

Assuring Quality in Higher Education in a Confucian Collectivist Culture: The Vietnamese Experience

Huong Thi Pham

Office for Testing and Quality Assurance, University of Finance and Marketing, Office for Testing and Quality Assurance, 2/4 Tran Xuan Soan, District 7, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Abstract: Quality assurance (QA) has been introduced and developed into Vietnam for almost 15 years. The importation of such a concept from other countries with different cultures may result in resistance in some ways. This study explores QA arrangements at three institutions of higher education (HE) in Vietnam, a Confucian heritage country, as perceived by academic leaders, QA practitioners, and academics to respond to QA policies from the government. The methodological approach taken in this research is a multiple case study. A qualitative approach was used to explore QA practices at three institutions. Data collected from documentation and in-depth interviews were analyzed for patterns and themes. It was found that centralism and large power distance of a Confucian collectivist country such as Vietnam significantly influenced the government's attempts to reform HE for quality improvement. Culturally appropriate measures from the bottom level with long-term strategies should be considered to assure and improve quality, including the shift to decentralization in HE.

Keywords: *quality assurance; Confucian collectivist culture; Vietnam; higher education governance*

Publication date: September 2018

Publication online: 3rd September 2018

Corresponding Author: Huong Thi Pham,
phamhuong.mu@gmail.com

0 Quality assurance (QA) as a global trend

QA in higher education (HE) has gained significant achievements all over the world and become one of major topics relating to HE. The introduction and rapidly widespread development of QA approaches to

HE reflect the role of HE to respond to global changes in economies and societies^[1] and also the legitimacy of QA because it aims to address public and societal expectations of quality.^[2] This happens when HE quality is no longer an internal issue of this sector; it becomes a public debate.^[3] These pressures triggered a new form of public management labeled as new public management.^[4] Managerialism of this reform applies “a business-type management into the public sector and emphasizes more freedom for managers to manage, explicit standards and performance measures, output controls, use of private sector management techniques, and more efficient use of resources.”^[5]

To describe a theoretical spectrum of globalization, Held and McGrew use a state/market binary with neo-liberal perspectives at one end and state-centric values at the other end.^[6] From the perspective of policymakers, neo-liberalism minimizes the involvement of government and maximizes the role of the market as the mediator of the global economy.^[7] As a result, QA policies of this neo-liberalism allow privatization in education; promote autonomy for institutions; and support QA agency that is independent of the state.^[8] On the other hand, statist supports the government's role to protect domestic economy and limit competition.^[7] QA policy in this ideology would include a highly centralized HE system with limited institutional autonomy and tightly controlled funding mechanisms for public institutions. QA agency tends to be also controlled by the government.

As a global trend, QA mechanism has been spread to developing countries. Some countries are successful in developing their own approach to match the local needs, but some others seem to be still at a developing

and piloting stage of completing their QA systems. Vietnam is such as case.^[9]

1 Vietnam - a Confucian heritage culture: large power distance country

Vietnam is among those Asian countries that represent a Confucian heritage culture, proven to share certain key characteristics across collectivist societies^[10,11] and it is a traditionally centrist nation.^[12,13]

Among the characteristics of a Confucian heritage culture, Vietnam is a country with large power distance, which is defined by Hofstede^[14] as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (p. 28). The unequal distribution of power has been demonstrated in the role pairs between teacher-student and boss-subordinate. At school, teachers are treated with respect. The educational process is teacher-centered, and teachers outline the intellectual paths to be followed. A teacher is a guru. The quality of one’s learning is virtually exclusively dependent on the excellence of one’s teachers. Even at HE level, students remain dependent on academics. In the workplace, superiors and subordinates consider each other existentially unequal; the hierarchical system is based on this perceived existential inequality. Organizations centralize power as much as possible in a few hands, leading to the popularity of centralization in large power distance countries. Subordinates expect to be told what to do. There are many supervisory personnel, structured into tall hierarchies of people reporting to each other (pp. 34–35).

These Confucian values have formed a long history of centralized governance in every aspect in Vietnam including HE with the strong centric role of Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) and other line ministries.

The following section will discuss the transition from centralization to decentralization in HE governance in Vietnam and the challenges it is facing.

2 Doi moi and HE in vietnam

In 1986, Vietnam officially announced a policy, which is well-known as “*doi moi*,” marking the movement from a communist-style planned economy to a market-led economy with a socialist orientation.^[15,16] This societal reform has significantly influenced the development of HE policy.

Before 1986, HE institutions (HEIs) were controlled centrally not only by the MoET but also other ministries. Ones controlled by MoET were mainly generalist universities and teacher-education universities. The majority of HEIs were oversight by various ministries with responsibility for a certain sector, including Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Industry, and Ministry of Health. These institutions offered narrowly-specialized programs to train the workforce for each sector.^[16]

After *doi moi*, with the introduction of market economy, the government also approved new policies for HE that allow institutions to train workforce for private companies, to have income from other resources outside the government budget, and develop their own institutional plans and academic programs to meet the requirements of the market economy. With this policy, the government is no longer responsible for graduates’ job. This is reflected in three significant policies in education: Educational law, HE law, and a national HE reform named “HE reform named (HERA).”

The Law on Education passed in December in 1998 set out the ground rules for education. Although allowing the market approach in education, the law emphasized that Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh Ideology remain the guiding principles in this sector. The law nonetheless remains ambiguous in areas relating to tuitions and fees, private institutions, and the role of the government and the universities. Until 2005, these issues were discussed, leading to the revision of the education law which allows changes in HE governance from centralization to decentralization, granting autonomy to institutions and supports non-public funding for education. It is argued that the relationship between the government and institutions is still vague.^[7,17]

To implement this change in educational policy, Vietnam developed HERA for the period of 2006–2020. The agenda proposed (a) to confer legal autonomy on HEIs, “giving them the right to decide and be responsible for training, research, human resource management, and budget planning;” (b) to “eliminate line-ministry control and develop a mechanism for having state ownership represented within public HEIs;” (c) to call for developing a system of “QA and accreditation for HE; improve on the legislative and regulatory environment and to accelerate the state’s stewardship role in monitoring and inspecting the overall structure and scale of HE;” and (d) to “develop a HE Law.”^[17]

Several researchers believed that HERA has signaled that HE governance in Vietnam must change, from the state control system to the one that characterized by state supervision.^[18]

In 2012, Vietnam passed HE Law. The law prescribed that HE system should be multi-tiered, consisting of three types of institutions: Research-oriented, application-oriented, and vocation-oriented. It required public institutions to have governing boards or university councils. These councils were intended to become responsible for overseeing the institutions, including setting institutional objectives and strategies, approving policies and guidelines for organizational structures, institutional finances, and facilities.^[19] However, they were not given authority to appoint rectors, nor to set tuition fees for academic programs.^[20] After 7 years of passing the law, it is now under revision to revisit HE governance and is claimed to resolve some fundamental problems still facing HE system in Vietnam.

3 Problems of HE governance in vietnam

Despite intended changes in HE governance as stated in HERA and the two education laws, the current practices of HE governance remain the same, state control.^[20] They are not sufficiently autonomous to operate and innovate. They are not able to make their own decisions relating to the organization, finance, staff, and research, in particular, the issues that are fundamentally important to them as academic communities.^[21]

Another governance challenge is the control of the line ministries of public universities which still exists till now. The control affects the stage budget distribution and the appointment of rectors, which in some ways refrains the university from being fully autonomous.^[20]

For private institutions of HE, they are autonomous to establish a governing board and financially autonomous. In other aspects, their autonomy is as limited as is the case for public ones. They rely entirely on tuition fees and have to comply with enrolment quotas and other government regulations.^[18]

The third challenge of Vietnamese HE system relates to the structure of Vietnamese HE. The types of organization, ownership, and functions of HEIs have become diversified. The size of the system expanded more than 10 times over the past 25 years. Notwithstanding such growth in a number of HEIs and student enrolments, the way HE is governed, has remained significantly unchanged over this period of

transition. The current model of HE governance in Vietnam has been discussed to be the most problematic areas in the sector^[20] even though more freedom has been given to HEIs recently,^[22] including the freedom to design academic programs except the required courses relating to the political ideology of the country.

In summary, Vietnam has gained initial steps to reform HE after almost two decades: Allowing market approach in education and attempting to change HE governance to decentralization. These have been legalized in Vietnam educational law and HE law. The government also developed a national HE reform from 2006 to 2020. However, at the implemental level, the results to date are very modest and at a piloting stage. Only 23 universities are piloting financial autonomy, and MoET and other line-ministries still control HE at large.

Vietnam's cultural values with a highly-centralised hierarchical system and a long history of central planning significantly slow attempts to reform higher education governance towards decentralisation. Even the QA system that was introduced to decentralize HE governance has been developed as another central tool.

4 Vietnam centralized QA system

MoET is the central manager of QA.^[23] MoET is responsible for issuing QA regulations, documents, and guidelines. These include standards for both institutions and programs at all levels as well as procedures and cycles for accreditation.

For QA agencies, although the current five QA agencies are not part of MoET's bodies, they are under the MoET's control. The ministry still plays a central role in issuing regulations and documents relating to the establishment of QA agencies, appointment of directors of these agencies, the training, and certification of quality evaluators. These agencies are part of public universities in Vietnam, except one under the umbrella of the Vietnam Association of Universities and Colleges. It can be argued that Vietnam has attempted to separate accreditation responsibilities from governmental organizations under the pressure of international and local experts and funding agencies.^[22,24] These agencies, however, are not fully independent from the government in nature. Otherwise, they have become extended arms of MoET in QA issues. Vietnam is believed to be an interesting case for other countries in the world because of the establishment of these agencies that are required to conduct accreditation activities in compliance with the government requirements.^[9]

5 Research objectives and methods

The introduction of QA approach into Vietnam as one of major objectives to reform HE governance after *doi moi* is believed to be fundamental to improve HE quality. However, Vietnam is a country belonging to Confucian heritage culture with large power distance. This is believed to have impact on the structure of this mechanism as well as how HE quality is assured. This also determines the success of transplanting a concept (a QA approach) from other countries to the Vietnamese setting, which this paper aims to explore.

The study applied a qualitative approach, seeking to explore QA practices at three institutions in Vietnam, applying in-depth interviews and document analysis as research methods of the study. Three universities offering similar undergraduate programs, business English, were chosen as three cases in this study. The universities were selected based on frame factors suggested by Hopkin.^[25] As a result, University of Education as a mature university, Open University as evolving, and Marketing University as embryonic joined this research. These are pseudonyms of the surveyed institutions.

Four academic leaders, nine QA practitioners, and 23 academics of the Business English Programmes voluntarily participated in the study. Academic leaders were selected as deans and heads of academic programs. QA practitioners joined the study because their positions likely allow them to provide rich sources of information on institutional QA. The selection of academic participants varied across the three universities. Purposive sampling was applied at Marketing and Open Universities, considering academics' genders, age and experience, and employment's status (tenured and guest) to ensure maximum variation sampling. Snowballing strategy was applied at University of Education. The data collected were analyzed at each university and then compared to recognize common and/or contrastive themes for QA practices across universities.

6 Results

6.1 MoET's Version of QA

Participants were divided in the way they perceived how quality was assured at the three universities. QA practitioners reported differently to what academics shared about how quality was assured at the departmental level.

QA staff members at the three universities all mentioned three activities their universities conducted to comply with the new policy from the government relating to QA. The first activity was institutional self-study, which was believed to respond to Decision No. 65/2007/QĐ-BGDĐT. This decision promulgated the regulation of criteria to self-evaluate HEIs. The second activity was the formation of a QA division, leading to an addition of QA function to the existing office at the three universities with some QA specialists nominated. The number of QA specialists was varied across the three cases, from three to four persons. This was done in response to Decision No. 76/2007/QĐ-BGDĐT by the MoET. The third QA activity discussed was a student survey on teaching performance. It was carried out to implement the Guideline No. 2754/BGDĐT- NGCBLGD, another requirement from the MoET. These reported activities were conducted in isolation from teaching and learning activities, hence, attracted little attention from the wider academic communities.

Academics participating in this study had little information to share about the three reported activities by QA staff members. They were asked about how quality was assured at their departments.

6.2 QA practices at the departmental level

6.2.1 Compliance with national regulations in everything

As regard to policies and regulations relating to aspects in designing academic programs, staff recruitment, teaching and research, and student assessment, almost all participants agreed that their universities and departments complied with national regulations. Some were able to name the regulations, and they were mainly persons at the middle level of leadership. The others were told that their departments and the institutions were in compliance with government regulations, including the framework for designing academic programs, criteria for staff recruitment and recruiting examination, academic salary and appraisal, as well as national regulations for student assessment.

6.2.2 Limited autonomy in designing academic programs

For program development, national regulations and frameworks were believed somehow to be in conflict with the aspirations of the three departments to develop

their own programs. Compliance with the framework was checked by academic affairs offices in all three cases, and in consequence, the departments all felt they lacked academic autonomy to design their programs. The general education stage, part of the framework reported as compulsory for HEIs in Vietnam, received little support from the academic communities of Marketing University and Open University which include courses of Marxism -Leninism and Ho Chi Minh Ideology.

6.2.3 Dual purposes of syllabus

Syllabus design served dual purposes at Marketing University and University of Education. Syllabi were first designed as an attachment and appendix to the programs for review at the national level as symbolic compliance. With this purpose, the dean at Marketing University developed course syllabi for the programs, and the head of the program at University of Education nominated several academics to undertake this task. Academics at Marketing University were unaware of such syllabi. Some academics designed their own syllabus to teach, and some did not and reported they taught based on required textbooks. Academics at University of Education used the syllabi as a reference for their courses because of the belief that syllabi required adjustment to match individual class situations. At Open University, syllabi for courses of academic programs were designed not only for program approval but also for academics to follow. These arrangements at Open University for common syllabi appeared to reduce the reported feeling of “ticking the box” or creating “compliance syllabi” required by the MoET.

The reported practices of syllabus design at Marketing University and University of Education were not found to be linked to the programs’ objectives. Further, without a shared perspective on the objectives of the programs, academics, and academic leaders of the three programs were divided in the ways they viewed their programs, specifically over whether they saw themselves as involved in a language program or a business program.

6.2.4 Cronyism and inbreeding in academic recruitment

Another shared theme at the three departments was the tendency of cronyism and inbreeding in academic recruitment. At Marketing University, relationship and “goi gam” culture (those involved in recruiting examination was asked to pass certain applicants)

distorted the quality of academic staff recruited. The academic viewed the process of recruitment as formalism because a person becomes an academic staff thanks to his/her relation with “big” persons regardless of their actual competence. This appeared to challenge the equity and transparency of the examination. Similarly, relationships and networking between existing academics were used for recruiting new academic staffs at University of Education. Offers of teaching positions were greatly influenced by personal relations. One director at University of Education claimed that the relation-based recruitment prevented the institution from recruiting qualified academics.

On the contrary, at Open University, inbreeding was believed to promote a sense of attachment to the institution. One academic argued that she preferred excellent graduates to be recruited to outsiders. She believed that alumni-staff tended to be more attached and committed to the university (TTB3). This belief was shared by two academics cum alumni of the department. They indicated willingness to work hard for the department and remained in the teaching profession because they were alumni of the department.

The findings clearly show that if multiple levels of relationship continue to dominate the recruiting practices, they will continue to distort the quality of academic staff. The relationship between a sense of attachment and the quality of academic staff as found in Open University requires further research.

6.2.5 Teaching from the textbooks and limited research outputs

Although academics reported their autonomy in pedagogical decisions across the three cases, common practices involved setting academics the task of teaching a course with a predetermined required textbook, followed by allowing the academic a choice of teaching strategies and assessment instruments.

Academics at Marketing University and University of Education were autonomous in using extra materials and other textbooks to teach if the required ones were either too difficult or too easy for their students, without intervention from the departments. One academic said, “After becoming a full-time academic, we are “free” (from department supervision)” (TTA1). Without shared academic values and norms in teaching, with time constraints and heavy workloads, quality of teaching at Marketing University and University of Education rested largely in the hands of academic staff. In

contrast, academics at Open University were required to comply with common syllabi with required textbooks and common tests. Further control from the department involved classroom observations. It was reported that one academic using another textbook to teach in a course at Open University, various measures were conducted to examine the case including analysis of student performance at the end of the course to compare with other students learning from the required textbook. The final conclusion is that all academics had to teach the required textbooks even if their students had better performance learning from different textbooks.

Academic staff at all three departments appeared to teach from required textbooks for individual courses or from the books they selected regardless of the differing autonomy.

As regard to research, it was reported to be very weak and limited at all three universities, though different contexts suggested different perceptions of research and attitudes to research. Improvement was manifest at one university (Open University) because of “sticks,” in the form of policy, but that improvement was limited to an increase in volume. No sound and comprehensive mechanisms to encourage academics to do research, or to truly improve research outputs, were found.

6.2.6 Problematic academic autonomy in student assessment

Academics believed they were granted sufficient autonomy in deciding what and how to assess their students. However, the autonomy enjoyed by academics at Marketing University and University of Education was reported to contribute to the perceived absence of impartiality in assessing students because of the belief that the departments did not have shared rubrics in student assessment:

- Many academics tolerate in assessment, and their test papers tend to be easy. Therefore, students get better scores (TTC5).
- There are disparities in test papers and marking among academics (TTA9).

A lack of knowledge in testing and assessment was articulated to affect the quality of assessment. This was significant at Marketing University:

- Academics could have some pedagogical knowledge, yet limited testing knowledge, which is important in assuring quality (TTA6).

In contrast, academics at Open University believed impartiality were assured through common tests.

Academic perceptions of assessment were found to inform their assessment strategies. The perception of checking attendance for progressive scores, passing students because of tolerance in marking, and regarding progressive scores as encouraging marks divided academics, and leading to the formation of two “types” of academics: “Easy” and “strict” academics.

The central control and government policy played a limited role in an attempt to change the legacy of testing practices. Instead, their role focused on the mechanics of assessment. Reliability, validity, and equity of assessment were largely reliant on wider academic communities: On their perceptions, responsibilities, experience, and competence. These led to large disparities in impartiality. As a result, shared standards and/or rubrics were perceived to be necessary to reduce bias in assessment, particularly at Marketing University and University of Education.

6.2.7 Intrinsic motivation in the choice and pursuit of the teaching profession

The legacy of the concept that teaching was a noble career with special social status in a Confucian society shaped similar motivations across the three universities, with intrinsic career values cited as determinants in the choice of teaching as a career. When other extrinsic factors, including national pay structure and promotion schemes, failed to compensate and/or motivate academics, students’ respect, love, and success were reported to be returns for academic commitment and dedication to teaching. However, the level of satisfaction with student love, success, and respect varied at the three universities. Among the three departments, the quality of graduates was perceived less negatively at University of Education, just acceptable at Open University, and poor at Marketing University. Most academics at University of Education and some at Open University articulated that the reputation of being academics enabled them to find another job elsewhere “easier” to earn more money. Student respect, love, and success could possibly be indications for evaluating academic performance, whereas the motivation to work elsewhere may be detrimental to teaching engagement.

6.2.8 The introduction of formal system for student feedback

The three universities reported they complied with the MoET’s requirement to survey students’ evaluation on teaching performance at the institutional level.

However, the concept of using student feedback to evaluate academics was believed to be primarily a western concept and require more research before implication to the Vietnamese context.

QA staff members were responsible for designing this at their universities. They reported various challenges, including the simplicity, equity, and validity of a questionnaire so that the results and findings of a survey could be interpreted in required areas for academics to improve their teaching. Confusion is a common feeling at the three universities on the use of the results. Consequently, waste of time and money was reported. University of Education, therefore, decided to stop implementing the survey the following years.

According to academics and academic leaders, such a survey of student feedback was necessary to enable teaching reflection for improvement (Marketing University), program evaluation and something necessary to shape the department's decision, and inviting a guest academic (University of Education). However, they expressed concerns over the possibility of using student feedback in Vietnam. Identified values that had an impact on the feasibility of student surveys were culturally conditioned: The special social status of the teaching career in Confucian culture, with the mindset that students should not evaluate their academics. Strategies for seeking students' opinions to evaluate academics were regarded as important because of the belief that this should be culturally and ethically appropriate. Ethically, anonymity was required to collect student feedback. Culturally, the special status of academics and rationales of a survey needed to be considered:

- The questionnaire should not be designed in a way that is inappropriate to Vietnamese values and culture (TTC5).

7 Discussion

7.1 Compliance-driven practices and fundamental challenges for quality education in Vietnam

The findings of this study indicate that HE quality was centrally assured in Vietnam, and HE governance in Vietnam is still centralized.^[12,20,26] The three universities reported compliance with the government regulations and documents in aspects under investigation in this study: Program development, academic recruitment, teaching and research, student assessment, and student feedback, as well as institutional accreditation.

The limited autonomy of individual universities has led to some problematic practices as reported in this study relating to quality of academic programs under investigation, confusion, and division among academics about the objectives of the three academic programs, quality of academics recruited, the alignment of academics' teaching from the textbooks with the objectives of the programs, limited research capacity of academic staff, student assessment, and teaching heavy workload. These issues were discussed previously in other studies in Vietnam.^[20,27]

The centrally imposed obligation in Vietnam could only promote a culture that developed coping strategies for compliance, rather than improvement at local level. Recently, the framework for academic programs had been repealed in an attempt to grant substantive autonomy to institutions. Although the abolishment of the framework in principle ensures the possibility that individual institutions may take this opportunity to reform programs, there is little hope for an authentic reform because the two national universities who had been granted such autonomy did not take that opportunity.^[28] This has resulted in "a type of regulated autonomy ... that they were still 'dancing in a cage' even though their shackles have been removed."^[29] Substantive autonomy is not sufficient for a university. HEIs are often not willing to be accountable for what is designed and planned centrally.^[30] As Jamil argued, "It is neither realistic nor fair to expect HEIs that enjoy limited autonomy to be fully accountable for their performance."^[30]

The significant finding of this study is the addition of institutional accreditation which has limited impact on QA practices at the departmental level.

7.2 Institutional accreditation: Another central system

The results of this study indicate that the introduction of QA approach in Vietnam is considered as a new centralized policy adding to the way HE is governed in Vietnam. Another unit or division was created to comply with this policy introduction and has limited impact on governance reform of HE. The promulgation of the national standards for quality accreditation had not changed traditional methods to assess quality at any of the three institutions and nor, evidently, had it improved quality.

QA practitioners had little to share about the way quality was assured at the departmental level, and

academics were unsure of the three reported QA activities at the institutional level. Although they were all in a position to be able to discuss the introduction of a formal system of student feedback, their different positions have led to a discussion of different aspects related to this tool. Being one of the four key aspects to be considered for HE reform in Vietnam, the QA approach alone is unable to make any significant change for the system. Instead, it has developed to be another centralized tool for neither as an accountability nor improvement mechanism so far.

7.3 Confucian heritage culture and decentralization

The decision to shift to decentralization, to confer legal autonomy to HEIs seems to be significant for the Vietnamese government in attempts to improve HE quality as stated in many policy statements. Accountability accompanying increased autonomy underpins this decision. The process of decentralization, however, is slow and confronts implicit resistance due to the inertia of the entire system that has been under the central control for a long time. Decentralization also seems to be contradictory to the value of larger power distance in a Confucian country, which perhaps has led to the absence of clear action plans at the government level for a reform to happen.^[18] As Nguyen and Mcinnis concluded, the cultural differences are no doubt an obstacle to the implementation of QA in education from a western perspective.^[31]

7.4 Student surveys and Confucian values

The use of student evaluation of teaching was widely resisted in participating institutions. The resistance takes roots from a value that academics have a special social image in the Vietnamese society,^[31] meaning there is lack of confidence at both the national and institutional levels to make student opinion a criterion for judging academic performance. Two cultural factors might be critical to the delay in officially using student feedback to evaluate academic performance: Academics' vulnerability to criticism and the fear of upsetting the student academic hierarchical order. Adapting a western approach for the student evaluation of teaching in the Vietnamese context remains a challenge, though research participants believed that student feedback on teaching performance could be useful in improving the quality of teaching. Assurance methods of teaching quality require a different culturally responsive approach to collecting student

feedback on academic performance, perhaps for teaching improvement rather than as an evaluating mandate.

One administrator believed it would be culturally inappropriate to enact a policy requiring students to evaluate academics. Students' love and respect for individual academics were regarded as the best reward for academics' commitment to the teaching career as reported in this study. In Vietnam, the boundary between academics and students is very important so that student evaluations on teaching performance are likely to be problematically unreliable. If students' love and respect for academics are regarded as the best reward of the teaching profession, educational managers, and QA practitioners could possibly develop a measure that necessarily make this explicitly to encourage teaching improvement. Evaluation based on evidence of student learning could be an answer, rather than asking students about the academic. Academic effectiveness should be about student learning, which is at heart of any attempt to improve the quality of an institution.

8 Conclusion

8.1 Real and full autonomy: A way forward for quality improvement

It is evident in this study that although all three institutions complied with national regulations and requirements in assuring quality, fundamental issues have been identified at the grassroots level that influences negatively the quality of their education provision. It is urgent for Vietnam to speed up the process of granting real and full autonomy to HEIs so that they can be fully accountable to quality in the current Vietnamese socio-political context as stated in HE Law and HERA, rather than just accepting the idea of autonomous universities and having a QA agency that is independent of the state in name only as found in Madden's study.^[15] As other countries in Southeast Asia, Vietnam has established the relationship with the regional organization to reinforce "its ability to walk the line between neo-liberal policies and state-centric practices."^[15] Vietnam, however, still supports a "market arbiter" role to remain its statist values^[15] while other countries in East Asia support the "market partner" role of the government.^[32]

8.2 Confucian ways of quality improvement

The starting point for university top leaders could be a call for a strategic plan to reform teaching and learning

at the program level. In other words, they should take opportunities for aspects that they are granted autonomy to improve the quality of programs offered with dedication and commitment to quality improvement as seen in the case of Open University. Such a plan should leave room for negotiation on conflicts (if any) with Confucian values in Vietnam as found in this study and other studies.^[15,33]

Assuring a delicate balance between reforms in governance and QA importing from other countries and the home cultural values are an extremely challenging job. Common lack of commitment and resistance from the grassroots level has been found in this study as well.

References

- [1] Bigalke TW, Neubauer DE, editors. *Quality and Public Good: An Inseparable Link*, In *Quality and the Public Good*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; 2009. p. 1-14.
- [2] Singh M. Quality assurance in higher education: Which pasts to build on, what futures to contemplate? *Qual High Educ* 2010;16:189-94.
- [3] Green D, editor. *What is Quality in Higher Education? Concepts, Policy and Practice*, in *What is Quality in Higher Education*. Buckingham: Society for Research in to Higher Education and Open University Press; 1994. p. 3-20.
- [4] Homburg V, Pollitt C, Thield SV, editors. *Introduction*, In *the New Public Management in Europe: Adaptation and Alternatives*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan; 2007. p. 1-9.
- [5] Pham TL. *Higher Education Governance in Vietnam*. U S A: University Action, the State and Changing Relationships; 2013.
- [6] Held D, McGrew AG. *Globalization/Anti-Globalization: Beyond the Great Divide*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity; 2007.
- [7] George E. Positioning higher education for the knowledge based economy. *High Educ* 2006;52:589-610.
- [8] El-Khawas E. Accountability and quality assurance. In: Forest JJ, Altbach PG, editors. *New Issues for Academic Inquiry in International Handbook for Higher Education*. Vol. 18. Dordrecht: Springer; 2006. p. 23-37.
- [9] Niedermeier F, Pohlenz P. *State of Affairs and Development Needs-Higher Education Quality Assurance in the ASEAN Region*. Indonesia: DAAD; 2016.
- [10] Nguyen PM, Terlouw C, Pilot A. Cooperative learning vs Confucian heritage culture's collectivism: Confrontation to reveal some cultural conflicts and mismatch. *Asia Eur J* 2005;3:403-19.
- [11] Tran TT. Is the learning approach of students from the Confucian heritage culture problematic? *Educ Res Policy Pract* 2013;12:57-65.
- [12] Hayden M, Lam QT. Institutional autonomy for higher education in Vietnam. *High Educ Res Dev* 2007;26:73-85.
- [13] Pham TN. The higher education reform Agenda. A vision for 2020. In: Harman G, Hayden M, editors. *Reforming Higher Education in Vietnam*. Amsterdam: Springer; 2010. p. 51-64.
- [14] Hofstede G. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. The United State of America: The McGraw-Hill Companies Inc.; 1997.
- [15] Madden M. Walking the line: Quality assurance policy development and implementation in Vietnam. *High Educ* 2014;67:91-104.
- [16] George E. Higher education in Vietnam: Education in transition to a new era? In: Nghi PT, Harman G, Hayden M, editors. *Reforming Higher Education in Vietnam: Challenges and Priorities*. London: Springer; 2010. p. 1986-98.
- [17] Hayden M, Lam QT. A 2020 vision for Vietnam. *Int High Educ* 2006;44:11-3.
- [18] Dao VK, Hayden M. Reforming the governance of higher education in Vietnam. In: Harman G, Hayden M, Nghi PT, editors. *Reforming Higher Education in Vietnam: Challenges and Priorities*. Amsterdam: Springer; 2010. p. 129-42.
- [19] Higher Education Law. Available from: <http://www.vanban.chinhphu.vn/portal/page/portal/chinhphu/hethongvanban?clAssid=1&page=2&mode=detail&documentid=163054>. [Last accessed on 2018 Jul 15].
- [20] Le TK, Hayden M. The road ahead for the higher education sector in Vietnam. *J Int Comp Educ* 2017;6:77-89.
- [21] Dao VK, Hayden M. Higher education governance reform in Vietnam. In: Joshi KM, Paivandi S, editors. *Global Higher Education: Issues in Governance*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation; 2015. p. 315-38.
- [22] Do TN, Pham TH, Nguyen KD. Quality assurance in the Vietnamese higher education: A top-down approach and compliance-driven QA. In: Shah M, editor. *The Rise of Quality Assurance in Asian Higher Education*. 1st ed. India: Chandos Publishing; 2017.
- [23] MoET, *The Report of the Development of Higher Education in Vietnam, the Solutions for Assuring and Enhancing Quality of Education*. Hanoi, Vietnam; 2009. Available from: <http://www.moet.gov.vn/?page=1.19&view=1736>. [Last accessed on 2011 Oct 30].
- [24] Nguyen HC. Some achievements in Vietnamese higher education accreditation and a plan for future implementation. *Natl Acad Educ Manag* 2017;9:7-14.
- [25] Hopkin AG. Frame factors and a quality assurance agency in an embryonic higher education system. *Qual High Educ* 2004;3:181-95.
- [26] Tran ND, Nguyen TT, Nguyen MT. The standard of quality for HEIs in Vietnam: A step in the right direction? *Qual Assur Educ* 2011;19:130-40.
- [27] Harman K, Nguyen TN. Reforming teaching and learning in Vietnam's higher education system. In: Harman G, Hayden M, Nghi PT, editors. *Reforming Higher Education in Vietnam*. London, New York: Springer; 2010.
- [28] Hayden M, Lam QT. Vietnam's higher education system. In: Nghi PT, Harman G, editors. *Reforming Higher Education in Vietnam: Challenges and Priorities*. Amsterdam: Spinger; 2010. p. 15-30.
- [29] Yang R, Vidovich L, Currie J. "Dancing in a cage": Changing autonomy in Chinese higher education. *High Educ* 2007;54:575-92.
- [30] Jamil S. *The Growing Accountability Agenda: Progress or Mixed Blessing?* Presented at the OECD's Outcomes of Higher Education: Quality, Relevance and Impact Conference, Paris, France; 2008.
- [31] Nguyen KD, Mcinnis C. The possibility of using student

- evaluations in Vietnamese higher education. *Qual High Educ* 2002;8:151-8.
- [32] Postiglione G. East Asian knowledge systems: Driving ahead amid borderless higher education. In: Chapman D, Cummings W, Postiglione G, editors. *Crossing Borders in East Asian Higher Education*. Vol. 27. Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre, Hong Kong University; 2011. p. 25-46.
- [33] Huang YS, Asghar A. Science education reform in Confucian learning cultures: Policymakers' perspectives on policy and practice in Taiwan. *Asia Pac Sci Educ* 2016;2016:2.