

Review Some Issues of Quality Assurance, Quality Accreditation for Higher Education Institutions and Reality of Vietnam

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Abstract Currently, quality assurance and quality accreditation are the very important tasks and the top concern for higher education institutions, because universities can achieve the goal to meet the needs of learners, the community and society on the educational and training quality to enhance the position of the university through quality assurance activities. Standards of quality assurance & quality accreditation are the best measurement for the level of quality education services. Quality assurance can help detect limited issues to adjust and overcome before implementing. The application of quality assurance and quality accreditation is the secret behind the success of most higher education institutions in the world and therefore the quality assurance and quality accreditation are concerned by universities in Vietnam in general and local universities in particular, especially universities in the most disadvantaged regions of Vietnam. This study discusses some of the theoretical issues of quality assurance and quality accreditation, the relationship between quality assurance and quality accreditation with the objectives, quality level and application of higher education in Vietnam, and at the same time provides some recommendations to help increase the application of quality assurance and quality accreditation in higher education institutions in Vietnam.

Keywords: *quality assurance, quality accreditation, higher education institutions, labor market, output standards*

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1. Introduction

Recently, Vietnamese higher education institutions (HEI) have considered quality assurance and quality accreditation as a seasoned philosophy to provide qualified human resources to meet global development, and at the same time meet the needs of local and regional labor markets in many different fields. In order to meet these needs, it is necessary to have management solutions to help Vietnamese higher education institutions (HEI) develop their resources, this is the unique way to ensure growth and development of higher education in Vietnam, it can be implemented through the application of a Total Quality Management - TQM. The quality assurance and quality accreditation system helps universities face problems by resolving activities in accordance with the "input-implementation process- output-feedback" chain, from that compared with regulatory standards and facilitate competition to achieve the highest possible level. The continuous assessment and accreditation is very important because it will motivate higher education institutions to regularly recheck their programs, processes and activities to find strengths and weaknesses before

implementing the improvement based on objective data, not based on conjecture, speculation to ensure the final goal which is the development of higher education institutions to serve the community well. The labor market is an important external environment for higher education institutions because it absorbs graduated students trained by higher education institutions [1]. During the recent time, the percentage of Vietnamese students graduating from universities without jobs is highly increasing, so, the satisfaction of the labor market and graduated students with jobs is the final target and it is also very important for the existence of higher education institutions in the world with many changes.

In Vietnam, there is only a few (07/236) universities are in the top 500 of Asia's leading universities, none of them are in the top 1000 in the world (according to the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) Education Organization's announcement, UK 2018). There are many reasons for the low rank of Vietnamese Higher Education Institution on the world higher education map, which is the limitation of the state management in higher education; the head of higher education institutions has weak governance ability; The resources for development of universities are still low, especially for local universities and universities in difficult areas of Vietnam such as the Northwest, Central

Highlands and Southwestern regions and one of the causes which has significant impacts is that higher education institutions are not really pay attention to the quality assurance and quality accreditation. Meanwhile, with the fact that in Vietnam recently, there are many educational services provided by higher education institutions with the same form and content, there are even many organizations that are expected to provide original services and also strong state that it can compete with others in the world market. This determination is commendable, but this competition will certainly not feasible unless quality control systems (QC) and quality assurance are fully and seriously applied. This is the reason why it needs to apply the quality assurance and quality accreditation system to Vietnamese higher education institutions and we believe that they are two strategies that can help broaden the scope and capacity of universities to a higher level, improve and increase resources and create motivation for growth and development. The initial important point of this study is from a hard effort to write a self-assessment report of a higher education institution in the Northwestern region of Vietnam, thereby it is essential to study about quality assurance and quality accreditation in universities and give some recommends for Vietnamese higher education institutions. The comparative and realization the concept of quality management, quality assurance and quality accreditation system will contribute to achieving the goals of Vietnamese universities, in order to improve performance and provide better services to keep up with the development of the university system in the world. And at the same time, it will have significant contribution to the socio-economic development of the region and the country. It is also expected that it will provide more information for researchers in this new field.

2. Studying Content

2.1. Quality Assurance in Higher Education Institutions

Quality assurance is a modern concept in TQM- Total Quality Management and has now become a solution for organizations to find ways to develop and improve labor performance in general. Total quality-TQ is part of TQM, in the educational field, TQ is implementing a set of standards and procedures to continuously improve educational products, and it refers to the Technical specifications, expected characteristics of educational products and processes, operations to be able to achieve the specifications of this product. Quality assurance includes all activities related to assessing and improving the value of one (or more) standards in the implementation process and is the assurance of the organization that their provided products or services meet the accepted quality standards. TQ is part of quality management, providing society and the community with the belief that they will met the quality requirements [2,3].

Modern concepts of TQM in educational institutions have shown that quality assurance in universities is a continuous process, an organized activity to measure quality according to criteria and standards. It aims to analyze the identified limitations and shortcomings and

implement the necessary actions to improve, develop and measure quality. Thus, quality assurance is a set of activities performed by organizations according to predefined criteria for products and is regularly evaluated. Quality assurance always aims to minimize mistakes that lead to failure, ensure higher education institutions always develop both in academic and governance so that it can provide quality products to meet the labor market.

There is a difference between the two terms Quality Control (QC) and Quality Assurance. The Quality Control is a process aimed at products or services to perform a specific action with products or services after consumers consider it carefully and find that the quality is not according to the requirements. This may lead to the denial or disposal of these products or services, or it may identify the cause of the failure and make recommendations for correction. Meanwhile, quality assurance is a procedure that is implemented before a product or service is formed and delivered to consumers. It aims to provide customers with quality products as required. Thus, QC is part of quality management, concentrating on meeting quality requirements, while QA is part of quality management, concentrating on proving that quality requirements will be implemented by the organization [3].

2.2. Quality Assurance Indicators in Universities

The quality assurance indicators in higher education institutions can be summarized as follows [4]: (1) Strategic management: This indicator evaluates the establishment and strategic management of a higher education institution. The strategic manager should determine the status of higher education institutions, consider the advantages and disadvantages, and thereby establish a strategic plan including the vision, mission and educational goals to orient the organization's activities in short or long term. (2) Quality management method: This indicator assesses the ability of educational institutions to provide services to meet the expectations of the community and society (workers, learners, labor market ...). (3) Marketing and customer services: This indicator identifies the needs of society, the trend of the labor market and learners to provide effective and appropriate training and educational services. (4) Human resource development: This indicator includes the continuous training of human resources to perform the job effectively and with high productivity. (5) Equal opportunity: This indicator determines that equal opportunity must be followed between educational institutions and labor markets to increase the satisfaction of employees and units resulting in improved productivity and labor quality. (6) Health and safety: Ensuring a healthy and safe environment for all employees, students and beneficiaries is a necessary indicator of educational institutions. (7) Contact management: This indicator provides educational institutions to meet the needs of students, employee and transmit information at horizontal and vertical levels. (8) Consulting services: This indicator focuses on the organization's governance activities to determine the different needs of learners (psychological, academic and social) and how to achieve. (9) Program design and implementation: The learning program should

be created on the requirements of the labor market as well as the students' needs. (10) Certificate of ranking: This indicator confirms that students will be eligible for a qualification which is suitable for their capability and qualifications due to their capability and qualifications.

The integration of all the above criteria and indicators into a set of key performance indicators (KPIs) is a scientific method for quality assurance in universities to achieve long-term goals with expected to create the high quality products meet the needs of society, labor market and especially obtain the customer satisfaction.

2.3. Quality Accreditation

This is one of the activities aimed at promoting higher education institutions through accreditation to upgrade programs and resources. Universities often create their reputation through accreditation certificates accredited and affirmed their quality assurance for their output when supplied to the labor market. Educational theorists suggest many different concepts on accreditation, but all agree that accreditation is a scientific event of an organization aimed at progress and help upgrade educational institutions and training programs of those institutions. From that, accreditation in this meaning is the same monitoring and legal process, providing accreditation certificates to an educational institution or training program to indicate that the organization has specific criteria for quality of education. Therefore, the accreditation in education is the recognition of an educational program or organization, which has achieved the required standards to ensure the activities and good service to the community and society [5].

There are two types of educational accreditation: "institutional accreditation" and "specialized or program accreditation". (1) Institutional accreditation is according to specific criteria on the adequacy of facilities, organizations, employees, the provision of academic services and student support, curriculum, achievement levels of students, academics and other components of educational institutions. Institutional accreditation is also an assessment of the entire organization and is focused on verifying administrative policies, procedures and stability. (2) Program accreditation is an evaluation program to ensure that the quality of these programs is suitable with the level of certificates issued to learners.

Accreditation is carried out by accrediting agencies based on specific criteria with the demonstration that the organization has met the minimum standards and therefore will be issued the certificate for a specific period of time. This recognition is a guarantee of the organization's *output quality*, thus bringing it a reputation both domestically and internationally. The importance of quality accreditation and regular accreditation arises from its positive effects on many objects: (1) For society: that higher education institutions are trying to achieve the social requirement level. (2) For learners: that educational institutions are providing them with the educational content, knowledge and experience that they need. Graduated at this educational institution, learners have suitable qualifications and abilities to serve for the work. (3) For employers: This is the basis for recognizing training

certificates and making the right decisions in the use of employees. (4) For the competition: The quality accreditation will raise the competitive spirit of educational institutions by directing the educational institutions' attention to the factors to improve the higher education institutions with higher quality. The quality accreditation and regular accreditation of universities is very important, but more importantly is that the development is only considered to be completed when the educational quality assurance of the educational institution's output lead to human resource development in local, regional or international [6].

Quality accreditation, improvement and continuous assessment are the important principles that higher education institutions seek to achieve in all activities to ensure the output standards and are the key to the success of the educational process; this evaluation is a continuous improvement cycle. The nature of continuous improvement is in the participation of all employees in the organization, process, products or services improvement by applying creative competencies to related issues and daily work. The implementation of continuous improvement is called the PDCA cycle or the Deming cycle (Figure 1) [7] including four steps: (1) Stage P (Plan) including the analysis of the current situation, Data collection, identification of target, scope, resources to implement, time and method of achieving goals. (2) Stage D (Do): Putting plans into action to create products or services provided to customers. (3) Stage C (Check): Based on the plan to check, determine whether the test or process is operating as intended, if it satisfies the customer, is there any need to modify, or should it be canceled or not, the test will evaluate the effectiveness of the whole system, the management process from which to build test data to plan the resolution. (4) Stage A (Act) includes necessary actions that focus on solving any problems developed during the accreditation, through the results obtained to implement the overcome process for potential or inappropriate causes and improve products to meet customers' requirements. When all of these stages are completed and fully met, improvements are considered to be standardized, but when the labor market changes or has the new elements, all standardized works, processes, products or services will continues to improve, so the PCDA cycle will be repeated so that the product can always suitable and meets the requirements of the labor market.

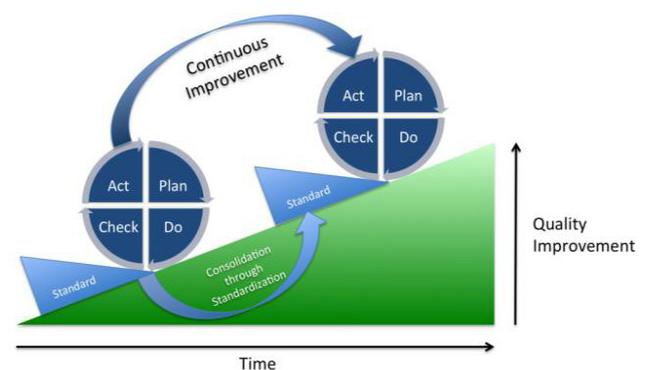


Figure 1. Deming cycle

2.4. International Quality Accreditation Organizations and Reality in Vietnam

The general trend of employers recently is to find employee working from accredited educational institutions, this is a proof for the quality of human resources training quality of educational institutions. Educational institutions seek accreditation from accreditation councils to certify their competencies and recommend to customers are employers. In higher education, accredited universities have more advantages to provide qualified employees recognized by employers. In the world, employers always want to recruit trained workers from a quality education and international accreditation is strong evidence to higher education institutions in training, scientific research.

2.4.1. Some International Accreditation Organizations

United States: According to a study [5], in the United States, educational accreditation is conducted primarily by private nonprofit member associations, the legitimacy of which is confirmed through recognition by the United States Department of Education (USDE), the Higher Education Accreditation Council (CHEA), or both of them. USDE and CHEA do not directly conduct the accreditation but recognize accreditation organizations. USDE's recognition is mandatory for accrediting organizations that perform accreditation of higher education institutions. CHEA's recognition brings legitimacy to academic accreditation organizations, helping to confirm the position of higher education institutions and their programs in the national higher education community [5].

United Kingdom: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is an independent organization responsible for managing and advising on U.K. standards and educational quality. Since 2011, the QAA has been appointed by the U.K. Border Agency (UKBA) to monitor higher education institutions to allow them to register as "trusted donors" as prescribed in UKBA Level 4. These qualified educational institutions are entitled to recruit foreign students to the United Kingdom [8].

Asia-Pacific: Currently, there are many countries in the Asia-Pacific region, such as Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Korea, China, Australia, India, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, Mongolia, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, and Vietnam, which already have quality accreditation agencies [9]. The earliest was the Hong Kong Academic Accreditation Council (HKCAA), which is an agency established under the HKCAA Ordinance 1990 [10]. Currently, the Asia-Pacific region has 18 operating national quality assurance organizations which have different functions or tasks, but the most common task of these organizations is the training program quality accreditation of higher education institutions in their country.

2.4.2. The Reality of Accreditation of Universities in Vietnam

Vietnam: Vietnam currently has one state management organization for quality assurance and quality accreditation, which is the Department of Quality Management under the Ministry of Education and

Training; five organizations carrying out independent quality accreditation tasks, including two Quality Accreditation Centers within Hanoi National University, and Ho Chi Minh National University; one Center of Quality Accreditation in the Association of Vietnamese Universities and Colleges; and two Centers of Quality Accreditation directly within the universities Da Nang University and Vinh University.

Currently in Vietnam, there are a few universities that have made efforts to change to achieve international recognition and have demonstrated training capacity, pre-social scientific research, and value to employers; therefore, these universities have been recognized with accreditation from international organizations. Four accredited universities have been recognized by the HCERES High Level Research and Higher Education Council; these are Hanoi University of Science And Technology, Danang University of Science and Technology, Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology, and National University of Civil Engineering. Three universities have been accredited according to AUN-QA standards (Asian University Network Quality Assurance): University of Science-VNU, Hanoi; International University of Ho Chi Minh City National University and Polytechnic University of Ho Chi Minh City National University. As of April 2019, Vietnam has 121/236 universities (excluding universities of the armed forces and foreign elements) and 3 colleges that are accredited by the Vietnam Center for Quality Accreditation, having achieved the quality assurance standard [11]; many universities are currently completing their applications to register for accreditation, including universities in the Northwest, Central Highlands, and Southwestern regions, which are the regions of the country with the most difficult socio-economic situations.

Seeking the recognition of accreditation organizations is a positive phenomenon in the Vietnamese university system; however, from a different perspective, quality accreditation is not a real need. Vietnamese universities find ways to achieve recognition by quality accreditation in order to ensure the criteria and standards set by the state management agencies on education, but these standards are not really aimed at the needs of learners and labor market. Thus, the desire of Vietnamese universities is to be awarded national or international accreditation (for big universities with strong traditions and resources), and this aspiration has pushed many Vietnamese higher education institutions to seek accreditation from accreditation councils at any cost, including universities in difficult socio-economic regions or universities in regions with good socio-economic conditions but with limited resources and governance. This leads to the quality of quality assurance activities being not really sustainable; the quality assurance is thus only temporary, and it certainly only exists for a very short time without frequent improvements and resource enhancement or good management and administration capabilities of the organization.

However, we believe that seeking to achieve recognition of quality assurance by meeting international standards such as the Ministry of Quality Assurance Standards the evaluation standards for new higher education establishments by the Ministry of Education and

Training, issued according to AUN-QA standards with 25 standards and 111 criteria of quality assurance [12] will be useful for higher education institutions in Vietnam today and in the future, although this standard has many criteria that are not really suitable for the situation of higher education in Vietnam. Moreover, all quality assurance efforts by higher education institutions in Vietnam require determination of the whole system. Comprehensive quality management, quality assurance, and current quality management are indispensable trends in education in Vietnam and all over the world, so it is necessary to equip the new generation of leaders, the heads of higher education institutions, and state management agencies in education with knowledge on quality assurance work so that they can understand and acknowledge the essential importance of quality assurance and quality accreditation work. This is because in Vietnam, many local state managers, leaders, managers of higher education institutions, state managers of education, and the majority of people working in educational institutions have not understood quality assurance and consider the processes of quality assurance and quality accreditation or comprehensive quality management of educational institutions to be a waste of time, effort, and money.

In order to help the training and scientific research capacity of universities in Vietnam gradually approach that of universities in the Asia-Pacific region and the world, higher education in Vietnam needs to accelerate and quickly implement quality assurance and quality accreditation standards for the following reasons: (1) To establish integration and harmony in the university community at different levels, because all higher education institutions are tested and evaluated together according to a set of criteria issued by the Ministry of Education and Training based on the standards of AUN-QA. (2) In order to no longer have ambiguity about the quality objectives of leaders and people working in organizations in general and in higher education in particular, or to consider quality accreditation by state management agencies, not by individuals or the organization that they manage or work in. (3) To adjust in order to overcome, improve, invest resources, and change management to gradually increase the general quality of higher education institutions. (4) To identify strengths and weaknesses in the areas of operation and then develop plans to improve activities and processes, especially improving outputs. (5) For higher education institutions to receive feedback and evaluation from the labor market and to develop a plan to adjust strategies, improvements, and development. (6) To achieve customer satisfaction, a leading and desirable element of university training institutions. (7) To establish a level of cooperation and coordination between universities and the community, ensuring that the activities of universities must be associated with local socio-economic development, especially universities in disadvantaged localities such as the Northern mountainous areas, the Southwest region, and the Central Highlands. (8) To allow universities to be more proactive in deciding to participate in scientific subjects, projects, technology transfer, and the application of scientific advances to production, service provision, and community service.

2.4.3. Factors for Success of Quality Assurance and Quality Accreditation in Vietnamese Universities

In order to successfully implement quality assurance and be recognized by domestic and international accreditation organizations, Vietnamese universities (and those around the world in general) need to implement some of the following factors: (1) Promote a culture focusing on quality and accreditation among the employees of the organization; this can be achieved by raising community awareness of the value of quality so that the employee always wishes to achieve the highest efficiency of work. At present, the majority of leaders, managers, and employees do not really care about or appreciate the culture of quality, and there is ambiguity about the role and importance of a culture of quality and quality accreditation of output products of higher education institutions. (2) Introduce standards of competence, experience, and devotion, which are the unique criteria important in selecting leaders and managers of higher education institutions. (3) Develop plans for training and retraining of employees in the organization to understand evaluation, self-assessment, and assessment and have a serious attitude to assessment and self-assessment. (4) Have direct participation of the heads of units and departments in all processes and all activities of quality assurance and quality accreditation. (5) Study rules and regulations governing the work and realization of material resources and human resources of higher education institutions.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations for Quality Assurance and Quality Accreditation for Vietnamese Universities

Study results of this article

- Quality Assurance and Quality Accreditation are very important for higher education institutions because they can help universities in Vietnam achieve goals to satisfy learners, society, and international integration.
- Quality assurance and quality accreditation standards according to the AUN-QA standards issued by the Ministry of Education and Training can be applied when measuring the quality of educational services provided by higher education institutions in Vietnam; however, it is still necessary to consider and adjust to the real conditions of Vietnamese education.
- The application of quality assurance and quality accreditation is one of the most important factors influencing the success of most higher education institutions worldwide and, more recently, in Vietnam; however, only a few of the higher education institutions in Vietnam are ranked in the top 500 in Asia or top 1000 in the world.
- Quality Assurance is a perfect mechanism to predict failures and detect problems before they happen during the implementation of plans in an educational institution; this is a very good activity given the current reality of resources for organizing training and scientific research

activities in higher education in Vietnam in general and in local universities in Vietnam in particular.

- International (for large universities with strong resources) or national (for local universities) accreditation certification is a positive motivation for Vietnamese higher education institutions to create a plan to strive to achieve and always consciously improve the performance and working capacity of organizations and individuals to meet the conditions and standards.

Recommendations

- Higher education institutions in Vietnam should apply Quality Assurance and Quality Accreditation as a tool to achieve goals and standards at a global level; local universities should apply the criteria and standards of the Standards Regulation issued by the Ministry of Education and Training on the basis of the AUN-QA Standard.

- A culture of overall quality should be disseminated deeply and broadly among all leaders and employees of higher education institutions through training and retraining in TQM programs.

- Universities, especially local universities which are limited in resources, should look for several means to ensure the quality of educational services that customers expect to be provided.

- Continuous improvement is the basis for achieving high levels of independence, stability, and trust in educational institutions.

- Developing a strategic plan with a clear and transparent vision of Quality Assurance and Quality Accreditation that really shows the strengths and weaknesses of Vietnam's educational institutions is an important task of higher education institutions, especially in the period in progress of gradual transition according to the current trend of international integration.

- Accreditation is the best way to check the quality of provided educational services. It is also the way to be recognized in university rankings at the local, regional, and global levels.

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