Achievements and Lessons Learned from Vietnam's Higher Education Quality Assurance System after a Decade of Establishment

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Abstract

Higher education quality assurance and accreditation were officially implemented in Vietnam over twelve years ago. From a totally centralized model, Vietnam's accreditation system has been becoming more independent, especially with the establishment of accrediting agencies. The first accreditation certificates were also awarded to universities that met quality standards and criteria. This paper investigates the development of Vietnam's higher education quality assurance and accreditation for the last decade since the national quality assurance organization was established. The study first synthesizes the results achieved within this system, both in policy and practice, leadership and management. It also discusses human resources development for quality assurance and accreditation in the national context. Next, the paper highlights the self-evaluation and external evaluation activities, two most important steps of the accreditation process. In addition, building a quality culture within higher education institutions is also paid attention to. Finally, lessons from the establishment and development of Vietnam's accreditation are drawn. This study looks at an overall picture of Vietnam's higher education quality assurance system since its establishment with a focus on policy, practice, leadership and management. It also hopes to contribute to the literature related to accreditation of Vietnam's higher education.

Keywords: Quality assurance, Accreditation, Higher education, Policy, Leadership, Management, Achievements, Lessons learned

1. Introduction

Quality assurance and accreditation in higher education has received a great concern from different stakeholders during the last few decades. The beginning of the 21st century has witnessed the establishment of a number of quality assurance mechanisms all over the world, particularly in Asia-Pacific Region (Hou et al., 2015). Different higher education systems follow different approaches for quality assurance. However, they normally implement one or more of the basic approaches including accreditation, assessment and audit (DEEWR, 2008; SEMEO RIHED, 2012). The main purpose of these mechanisms is for control, accountability or enhancement of higher education institutions or programs (Beerkens, 2016).

With over four hundred higher education institutions and more than two million students, Vietnam has employed different ways to assure the education quality. Its higher education, therefore, is not an outsider in the global and regional trends regarding quality assurance. Accreditation has been compulsorily implemented for all higher education institutions and programs in Vietnam since 2005 under the Education Law (Nguyen, 2014; Nguyen, Oliver & Priddy, 2009). In spite of the fact that there have been several arguments about the independence and effectiveness of this approach in Vietnam's context (Dao, 2015; Madden, 2014), accreditation of tertiary education in this country has achieved certain results (Nguyen, 2014). This paper discusses the achievements of Vietnam's higher education quality assurance after over one decade of development through a desk-top research study. Lessons learned are for future policy-making, leadership and management.

2. Development of Vietnam's Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation System

The model for Vietnam's higher education quality assurance and accreditation has taken advantage of those implemented in countries in Asia-Pacific Region (Asia-Pacific Quality Network - APQN Chiba Principles), Southeast Asia (ASEAN University Network – AUN), and Europe (through Bologna Process). Vietnam's quality assurance model consists of three components: internal quality assurance, external quality assurance and accrediting agencies (Kristoffersen, 2010). With future directions for the development of the quality assurance system including these components above, the Government has promulgated the core legal frameworks for the operation of this system. The regulations for accreditation and quality culture development have also been seen in legal documents.

Among the legal documents, the Education Law and Higher Education Law, the highest level of the legal framework, regulate the state management in quality assurance, including the promulgation of evaluation standards, procedures and cycles of accreditation, establishment and operation of accrediting agencies. At the same time, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) is assigned by the Government to be in charge of managing and supervising accreditation activities (National Assembly, 2005, 2012). Moreover, the General Department of Education Testing and Accreditation (GDETA), a unit of MOET, is responsible for guiding the individuals, institutions and organizations to implement quality assurance programs nationwide. During the last decade, GDETA as an external quality assurance agency, together with other organizations, has supported to develop internal quality assurance mechanism within higher education institutions, step-by-step creating institutional quality cultures to enhance the quality of education (Niedermeier & Pohlenz, 2016).

In terms of accrediting agencies, at present, Vietnam has four accrediting centers. They are Center for Education Accreditation - Vietnam National University, Hanoi (VNU-CEA), Center for Education Accreditation - Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM CEA), Center for Education Accreditation - Da Nang University (DNU-CEA), and Center for Education Accreditation of the Association of Vietnam Universities and Colleges (CEA-AVU&C). These accrediting agencies, which were established by the Minister of MOET, are authorized to conduct accreditation for higher education and professional secondary institutions and programs (Tuyen giao, 2015). In order to accredit over seven hundred institutions, colleges, technical and vocational schools and thousands of programs, these accrediting agencies need to be provided with adequate human and financial resources. Also, by law, more accrediting agencies will be established to undertake the external evaluation and accreditation exercise (MOET, 2012b).

Regarding the internal quality assurance, according to MOET, almost higher education institutions have established an internal quality assurance unit. Among them, several universities had their internal quality assurance units at the quite early time. For example, the Institute for Education Quality Assurance was established in Vietnam National University, Hanoi in 1995; the Center for Educational Testing and Quality Assessment was established in Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City in 1999; Da Nang University, Hue University, Thai Nguyen University, Can Tho University and Vinh University established their quality assurance unit in 2005. Besides, some ministries such as Ministry of Health, Ministry of National Defense, and Ministry of Public Security also established a unit specializing in quality assurance (Ta, 2016).

These units have carried out a number of quality assurance activities within the institutions According to a survey conducted with 156 quality assurance units in 2012 by the Higher Education Project No.2 (HEP2), several activities undertaken by quality assurance units include: developing guidelines for internal quality assurance; building and managing the testing item bank center; collaborating to organize exams; conducting institutional self-evaluation; conducting program self-evaluation; evaluating teaching activities; evaluating training support activities; collecting feedback from students and graduates; collecting feedback from employers (MOET, 2012a). Some units are also in charge of managing qualifications and certificates or evaluating research activities. Details are highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1. Activities Conducted by Quality Assurance Units

Quality Assurance Activities	Involved (%)	Not Involved (%)
1. Developing guidelines for internal quality assurance	90.3	9.7
2. Building and managing the item bank center	67.5	32.5
3. Collaborating to organize exams	78.2	20.6
4. Conducting institution self-evaluation	89.3	10.7
5. Conducting program self-evaluation	67.6	32.4
6. Evaluating teaching activities	86.4	13.6
7. Evaluating training support activities	62.9	37.1
8. Evaluating research activities	32.1	54.7
9. Evaluating institutional leaders and managerial staff	34.1	65.9
10. Collecting feedback from students	91.9	9.1
11. Collecting feedback from graduates	71.7	28.3
12. Collecting feedback from employers	61.4	38.6
13. Managing qualifications and certificates	25.1	74.6
14. Conducting inspection, monitoring	63.6	36.4
15. Conducting international cooperation activities in quality assurance	26.1	58.2

Through Table 1, it can be seen that universities have been involved in activities to develop internal quality assurance systems, particularly the evaluation of teaching performance and getting feedback from students, graduates, employers. These are the requirements of the university accreditation criteria. Many institutions have been concerned about the self-evaluation, assessment, monitoring activities for quality assurance. However, the results from the survey also point out that the missions, purposes and visions of several units are not clear. Some units are only in charge of institutional self-evaluation, some focus on testing and self-evaluation, and some are involved in inspection, testing and quality assurance.

Apart from being involved in developing the national quality assurance system, organizations and institutions in Vietnam have actively participated in regional and international quality assurance networks. Specifically, five organizations are members (2 full members and 3 associate members) of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) (INQAAHE, 2017); six organizations/ institutions are members (1 full member, 1 intermediate member and 4 institutional members) of APQN (APQN, 2017); two organizations are members (1 full member and 1 associate member) of ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN) (AQAN, 2017); three universities are full members of AUN (AUN, 2017). With the support of these networks and through participating in their projects and activities, Vietnam's higher education quality assurance has been integrated with international trend as well as gaining invaluable experience.

3. Human Resources for Vietnam's Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation

3.1 Quality Assurance Staff

In order to implement quality assurance and accreditation policies, human resources development for this system has been dramatically paid attention to. At the national level, GDETA, the policy-making organization for quality assurance has encouraged and supported their staff to take part in local and overseas short courses and/or postgraduate programs related to educational administration, management, evaluation, quality assurance and accreditation. Among five officials working directly in higher education quality assurance, all of them were trained in short courses overseas and can communicate in English, three officials were awarded Masters degrees in educational administration, management or evaluation overseas (one of whom is undertaking a PhD program in quality assurance in Australia). GDETA's officials have played an important part in making policy on quality assurance as well as supporting institutions to implement quality assurance and accreditation activities (Nguyen, 2016).

At institutional level, almost higher education institutions established a unit specializing in quality assurance as regulation from MOET's legal documents (Nguyen, 2014). Moreover, human resources have also been allocated for these units, particularly the training and capacity building for the staff to be able to implement quality assurance programs and activities. According to GDETA, each unit has from three to seven full-time staff, and the number of quality assurance specialists at higher education institutions in 2011 was 875 (Ta, 2012).

In 2012, HEP2 also conducted a national survey with 353 quality assurance specialists. The result revealed that the average age of these staff was 39. The gender in this regard was comparatively balanced with male account for 50.7% and female account for 49.3%. In terms of qualifications, those having bachelor degrees gained 12.6%, Masters Degree with 48.8% and doctoral degree with 38.6% (MOET, 2012a).

During the last few years, the majority of the institutional quality assurance staff members have taken part in training workshops in quality assurance and accreditation organized by MOET and GDETA. According to GDETA, up until 2012, over one thousand staff members have been trained in self-evaluation, and nearly seven hundred staff members have been trained in external evaluation. These training workshops have provided these staff with knowledge and skills related to quality assurance and accreditation (techniques for collecting information and evidence, preparing self-evaluation reports, conducting an external evaluation for institutions or programs, etc.) (Ta, 2016). However, the capacity of these staff is still inadequate. This is mainly due to the fact that accreditation is still new in Vietnam. Another point is that almost those involved in quality assurance have not been professionally trained in this field. Additionally, there are often changes in personnel working in quality assurance units, which has caused ineffectiveness in institutional quality assurance activities (Nguyen, 2017).

Only a very small number of institutions employed Master/ Doctor of Assessment and Evaluation holders to work in quality assurance units. These people took part in local or overseas postgraduate courses. For foreign courses, almost are in Australia, several are in the USA, and some are in the Netherlands. For local courses, Vietnam National University, Hanoi is the only institution offering master and doctor of educational assessment and evaluation courses. Up until present, there have been over 191 Masters Graduates and 5 doctors. These persons are core staff to implement quality assurance and accreditation activities in Vietnamese higher education institutions (Ta, 2016).

3.2 Accreditors

Vietnamese accreditors are trained by accrediting agencies such as Vietnam National University, Hanoi and Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City. Up until present, Vietnam has over 700 accreditors, 240 of whom were issued accreditor's cards by MOET (NAEM, 2017).

In the academic year 2014-2015, Vietnam has 219 universities, 217 colleges and 313 technical and vocational schools with over 5 thousand programs (MOET, 2015). It is estimated that an accreditor need 20 days to participate in an institutional external evaluation team and 15 days for a program external evaluation team. If an accrediting agency employs 50 full-time accreditor a year, it can accredit 50 institutions or 60 programs. With a 5 year accreditation cycle, one accrediting agency can only accredit a maximum of 250 institutions or 300 programs (Ta, 2016).

According to MOET (2012b), each accrediting agency needs to employ at least 10 full-time accreditors. In addition, every accrediting agency should have an Accreditation Board consisting of at least 9 members and the Secretariat. Therefore, one accrediting agency needs to have around 50 full-time accreditors of different areas to perform its tasks effectively. In fact, accrediting agencies have difficulty in selecting accreditors as many of them are not much experienced in the field of quality assurance and accreditation (Ta, 2016). Hence, in order to carry out the external evaluation exercises precisely and professionally, accreditors need to participate in training courses. Furthermore, local accrediting agencies should have collaborative programs with other overseas and international ones (MOET, 2017).

4. Self-Evaluation and External Evaluation Activities

4.1 Self-Evaluation

Universities and colleges have conducted the institutional and program self-evaluation since 2005. According to GDETA (2016), up until the end of May 2016, 564 higher education institutions have completed the self-evaluation reports, which are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Number of Higher Education Institutions Completing Self-Evaluation Reports

Kind of Institution	Number of Institutions	Completing Self-Evaluation Report	
		Number	Ratio (%)
Universities	219	205	93.61
Colleges	217	209	96.31
Vocational schools	313	150	47.92
Total	749	564	75.30

Besides undertaking institutional self-evaluation, universities and colleges have also conducted program self-evaluation based on the standards and criteria promulgated by MOET. With the support of some educational projects, there have been 10 self-evaluation reports of primary school teacher training programs, 100 self-evaluation reports of high school teacher training programs and 7 self-evaluation reports of technical teacher training programs (Le & Nguyen, 2013).

With 90% of higher education institutions completing self-evaluation reports, it can be seen that the quality assurance policy has run in the right track. However, there is still a gap between two cycles of accreditation. After completing their self-evaluation report, many institutions have not carried out quality improvement plans. Table 3 shows that only a few institutions that completed the self-evaluation reports between 2005 and 2011 updated them. In fact, only 114 out of 564 institutions have updated their self-evaluation reports (GDETA, 2016). It means that lots of institutions have not been active to conduct self-evaluation, have not taken advantage of self-evaluation activities for quality assurance.

Table 3. Self-Evaluation Reports Completed Yearly

	2005-2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total	Updated Reports
Universities	134	14	26	20	9	2	205	50
Colleges	120	8	54	8	12	7	209	54
Vocational schools	81	9	7	21	27	5	150	10
Total	335	31	87	49	48	14	564	114

One reason for this is that many institutions have not been fully aware of the importance of self-evaluation. They considered self-evaluation exercise the procedure of writing reports. Therefore, after submitting the report to MOET, they had nothing to do with quality assurance. Another reason is due to the discontinuation of the accreditation activities. No external evaluation activity for institutions was conducted by MOET from 2009 to 2013. It is only in 2014 when the two accrediting agencies receiving the official permit for operation that institutions were concerned about self-evaluation.

4.2 External Evaluation

4.2.1 External Evaluation for Institutions

With the support of the Higher Education Project No.1 (HEP1), the first 20 universities received an external evaluation before 2008, and had the National Accreditation Council appraise their outcomes. However, the outcomes were not publicly announced. Next, with the funding of HEP2, MOET conducted external evaluations for other 20 universities in 2009. Although the outcomes were not publicly announced either, institutions received recommendations from external evaluation teams to enhance the education quality (Niedermeier & Pohlenz, 2016).

Besides the external evaluation activities organized by MOET, two national universities and regional universities such as Can Tho University, Da Nang University and Thai Nguyen University carried out peer reviews. These activities also helped universities comprehend their strengths and weaknesses. Based on the recommendations of the peer review teams, institutions set up plans for quality improvement (Ta, 2016).

The actual external evaluation for accreditation has been undertaken since the operation of the accrediting agencies. Up the end of 2016, 30 universities have undergone an external evaluation by accrediting agencies (12 universities were awarded accreditation certificate) (GDETA, 2016). By law, accrediting agencies are responsible for conducting external evaluation and recognizing institutions or programs that meet quality standards.

4.2.2 External Evaluation for Programs

Program external evaluation can be defined as the evaluation activities conducted by an organization outside the institution offering the programs. Up until the end of January 2017, only 105 programs have been externally evaluated. There are 18 programs evaluated by MOET (thorough some projects), 5 programs evaluated by VNU-CEA, and other programs evaluated by overseas agencies which are Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP), the Association of MBAs (AMBA), AUN-QA, Commission des Titres d'Ingénieur, French language for *Engineering Accreditation Institution* (CTI), the Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (FIBAA), and the International Assembly for Collegiate Business Education (IACBE) (GDETA, 2017; Nguyen, 2017). Table 4 highlights the number of higher education programs undergone an external evaluation conducted by local and international agencies.

Table 4. Higher Education Programs Undergone an External Evaluation

Agency	Number of Programs Externally Evaluated
MOET	18
VNU-CEA	5
ABET	2
ACBSP	5
ACBSP/AMBA/IACBE	1
AUN-QA	57
CTI	16
FIBAA	1
Total	105

It can be seen that the number of programs receiving an external evaluation is relatively small. Moreover, these programs are considered the best ones of universities which have been funded by certain projects. Obviously, it takes time to accredit all higher education programs offered by Vietnamese universities. In addition, resources need to be allocated to the programs after being externally evaluated for the purpose of quality enhancement (Nguyen, 2017).

5. Building and Developing Quality Culture

There have been several definitions of quality culture. European University Association (EUA) (2006, p.10) states that:

> [Q]uality culture refers to an organizational culture that intends to enhance quality permanently and is characterized by two distinct elements: on one hand, a cultural/psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality and, on the other hand, a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts.

In the context of Vietnam's higher education, the term 'quality culture' has only been mentioned in recent years in workshops or conferences organized by MOET or some universities. The awareness of building and developing a quality culture within a tertiary education institution has not gained much concern from many institutional leaders. In fact, quality culture comes together with quality assurance. Therefore, implementing quality assurance programs effectively means developing institutional quality culture (GDETA, 2013). In fact, Vietnam National University, Hanoi already developed the first Vietnamese set of criteria concerning building institutional quality culture in 2011 (Nguyen, 2013).

Several universities are focusing on building quality culture. This helps the quality assurance activities be implemented appropriately (Nguyen, 2013). Moreover, MOET has organized many workshops and conferences on quality assurance and accreditation to help raise the awareness of quality assurance for institutional leaders, managerial staff and lecturers, step-by-step building quality culture inside the institution. Attempt and commitment of all institution's members to develop its internal quality assurance system will help contribute to building the institutional quality culture (Ta, 2016).

However, universities still meet difficulty in conducting quality assurance activities and building quality culture. The main reason for this is the awareness of institutional leaders and capacity of quality assurance specialists (Nguyen,

2013). Result from a survey with 353 institutional quality assurance staff shows that 30% of these staff said that they had no idea about quality culture and building quality culture (MOET, 2012). Obviously, these staff need professional development or capacity building programs in quality assurance to provide them with the necessary knowledge and skills to perform their tasks effectively.

In summary, quality culture is step-by-step being created and developed in several Vietnamese universities. In order to make quality culture part of school's life, higher education institutions need more attempt and commitment for their internal quality assurance activities.

6. Lessons Learned

A decade of implementing accreditation in Vietnam's higher education has witnessed achievements and challenges. The lessons below are also drawn for future policy-making and implementation of accreditation in Vietnam as well as other developing countries in the region.

Lesson 1: External quality assurance agencies should be independent from the Ministry of Education and Training.

The establishment of accrediting centers marked the significant change in Vietnam's higher education accreditation. Although they were established by MOET and their directors were appointed by the Minister of MOET, their evaluation and accreditation decisions were not interfered by any party outside, inclusive MOET. It is expected that the national quality assurance agency should be independent from MOET. In addition, in order to be fully independent, accrediting agencies need to be autonomous to develop their own accreditation procedures and standards.

Lesson 2: International collaboration is necessary for every stage in the development of the quality assurance system.

At the initial stage, Vietnam received international consultancy for the legal framework development and external evaluation pilot of several institutions and programs. Being members of regional and international quality assurance networks such as AQAN, AUN, APQN and INQAAHE as well as taking advantage of projects with overseas partners, Vietnam had an advantageous start for its quality assurance system. Moreover, these networks helped build capacity for hundreds of quality assurance staff. In addition, dozens of programs have been assessed or accredited by international accrediting agencies.

Lesson 3: Human resources development in quality assurance should always be in great concern.

Human resources development is always necessary for any newly-established system. At the macro level, it is the officials working as policy-makers at the national quality assurance agency. At the meso level, it is the staff working at accrediting agencies, accreditors and officials of other ministries in charge of quality assurance. At the micro level, it is the staff working at institutional quality assurance units and lecturers implementing quality assurance activities in their departments.

Lesson 4: Professional development and capacity building for quality assurance staff play an important part in the sustainable development of higher education quality assurance.

As most of those working in quality assurance have not been academically trained in this field, professional development or capacity building programs are the most appropriate way to help them acquire knowledge and skills necessary for their career. External quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions need to have clear and detailed policies in professional development for their staff. On the other hand, every quality assurance staff needs to select suitable programs and strategies to meet their demand.

Lesson 5: Building quality culture and developing internal quality assurance system are crucial for institution's quality enhancement.

Every member of a university is responsible for building and developing quality culture. Institutional leaders, managerial staff and quality assurance specialists should be those who thoroughly understand definitions, features and principles of quality culture. Institutional leaders need to have strategies, policies and plans to introduce a quality culture to their staff, lecturers and students to implement it effectively. Additionally, building a quality culture always goes with developing an internal quality assurance system within an institution. It is the involvement of every individual and the commitment of the leaders that makes quality culture invaluable institution property.

7. Conclusion

Quality assurance and accreditation of Vietnam's higher education has developed for over ten years and it has earned certain results. Almost universities and colleges have completed their self-evaluation reports. Several institutions

have undergone an external evaluation by independent accrediting agencies and a few of them were awarded accreditation certificates. Internal quality assurance units have been established in nearly every institution with the increasing number of staff working in this field. Moreover, quality culture has step-by-step been created and developed in many universities. Institutional leaders, managerial staff and lecturers are becoming more and more aware of the importance of quality assurance for their institution's growth and survival.

As the insiders of this development, the researchers have drawn five lessons, which are expected to contribute to policy-making and implementation of quality assurance. Lessons learned are related to the independent mechanism of accreditation, international cooperation and collaboration in quality assurance, human resources development in quality assurance, professional development and capacity building for quality assurance staff, and quality culture building and internal quality assurance development. These lessons can be applied not only for Vietnam, but also for other developing countries in the region.

In this paper, the authors only look at the achievements of Vietnam's higher education quality assurance and accreditation after one decade of development. This can be seen as the limitation of the research. Consequently, further studies could focus on the impact of accreditation on the quality management of higher education institutions, challenges, advantages and disadvantages or future directions for this system.

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