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FACTORS AFFECTING THE OPERATION OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS AT VIETNAMESE ECONOMICS UNIVERSITIES

Huynh Anh Tuan^{1,*}, Nguyen Thi Hong Hanh²

¹VNU University of Languages and International Studies, No.2 Pham Van Dong, Cau Giay, Hanoi, Vietnam

²College of Economics and Public Management, National Economics University,
No.207 Giai Phong Road, Hai Ba Trung District, Hanoi, Vietnam

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Abstract: This research paper examines the factors influencing the operation of professional learning communities (PLCs) among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers at Vietnamese economics universities. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews from four universities in Hanoi to provide a more profound understanding of PLC implementation and management in Vietnam higher education contexts. The key findings indicate that strong institutional support, effective leadership, high teacher engagement, and favorable external conditions are essential for the success of PLCs in the investigated institutions. The study identifies significant challenges, such as the lack of synchronization in PLC activities and inconsistencies in quality management, which impede PLC effectiveness. Recommendations include developing structured models and policies to foster collaborative learning, promoting a culture of continuous professional development, and ensuring external conditions are conducive to PLC sustainability. This research enriches the existing literature on PLCs by analyzing their dynamics within Vietnamese higher education and offers practical strategies for educational leaders and policymakers to enhance PLC operations. Ultimately, these recommendations aim to support the professional growth of EFL university teachers and improve the overall quality of education in Vietnamese economics universities (VEUs).

Keywords: professional learning communities, EFL teachers, economics universities in Vietnam, professional development

* Corresponding author.

Email address: huynhanhtuan@vnu.edu.vn

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CÁC NHÂN TỐ ẢNH HƯỞNG ĐẾN HOẠT ĐỘNG CỘNG ĐỒNG HỌC TẬP CHUYÊN MÔN CỦA GIÁO VIÊN GIẢNG DẠY TIẾNG ANH NHƯ MỘT NGOẠI NGỮ TẠI CÁC TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC KINH TẾ Ở VIỆT NAM

Huỳnh Anh Tuấn¹, Nguyễn Thị Hồng Hạnh²

¹Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội, Số 2 Phạm Văn Đồng, Cầu Giấy, Hà Nội, Việt Nam

²Trường Kinh tế và Quản lý công, Đại học Kinh tế Quốc dân,

Số 207 Giải Phóng, Quận Hai Bà Trưng, Hà Nội, Việt Nam

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Tóm tắt: Bài viết phân tích các yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến hoạt động của cộng đồng học tập chuyên môn (PLC) của giảng viên giảng dạy tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ (EFL) tại các trường đại học kinh tế ở Việt Nam. Sử dụng phương pháp hỗn hợp, nghiên cứu kết hợp phân tích dữ liệu khảo sát định lượng với các dữ liệu phỏng vấn định tính thu thập từ bốn trường đại học ở Hà Nội để đưa ra cái nhìn sâu sắc hơn về việc triển khai và quản lý PLC trong bối cảnh giáo dục đại học ở Việt Nam. Các kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy sự hỗ trợ mạnh mẽ của nhà trường, lãnh đạo có hiệu quả, sự tham gia tích cực của giảng viên và các điều kiện khách quan thuận lợi là những yếu tố thiết yếu cho sự thành công của PLC tại các trường đại học trên. Nghiên cứu chỉ ra những thách thức đáng kể như thiếu sự đồng bộ trong các hoạt động PLC và sự không nhất quán trong quản lý chất lượng đã gây cản trở đến hiệu quả của PLC. Các khuyến nghị bao gồm phát triển các mô hình hữu cơ và có cơ chế chính sách thúc đẩy học tập cộng tác, khuyến khích văn hóa phát triển chuyên môn trọn đời và đảm bảo các điều kiện khách quan thuận lợi cho sự bền vững của PLC. Nghiên cứu này góp phần bổ sung tri thức trong tài liệu khảo cứu hiện có về PLC bằng cách phân tích tính năng động của PLC trong giáo dục đại học Việt Nam và đưa ra các chiến lược thực tiễn cho các nhà lãnh đạo giáo dục và các nhà hoạch định chính sách nhằm nâng cao hiệu quả hoạt động của PLC. Trên hết, những khuyến nghị này hướng tới hỗ trợ sự phát triển chuyên môn của giảng viên giảng dạy tiếng Anh bậc đại học và nâng cao chất lượng giáo dục tổng thể tại các trường đại học kinh tế ở Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: cộng đồng học tập chuyên môn, giảng viên giảng dạy tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ, các trường đại học kinh tế ở Việt Nam, phát triển nghề nghiệp

1. Introduction

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have become a significant component in the professional development of teachers worldwide, providing a collaborative environment where educators can share experiences, strategies, and resources to enhance their teaching practices and improve student outcomes (Ikpuri & Peter, 2024; Khasawneh et al., 2023; Harris & Jones, 2010). In the context of Vietnamese economics universities, the professional development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers is even more crucial due to the essentiality of the integration of their English proficiency with economics knowledge. PLCs have emerged as an effective model for fostering continuous teacher development and improving instructional practices under this prerequisite. However, the implementation of PLCs in Vietnamese universities in general, and economics universities in particular remains inconsistent and fragmented (Phan, 2020), necessitating a deeper exploration of the factors that influence their operation.

Grounded in the theories of social and situated learning, which emphasize the importance of collaborative activities and shared practices among educators (Wenger, 1998), PLCs offer significant potential benefits. Nonetheless, various studies highlight discrepancies in how PLCs are defined and executed. Researchers such as Dufour et al. (2005) and Timperley et al. (2009) present differing views on their essential components. Dufour et al. (2005) describe PLCs as groups of teachers who collaboratively develop strategies to enhance student learning, while Timperley et al. (2009) focus on the collective effort to advance professional knowledge and teaching expertise.

The significance of this research is multifaceted. By examining the factors that affect the operation of PLCs among EFL teachers at Vietnamese economics universities, the study aims to provide valuable insights that can help educational leaders and policymakers design more effective professional development programs. This involves assessing the current state of PLCs, identifying challenges to their effective implementation, and proposing solutions to enhance their functionality. The specific objectives of the research are to identify external and internal factors influencing the operation of PLCs, including institutional policies, resource allocation, teacher motivation, and organizational culture. Enhanced PLCs can lead to improved teaching practices, fostering better learning outcomes for students and contributing to the overall quality of education (Brown et al., 2018).

Adopting a mixed-methods approach, this study integrates quantitative and qualitative data to provide a discerning analysis of PLC operations in four Vietnamese economics universities. Surveys and semi-structured interviews with EFL university teachers and leaders constitute the primary data sources, offering insights into the practical realities of PLC implementation and the factors that facilitate or hinder their success. The findings are anticipated to guide the development of models and policies that bolster the professional development of EFL teachers and enhance educational quality at Vietnamese economics universities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Professional Learning Community (PLC) Operation

PLCs are defined as groups of educators that continuously seek to improve their teaching skills and student outcomes through collaborative learning and shared practices (Ikpuri & Peter, 2024; Khasawneh et al., 2023; Prenger et al., 2017; Burns et al., 2017; Harris & Jones, 2010). DuFour (2004) and Hord (1997) highlighted the importance of shared leadership, collective learning, and supportive conditions in the successful implementation of PLCs. PLCs have been conceptualized in various ways since the term's inception. Originating from learning organizational theory, PLCs focus on collective learning and continuous improvement within an educational setting (Wenger, 1998). These communities are characterized by shared values and vision, collective responsibility, reflective professional inquiry, and collaboration (Astuto et al., 1993; Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth, 2001; Little, 2005, 2012; Dufour, 2004; Hargreaves, 2007; Mitchell & Sackney, 2011; Stoll, 2011; Stoll et al., 2006; Stoll & Louis, 2007). Despite the varied definitions, there is consensus that PLCs play a crucial role in fostering professional growth and improving educational practices (Lomos, Hofman & Bosker, 2011; Mullen, 2009). The operationalization of PLCs involves four key components that collectively enhance the effectiveness of teacher professional development: cumulative learning, dimension, deployment and implementation, and quality management.

One of the foundational elements is cumulative learning (Maton, 2009; Lee, 2012).

According to social learning theory, teachers within PLCs engage in ongoing learning activities that are essential for their professional growth (Hipp & Huffman, 2010). This continuous learning process allows teachers to reflect on their practices, share insights with peers, and adopt new strategies that can improve their instructional methods and student outcomes. Cumulative learning thus serves as the bedrock upon which effective PLCs are built, fostering a culture of perpetual professional enhancement (Maton, 2009; Lee, 2012).

Another critical component of PLCs is the dimensions that define their structure and function (Zhang & Pang, 2016). These dimensions include shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions (Hipp & Huffman, 2010). Shared and supportive leadership involves collaborative decision-making processes where teachers and administrators work together to set goals and develop strategies for achieving them. Shared values and vision ensure that all members of the PLC are aligned in their educational philosophies and objectives, creating a cohesive and focused group dynamic. Collective learning and application emphasize the importance of working together to implement new ideas and practices, while shared personal practice involves teachers observing and providing feedback to one another. Supportive conditions, both relational and structural, provide the necessary environment for these activities to thrive, including time, resources, and a culture of trust and mutual respect.

Deployment and implementation of PLCs are equally crucial and are guided by organizational learning theory. This theory posits that effective deployment and implementation require structured processes and robust support systems (Hipp & Huffman, 2010). For PLCs to function optimally, institutions must establish clear protocols and provide the necessary resources and support to facilitate collaborative activities. This includes scheduling regular meeting times, providing professional development opportunities, and ensuring that there is administrative support for PLC initiatives. Effective deployment and implementation also involve ongoing training and development for teachers to keep them engaged and equipped with the latest educational practices and tools.

Quality management is another vital component of successful PLCs. Effective PLCs incorporate mechanisms for continuous assessment and improvement, which are often guided by rubrics and frameworks developed by educational theorists (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Laures & Vanre, 2013). These frameworks provide a structured approach to evaluating the effectiveness of PLC activities and identifying areas for enhancement. Regular assessments help ensure that the goals of the PLC are being met and that the professional development activities are translating into improved teaching practices and student outcomes. Quality management also involves collecting and analyzing data on PLC activities, using this information to make informed decisions about future initiatives and interventions.

In conclusion, the operationalization of PLCs encompasses cumulative learning, well-defined dimensions, strategic deployment and implementation, and rigorous quality management. By integrating these components, educational institutions can create robust PLCs that support ongoing teacher professional development and enhance the overall quality of education.

2.2. Factors Influencing PLC Operation

Factors influencing the effectiveness of PLCs encompass both internal and external elements. Internal factors include teachers' motivation, experience, and engagement, while external factors involve institutional support, policies, and the socio-cultural context. Studies

by Hargreaves (1994), Stoll (2006), and Kilbane (2009) demonstrated that supportive leadership and adequate resources are crucial for the sustainability of PLCs. These factors create a robust environment where teachers can thrive and collaboratively enhance their professional practices. In this study, the factors are categorized into teacher-related (internal) factors and organizational (external) factors.

2.2.1. Teacher-Related (Internal) Factors

Teacher-related factors, which include teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and prior experiences with collaborative learning, significantly impact the effectiveness of PLCs (Haukås & Drange, 2024; Brody, 1998). For instance, teachers who have positive attitudes toward collaboration and believe in the benefits of shared learning are more likely to engage actively in PLC activities. Additionally, prior experiences with successful PLCs can enhance a teacher's commitment to continuous professional development. The willingness to engage in reflective practice is also critical, as it allows teachers to critically analyze their teaching methods, identify areas for improvement, and implement new strategies based on collaborative feedback (Vo & Mai Nguyen, 2010). The collective efficacy among teachers, or their shared belief in their ability to effect change, is another pivotal factor that drives the success of PLCs. In this study, teacher-related factors involve their teaching experience and qualification which might affect their participation and engagement in PLCs. Other internal factors such as gender and position are deliberately excluded because of the huge discrepancies among the participants concerning these two factors (very few of them are males and few of them hold leading positions in the investigated institutions).

2.2.2. Organizational (External) Factors

Organizational support is paramount for the successful implementation of PLCs (Brown, Horn, & King, 2018). This includes administrative backing, resource allocation, and the establishment of a conducive environment for collaborative learning (Lomos, Hofman & Bosker, 2011). Administrative support can manifest in various forms, such as providing time within the school schedule for PLC meetings, offering professional development opportunities, and recognizing and rewarding collaborative efforts. Resource allocation is equally important; sufficient funding for materials, access to technology, and opportunities for attending workshops or conferences can significantly bolster PLC activities.

The establishment of a conducive environment for collaborative learning involves creating a culture of trust and openness where teachers feel safe to share ideas and take risks. This environment is often influenced by the institution's leadership, which must actively promote and model collaborative practices. Moreover, the socio-cultural context within which PLCs operate can either facilitate or hinder their effectiveness. In some cultural settings, hierarchical structures and traditional views on teacher autonomy may pose challenges to the collaborative ethos of PLCs (Derk, 2019; Boone, 2014; Yan & Yang, 2019). Understanding and navigating these cultural nuances is essential for fostering effective PLCs. This is where internal and external factors interplay in bringing about the successes of PLCs.

In summary, both teacher-related and organizational factors play critical roles in the effectiveness of PLCs. Teacher-related factors such as motivation, beliefs, and engagement are foundational, while organizational support and the socio-cultural context provide the necessary framework for these communities to thrive. By addressing both sets of factors, educational institutions can enhance the effectiveness of PLCs, leading to improved teaching practices and better educational outcomes.

2.3. Sociocultural and Organizational Learning Theories

Sociocultural theory, pioneered by Lev Vygotsky and further developed by scholars like Wenger (1998), underscores the significance of social interactions and cultural contexts in the learning process. According to this theory, learning occurs through participation in social activities, where individuals engage in collaborative dialogues and shared practices. In the context of PLCs, this means that teachers learn and develop professionally not in isolation but through interactions with their colleagues. These interactions help to co-construct knowledge, share experiences, and develop new instructional strategies. The cultural context of the educational environment, including the norms, values, and beliefs shared by the members, plays a crucial role in shaping these learning experiences. Therefore, the effectiveness of PLCs is heavily influenced by the extent to which they foster a collaborative culture and create opportunities for meaningful social interactions among teachers.

Organizational learning theory, on the other hand, focuses on how organizations facilitate learning through their structures and processes (Boone, 2014). This theory posits that learning within an organization is a continuous process that involves the acquisition, dissemination, and utilization of knowledge. For PLCs, organizational learning theory highlights the importance of having supportive structures and processes that promote continuous professional development. This includes establishing clear goals, providing adequate resources, and creating an environment that encourages experimentation and reflection. Effective PLCs are those that are well-integrated into the organizational framework of the school, with strong support from leadership and a well-defined process for implementing and sustaining collaborative learning activities. Organizational learning theory also emphasizes the role of feedback and evaluation in the learning process, suggesting that PLCs should have mechanisms in place for regularly assessing their activities and outcomes to ensure continuous improvement.

By combining sociocultural and organizational learning theories, educators and policymakers can gain a deeper understanding of the factors that influence the success of PLCs. Sociocultural theory provides insights into the interpersonal and cultural dimensions of learning, highlighting the importance of building a collaborative culture and fostering social interactions. Organizational learning theory, meanwhile, offers a lens through which to examine the structural and procedural aspects of PLCs, emphasizing the need for supportive organizational frameworks that facilitate continuous learning and improvement.

The integration of sociocultural and organizational learning theories provides a robust framework for understanding and enhancing the dynamics of PLCs. By recognizing the interplay between social interactions and organizational structures, educators can create more effective PLCs that support ongoing professional development and ultimately lead to improved teaching practices and student outcomes.

2.4. Previous Related Studies

Numerous studies have explored the impact of PLCs on teacher development and student outcomes globally. Research by Hord (1997), Hipp & Huffman (2003), and Mitchell (2007) highlights the positive effects of PLCs on teaching practices and student achievement. These studies employed mixed methods, including surveys, interviews, and document analysis, to capture the multifaceted nature of PLCs. Studies specifically focusing on TPD for EFL teachers underscore the benefits of PLCs in enhancing teaching efficacy. Li (2013) and Yan & Yang (2019) demonstrated that PLCs foster professional collaboration, reflective practice, and

instructional innovation among EFL teachers. These studies revealed that PLCs help address common challenges such as isolation and lack of professional support in the EFL context.

In Vietnam, research on PLCs is still emerging. Studies by Hoa (2008), Vo and Mai Nguyen (2010), and Nguyen, Fehring, and Warren (2015) have begun to explore the role of PLCs in Vietnamese higher education. These studies indicate that while there is recognition of the importance of PLCs, significant gaps remain in implementation, particularly in the context of EFL teaching at economics universities (VEUs).

Despite the growing body of literature on PLCs, several gaps persist, particularly within the Vietnamese context. Theoretically, existing studies have not fully integrated sociocultural and organizational learning theories into the analysis of PLCs in Vietnam (Derk, 2019; Boone, 2014; Yan & Yang, 2019; Lare & Brazer, 2013). Population-wise, there is a lack of research focusing specifically on PLCs among EFL teachers and the factors affecting the operations of those PLCs at Vietnamese economics universities, leaving this segment underexplored in the current literature. Additionally, there is a practical-knowledge gap, with minimal research dedicated to practical strategies for implementing PLCs in higher education settings, particularly for EFL teachers in Vietnam. By addressing these gaps, this research aims to contribute to the understanding of PLCs' operation and effectiveness in Vietnamese economics universities, providing valuable insights for policy and practice. Therefore, this research addresses a critical gap in the field of teacher professional development by providing an in-depth examination of PLCs within a specific educational context. It aims to contribute to both theoretical understanding and practical applications by identifying effective strategies for fostering collaborative learning environments and improving the professional competencies of EFL teachers in Vietnam. Within the scope of this paper, the focus is on the factors affecting the operations of the PLCs of EFL teachers at four economics universities in Hanoi, Vietnam.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This research employs a mixed-method explanatory sequential design, consisting of two interactive stages (Creswell & Clark, 2018). In the first stage, quantitative data from the questionnaire is collected, analyzed, and interpreted. The findings from this stage guide the qualitative data collection from the interviews in the second stage, providing further clarification and depth. This approach aligns with the research aim, allows for an insightful understanding of the phenomenon, and enhances the validity and credibility of the findings through data triangulation (Creswell, 2014; Green, 2007).

The quantitative phase involves a questionnaire survey to generate a broad understanding of PLC operations among EFL teachers, identifying patterns, trends, and commonalities. The qualitative phase uses semi-structured interviews to gain deeper insights into teachers' experiences and perceptions, complementing and expanding on the quantitative results (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002).

3.2. Data Collection

Research Sites: The study was conducted at four leading public economics universities in Hanoi, Vietnam. These universities were selected for their similarity in training history and the prestige of their EFL teachers. Each institution offers a range of economics training levels and uses English as a medium of instruction in several programs. The differing scales, training capabilities, infrastructures, and financial autonomy mechanisms of these universities provided

a rich context for assessing the impact of various factors on PLC operations.

Survey Participants: Purposive sampling was employed to select the participants with a comprehensive understanding of the primary phenomenon (Creswell & Clark, 2018). The survey included a diverse group of 233 participants, consisting of 10 males (4.29%) and 223 females (95.71%). The age distribution varied, with the majority being between 30 and 40 years old (68.24%), followed by those aged 41 to 50 years (13.73%), under 30 years (10.73%), and over 50 years (7.30%). Regarding qualifications, a significant majority held a Master's degree (92.27%), while 7.73% had a PhD, with no participants having a Bachelor's degree. The participants' fields of study were primarily Linguistics (51.93%), TESOL (38.20%), and Economics (20.60%). Teaching experience among participants ranged from 0-3 years (15.02%), 4-7 years (36.05%), 8-15 years (31.76%), 16-23 years (10.73%), to over 24 years (6.44%). The teaching areas covered included Writing (79.83%), Reading (70.82%), Speaking (48.07%), Listening (46.35%), ESP (15.02%), Interpretation/Translation (17.60%), and other subjects (10.30%). Of the participants, 12.45% were teacher-leaders, while the remaining 87.55% were teachers. In terms of weekly teaching hours, 67.81% taught more than 20 hours, 19.31% taught 16-20 hours, 8.15% taught 10-15 hours, and 4.72% taught less than 10 hours. This diverse sample provided a robust foundation for analyzing PLC operations. The differences in the parameters (gender, age, qualification, field of study) show the status quo of the lecturers at economics university at the time of the research with much fewer males than females, much fewer teacher-leaders than mere teachers. That is why no valid conclusion could be made about the differences in those parameters in the quantitative data analysis.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Participants

	Items	Number	Percent (%)
Age	Less than 30 years old	25	10.73
	From 30 - 40 years old	159	68.24
	From 41 - 50 years old	32	13.73
	More than 50 years old	17	7.30
Gender	Male	10	4.29
	Female	223	95.71
Qualifications	BA	0	-
	MA	215	92.27
	PhD	18	7.73
Major-related qualifications	TESOL	89	38.20
	Linguistics	121	51.93
	Interpretation/Translation	0	-
	Economics	48	20.60
Teaching experience	0-3 years	35	15.02
	4-7 years	84	36.05
	8-15 years	74	31.76
	16-23 years	25	10.73
	>24 years	15	6.44
Teaching areas	Writing	186	79.83
	Reading	165	70.82
	Speaking	112	48.07
	Listening	108	46.35
	ESP	35	15.02

	Interpretation/Translation	41	17.60
	Others	24	10.30
Position	Teacher-Leader	29	12.45
	Teacher	204	87.55
Teaching hours per week	<10 hours	11	4.72
	10-15 hours	19	8.15
	16-20 hours	45	19.31
	>20 hours	158	67.81

Interview Participants: 5 participants who met the criteria for follow-up semi-structured interviews were recruited from the larger survey sample of 233 respondents. The criteria encompassed: teacher-leaders, experienced teachers (with minimum 16 years of teaching experience), PhD holders and research-qualified experts. This diverse group provided valuable insights, drawing from their extensive experience and leadership roles within their institutions, which was critical for the in-depth exploration of PLC operations and the factors influencing them in their institutions.

Data Collection Instruments: Complementary data collection techniques, including questionnaires and individual interviews, were employed to gather substantial data for the analysis centering on the operations of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in the investigated universities. Triangulation was used to enhance the credibility and reliability of the analysis (Eisner, 1998; Johnson & Christensen, 2012; Yin, 2009).

Questionnaire: The questionnaire was designed to explore teachers' perceptions of the current operation of EFL teachers' PLCs at the researched universities, based on the Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised (PLCAR) (Hipp & Huffman, 2010). The questionnaire consisted of four sections: demographic information, personal experiences, PLC dimensions performance, and recommendations for promoting PLC activities. The reliability and validity of the questionnaire were ensured through Cronbach's Alpha internal consistency analysis. The development of the questionnaire involved several stages: creation, piloting, and distribution. It was aimed at collecting data on various aspects of PLCs, including dimensions, development stages, deployment, implementation, and quality management. The data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS 20. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to summarize trends and patterns, while inferential statistics and cross-tabulations were performed to examine variations between different participant types. The statements of the survey are categorized into six representative groups: (1) Items 1-11 focus on the attributes supporting shared and supportive leadership; (2) Items 12-20 assess shared values and vision; (3) Items 21-30 determine the participants' perceptions in regards to collective learning and application; (4) Items 31-37 assess the shared personal practice; (5) Items 38-42 pertain to supportive conditions- relationships; and (6) Items 43-52 pertain to supportive conditions- structures (Hipp & Huffman, 2010). The 4-point Likert scale is utilized in the questionnaire from strongly disagree to strongly agree (SD = Strongly Disagree = 1, D = Disagree = 2, A = Agree =3, SA = Strongly Agree =4) for factors influencing teachers' cumulative learning, PLC dimensions performance related factors and PLC deployment and implementation related factors. The neutral point is discarded to avoid undecided responses. Open-ended questions are used for PLC quality management related factors.

Interview: Semi-structured interviews were conducted to provide an in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions and experiences regarding PLCs. These interviews focused on several themes, including the necessity of PLCs for English teachers, factors influencing PLC operations, and recommendations for PLC implementation and quality

management. Interviews were also used to gather detailed knowledge about proposed PLC models. Participants were given interview questions in advance to allow adequate preparation. Each interview lasted between 20 to 30 minutes, and the collected data were meticulously analyzed to draw necessary conclusions. The inductive qualitative content analysis approach was employed to analyze interview data. The raw data were transcribed, coded, and translated, with themes and sub-themes identified and analyzed to ensure accuracy and reliability (Gibbs, 2007; Brislin, 1970).

Pilot Study Procedure: The pilot study was conducted to test the effectiveness of data collection procedures and ensure the questionnaire's relevance to the local educational setting. Involving five English teachers from a Hanoi economics university, the study aimed to identify and rectify potential issues with the research instruments. Participants completed the questionnaire and then provided detailed feedback on clarity, language appropriateness, logical flow, and length. Based on their input, ambiguous questions were rephrased, complex items were simplified, redundant questions were removed, and a glossary of terms was added. The layout was also revised for better navigation. Additionally, the pilot study assessed the time required to complete the questionnaire and tested logistics for distribution and collection, ensuring respondent anonymity and a high response rate. Preliminary data analysis using SPSS 20 validated the data processing workflow. Overall, the pilot study provided critical feedback, allowing for the refinement of data collection instruments and procedures, ensuring the main study would be robust, reliable, and relevant to the local educational context.

3.3. Analytical Framework

The data are both quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed to explore the internal and external factors affecting the operation of the PLCs in the universities investigated.

The quantitative analysis is based on responses from the questionnaire using SPSS to identify the teachers' perceptions of 1) factors affecting their cumulative learning in terms of shared and supportive leadership and shared values and vision 2) the differences (if any) in the perceptions of the teachers judging from their teaching experience and qualification 3) PLC dimensions performance related factors 4) PLC deployment and implementation related factors; 5) PLC quality management related factors. The aim of the quantitative analysis is to explore the relationship between each external PLC dimension (shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, supportive conditions in relationship, supportive conditions in structures) and participant characteristics (the internal factors) in terms of teaching experience and qualification. The focus is on the mean values and the significance (Sig.)/probability (p.) values.

Qualitative analysis adopting thematic analysis with 4 major steps: 1) Initial coding: Identifying, reviewing, defining and naming themes based on initial codes; 2) Open coding: Breaking down the data into distinct parts and assigning labels (codes) to these parts; 3) Axial coding: Organizing the codes into categories based on relationships and patterns identified to refine and connect codes to form more significant themes; 4) Selective coding: Identifying the core themes, integrating and refining the themes that have emerged from open and axial coding to create a coherent narrative. The factors analyzed encompass both internal and external factors affecting the creation and maintenance of PLC operation, factors affecting teacher professional development, and factors affecting professional activities of PLC. The qualitative analysis also delves into some suggestions for the orientation of PLC operations voiced by the teachers themselves.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative Results

The survey results indicated that while many teachers are aware of PLCs and the benefits of participating in PLC activities, their engagement levels vary significantly. Factors such as time constraints, lack of institutional support, and unclear objectives were identified as major barriers to active participation in PLCs.

4.1.1. Factors Influencing Teachers' Cumulative Learning

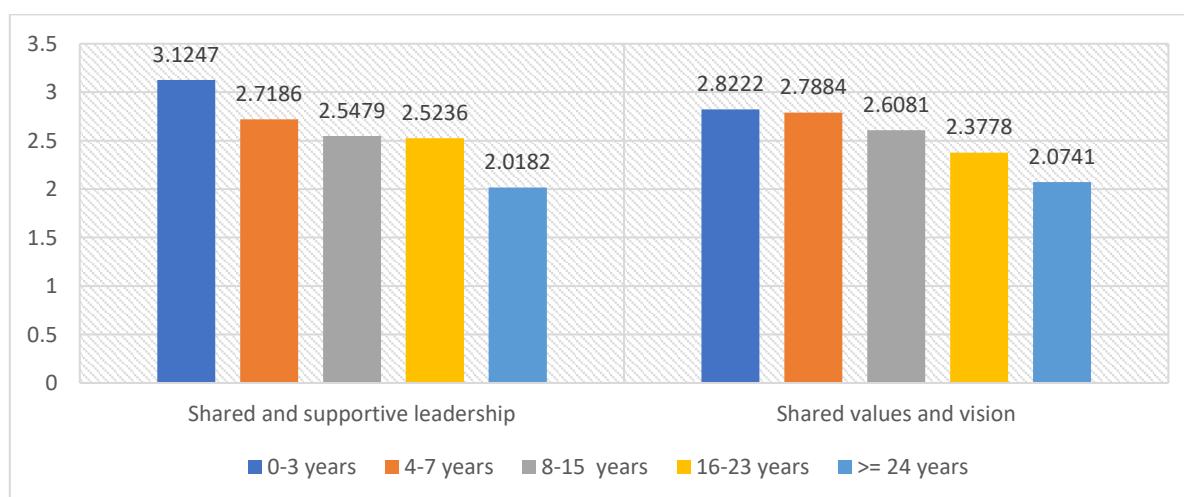
The survey identified the teachers' perceptions of several factors crucial in affecting the current stage of PLC operations among EFL teachers at VEUs. The Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised (PLCA-R) tool was used to understand the relationship between each PLC dimension and participant characteristics in terms of their teaching experience and qualification.

Experience: The data (Figure 1) indicated significant differences in perceptions of shared and supportive leadership and shared values and vision based on teaching experience, with Sig. values of 0.000 and 0.010, respectively. Teachers with 0-3 years of experience rated these dimensions higher compared to those with more than 24 years of experience. This aligns with the literature suggesting that less experienced teachers are more enthusiastic about student learning and more critical of the support structures in place (Ghaith & Shaaban, 1999).

The data indicates that shared and supportive leadership (Sig. = 0.000 < 0.05) and shared values and vision (Sig. = 0.010 < 0.05) are significantly influenced by teaching experience. Less experienced teachers place higher importance on these dimensions, possibly because they are more focused on developing supportive environments and shared goals early in their careers. In contrast, experienced teachers might already have established their teaching methods and networks, hence placing less emphasis on these dimensions.

Figure 1

The Differences in Teachers' Perceptions of Shared and Supportive Leadership and Shared Values and Vision Regarding Their Teaching Experience



Qualification: There were differences in perceptions based on qualification levels, particularly in shared values and vision and supportive conditions. The Sig. value of 0.079 < 0.1 indicates that 10% of teachers at different educational levels have different perspectives on

PLCs. Table 2 shows the differences in PLC ratings based on the qualification of participants.

Table 2

The Differences in Teachers’ Perceptions of PLC Dimensions Regarding Their Qualification

Characteristics of PLCs	Mean (Doctor)	SD (Doctor)	Mean (Master)	SD (Master)	T	Sig.
Shared and supportive leadership (11 items)	2.5808	0.81856	2.6698	0.80386	-0.440	0.660
Shared values and vision (9 items)	2.4815	0.91227	2.7092	0.85790	-1.050	0.295
Collective learning and application (10 items)	2.4278	0.87636	2.6059	0.85788	-0.826	0.410
Shared personal practice (7 items)	2.2937	0.84511	2.3603	0.92090	-0.291	0.771
Supportive conditions – relationship (5 items)	3.0000	0.63246	3.1544	0.72376	-0.862	0.390
Supportive conditions – structures (10 items)	2.3556	0.78157	2.7346	0.83501	-1.822	0.070
Total	2.5232	0.42907	2.7057	0.40856	-1.770	0.079

The Sig. value < 0.1 indicates that qualification has a statistically significant impact on the teachers’ perceptions of PLC dimensions. This suggests that teachers with different levels of education have varied perceptions of PLC effectiveness.

4.1.2. PLC Dimensions Performance Related Factors

The study found that teaching experience has the greatest impact on the teachers’ perceptions of PLC operations, with varying perspectives among individuals with different backgrounds. Additionally, those with advanced degrees have distinct perspectives on PLCs. This highlights the importance of enhancing training programs, seminars, and knowledge sharing to address these disparities.

The literature supports that three groups of influence factors related to PLC dimensions—leadership, collaboration, relationship, and supportive conditions—affect other factors in PLC dimensions. The research identified three basic factors that interact and are categorized according to their influence.

Table 3

The Influence of PLC Dimensions Performance Related Factors

Factors	Influence Degree	Mean
Perception of true value of PLC	0	0
Current teaching skills of teachers	0	12
Current teaching experiences of teachers	0	15
Professional characteristics of EFL teachers (Teaching career, scale, objectives, training orientation for EFL teachers)	9	31
Characteristics and needs of EFL teachers at university	15	38
Current teachers’ qualification	28	54
Supportive Conditions	10	38

The most critical recommendations include establishing a core team to organize resources and engage stakeholders, continuously carrying out PLC activities, resolving disputes effectively, and maintaining conducive conditions for PLC operations.

4.1.3. PLC Deployment and Implementation Related Factors

Survey results indicate that the implementation of PLC guidelines, such as visions, strategic planning, and operational plans, were the most influential factors, with averages above 4.0. Other significant factors include requirements for teachers, university policies for professional development, national and education industry development, integration needs, student needs, and English requirements for student outcomes.

Table 4

The Influence of PLC Deployment and Implementation Related Factors

Factors	Influence Degree	Mean
Guidelines (visions, strategic planning, plans) toward PLC	0	0
The implementation of PLC	0	0
Requirements for teachers	0	0
Guideline and policy of the university for EFL teachers' professional development (training mechanism)	9	38
The development of the nation and the education industry	11	37
The needs for integration, the needs of students and the requirement of English for students' outcomes	25	36
Strategic plan and development of English teaching of the university	22	36
Objectives, contents and methods of PLC	21	36
The evaluation and assessment of the implementation of PLC	19	45
Science, technology, information, and technology creation requires English teachers to enhance their capacities and better themselves	31	42
Other impacts: perceptions, qualifications and abilities of members at university, faculty, and department to the family of teachers	28	45

External factors affecting the PLC environment include state and ministry regulations, ministry and university vision and orientation, provisions for teachers' standardization, requirements for standardizing student outcomes, trainer training and development, organizational capacity, and faculty relationship conditions. Internal factors include benefits, difficulties, the current PLC development stage, policy, vision, intentions, current PLC operations, and quality assessment.

4.2. Qualitative Results

Interviews revealed that successful PLCs often possess strong leadership support, clear goals, and a collaborative culture. Teachers emphasized the importance of dedicated time for PLC activities and the need for professional development opportunities tailored to their teaching contexts.

4.2.1. Factors Affecting the Creation and Maintenance of PLC Operations

Interviews highlighted that the implementation efforts of leaders and coordinators, along with the dedication of all lecturers, are critical for PLC success. The current qualifications and skills of teachers play a crucial role in the effectiveness of PLCs, as varied teaching

experiences contribute to diverse perspectives and approaches within these communities. Supportive institutional policies are essential to facilitate the creation and maintenance of PLCs. Additionally, understanding and agreeing on long-term goals, strategies, and visions are fundamental. Clear objectives and well-defined methods ensure the proper functioning of PLC activities, while effective organizational procedures are necessary for consistent implementation. A conducive operating environment further fosters collaboration and sustained PLC activities. More external factors are mentioned than internal factors in the interviews. This might suggest that the teachers are more concerned about the (supporting or hindering) conditions than their own personal traits in securing the success and effectiveness of the PLCs.

4.2.2. Factors Affecting Teacher Professional Development

The interview results underscored the importance of continuous training and development for EFL teachers at economics universities in Vietnam (EETs). The teachers recognized the necessity of ongoing professional development to enhance their skills and take responsibility for their own learning and development. The ability to raise qualifications is influenced by various factors, including personal trends and career aspirations. Characteristics such as gender, position, qualifications, and experience also play a significant role. The influence of peers and the broader educational community is crucial, as are the context and history of the institution. Support from family and institutional policies are important, and specialized training tailored to specific fields of study is necessary to meet the diverse needs of EETs. Three major themes emerged from the interviews: comprehensive, practical and long-term policy for sustainable motivation and self-discipline in participation, clear objectives and structured implementation for maximal benefits and limited experience sharing practices. One participant emphasized the crucial role of a comprehensive policy in maintaining the sustainability PLC operation, *"The policy of the institution in terms of scale, quantity, quality, goals, orientations for additional training and improvement of English teachers' qualifications is the most important factor promoting the creation and maintenance of English language teachers. If the institution does not have a policy, the activities will be spontaneous and often not carried out for a long time"* (Participant 5). Another highlighted the need for a practical and long-term policy, stating, *"Understanding the practicality and agreeing on a long-term policy in implementing and maintaining PLC activities: understanding the need will create motivation and self-discipline when participating in PLC activities"* (Participant 2). The significance of clear objectives and structured implementation was also noted: *"Objectives, methods, contents, and methods of organizing the implementation and evaluation of PLC activities are important to help PLC activities not be deviated, and to maximize the benefits of PLCs"* (Participant 1). However, the challenges of fostering a sharing culture in Vietnam were acknowledged: *"In Vietnam, the sharing culture is still limited, people often only share on a small scale (small group) or be asked to join the sharing"* (Participant 3).

4.2.3. Factors Affecting Professional Activities of PLC

Effective PLC activities depend on the active involvement of faculty leaders and coordinators. Allocating sufficient time for PLC activities and preparation is crucial, and coordinators must understand and effectively facilitate the content of these activities. Cooperation between leadership and core teams with community members is vital to build a supportive and collaborative environment, enhancing the overall effectiveness of PLCs. Five major themes emerged in the data: personal disposition, inclination and predisposition of the lecturers, faculty leaders and coordinators, peers experience sharing/collectivistic spirits among colleagues/ institutional support, working environment and working context, familial support

and alignment of English for economics/business purposes with institutional and learner needs.

The success of PLCs is influenced by various factors, as highlighted by the participants. One participant noted, *"Personal trends and personal change orientation; characteristics of lecturers including gender, working position, qualifications, experience"* (Participant 1). Another emphasized, *"The impact of the collective, the motivation to learn from the collective, colleagues, friends"* (Participant 2). The broader context was also considered important: *"The effects of history, context, scale, transformation, capacity enhancement, average level of knowledge, and professionalism of university lecturers at work"* (Participant 3). Additionally, familial and institutional support were highlighted: *"The impact of families, the attitudes of leaders, the collective with the learning of lecturers, policies to encourage preferential use of the institution by qualified teachers"* (Participant 4). Finally, the necessity of aligning the major with institutional and learner needs was underscored: *"The necessity of this type of major for the institution and the learners themselves; the success, growth through learning, and improving the level of those who had experiences"* (Participant 5).

4.2.4. External Factors Affecting PLC Implementation

External factors play a significant role in the environment of PLC implementation. Three major themes are revealed in the interviews: the State, MoET and institutional regulations, vision, mission, standardization, development orientation and training capacity, lack of formal policy and underdeveloped PLC. One participant noted, *"Regulations of the State, of the Ministry are the orientations for institutions to develop; Vision and orientation of the Ministry and university are orientations for faculties and units to develop PLC"* (Participant 1). Another emphasized the necessity of standardization, stating, *"Regulations on standardization of lecturers are necessary"* (Participant 4). The capacity for training and development of trainers is crucial, as highlighted by another participant: *"Training and development of trainers is a tool to build the orientation of PLC activities; Implementation capacity determines the success or failure of PLC activities; Condition of the faculty on relationship is the condition that promotes the formation and development of PLC"* (Participant 5). The development stage of PLCs is still in its infancy, as another participant noted, *"The current PLC development stage is in early stage. In terms of current policy, vision, and intentions, there are policies related to PLC development in Vietnam. However, the current PLC operations are small-scale"* (Participant 5). *"That there is no policy to promote the development of PLC in an orthodox way is a big obstacle when forming a PLC"* (Participant 3).

4.2.5. Internal Factors Affecting PLC Organization and Operation

Internal factors are equally influential in the organization and operation of PLC activities. Two major themes are identified in the interviews: lecturers' desire and willingness to participate in PD activities and self-established cultural barriers. As one participant observed, *"PLC has initially formed and developed in the teaching community in Vietnam, lecturers have the need to participate in PLC activities to develop their own careers"* (Participant 4). However, challenges exist including cultural barriers. *"The cultural factor of shyness to share is the biggest difficulty when forming a PLC"* (Participant 3).

4.2.6. Teacher Professional Development (TPD) Orientation for EET at VEUs

Acknowledging the importance of TPD is crucial for English teachers to enhance their qualifications and keep pace with economic developments. Continuous self-research, study, and practice are essential for professional growth. Institutions should encourage self-study to develop qualifications, provide additional coursework in business English and economics, and promote active participation in PLC teams. By supporting and encouraging these activities,

institutions can ensure effective PLC operations and continuous improvement, ultimately benefiting both teachers and students. Four major themes centering around the cruciality of TPD for ongoing long-term career development and professional self-improvement emerged from the analysis of the interviews with the participants: the vitality of organizing TPD activities, the necessity for self-research and self-trained practice among lecturers, the indispensability of additional ESP/economics/business teaching workshops/coursework and the importance of teamwork and self-improvement activities.

One participant emphasized, *"It is vital to have TPD activities for English teachers in order to grow their career. TPD is not only a first training activity, but also an ongoing career development activity. Additional training sessions include both on-the-job and self-training"* (Participant 3). Another participant highlighted the broader scope of TPD, stating, *"TPD is an endeavor to foster each lecturer's professional development through self-research, study, and practice in order to self-train, enhance qualifications, amass knowledge and skills, and experience to give at PLC"* (Participant 3). The indispensability of specific additional coursework was also noted: *"Additional coursework in business English, economics, economics management, classroom practice, and scientific research is indispensable"* (Participant 4). Finally, the importance of teamwork and self-improvement was underscored: *"Join the PLC team to benefit from the PLC's commitment to teamwork"* (Participant 1) and *"Encourage self-improvement activities and encourage EET members to join the PLC"* (Participant 3).

4.2.7. PLC Quality Management Related Factors

The survey findings based on the responses from the open-ended questions identified external factors affecting PLC quality management including documents, regulations, guidelines, criteria, rules, quality levels, assessment methods, and the PLC implementation proposal, deployment and implementation of PLC activities, checking, supervising, evaluation of quality management, requirements on quality improvement, and methods of quality management. It is necessary to study and apply more quality management measures in training PLCs to make quality management proactive. Documents, regulations, and instructions from the training management level on PLC serve as a focal point for the formation and development of PLCs, focusing on self-training and quality improvement. *"Because this is a very important activity, it should be structured and maintained on a regular, periodic basis, with expert advice and direction. There might be more effective assessment and evaluation activities after each quarter to raise teachers' awareness of the value of PLC."* (Participant 2).

4.2.8. Suggestions for Enhancing the Quality of PLC Operations at VEUs

While institutions offer PLC activities, they often lack synchronization in organization, implementation, management, control, quality assessment, and effectiveness evaluation. Providing specialized training programs that address the specific needs and contexts of EETs will support their development. Those factors can create either support or hindrance for the operationalization of PLC activities. To enhance PLC activities as a form of TPD for EETs at VEUs, it is proposed that *"institutions analyze and implement comprehensive quality management measures to ensure proactive PLC quality management"* (Participant 1). Developing supportive policies and systems to facilitate continuous PLC operations is also recommended. *"Encouraging self-study, additional coursework, and active participation in PLC teams are key strategies for professional growth"* (Participant 2).

5. Discussion

This study explored the factors affecting the operation of PLCs among EFL teachers at

Vietnamese economics universities (VEUs). By integrating findings from both qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys, it provides a comprehensive view of the dynamics and challenges inherent in PLCs within this specific educational context.

Internal (Teacher-Related) Factors: The analysis revealed that teacher-related factors, including their qualifications and teaching experience play a pivotal role in the effectiveness of PLCs. This aligns with Ghaith and Shaaban's (1999) assertion that less experienced teachers are often more concerned about their teaching impact and more enthusiastic about student learning. The survey data indicated significant differences in PLC ratings based on teaching experience and qualifications, suggesting that less experienced teachers place higher importance on shared and supportive leadership, as well as shared values and vision. This may be because they are still developing their professional identities and seek more collaborative and supportive environments (Vo & Mai Nguyen, 2010).

However, despite the enthusiasm of less experienced teachers, the effectiveness of PLCs also depends heavily on the involvement and commitment of more seasoned educators. This finding italicizes the need for a balanced approach that harnesses the enthusiasm of newer teachers while leveraging the experience and expertise of veteran educators to create a dynamic and effective PLC environment (Lomos, Hofman & Bosker, 2011).

Organizational Factors: Organizational support emerged as a crucial factor influencing PLC effectiveness. The study discovered that institutional policies, resource allocation, and a conducive environment are essential for the successful implementation and maintenance of PLCs. This is consistent with the literature, which emphasizes the importance of supportive conditions—both structural and relational—in fostering effective PLCs (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Dufour et al., 2005). The lack of synchronization in the organization, implementation, and management of PLC activities, as highlighted by the survey and interview findings, indicates a significant gap that needs to be addressed.

The absence of a systematic policy to encourage PLC growth and the cultural hesitation to share information were identified as major barriers. This finding echoes the concerns raised by Boone (2014) about the cultural and organizational challenges that can impede the development of collaborative learning environments. Therefore, it is imperative for VEUs to develop clear policies and frameworks that promote and support PLC activities, ensuring that they are well-integrated into the broader organizational structure.

Sociocultural and Contextual Factors: The study foregrounds the significant impact of sociocultural factors on PLC operations. Teachers' perceptions of the value of PLCs, their current teaching skills and experiences, and the professional characteristics of EFL teachers were found to influence PLC performance. This aligns with the sociocultural theory which posits that learning is a socially situated activity (Wenger, 1998). The findings suggest that less experienced teachers may be more critical of the current state of PLCs due to their higher expectations for collaborative and supportive environments. This discrepancy in expectations can create tensions within PLCs, underscoring the need for tailored professional development programs that address the specific needs of different teacher groups (Yan & Yang, 2019).

Additionally, the study discerned that external factors such as state and ministry regulations, institutional policies and leadership significantly influence the PLC environment. This is consistent with the organizational learning theory, which emphasizes the role of external and internal factors in shaping organizational practices (Boone, 2014). The need for a supportive regulatory and policy framework to foster the development of PLCs is evident from the findings.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study have several practical implications for enhancing the operation of PLCs among EFL teachers at VEUs. First, there is a clear need for structured models and policies that support the development and sustainability of PLCs. Educational leaders and policymakers should focus on creating an environment that encourages collaboration, continuous learning, and shared leadership (Mitchell & Sackney, 2011). Second, professional development programs should be tailored to address the diverse needs of teachers at different stages of their careers. For instance, less experienced teachers may benefit from more structured and supportive environments, while experienced teachers may require opportunities for advanced professional development and leadership roles within PLCs (Hord, 1997). Third, it is essential to address the cultural barriers that hinder effective collaboration within PLCs. This can be achieved by promoting a culture of openness and trust, where teachers feel comfortable sharing their experiences and learning from each other. Institutions should also provide the necessary resources and support to facilitate regular and meaningful PLC activities (Timperley et al., 2009). Finally, the study features the importance of continuous quality management and evaluation of PLC activities. Institutions should implement robust mechanisms for assessing the effectiveness of PLCs and making necessary adjustments to enhance their impact. This includes regular feedback from teachers, continuous monitoring of PLC activities, and aligning PLC goals with the broader institutional objectives (Hipp & Huffman, 2003).

In a nutshell, the study accentuated the complex interplay of various factors affecting the operation of PLCs among EFL teachers at VEUs. Teacher-related factors, organizational support, sociocultural context, and institutional policies all play significant roles in shaping the effectiveness of PLCs. By addressing these factors through targeted policies, professional development programs, and a supportive institutional framework, VEUs can enhance the operation of PLCs and ultimately improve the quality of education for their students. The findings contribute to the existing literature on PLCs and provide practical insights for educational leaders and policymakers aiming to foster collaborative and effective professional learning environments in higher education institutions. Further research in this topic should have more interviewed participants for more insightful qualitative findings focusing on the cultural factors affecting the operations of PLCs in Vietnamese contexts.

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