through DFL mode of studies despite uncertainties surrounding the possibility of completing the course

solely through the DFL mode of study. This further emphasises the positive outlook of teachers towards using DFL mode of learning for professional qualification upgrade.

RQ.2 What are the challenges faced by ESL teachers in Distance and Flexible learning mode of study?

Through the interviews and questionnaire, the respondents indicated that they face specific challenges as illustrated by Figure 2.

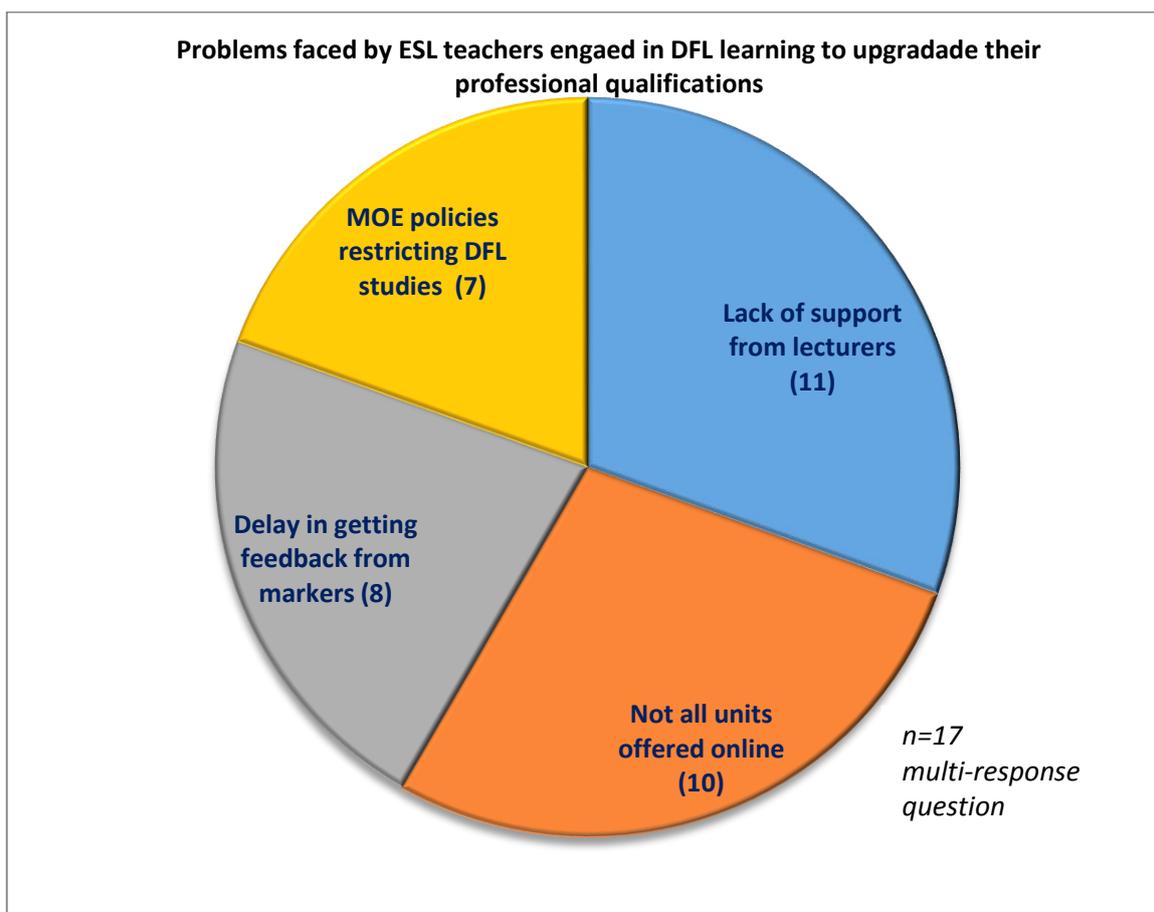


Figure 2

It was interesting to note that the biggest perceived problem faced by respondents is the lack of support from their lecturers (11) and delay in getting feedback from the markers (8). This indicates that ESL teachers engaged via online learning are not fully supported in their learning and this could possibly have adverse effect on their learning. Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap (2003) states that while learners who are engaged in distance and online learning mode are thought of as independent learners, they must be provided with the necessary support, as they are isolated from other learners.

Another issue of concern faced by the respondents is that there are uncertainties regarding the possibility of respondents to complete all units online as all units are not offered online. Respondent 5 said that “[he] is only left with 4 more units to complete before applying

for graduation but [the university] is not offering those four units the DFL mode of studies”. In addition, the Ministry of Education (MOE) stipulates that teachers can only take one unit per semester for DFL studies (Fiji. Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts, 2011, p.6). If teachers take more than one unit, then the MOE will cease their salary for the duration of their studies and hence, this policy discourages teachers from engaging in DFL learning because it will take a considerable amount of time to complete a degree (22 units required) at a rate of one unit per semester. Naidu (2003) highlights that negative institutional policies hinder professional development of teachers as they preclude opportunities for teachers and act as barrier to further professional development.

RQ3. How can these challenges be met?

Policy Development

14 out of 17 respondents felt that the lack of support from lecturers could be solved if the university, which facilitates the DFL mode of study, enforces stringent policies with regard to feedback from lecturers and tutors. Respondent 6 said

Once I sent an email to my lecturer to ask a question relating to assignment. I got a curt reply saying that I am an independent student and I should “read in between the line”, plus that reply came after two weeks from the time I sent my email. I was devastated and withdrew from my course and the university. Now, I am studying at a different university but the situation is same. Some lectures are good, they provide helpful feedback but some lecturers are plain rude and arrogant. They should have a timeframe within which they provide feedback.

From discussions, respondents hold the view that they are paying for their courses and in return, they want quality service. They feel that the university should have a system in place that ensures that feedback is provided within a specific time. Students perceive that feedback provided within a specific time period will provided them with the necessary support needed for them to engage effectively with their studies. Given the fact that students pay fees to the universities, respondents feel that there should be a process through which the DFL students can take their grievances to the appropriate body within the university so that the university is more receptive to their problems and seek ways to provide better services for the DFL students.

The suggestion for respondents to have feedback provided to them within a specific time is noteworthy, as feedback will enable the learner to clear their doubts (Colvin, 2007). It is even more so important in the case of DFL learners because they work in isolation and they need all the necessary support from their lectures as suggested by Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap (2003).

Streamlining of DFL courses

Respondents also had the opinion that their problems could be solved if the different universities ensured that they are able to offer degree programmes that could be completed solely through the DFL mode. According to Respondent 1 “it will be convenient if degrees can be completed through the DFL mode without having to go to universities for a semester or two to complete it”. The respondents see this as important because it will mean that they will not have to leave their families and travel to the capital city to attend face-to-face classes for a semester. This solution will see that students are able to complete their studies through the DFL mode without having the need to leave their work and family to complete studies. Students are also of a view that more courses should be offered through the DFL mode of study as currently only a limited option is available for them. According to Respondent 6, “I wanted to do postgraduate diploma in linguistics but the university does not offer it through DFL mode so I ended up doing postgraduate diploma in Education”. By having a wide variety of courses available for students via the DFL mode of learning, the universities will help Fiji to develop its workforce. By offering limited and narrow scope of studies, the universities are discouraging its DFL students.

Changes in MOE Policies regarding DFL studies

12 out of 17 respondents said that they wanted the MOE to allow them to take two units per semester rather than one as this will speed up the time taken for them to get their qualification. Respondent 4 said

It is sad that the MOE is asking teachers to take only one unit per semester because teachers get discouraged by calculating the time that it will take for them to complete their qualifications

This is again another example of a noteworthy suggestion as this has direct implications for both- current and future teachers - who might wish to study via the DFL mode of studies. While on one hand the MOE Fiji is emphasising the need for more qualified teachers (Mocewai, 2014; Rawalai, 2014 & Ratubalavu, 2010), on the other hand, they are imposing regressive policies that restrict and act as a deterrent for further qualification upgrade. This is a serious problem and reflects directly on policy planning abilities of MOE.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This research was a Case Study with the objective of examining the perceptions of ESL teachers regarding the role of DFL learning in professional qualification upgrade. The findings suggest that teachers view DFL learning as important in enabling them to engage in further learning to upgrade their qualification. DFL learning also counts towards teachers professional development requirements, as it is compulsory for teachers to engage in a minimum of 20 hours of professional development sessions per year for them to have their teaching license renewed for the following year. Overall, the research found that while teachers upgrade their

qualification through DFL mode of study, the real purpose for doing so is for improved chances for career progression and increased pay.

It was also seen that there are challenges faced by teachers in the DFL mode of study. The respondents saw the lack of support from their university lecturers in providing feedback to the teachers as a challenge. They felt that this problem could be solved if there is a policy in place within the different universities that stipulates that lecturers and tutors must provide feedback to the students within a specific timeframe. Another area of concern was that teachers failed to complete their studies solely through the DFL mode and this was seen as a major challenge by the respondents. The policy of the MOE was also seen as a major problem as it restricted the number of units that can be taken by the teachers per semester.

It is recommended that the universities in collaboration with the Ministry of Education develop specific pathways for teachers so that it possible for them to complete their courses though the DFL mode. This could be done by having special tutorials during the school term breaks and by delivering more modules through the DFL learning mode. It is also recommended that feedback policy be developed so that there is a specific time within which feedback would be provided for students.

One limitation of this study was that the due to the scope of this study, regrettably, the issue of school based professional development could not be discussed as teachers also use school based professional development sessions to upgrade their qualifications.

Due to the small-scale nature of this study, there would be need for further studies. It is recommended that investigations be carried out regarding the challenges faced by teachers engaged in the DFL mode of studies on a larger scale. This will provide a deeper insight into this issue and findings from the study could be used to design realistic solutions, thus benefitting the teacher education system in Fiji.

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