

TOWARDS EFFECTIVE INTERNAL QUALITY MANAGEMENT IN VIETNAMESE PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Over the past thirty years, political, economic and socio-cultural drivers have contributed to major changes in Vietnamese higher education, which in turn have spurred the need for more formalised approaches to quality. Many ideas, suggestions and policies have been issued and many measures have been implemented, all aimed at assuring and enhancing the quality and the higher education system. While some initial efforts and achievements have been recognised, university education outcomes are still low and do not meet the needs of the society let alone adequately address the challenges faced by a developing country. This paper advances research-based insights into effective internal quality management, arguing for the need to improve internal infrastructure and capability. The paper looks at the architecture of quality management frameworks, the role of leadership and institutional culture, and the design of reliable sets of indicators that put in place new foundations and prospects for quality improvement. The study's findings will facilitate ongoing dialogue aimed at comprehensively and effectively addressing the achievement of relevant and worthwhile tertiary education outcomes, and supporting current attempts to implement systematic reform in universities.

Key words: *quality in higher education, quality management framework, leadership, institutional culture, Vietnamese universities*

INTRODUCTION

In the field of higher education in Vietnam, major changes have occurred over the past few decades. The government has implemented several reforms in higher education, aimed at creating a higher education system that can effectively respond to new demands and challenges. While some initial efforts and achievements have been recognised, university education outcomes are still low and do not meet the needs of the society let alone adequately address the challenges faced by a developing country. This paper advances research-based insights into effective internal quality management (QM), arguing for the need to improve internal infrastructure and capability. The paper looks at the architecture of quality management frameworks, the role of leadership and institutional culture, and the design of reliable sets of indicators that put in place new foundations and prospects for quality improvement.

THIRTY YEARS OF CHANGE IN VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION

The first noticeable change is the exponential growth in the number of both students and higher education institutions (HEIs) in Vietnam as indicated by statistics published by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2009, 2013). As illustrated below, by the school year 2014-2015, the number of universities and colleges had skyrocketed to 436 from 101 in 1987. The number of students has escalated over 1,676% in 2014-2015 in comparison to that of 27 years before. While the number of students soared over 16 times, the number of lecturers just rose fourfold, which led to a student-teacher ratio of 26:1. This ratio slightly declined from 28:1 in 2009-2010 after a series of measures to increase the number and qualifications of lecturers from MOET. Nevertheless, it is significantly greater than that in countries such as Japan (7:1), the USA (13:1), Singapore (14:1), Thailand (16:1), Malaysia (16:1) (UNESCO, 2014). Viewed in this context, the low quality in higher education is unavoidable, causing widespread concern to the whole society.

Table 1: Vietnamese HEIs, students and lecturers 1987–2013

School year	HEIs	Private institutions	Public institutions	HE students	HE lecturers
2014-2015	436	89	347	2,363,900	91,410
2012-2013	421	83	338	2,177,229	87,682
2009-2010	376	81	295	1,719,499	61,190
1987-1988	101	0	101	133,136	20,212

Source: Adapted from MOET Annual Report (2009), MOET Statistics on Training and Education (2013) & Statistics Year Book of Vietnam (2014)

The second challenge is the increasing diversity of university programs. As a result of socialisation, public schools offer additional programmes, i.e. in-service, second degree, transfer programmes apart from regular programmes. However, due to the lack of qualified teachers and infrastructure as well as a suitable quality assurance system to evaluate the quality of these programmes, beginning December 3, 2010, seven large cities and provinces in Vietnam refused to recruit in-service graduates due to the bad reputation of these programmes in the whole country. This issue

has received widespread media coverage detailing the alarming problems of the teaching and learning in in-service programmes as well as other non-regular programmes at universities in Vietnam. The resulting conflict between the issues of quantity and quality of education underlines the urgent need to address these problems, particularly quality assurance (QA).

The third change is the participation of the non-public sector, which has also advanced sharply in number. Before 1987, there were not any private providers. In 1997, there were only 15 non-public colleges and universities; but by 2015 this number was 89, an increase of 6 times. Obviously, this creates an opportunity for private providers to operate alongside public HEIs, effectively establishing competition between these two types. Yet, the expansion did not fully anticipate the low quality of these private institutions' operations. Every year, non-public institutions' enrolment becomes lower as students' first choice is always the public institutions (Hayden & Dao, 2010). Thus, initiated in 1998, the first World Bank Higher Education Project supported the establishment of a QA system with an aim of boosting enrolment for private HEIs (World Bank, 1998). QA policies were designed to solve potential challenges private HEIs had to cope with such as weak methodology and poor academic quality. However, private HEIs are currently experiencing serious difficulties of students' shortage after two decades.

The fourth change in Vietnamese higher education is the establishment of provincial universities in every province of the country. Though these institutions offer favourable conditions for students living in rural, remote and mountainous areas to join in higher education and serve the particular needs in relation to the socio-economic, cultural and political development of a region, the capacity of the system is in question.

GOVERNMENT EXPENDITURE ON TERTIARY EDUCATION

Though (Lam & Vu, 2012) argued "[t]he development of Vietnam's higher education indicates a trend toward a massified, multi-layered, multi-functional and multi-owned system, which well suits the country's needs in its transition from a centralised economy to the market economy", it is facing enormous challenges. To perform the job of an effective driver for the national, regional, and global knowledge-based economy, Vietnamese HEIs have to produce highly skilled workers, create new knowledge through teaching and research and transfer knowledge to the whole society. In addition, they now have to deal with wide diversity in higher education, an expanding number of students with resource constraints, a growing climate of increasing accountability and internationalisation of higher education. In response, the Vietnamese government has made a strong commitment through the budget allocated on education in Vietnam which is increasing year after year. The ratio between State Total

Expenditure and Expenditure on education and training increases from 12% in 2010 to 16.5 % in 2013 (General Statistics Office, 2015).

Table 2: Government expenditure in educational institutions as % of GDP

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Australia			4.19		
Cambodia	2.6				
Indonesia			3.37		
Japan			3.59		
Laos					4.17
Malaysia				5.32	
Singapore			3.12		
Thailand			4.93		
UK				5.06	
USA		4.83			
Vietnam			6.3		

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2014)

Table 3: Expenditure on tertiary as % of government expenditure on education

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Australia	22.46	22.11	22.28	23.20	23.68	
Cambodia			14.54			
Indonesia	10.98	12.17	16.05	15.58	17.18	16.41
Japan	18.86		20.09	19.47	20.14	20.00
Malaysia		35.94	34.45	36.97		34.01
Singapore	32.59	34.42	35.06	35.63	38.04	35.28
Thailand	21.18	19.32	16.51	14.92	14.42	
UK	15.71	14.37	16.39	22.10		23.96
USA	23.33	22.61	25.65	26.11		
Vietnam	22.16		14.72		16.67	

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2014)

Though Vietnam GDP is low in comparison to that in developed countries like Australia or the USA but at least this can display the considerable effort from the Vietnamese government on education especially on higher education. This policy can also be expressed through the different periods of QA development in Vietnamese higher education.

QA DEVELOPMENT IN VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION

From a holistic historical review of QA in Vietnamese higher education, we can deduce that the development of QA can be classified into 3 phases: from 1945 to 1986, from 1987 to 2003 and from 2004 till present.

From 1945 to 1986, the method used for QA in Vietnamese higher education was quality control of the input, output and inspection of the key operations in the educational process. During this period, elite higher education prevailed in Vietnam with its common characteristics. The intake was carefully chosen through highly competitive university entrance examinations. The output was controlled by numerous examinations, certificates as well as approval of graduation status from a strict university committee through a stringent procedure. In addition, the inspection system with burdensome rules was a principal form of QM. It did not function effectively, however, as its focus was just detecting and punishing violations to the regulations. This compliance focus could not guarantee the quality of the product. Nevertheless, in the context of Vietnam in those years, a pro-active QM practice was not urgently felt until the late 1980s, especially in December 1986 when the whole country embarked on Doimoi, its comprehensive process of reform and liberalisation.

From 1987 to 2003 there was a stepping stone towards a standard QA system. The four premises from the conference of college and university leaders in the Ministry of Higher Education and Professional Secondary Education (now MOET) in the summer of 1987 (MOET, 1995), which aligns well with the Doimoi policy, marked a substantial reform of Vietnamese higher education, a stepping stone towards the building of a national QA system. However, the beginning of the new millennium saw a series of concerns about the corruption of higher education quality. These debates critically reflect a strong demand for a new method of QA in this new phase of development to ensure higher education quality.

In response, some of the QA centres were founded and the first step to implement quality assessment and evaluation of higher education in Vietnam was taken: the Centre for Educational Quality Assurance and Research Development (1995) of Vietnam National University-Hanoi (VNU-HN), the Centre for Testing and Educational Quality Evaluation (1998) of Vietnam National University-Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM) and the General Department for Education Testing and Accreditation (GDETA) from MOET (2003). The establishment of QA centres at national level can be regarded as a revolutionary innovation in the organizational structure and management of the education sector in Vietnam. These establishments expressed the desire for a complete system of legal frameworks for higher education QA and accreditation in preparation for responding to worldwide requirements of QA, and an awareness of QA as a process in internationalisation and globalisation.

The period 2004 to the present saw the emergence of an efficient quality assurance system. Since 2004 Vietnamese higher education has witnessed several pieces of new legislation, necessary legal documents and guidelines to implement the activities of educational testing, accreditation, and recognition of overseas degrees issued for Vietnamese citizens. In its early stage of development, the higher education QA and evaluation system in Vietnam, both of institutions and of programmes, has been formally selected and stipulated in the Education Law of 2005, 2009 and 2012, the Higher Education Law 2012, Government decrees and Prime Minister's decisions. These documents outlined the tasks for the whole education system demanding the administration at all levels "to perfect and implement the structure and mechanism of the testing and accreditation system for the purpose of increasing the quality of education" (MOET, 2004b, p. 4); National Assembly (2004, p. 2) pointed out that "quality management should be the focus; accreditation activities are to be conducted yearly". In 2004, MOET (2004a) issued the Provisional Regulation for Accreditation of Universities' Quality. Three years later, MOET (2007b) required universities to establish QA Centres, perform self-assessment every five years and carry out improvement based on self-assessment results. These assessments are based on the 2007 set of 10

standards and 61 accompanying criteria, which cover almost all aspects relating to the governance and operations of a modern university, which closely keeps pace with regional or international QA standards (MOET, 2007a). The birth of an official set of Quality Standards to monitor the quality of a HEI constitutes a breakthrough in the educational administration, expressing an urgent desire to provide high quality HE.

Vietnamese higher education has also been conscious of promoting regional and international cooperation in higher education QA networks at national and institutional levels. GDETA has already joined the regional and international QA networks such as ASEAN University Network (AUN), Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN), and the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). Besides, four QA centres of four universities are members of APQN, and two national universities are members of AUN (Pham, 2013). In addition, some leading universities with more ambitious goals of integrating into the Southeast Asian region and receiving international recognition are encouraged to apply for institution or programme accreditation or assessment by international accreditation agencies.

In short, with the consultation of GDETA, MOET has developed awareness and regulations concerning QA activities for Vietnam's HEIs. The leaders have managed to sustain all resources to build up a new QA system, especially with the two newly built QA agencies for external assessment in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in 2014. Vietnam's completed national qualification framework is expected to be announced. The QA system of higher education in Vietnam is relatively complete with the Internal QA (IQA) units in institutions, External QA (EQA) and QA agencies. This young but rather complete QA system has initially facilitated favourable conditions for Vietnamese institutions to know where they are and what they are expected to achieve in the new era full of challenges and to be able to start to familiarise themselves with IQA and EQA. QA in Vietnamese higher education has taken a significant step towards the development and integration into international QA trends.

Despite great efforts by the government, MOET and HEIs, the media highly features intense debates on graduates' unemployment, growing doubt of PhD degrees, programs, evaluation and assessment and widespread concern about struggling universities for students. The sombre picture of employment somewhat reflects the low university education outcomes and the failure to meet the needs of the society.

Table 4: Unemployment in Vietnam in 2015

	3/2015	6/2015	12/2015
Number of unemployed graduates and postgraduates↑	176,900	198,900	225,000
Number of national unemployed people ↓	1,177,200	1,151,800	1,090,500
Percentage of unemployment by educational level 12/2015 (%)			
Unskilled labour			43.50
Short term vocational training			5.79
Long term vocational training			11.39
College and university education			39.32

Source: General Statistics Office of Vietnam (2015)

VIETNAMESE EXPERTS' PERCEPTION OF UNIVERSITY OUTCOMES AND PERFORMANCE

The study reported in this paper was not a study on experts' perceptions of university outcomes and performance per se. It was part of a larger investigation into the nature of QM at Vietnamese public HEIs. The study gathered 35 experts with an expertise in higher education, quality assurance and quality management in Vietnamese public universities across Vietnam.

Table 5: Demographics of survey participants

	Number	Per cent
Gender		
Female	10	28.6
Male	25	71.4
Highest degree earned		
Master	6	17.1
PhD	29	82.9
Title		
Lecturers and Senior Lecturers	15	42.9
Associate Professors and Professors	13	37.1
Officers and Senior Officers	7	20.0
Years of experience in higher education		
3-9	3	8.6
10-19	13	37.1
21-9	12	34.3
>=30	7	20.0
Current position		
Quality Experts and Assessors	20	57.1
Higher Education Experts	3	8.6
Quality Management Leaders	12	34.3
Years of experience in current position		
1-3	16	45.7
4-9	13	37.2
>= 10	6	17.1
Years of experience in quality management		
1-3	9	25.7
4-9	14	40.0
>=10	12	34.3

From the demographic figures, the expert panel utilized in this research is a compilation of 42.9% from lecturers and senior lecturers, 37.1% from associate professors and professors, so almost all of them are keen on teaching, learning, doing research and other activities at their institutions. One more interesting point is that all of them have more than three years' experience in higher education, and seven even have worked in higher education for more than 30 years. Importantly, a majority (57.1%) was quality experts and assessors across the country, 34.3% are presidents and vice presidents in prestigious universities in Vietnam. In a nutshell, the data revealed the demographic information of the expert panel whose combined professional experience and background are closely related to the subject of study, which met the requirements of the research. These high profile cases would be definitely beneficial as a reliable feedback resource. Their needed background and experience were necessary for the consensus-building goal of the study.

For empirical work, a review based on iterative approach was administered to experts to reach consensus on a specific quality framework, specific achievements and shortcomings of QM in Vietnamese public HEIs. As a result, it was possible to obtain a detailed and complex data set and to ensure that the findings were triangulated.

A series of initial findings can be gleaned from the research. First, MOET issues a rigid set of ready-made quality standards evaluating the quality of all universities, which may not fit with all universities in the system, as these universities may operate for different purposes based on their own missions and visions, so this may disadvantage universities that want to make some innovations a little bit different from the common practice. In response, most of the procedures of self-assessment, quality improvement and accreditation are performed for the sake of merit. As a result, quality is not improved and stakeholders are not satisfied.

Second, quality culture is not strongly established. Quality improvement seems to be the job of the GDETA, VNU-HN and VNU HCM QA centres and IQA units at HEIs. To make it worse, at some HEIs, mainly student stakeholders are paid more attention in the IQA system. There is a lack of effective system of getting feedback from the staff, or the feedback may sometimes turn out to be difficult to solve due to the lack of finance and human resources or several of the staff may feel that feedback giving is not their duty at meetings that seek for opinions

Third, QM at each university is lacking in comprehensive and detailed guidelines and monitoring mechanism. According to an expert, "management in Vietnamese universities is notoriously weak and half-way done". Therefore, this will be a big challenge for QM because this is a continuous process.

Fourth, though HEIs are now enjoying a lot of autonomy in comparison to the past, most universities are operating in accordance to MOET and the government instead of the needs of the universities. From an expert, "as universities are often centralized in management practice (not in theory or legal document), the adopted quality concept may originate from top-level leaders, which may not match academics' perspective". This may result in teaching staff's disengagement with QM as universities are born not to comply but to liberate humans.

Fifth, at present many HEIs are very keen on accreditation with compliments on the number of programs accredited by GDETA and other international organizations. Yet, selection of appropriate approaches to EQA and establishment of IQA units do not guarantee quality improvement. As Sheridan (2010, p. 33) puts it, "An internal quality system is an essential component for any roadmap for institutional development that will bring responsiveness to economic and industry needs".

In general, the experts' feedback from the study indicated that QM in Vietnamese public HEI is not very strong even though the Vietnamese government has spent lots of money and effort on higher education. The findings of this study supported the conclusion drawn by earlier published studies and international ranking organizations that Vietnamese public HEIs needs more formalised approaches to quality. In the larger study of which this research formed a part, this feedback resource helped to explain why a framework for effective QM is needed and provided insights for improving quality in Vietnamese public HEIs.

SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The paper has drawn a general picture of higher education in Vietnamese public HEIs. Even though measures have been taken, the quality of tertiary education is still alarming and from the above analysis, the root of all the reasons is ineffective QM.

The paper highlights general aspects of QM that will probably need to be adjusted to the specific Vietnamese context.

There is a need to go straight to people. Vietnamese higher education is building QA in accordance to the sequence of nation-institution-people but this aspect will probably need to be adjusted to the specific Vietnamese context - the other way round. That is involving and encouraging faculty, staff and students in QM, helping them to see how important their contribution is to overall institutional quality. Faculty engagement, staff engagement and student engagement are needed.

There is a need for a sound, valid and reliable information system, able to identify relevant data and translate them to information and then knowledge; the development of institutional research capacities, that is, the

ability to gather information about the institution and its context, process it and analyze it to support decision making.

There is a need to develop, at each managerial level, the capacity to provide sound management practices based on academic priorities, that is, to find the right balance between what is academically desirable and what is economically feasible.

There is a need for an institution to clearly develop its vision and mission statement by prioritizing the relative weights of teaching and learning, research, scholarship, innovation, creative work, community outreach... based on institutional principles, values, relevant environment and so on and then making sure that it has adequate mechanisms in place to carry out the selected functions with quality: policies in place for the design, implementation, review and adjustment of each of those functions.

There is a need for relevant experiences. Learning from others, either within the university or taking into account external experiences is always important. However, it is also important to focus on relevant experiences... what is good for Europe may not be good for Vietnam. What is good for the US may not be adequate in other parts of the world. There is a tendency to think that if it works in a world class university, then it should be brought to our institution, but this is usually not the case. HEIs should focus on peer institutions, mostly in the country or the region, and benchmark with them. Comparing a new, emerging university, operating in a context where access, professional training and community outreach is a priority, with Harvard or Cambridge is quite useless and may lead to the wrong decisions.

There is a need for internationalization of the curriculum, teaching and learning foreign languages for faculty and students, exposing students to different cultural or international experiences, including faculty and student mobility, etc.

In short, universities in Vietnam need an effective QM framework with an emphasis on the role of leadership and institutional culture, and reliable sets of indicators that put in place new foundations and prospects for quality improvement. However, due to the diversity of universities, it is impossible to have a prescriptive framework for QA in higher education. The framework should be non-prescriptive that allows universities of different orientations to apply QA to their own context. However, there should be agreement on common key criteria of QA in higher education for the purpose of harmonization to meet the ASEAN QA framework and ASEAN Qualification Reference Framework to facilitate student and labour mobility within ASEAN.

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