



Understanding research engagement of Thai teacher educators: A case study of a National Research University

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Abstract

Research of university teachers, including teacher educators, has received growing expectations worldwide over the previous three decades. Despite the wealth of literature regarding the research activities of mainstream university teachers, an in-depth understanding of teacher educators' research activities from policy to implementation is lacking in the literature. This qualitative case study explores how research of teacher educators in an autonomous national research university in Thailand is promoted and how they practice. Triangulated data were gained from semi-structured interviews with four university executives and 12 teacher educators, related documents, and the teacher educators' published research articles. The integrated approach of deductive and inductive content analysis reveals two main gaps: one between the policy expectation and support provided, and another between the policy expectation and teacher educators' real practice. Despite the policy expectations of interdisciplinary research, teacher educators received relatively less support for expanding research networks, and the largest portion of their research was related to the field of education. They produced research as educational researchers and teacher education scholars. Apart from a mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, social belongingness within research teams was observed as a reason for their research engagement. Obstacles were limited time, complicated procedures for the research ethics approval, and difficulties derived from the policy stress on interdisciplinary research. The study suggests critically analyzing the issues of over-emphasis on interdisciplinary research and international publications, and reconsidering "what for?" of teacher educators' research.

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Introduction

A great emphasis on research functions has been implemented in universities worldwide over the previous three decades (Huang et al., 2022). This emphasis becomes more prominent when many countries have aimed at joining global competitiveness for which neoliberal policies are employed in the universities' academia (Berg & Seeber, 2016). Aligned with this international trend, the Thai government has encouraged Thai universities to develop world-class, research-intensive universities. Some prominent national initiatives include the increased government budget for the research and development sector and the National Research Universities Project (2009), though Thailand is still facing challenges in developing a high status of its universities internationally (Lao, 2015). Accordingly, research of Thai university academics has received growing expectations and research is counted as one of the four major responsibilities of all the university academic staff in Thailand. Like many other countries, teacher education in Thailand is situated in universities and, accordingly, is guided by the higher education authorities. Thus, there is no exception for teacher educators in terms of the expectations of their research activities.

In a general sense, teacher educators are professionals who prepare intending teachers and/or provide professional development programs for serving teachers (European Commission, 2013). Acknowledging their significant role in the educational development of countries, the necessity to understand the professional responsibilities of teacher educators, especially how they are supported and how they practice, has been underscored by scholars. However, the research regarding this professional group is not yet mature, though it has increased recently (Lunenberget al., 2014). Particularly in Thailand, little attention was paid to the research of teacher educators, although a considerable number of studies have been conducted regarding the overall governance of research universities and faculty members of higher education institutions (HEIs). The present study explored how teacher educators in an autonomous national research university are supported and practice their professional responsibilities, focusing on research engagement. This will enrich our understanding of the professional group of teacher educators from an Asian country like Thailand, where teacher educators are still under-researched.

The investigated university was established in the 1940s, the early years of higher education development in Thailand. It became an autonomous university in 1998 and was regarded as a national research university in 2011; since then, it has been expected to raise the status of the university in global rankings (Rungfamai, 2011). As of 2022, it stands among the top five universities at the national level according to the results of QS university ranking (2022). The rationale for selecting this university is in line with the research purpose to understand the policy context (how it is expected and supported) and individual-level practices of teacher educators regarding their research engagement activities.

In the current study, teacher educators are the academic staff in the Faculty of Education in the investigated university. Research engagement encompasses both research-consuming activities (e.g., reading research-related materials and participating in conferences) and research-producing activities (e.g., undertaking research individually and/or collaboratively, making presentations at conferences, and producing research publications) (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2012). Following Pollard's (2006) categorization of research, this study considers research related to educational policies and practices as "educational research," studies contributing to the academic expertise of teacher educators concerning their respective subjects as "academic research," and studies done to improve their teaching practices as "practitioner research."

Literature Review

Promoting Research in National Research Universities Worldwide and in Thailand

In national research universities that intend to develop a country's competitiveness in the global knowledge economy, a greater emphasis is placed on international publications in indexed journals (Wang et al., 2011), despite the problematic nature of English language bias for publishing in international journals (De Rond & Miller, 2005). Additionally, since those research universities play a leading role in enhancing the nation's economic and social development, applied research that can contribute to national-level development is also promoted (Huang et al., 2022). University academics' research activities are supported by providing research funding, technical support, and arranging opportunities such as workshops and conferences

(Griffiths et al., 2010). Many research grants cover not only for conducting research but for disseminating research-based knowledge through publications and conferences (Panova & Yudkevich, 2022).

In the academia of universities, there has been an increased push to conduct interdisciplinary research highlighting the necessity and its benefits in addressing complex societal issues (van Eeden, 2011). Consequently, the trend of research collaboration and co-authoring from diverse academic fields is on the rise currently. However, scholars discussed its challenging nature in terms of organizing experts from diverse fields (Jacob, 2015), a tendency of a disciplinary identity loss due to the conflicting interests and needs of different disciplines (Holmwood, 2010), and research ethics issues such as ghost or gift authorships and plagiarism (Panova & Yudkevich, 2022). Such issues concern what Towers and Maguire (2023) noted as policy problems and a similar context applies to Thailand, where the gap between policy and practice has already taken place (Uerpaiojkit, 2016).

Several scholars tried to explain the research of faculty members in Thai universities. Rungfamai (2011) investigated the research universities' governance in Thailand and revealed the red-tape procedures in the bureaucratic system as an obstacle that hampers the research performance of academics. The author also underlined the importance of the research environment as an encouraging factor for the quality and sustainability of university academic staff's and students' research (Rungfamai, 2011). In Thailand's public universities, although faculty members' research publications could be enhanced through the university support systems (Jernsittiparsert et al., 2016), issues of the modest research competency and confidence of university staff, inadequate resources for research in terms of time and support provided remained challenging (Jernsittiparsert et al., 2016).

Teacher Educators' Research Activities

Findings from studies pertaining to research engagement activities emphasized that teacher educators both consume and produce research. They mostly consume research-driven knowledge to update their content knowledge, polish their expertise in teaching practices, and reference it in their own research. In most cases, they refer to online sources for research-related materials; yet a few mentioned their library use (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2012). Further, they may also take part in conferences and/or research-related workshops

to pursue research knowledge (Kosnik et al., 2015). Regarding research-producing activities, Gemmell et al. (2010) highlighted that teacher educators preferred to undertake practitioner research because they didn't have to compromise their researcher identity with their teacher identity. Further, Cochran-Smith et al. (2020) observed that most of the research that teacher educators produce is small-scale qualitative studies rather than quantitative studies with large samples. However, despite the popularity of practitioner research for teacher educators' ongoing progress, they are likely to face difficulty in obtaining research funds (Smith, 2022). Additionally, teacher educators also disseminate their scholarship from research findings to the public through conference presentations and publications (Cochran-Smith, 2005).

Existing literature also discusses contributing and challenging factors to the research activities of teacher educators. Both intrinsic motivations and extrinsic motivations were reported as contributing factors. The former includes teacher educators' personal preferences for research and their strong belief in research as a way of solving problems in teaching, their professional development, and their contribution to educational institutions (Kosnik et al., 2015; Lunenberg et al., 2014). The latter addresses concerns with fulfilling their institutional requirement for research, monetary incentives like salary and bonuses, and rewards such as promotional opportunities and enhanced facilities (Alhija & Majdob, 2017; Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2012; Kosnik et al., 2015). Regarding the obstacles, significant challenges were insufficient research capacity, self-confidence of teacher educators, time, workload problems (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2012; Gemmell et al., 2010), inadequate financial and technical support, and underdeveloped organization and research culture (Alhija & Majdob, 2017). Further, teacher educators' work institutions matter in their professional identity development whether the 'researcher' or 'teacher' identity is more prominent. According to the findings by Liang et al. (2023), in research-intensive universities, the 'researcher' identity is predominant, while the identity of the teaching aspect is more apparent in provincial normal universities.

Review of the above literature, both in international contexts and in Thailand, indicates three important research gaps. First, from the previous studies, we have learned the research practices of teacher educators and the role of organizational context as an important shaping factor for the research activities of teacher educators. However, very few research studies touched upon both

the two levels of policy and implementation regarding teacher educators' research practices. Second, some former studies were conducted regarding the overall university governance and Thai university academic staff's research activities. Yet, none of them specifically focused on teacher educators even though they are worth being studied. Third, all the previous studies in Thai university research paid attention mainly to the research productivity measured only by research publications rather than including research-consuming activities, such as how they pursue research-driven knowledge. To address those gaps, the current study explores the overall research engagement, covering both research-consuming and producing activities of teacher educators, specifically how they are expected and supported, and how they practice. This study was guided by the following research questions:

What are the university executives' expectations in terms of teacher educators' research engagement?

What kinds of support are available for teacher educators' research engagement?

How and why do teacher educators practice research engagement activities?

What obstacles do they face in their research engagement?

Research Methods

In this qualitative case study, the study participants were selected using the intensity sampling method to identify information-rich cases or informants to develop an in-depth understanding of the investigated phenomenon (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Accordingly, the researcher approached prominent teacher educators who have research experience and publications both in Thai and international journals. Based on the availability of targeted participants during the researcher's data collection visit to Thailand in December 2022, 12 teacher educators were interviewed. Moreover, to ensure diverse perspectives from different levels, the university executives ($n = 4$), including the director of the Research Institute, dean, associate dean (Administration), and associate dean (Research) in the Faculty of Education were also interviewed.

The instruments were two sets of semi-structured interview guides (one for the university executives and another for teacher educators) that the author built based on the literature review. There are seven questions under two main components (expectations and support) in the interview guide for university executives.

The interview guide for teacher educators is composed of 15 questions under four main components (research-consuming activities, research-producing activities, motivations, and obstacles for research engagement). Interview guides were prepared in both English and Thai languages, and the interviewees had the option to speak either in Thai or in English during the interview. Out of the 16 participants, 12 spoke in English, while two chose to speak in Thai. A native Thai teacher educator helped the researcher as an interpreter. Back translation was done by a native Thai PhD student who is competent both in Thai and English. Interviews lasted for (45–60 minutes) for each interviewee. All the participants (female = 11; male = 5) held doctoral degrees and their professional ranks included lecturers, assistant professors, and associate professors. Their work experience as teacher educators ranged from 5–19 years, and they were 39–55 years old.

Furthermore, related policy documents were collected from the university's official website. The collected documents included "Invitations to Participate in the Preparation of Manuscripts for International Publications," "Human Research Ethics Workshops," "Announcements of Research Grants," and "Statistics of the Database Access." Additionally, research articles authored by teacher educators were analyzed to complement the understanding of their research practices. Teacher educators' published articles that were fully accessible on Google Scholar, Research Gate, and THAIJO were searched, and 81 articles in total were collected. The analysis paid special attention to the research themes, types of research, study participants, research methods used, the language published, and authorship. Hence, the quality and triangulation of data in this study were sought by uncovering perspectives from more than one level and applying more than one data collection method.

Guided by the research purpose and research questions, collected data were analyzed using the integrative approach to qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this qualitative study, deductive content analysis was employed to support the interpretation phase of inductive data analysis to generate the best content-analytic studies. The application of both deductive and inductive analysis enables the researcher to uncover the latent meaning of the text data by interpreting its content while simultaneously analyzing it (Weber, 1990). Regarding the research ethics considerations, the whole research process got an approval by the Ethic Review Board at the researcher's institution (HR-ES-000386).

Results

Expectations: Interdisciplinary Research, Contributions to the National Level, and International Publications

The results showed that teacher educators were expected to conduct research with a wide scope that can contribute to solutions for national-level issues. Instead of research that addresses only a specific area, they were more encouraged to undertake interdisciplinary research, collaborating with researchers from diverse fields. The university executives encouraged not only research collaborations within the country but also internationally. In terms of research publication, international publications were preferable so that teacher educators could publicize their research findings to a wider level and could gain more citations. However, while more emphasis was placed on international publications and research collaborations with diverse fields, expectations of conference attendance or presentation were less spelled. According to the university executives, since the quality assurance policy of the university focused on the publications but not on the conference presentations, there was no requirement for conference presentations; hence, it was up to the faculty members. Such expectations can be witnessed in the sample interview quotes in Table 1.

Support Provided: Both Tangible and Intangible Support

The data from the interviews with the university executives and teacher educators, as well as the relevant documents, indicate that a variety of research opportunities and support were available for teacher educators in the studied university. They were provided with tangible

support, such as research funds, rewards, and material resources (online databases, papers, computers, and printers) and with intangible support, such as mentoring by senior researchers and an encouraging environment. Table 2 presents a summary of the dataset that evidenced the available support and opportunities for the research of teacher educators.

Teacher Educators' Research Activities

Research consuming: As teacher education practitioners and university academics

The results illustrated that respondents engaged with research mainly as teacher education practitioners and university academics. As teacher education practitioners, they consumed research to reinforce their teaching practices. 11 out of 12 interviewed teacher educators regularly read research-related materials such as articles and textbooks about research methodology to strengthen their teaching. For example, TE11 responded, "I read research-related materials on a regular basis for use in preparation for teaching and update for the new knowledge."

As for the materials, they read both Thai and English articles. All of them accessed articles, books, or other research-related materials online using the online databases that the university provided. This result was validated by the documentary data issued by the university library. From January to December 2022 (when the researcher conducted the data collection), 986,290 articles were downloaded by the Faculty of Education from six main online databases such as Science Direct e-journal, Scopus, Sage journals, Springer Link e-journal, Taylor & Francis Online e-journal, and Wiley online library e-journal.

Table 1 Analysis of the expectations of teacher educators' research

Expectations	Sample Interview Excerpts
Interdisciplinary research and contributions to the national level	<p>"As I said before, in our expectation for the educator research, we don't want only the narrow scope, only the specific class, only the specific area; we like to expand the research problem as a national problem. So, the solution can be used as you know, at the national level." (Director)</p> <p>"I expect the collaboration between the faculty staff like integration or across the border or interdisciplinary... You know, when we want to solve a specific problem, it does not mean to use just one area of knowledge, it should be integrated with a lot of areas of knowledge to solve some problems. So, we should do research collaboratively among a lot of disciplines..." (Dean)</p>
International publications	<p>"Because now, we more focus on international publications, so we would like to have the English papers. If possible, we encourage more international publications because it has wider audience. And, you can have more citations. Citation is also the key... We give a smaller credit for Thai papers, for example, TCI [Thai Citation Index]." (Director)</p> <p>"It is actually because of the university's policy as well. You know, because based on the quality assurance, they focus more on publications, but not on presentations or attendance at conferences." (Associate Dean1)</p>

Source: Created by the researcher based on the interview data.

Table 2 Analysis of support provided for teacher educators' research

Support provided	Data from Documents	Sample Interview Excerpts
Funds	- Announcements of research grants	"To develop the potentials of faculty staff, we provide the funds for research..." (Dean)
Rewards	- Announcements of awardee professors	"We also provide rewards for our faculty members who can publish in international publications." (Associate Dean2)
Material resources	- Online databases	"We can also ask the librarian to buy this book and they order for us." (TE6)
Technical support	- Announcement of workshops for preparing research proposals - Announcement of workshops for writing manuscript for international publications - Announcement of workshops for Human Research Ethics	"There are many workshops and seminars related to the university teachers' research. So, they, I mean university teachers, can do more exercises and gain more. For example, the title of the seminar 'How to write the paper,' 'How to write the research proposal' something like this. That is regular." (Director) "Here, even you can submit in Thai to the committee to see the quality of your research. If you pass the quality, then they transfer it to the translator." (Director) "We also provide them with ecology system. We have the Research Center, and staff to help our faculty. We have a lot of workshops for our staff, we also have Research Clinic and Research Groups and Research Center to provide a lot of things... And also, we provide some mentors and editors to edit for the faculty members for international publications." (Dean)
Encouraging environment		"...we provide the mentors for the new researchers like the beginners... We also established the research groups...there are 9 research groups based on the research interest and based on our Faculty of Education's policy... It depends on the faculty members who are interested in any group, they can join..." (Associate Dean2) "...not just in terms of money, but they don't reject, or they never say, 'No, you cannot do this or that'... they always support and ask the officers and staff to help us. So, everyone supports the research activities. We have a very good environment. The environment is also very important. And also, we value research as a good thing. The common value on research is also in our atmosphere and our culture... So, they encourage me to do more research with my happiness." (TE5)

Source: Created by the researcher based on the data from relevant documents and interview

Moreover, as university academics, they made academic contributions. They had to read the research of graduate students from other universities and serve as peer reviewers for journal articles. As experts in their respective fields, they also performed as conference organizers and were invited as keynote speakers at conferences held by other universities. For instance, TE3 and TE7 shared,

"For peer review, many journals ask me to do peer review and I have to read a lot of articles from both international and Thai journals. And also, sometimes, I am invited as an external expert to thesis defense of graduate students from other universities."

(TE3).

"I am also the one who organizes those conferences, webinars and workshops most of the time. And also, I am invited as a guest speaker to other university conferences."

(TE7).

However, many of the participating teacher educators (8 out of 12) did not target conference attendance or presentation, though all the respondents had experience attending both Thai and international conferences.

Research producing: As educational researchers and teacher education scholars

The analysis of teacher educators' research articles demonstrates that they undertook research as educational researchers and teacher education scholars. The largest portion of their research studies (93%) was related to education, while only 7 percent were about other areas or had an interdisciplinary focus. As educational researchers, many (53%) of their research foci were set on the policy and practices of teaching and learning in education, including basic education, teacher education, and higher education in Thailand. Another big area of their research (39%) was concerned with their teaching subject; as scholars in teacher education, they researched topics related to their teaching subject. Practitioner research conducted to improve their classroom practices took only a minimal portion (8%).

The scope of teacher educators' research included both large- (45%) and small-scale research (55%). Regarding research methods and instruments, the use of a single method, either quantitative or qualitative, was 58 percent, and the application of multi-method was 42 percent. They employed a variety of methods, including questionnaires, interviews, observations, and focus group discussions. For example, in TE12's article 3, different methods, such as questionnaires, workshops, and focus group discussions, were employed. A detailed analysis of teacher educators' research works is provided in Table 3.

All the interviewed teacher educators had done both individual and collaborative research. According to their explanation, they did individual research in their beginning years as teacher educators because they didn't have relationships or contacts with other researchers within their field or other disciplines. After three to five years of conducting research individually, they knew and were also known more by other researchers, and consequently, their research networks broadened; hence, they engaged more in collaborative research in later years. For instance, TE4 explained, "In the past, a lot of individual research...like as a new researcher, you start from individually like that. Now, we have a lot of contacts and connections, especially with the MOE, so now, this year, I have three projects."

As for research publications, all the respondents had both Thai and international publications. Most of them published in Thai journals in their earlier years, though they currently targeted international publications, especially in Scopus Q1 or Q2 level journals. This can be observed in the following interview quote by TE2, "Recently I only publish in international journals, though I used to publish in Thai journals in the past, about 15–20 publications—5–7 are national in the past 5–10 years."

Reasons for research engagement

The study found that teacher educators had combined motivations to engage in research. For 10 out of 12 participants, their motivations were mixed with intrinsic motivation, such as their personal preference, and extrinsic motivation, such as university requirements to secure their position, get promotions, and obtain research funds.

However, some respondents (TE 6 and 8) explicitly shared that they preferred teaching to research, yet they experienced doing more than 10 research projects. For those teacher educators, it appears that they did research more for social reasons. When they belonged to a group, they perceived that they had a certain responsibility that motivated them to undertake research. They also explained that they joined research collaborations to maintain communication with their friends or colleagues rather than to gain other incentives such as promotions or rewards; this can be observed in the interview excerpts provided in Table 4.

Table 3 Analysis of teacher educators' research works

Teacher Educators' Research			Frequency (%)
Study on	Education	Basic education (<i>n</i> = 29)	75 (93%)
		Teacher education (<i>n</i> = 28)	
		Higher education (<i>n</i> = 14)	
		Combined areas in education (<i>n</i> = 4)	
	Interdisciplinary	Interdisciplinary	6 (7%)
Types of research	Educational research		40 (53%)
	Academic research		29 (39%)
	Practitioner research		6 (8%)
Methods employed	Studies with only one method		47 (58%)
	Studies with multi- or mixed-method		34 (42%)
Authorship	Single authorship		17 (21%)
	Co-authorship		64 (79%)
Published language	English		47 (58%)
	Thai		34 (42%)

Source: Created by the researcher based on the data (research articles authored by teacher educators)

Table 4 Analysis of motivations for teacher educators' research engagement

Reasons for Research Engagement	Sample Interview Excerpts
Combined motivations	<p>"I like it. My personal interest and also, I like to be an associate professor like for professional position." (TE9)</p> <p>"The first one is because I am interested in the topic, I do the research. The second one is for publication, because of the requirement of publication. Because when you teach in Thailand, you cannot do only teaching, you have to publish articles." (TE10)</p>
Social belongingness within research teams	<p>"Sometimes, my friend is the head of the project, and she invites me to join. So, ok for me and let's do it together and we can go together outside the city like that. Not for big incentives or reward for doing research." (TE6)</p> <p>"...But, for me, I prefer teaching more than research... For some research, I work with my classmate... he is eager to do research. Sometimes, he told me like 'I have a research with my group and we want your contribution.' So, of course, why not? And so, we work together... Actually, the faculty encourages us to do research and try to find research funds. Even like I told them, I don't have time to do research or find the funding, and so, they told me 'Ok...we have set the research group.' Then, they drive us to do it because you know, as we work as a group, it can force us to do something. And, in that group, when someone initiates like 'should we do it together?', then we say, 'why not?' and do it together." (TE8)</p>

Source: Created by the researcher based on the interview data

Obstacles

The identified obstacles from the data were time, complicated procedures from the IRB (Institutional Review Board), and difficulties stemming from the policy focus on interdisciplinary research (difficulty in forming research teams, communication issues in teamwork, and challenges regarding how to fit the big interdisciplinary research in the field of teacher education). All the respondents pointed out time as one of their main obstacles because of their tight schedules overloaded with teaching hours and other responsibilities as university faculty members. This result was triangulated with their work hours per week and the interview data with the university executives. Their work hours per week ranged from 35–45, and they had to teach even on weekends. Additionally, some respondents (TE2, 7, and 10) complained about the complicated and long procedures required to get approval from the IRB, which negatively impacted the time management of their research.

Another challenge was related to the bigger scope or interdisciplinary research, which was highly encouraged by the policy. However, a primary necessity to be able to do these interdisciplinary research projects was to

have broader networks of researchers; many participants (7 out of 12) expressed this necessity. They commented that even though they had been encouraged to conduct collaborative and interdisciplinary research, they lacked a clear strategy for those collaborations; instead, they had to rely solely on their social networks or personal connections. Another problem was derived from the nature of collaborative teamwork, which required more time to discuss the research from different perspectives. Meanwhile, when the time was limited, and a consensus could not be reached among team members regarding the results or conclusion of the research, this negatively impacted their future collaborations. This challenge was more apparent when the co-researchers were not familiar with each other.

Moreover, there were also some respondents (5 out of 12) who felt that research in teacher education was undervalued since teacher educators were pressured to conduct this kind of interdisciplinary research. They called for the policymakers' acknowledgement of the importance of teacher education. They also expressed their challenges in fitting interdisciplinary research within the field of teacher education and their specific areas of focus. Table 5 presents the analysis of obstacles based on the interview data.

Table 5 Analysis of the obstacles

Obstacles		Sample Interview Excerpts
Time difficulty		“The most important and difficult challenge is the faculty members’ time because we have a large work load...we have so many things to do. Like us, we work like 7 days a week. We work so hard...like today is Saturday, but we have to work... For the other support, we have provided them all, we provide funds, provide ecosystem, we provide everything, but when they don’t have time, it is quite hard.” (Dean)
Complicated procedure in IRB		“We have IRB to make sure your research is appropriate and ethical for human participants. But, I would say that it is not much help since it takes so much time, too many documents... and is a very complex process.” (TE2)
Difficulties derived from the policy focus on interdisciplinary research	Difficulty to form research teams	“Sometimes, it is tough... We should have integration like education with engineering or interdisciplinary or things like that. So, that is also a challenge. And, there are also challenges in organizing research teams... Right now, in Thailand, we are encouraged to do more collaborative research; however, they don’t have any clear ways that support our collaboration. We just have to search by ourselves personally, not at the policy level...” (TE5)
	Communication issues in teamwork	“I think my challenge is collaborative research. It happens in collaborative research because we have never known another researcher. Like, I am very interested to do it...but, maybe, he is not very interested ...it may impact on their collaboration. You know, the biggest challenge is about people if you do the collaborative research.” (TE9)
	Fitting the interdisciplinary research in the field of teacher education	“As my research is broad, [so] another challenge is how to make it...like it is big and has a broad range of data not only about teacher education but also about tourism or environment...So, I’ve to fit the broad scope of research in the field of teacher education. That’s also my challenge.” (TE2) “Especially in terms of teacher education, I want people and the policymakers to understand us as teacher educators or teacher education programs. Some people may think that teacher education programs do not have a very big impact, doing very tiny things. They may see the interdisciplinary or the big projects are better. If they understand what we do, why we do so, and we educate people to be like human power or we educate them to be a change agent... if they understand that, I mean the university, or the government, they value and support much on teacher education, and I will be very happy. Ok, they value the research, but in our area, if they value it, we can do more in teacher education than what we have now.” (TE5)

Source: Created by the researcher based on the interview data

Discussion and Conclusion

Teacher educators in the present study were encouraged to undertake interdisciplinary research contributing to solutions for national-level issues. International publications in indexed journals were strongly encouraged and relevant support was offered accordingly. Both tangible and intangible resources were available in the investigated university. These kinds of expectations and support provided are consistent with the ways of enhancing research in national research universities in other countries such as China (Wang et al., 2011) and Japan (Huang, et al., 2022). However, those kinds of neoliberal measures for research outputs and publications have a tendency to undermine the primary value of research that creates and disseminates

knowledge in a particular field (Berg & Seeber, 2016). The current study reveals a gap between the policy expectation and the support provided; despite the expectation of interdisciplinary collaborative research, teacher educators received relatively less support for expanding research networks. University executives and teacher educators paid relatively less attention to conference attendance and presentation, which are crucial to broaden the latter’s social networks; this raises a concern regarding more collaborative interdisciplinary research, which is the policy intention.

The study also reveals another gap between the policy expectation and implementation, reflecting a policy-practice gap in Thailand (Uerpaiojkit, 2016); despite the high expectation of interdisciplinary research, most of the participants’ research was situated in the field

of education. It can be inferred that teacher educators are still maintaining their professional identity as education and teacher education scholars although they are working in a national research university context where interdisciplinary research is more encouraged. It appears that teacher educators in this study are trying to align what they research with what they do in educating teachers as suggested by Liang et al. (2023). Moreover, while practitioner research was noted as a main type of teacher educators' research (Gemmell et al., 2010), this study found teacher educators as educational researchers and academic researchers rather than as practitioner researchers. Perhaps, this is because they were working at a leading national research university where research productivity and attaining external research funds are highly encouraged, and it is challenging to secure research funds for practitioner research (Smith, 2022). Furthermore, different from Cochran-Smith et al.'s (2020) claim that teacher educators mostly do small-scale qualitative studies, the study found a balance between the small-scale and large-scale studies, and the application of a variety of methods in their research illustrates the development of teacher educator research methods in a national research university context. Teacher educators' increasing research collaborations both nationally and internationally demonstrate the growth of their social capital along with their career trajectory; however, they called for more support to expand their research networks.

A mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for their research engagement was reported in the present study. This result validates the findings of previous studies (e.g., Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2012; Kosnik et al., 2015; Lunenberg et al., 2014). In addition to that, in this study, social belongingness within research teams was shown as a reason for their research engagement. This may be explained by the collective culture of Thailand, where individuals enjoy doing and learning together (Crocco, 2018), and this culture consolidates Thai teacher educators' participation in collaborative research projects. It also appears that the notion of being involved in research teams as a manifestation of research capacity building (Huang, 2014) would be even more meaningful in Thailand with such a sociocultural context.

Regarding the obstacles, time difficulty and complicated bureaucratic procedures for the research ethics approval were mainly illustrated. This result supports the findings of former researcher, Rungfamai (2011). Additionally, similar to Jacob's (2015) findings, the present study revealed another obstacle—difficulties

derived from the policy stress on interdisciplinary research. Further, teacher educators participated in this study expressed their comments about the under-valued teacher education as a discipline, reflecting a global issue of the marginalization of teacher education (Aydarova & Berliner, 2018). This issue would be related to the over-emphasis on interdisciplinary research that could lead to the disciplinary identity loss of a particular discipline (Holmwood, 2010). This also indicates an unintended outcome of policy measures in teacher education (Towers & Maguire, 2023).

Based on the above findings, the study provides the following recommendations for policy and practice. First, the issues of over-emphasis on interdisciplinary research should be critically analyzed. On the one hand, it is beneficial to address complicated issues and contribute to national-level development. On the other hand, the development of teacher education, a crucial discipline for the educational development of a nation, though being sidelined in policy deliberations (Aydarova & Berliner, 2018), should not be neglected. Importantly, answering the question, "what for?" of teacher educator research is needed for consideration at the administration level. Further, despite the emerging trends globally, interdisciplinary and collaborative research raises research ethics-related issues, especially in contexts where university academia is pressured for publications (De Rond & Miller, 2005). Such problematic issues should be seriously analyzed in order to take preventative actions. Second, as voiced by teacher educators in this study, formal support at the policy level for collaborative research networks is strongly recommended. Specifically, it is necessary to support the process of how to build and broaden research networks instead of solely emphasizing research outputs or publications. Third, procedures for getting IRB approval should also be in accordance with the conducive system for university faculty members' research. Those recommendations would be applicable not only in the studied university context but also in other countries and universities where the research performance of teacher educators is aimed to be fostered.

This study provided a complete understanding from policy to practice of teacher educators, paying special attention to how they are supported and how they perform their research activities. This enriches our understanding of the under-researched professional group of teacher educators, especially from an Asian country context. Although this study offered contributions both academically and in practice, it has a few limitations. As a qualitative study, it could not provide generalizable

results. This study focused only on the context of a Thai national research university and could not include other universities, such as Rajabhat Universities. Therefore, future studies using quantitative or mixed-method approaches with a larger sample size of universities and participants are recommended. Additionally, as demonstrated by teacher educators in this study, future studies on teacher educators' research collaboration, their social capital, and challenges would also be interesting.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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