Factors Affecting Successful Quality Assurance Implementation in Vietnamese Higher Education: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Quality assurance and accreditation was officially introduced into the higher education system in Vietnam over ten years ago. It is evident that quality assurance has resulted in positive impacts on university management, teaching, learning and research activities. This paper aims to explore factors that aid the successful implementation of higher education quality assurance and accreditation in Vietnam. Through semi-structured interviews with 32 participants, this study identified a number of factors that contributed to quality assurance processes, including awareness of the importance of quality assurance, better institutional manager leadership, support of university lecturers, staff, and students, and the vital responsibility of internal quality assurance staff. These confirm that internal stakeholders play an important role in undertaking quality assurance programmes and activities.

Keywords

accreditation, quality assurance, higher education, implementation, qualitative study

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Quality assurance and accreditation was officially introduced into the higher education system in Vietnam over ten years ago. It is evident that quality assurance has resulted in positive impacts on university management, teaching, learning and research activities. This paper aims to explore factors that aid the successful implementation of higher education quality assurance and accreditation in Vietnam. Through semi-structured interviews with 32 participants, this study identified a number of factors that contributed to quality assurance processes, including awareness of the importance of quality assurance, better institutional manager leadership, support of university lecturers, staff, and students, and the vital responsibility of internal quality assurance staff. These confirm that internal stakeholders play an important role in undertaking quality assurance programmes and activities.

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Introduction

Assuring quality in higher education has been a major strategic issue around the world in recent decades. A variety of quality assurance mechanisms, including accreditation, assessment, audit, peer review, and benchmarking, have been implemented in many countries

for the purpose of quality control, accountability and quality improvement (Martin & Parikh, 2017; UNESCO, 2006). Quality assurance has been used by many different stakeholders for different specific purposes. For example, the government uses quality assurance to assure quality higher education for its citizens and/or to determine which institutions and programmes receive public funding; employers use quality assurance to assure qualified employees; higher education institutions use quality assurance to improve institutional information and data as well as enhance institution planning; students use quality assurance to select institutions for study and ensure efficient transfers between accredited institutions (Lenn, 2004). Associated literature discusses how quality assurance has been adopted as a driver for change and enhancement of higher education systems (Alzafari & Ursin, 2019; Hou, Ince, Tsai, & Chiang, 2015; Nguyen & Ta, 2018; Shah, 2012).

In the Vietnamese context, a quality assurance system based on the assessment and accreditation of higher education institutions and programmes was officially established in the beginning of the 21st century. Over more than fifteen years of development, the Vietnamese higher education quality assurance system has been structured on three levels: the macro level (the national quality assurance organisation), the meso level (accrediting agencies), and the micro level (higher education institutions; Nguyen, Evers, & Marshall, 2017). Accreditation, the key instrument in the national quality assurance system, is mandatory for all Vietnamese universities and academic programmes (National Assembly, 2018). Consequently, Vietnam has implemented both institutional and programme accreditation, which include four steps: educational institution self-assessment; registration for external assessment with an accrediting agency; external assessment by accrediting agencies; and recognition of accreditation outcomes by the accrediting agency's accreditation board. Accreditation must be renewed every five years (MOET, 2013, 2017). As of May 2019, 92% of all universities (218/236) had completed their self-assessment reports; 128 had undergone external assessment (of which 121 universities were awarded accreditation certificates) by accrediting agencies, and 6 other institutions were assessed by overseas accrediting agencies. For programme accreditation, of more than 5000 higher education programmes, only 41 programmes have undergone an external assessment (of which 16 programmes were awarded accreditation certificates) by Vietnamese accrediting agencies, and 126 programmes have been accredited by overseas agencies (VQA, 2019a, 2019b).

Quality assurance has successfully created positive impacts on Vietnamese higher education institutions. Specifically, quality assurance processes have contributed to increasing graduate employability (Pham, 2016), and helped develop a quality culture within higher education institutions (Nguyen, Ta, & Nguyen, 2017). Further, Nguyen (2018) investigated the impacts of international accreditation on Vietnam's emerging quality assurance system and concluded that many key stakeholders, including students, teachers, educational managers, institutions and the government, would benefit from accreditation activities conducted by overseas accrediting agencies. Furthermore, Nguyen and Ta (2018) observed significant enhancements in the management of academic programmes, training activities, teaching and supporting staff, students and student support, and facilities of a national university with high autonomy as the result of accreditation implementation.

However, limited research has investigated how different stakeholders play a role in quality assurance implementation processes and how institutional leaders, academics and quality assurance staff are involved in undertaking quality assurance activities. This study provides insights into these questions, focusing on Vietnamese higher education quality assurance and accreditation. Specifically, this study investigates the roles of institutional managers/administrators, lecturers, supporting staff, quality assurance specialists and students in quality assurance procedures. This study includes different stakeholders as they all play vital roles in institutional quality assurance. Institutional managers/administrators lead and

supervise quality assurance activities, lecturers and supporting staff implement quality assurance activities while quality assurance specialists develop quality assurance plans. The research findings address a gap in accreditation implementation in emerging quality assurance systems. Moreover, the conclusions of this paper contribute to understanding the factors that contribute to the successful implementation of quality assurance and accreditation.

Literature Review

The associated literature has introduced a range of understandings and definitions of quality assurance. "Quality assurance involves the systematic review of educational programmes and processes to maintain and improve their quality, equity and efficiency" (European Commission, 2018, p. 2). According to Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, and Pârlea (2007) quality assurance is defined as an ongoing process of evaluation that includes monitoring, assessing, guaranteeing, maintaining, and enhancing the quality of higher education systems, institutions, or programmes. Quality assurance is also a tool for accountability and/or improvement. In addition, quality assurance can take many forms, from simple self-assessment to more comprehensive accreditation, audit, review or inspection supported by external and independent peer review (Kadhila & Iipumbu, 2019). Furthermore, UNESCO (2006) defines quality assurance as "a process of establishing stakeholder confidence that provision (input, process and outcomes) fulfils expectations or measures up to minimum requirements" (p. 17) and distinguishes internal quality assurance (IQA) and external quality assurance (EQA). IQA refers to the policies and mechanisms of an institution or a programme that ensure it is fulfilling its own purposes as well as the standards that apply to higher education in general or to the profession or discipline in particular. EQA refers to the actions of an external body that assesses institution operations or that of its programmes in order to determine whether it meets established standards or criteria. Similarly, the European Commission (2018) states that "quality assurance approaches can include mechanisms that are external and internal to schools. External mechanisms may include national or regional school evaluations and/or large-scale student assessments. Internal mechanisms may include school self-evaluation, staff appraisal and classroom-based student assessments" (p. 2).

The purposes of quality assurance vary from one institution to the next. Higher education institutions may choose to focus on the equal allocation of resources, compliance with external quality, and accountability to society and government, institutional performance assessments or institutional learning, and/or improvement of their academic and management activities (Martin & Parikh, 2017). Quality assurance activities serve the dual purposes of *accountability* and *enhancement,* creating trust in the performance of higher education institutions. Specifically, when implemented successfully, quality assurance provides information to assure higher education institutions and the public of the quality of the higher education institution's activities (accountability) as well as provide advice and recommendations on how it might improve what it is doing (enhancement; ESG, 2015). In short, the common objective of quality assurance is to improve teaching and learning, with the goal of supporting the best learner outcomes (European Commission, 2018).

According to Harvey and Newton (2004), quality assurance mechanisms may be categorised into to four approaches: namely accreditation, assessment, audit, and external examination/moderation. Of these methods, accreditation is the most widely and has recently been introduced into many higher education systems. Accreditation is a process in which a body independent of an institution evaluates its quality as a whole or that of a specific academic programme in order to formally recognize it as having met certain predetermined minimum standards or criteria. The result of this process is usually the awarding of a status (a yes/no

decision), recognition, and sometimes a license to operate within a time-limited validity (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007).

Previous studies have evidenced the positive impacts of quality assurance and accreditation. First, in countries without a tradition of course and programme evaluation, quality assurance processes have provided students with opportunities to provide feedback on teaching and other supporting services (Mcdowell & Sambell, 1999; Nguyen & Ta, 2018; Vincenzi, Garau, & Guaglianone, 2018). Second, assessment standards and criteria require higher education institutions to involve stakeholders outside university campuses such as employers and alumni in academic activities, for example, curriculum development. This has been shown to help universities enhance quality (Godwin, 2011; Lyytinen et al., 2017; Sandmaung & Khang, 2013). Third, the implementation of quality assurance and accreditation has resulted in cultural change in leadership and management. Evaluation standards require institutions to periodically evaluate, revise, and amend their core values, missions, visions and strategic planning (Liu & Liu, 2018; Vincenzi et al., 2018). Additionally, improvements in facility management were also observed. Universities have often upgraded equipment and software in computer labs (Nguyen & Ta, 2018) or applied new software to manage scientific and technological activities (Pham, 2018).

The Role of Researchers

The seven researchers are all Vietnamese and involved themselves deeply in education. Specifically, all researchers are all interested in undertaking research that focused on science education, quality in education, and educational leadership and management.

The first author is Loc Thi My Nguyen, who is the Chairwoman of the Vietnamese State Council for Professorship in Education. She is a doctorate professor who has an interest in researching school governance, educational management, teacher development and educational psychology. She supervised this study.

The second author is Trung Tran. He is a doctorate associated professor who is interested in science education and education for ethnic minorities. He managed this study and acted as the corresponding author for this paper.

The third author is Thuan Van Pham. He is a doctorate associated professor in education. He contributed to the data analysis process and reviewing and editing the manuscript.

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The fifth author is Hien Thi Thu Le, who is a doctorate associated professor. The sixth author is Thao Thi Phuong Trinh, who is a doctorate associated professor. The seventh author is Thanh Thi Nghiem, who is a PhD candidate in education. All these three authors contributed to interviewing and analysing data.

Method Design

In this study, we employed a qualitative research approach. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011, p. 3), "qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them." As such, by utilising this research design and using semi-structured interviews, this study investigated the views of different institutional stakeholders, including institutional leaders, lecturers, researchers, supporting staff, internal quality assurance staff and students.

In addition, we employed purposeful sampling as a specific qualitative approach to case selection. "The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (Patton, 2015, p. 264). In this study, purposeful sampling was adopted to capture a wide range of Vietnamese higher education key stakeholder perspectives relating to factors that contribute to successful quality assurance implementation in Vietnamese universities. The results of accreditation implementation in all Vietnamese universities are publicly available on the website for the Ministry of Education and Training (http://www.moet.gov.vn). To employ purposive sampling for this study, the researchers selected 2 universities in each main region (the North, the Central and the South) of Vietnam. Consequently, 6 universities with diverse locations, academic programmes, number of academics and number of enrollments were selected. Each university's website was then assessed to create a list of institutional leader (president, vice presidents) and internal quality assurance staff member email addresses and telephone numbers. Potential informants were contacted and invited to participate in the study as well as introducing other academics involved in institutional quality assurance processes. In the Vietnamese context, there is not any institutional board for ethical research or protection of human subject. However, we ensured ethical research practice to protect informants' privacy and confidentiality. We prepared written consent forms which were all signed by participants who had been informed about the purposes of the study and that their identifications were anonymous.

A total of 32 people agreed to participate in the study, including 6 institutional leaders, 6 heads/vice heads of quality assurance units, 7 internal quality assurance staff members, 7 academics and 6 students. Semi-structured interviews were performed and focused on exploring informant involvement, roles, and contribution in their institution's quality assurance processes. These interviews were face-to-face and audio-recorded for transcribing purposes, as well as conducted in Vietnamese to allow participants opportunities to freely express their ideas. Each interview lasted between 30 to 45 minutes.

All the recorded interviews were then transcribed verbatim in Vietnamese by the fifth, the six and the seventh authors. The Vietnamese transcripts were used for data analysis as all the researchers are Vietnamese. The qualitative content analysis was found to be the appropriate method for transforming transcribed texts into latent meanings (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The third and the fourth authors worked together to identify the initial coding scheme. Codes were then sorted into categories based on how different codes were related and linked (Patton, 2015). Themes that highlighted factors affecting successful quality assurance implementation were given to the first and the second authors for double-check. All the authors then worked together to select the appropriate transcripts to illustrate each theme. The sixth author translated the quotes from Vietnamese into English, double-checked by the second author.

Findings

Participants reported that a number of factors during the process of implementing quality assurance assisted with the embedding of quality assurance, particularly when undertaking self-evaluation. These factors mainly derive from an awareness of the importance of quality assurance by all interviewed institutional members, institutional leaders and staff, and internal quality assurance staff. These are discussed below.

Awareness of the importance of accreditation

Most participants (27/32) stated that the success that their institution achieved in quality assurance and accreditation was due to institutional managers and staff being fully aware of the importance of quality assurance for the survival and growth of the university. Here are some views:

In this regard, many of the institutions had developed and implemented quality assurance programmes. For example, they:

> In our annual quality assurance programmes, we survey graduates and businesses on the quality of education. We also standardise the testing processes following regulations (a head of quality assurance unit).

> It [The awareness of the significant role of QA in the university life] helps the Institution to adjust training and management activities, orient future development to improve training efficiency and meet evaluation criteria (a university vice president).

> I think that when the institutional leaders, staff, and lecturers comprehend the value of quality assurance, they will introduce positive action and support for quality assurance programmes (a quality assurance specialist).

These views show that awareness of the importance role of quality assurance and accreditation brought about a number of changes to the universities' activities, including changes to leadership, management, curriculum design and student support.

Better leadership by institutional managers/administrators

Half of the participants (16) said that one major advantage that occurred when universities implemented quality assurance activities was improved leadership and management of institutional leaders. For example:

> They [The university president and vice president] attended training workshops in quality assurance (a head of a quality assurance centre).
> We hired consultants to help with self-evaluation and provided more funds for quality assurance activities (a university vice president).

> The institutional managers allocated adequate human and material resources for quality assurance activities (a lecturer involved in preparing the self-evaluation report).

> The rector ordered the quality assurance unit to report on the progress of preparing the institutional self-evaluation report (a quality assurance specialist).

It can be seen that institutional leaders were particularly concerned about quality assurance programmes because quality assurance and accreditation helped them reveal the strengths and weaknesses of their institutions.

Support of institutional staff and students

All the institutional leaders and heads/vice heads of the quality assurance unit (12) remarked that they were grateful to their staff and students for their support during the process of implementing quality assurance activities:

In our university, a number of staff had participated in the Self-evaluation Council to prepare self-evaluation reports. They are involved in collecting evidence as well as disseminating information related to quality assurance to other members of the university. Some lecturers also volunteer to have their teaching performance evaluated by students (a vice head of the quality assurance unit). We encourage our students to contribute to quality assurance activities. They can do it by providing information and evidence related to their work to help prepare self-evaluation reports. Furthermore, they answer survey questionnaires about student support and teacher performance responsibly (a university vice president).

Without the support of the institutional staff and students, we could hardly complete the self-evaluation report (a head of the quality assurance unit).

High responsibility and enthusiasm of internal quality assurance staff

All the institutional leaders (6) and most of the academics (6/7) reported that their internal quality assurance staff members were highly responsible and enthusiastic about quality assurance activities. Several of other comments include:

I rarely saw them [internal quality assurance staff] leave the office before 6 p.m. (an academic of a university located in a big city)

Our internal quality assurance staff did not seem to have a day off. They still worked on the weekends and public holidays (a university vice president).

Their [Internal quality assurance staff's] working hard gave us inspiration to complete the self-evaluation report on time" (a lecturer of a university located in the central region).

In Vietnam, almost of all higher education institutions have established a unit specialising in quality assurance and allocated staff to work in this unit. These staff members are responsible for training accreditation criteria and process for lecturers and other staff of their university. They are also involved in preparing the self-evaluation report.

Discussion

After over ten years of quality assurance and accreditation implementation, many Vietnamese higher education institutions have recognised the importance of quality assurance for their development (Nguyen, Ta, & Nguyen, 2017). Specifically, most universities have established a quality assurance unit that serves as the focal point for all quality assurance and accreditation programmes in the institutions (Nguyen, Evers, & Marshall, 2017). Institutional leaders have also allocated more materials and human resources for quality assurance activities. The number of quality assurance projects undertaken by universities has also increased

(Nguyen, 2018). The results of this study confirm those of previous research. All internal stakeholders (institutional leaders, administrative staff, supporting staff and teaching staff) in the selected universities expressed their comprehension of the value of quality assurance and actively participate in their institution's quality assurance processes. A study conducted by Beerkens and Udam (2017) found that institutional leaders and academics "see the importance of quality assurance as a tool to facilitate improvement" (p. 354). Institutional leaders understand that quality assurance should serve a primary role in helping organizations. For example, offering feedback from peers and contributing to the improvement in education. Similar to institutional leaders, academic staff and students also greatly value quality assurance for internal development and seem to value the reflection that a good assessment procedure encourages. While teaching staff are aware that the primary role of quality assurance is to support the internal development of higher education institutions, students list trust and credibility as the most important aim of quality assurance.

The findings of this study indicate that one factor that contributes to the successful implementation of quality assurance in higher education in Vietnam is improved leadership by institutional managers. This is consistent with the findings of Bach et al. (2014), Martin and Parikh (2017) and Nguyen and Ta (2018). In 2010, Bach et al. (2014) surveyed 222 institutions in 36 European countries on internal quality assurance and found out that 66.7% of institutional leaders were involved in quality assurance processes through formal participation in consultation bodies and 66.2% had formal involvement in self-evaluations or other assessment activities. Additionally, the percentage of rectors or vice rectors in charge of quality assurance issues has grown in the last 10 years. In a leadership role, institutional managers monitor, make decisions, and/or facilitate the quality assurance process. Similarly, surveys by Martin and Parikh (2017) of 311 vice presidents or officers in charge of quality management in higher education institutions around the world asked institutions to indicate the most important factors in the development of quality assurance and found that leadership support accounted for 90%. They state that, "among the internal factors that support the development of quality assurance, leadership support was clearly identified as a key element" (Martin and Parikh, 2017, p. 80). Moreover, in Vietnam, institutional administrators contribute to the quality assurance processes by prompting institutions to revise quality assurance regulations for programmes and curriculum development (Nguyen & Ta, 2018).

Support from institutional staff and students has played a crucial role in the quality assurance and accreditation implementation of the selected universities in this research. This finding was also reported by Bach et al. (2014), as a key principle in developing both quality culture and quality assurance processes was the participation of staff and students, who have taken part in the planning of the institutional quality assurance systems. For academic staff, 90.6% of 222 surveyed institutions formally involved in self-evaluation or other evaluation activities and 74.8% had formal participation in consultation bodies. This indicates that the level of staff participation in quality assurance processes is relatively high (Bach et al., 2014). Furthermore, research by Martin and Parikh (2017) shows that the participation of staff in the development of quality management (88% of 311 surveyed institutions) is the second most important internal factor in the development of quality management, following leadership support. Students are now understood to be important for the legitimacy of quality assurance processes. They have wide and significant impacts on the revision of study programmes and are involved in the evaluation and revision of programme learning outcomes (Leisyte & Westerheijden, 2014). In fact, course evaluation by students and student satisfaction surveys are the most frequently used tools for the enhancement of academic programmes (Martin & Parikh, 2017).

Internal quality assurance staff have played a significant role in every quality assurance activity by universities. These staff members have been trained professionally in quality

assurance. Their major duties include: organising workshops, conferences, and seminars on quality assurance; training other institutional staff about quality assurance; and being the focal point for preparing self-evaluation reports (Nguyen & Ta, 2018). Findings from this research confirm that the enthusiasm of internal quality assurance staff greatly contributes to the quality assurance processes. To perform their tasks successfully, internal quality assurance staff need to comprehend the necessary knowledge related to higher education governance and quality assurance and skills, including communication, digital, interpersonal and personal skills. Further, they must engage in communication with various stakeholders, both internal and external (Jingura & Kamusoko, 2019).

Conclusion

Quality assurance and accreditation has been successfully implemented in many higher education systems across the world, including Vietnam. Despite having an emerging quality assurance system, higher education in Vietnam has already experienced many changes regarding quality enhancement (Nguyen, 2017; Nguyen & Ta, 2018). Exploration of the factors that have assisted in the successful implementation of quality assurance in Vietnam revealed internal stakeholders to be key contributors. These factors include awareness of the importance of the quality assurance of institutional leaders, academics, and students, better leadership by institutional managers, the support of institutional staff and students, and the responsibility and enthusiasm of internal quality assurance staff. However, these findings were only observed based on internal stakeholder perspectives. Future research should consult external stakeholders to triangulate such findings.

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