

Role of Quality Assurance and Quality Accreditation in Higher Education in Some Developing Countries and Vietnam

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Abstract In today's fast-changing and highly volatile world, improving the quality of education has become a universal goal. The curriculum and content of higher education are all directed toward forming the personality and intellectual abilities of students to meet the job market. Striving to ensure the quality of education is an important goal for any country, especially for developing countries, because it has been proven that economic growth is determined by educational growth. If they ignore the quality of education or are not interested in accrediting the quality of education, universities in developing countries, including Vietnam, will face the risk of development being pushed back. Accreditation in education is a process by which agencies evaluate an educational institution or an educational program and recognize that it has met and satisfied, or exceeded, predetermined educational quality requirements and standards. However, instead of implementing effective activities to ensure the quality of teaching and learning, many universities in developing countries, including in Vietnam, are trying to seek external assessment and recognition through missing preparing records, documents, reports, and evaluations, quality assurance plans about policies, and community services.

Keywords: *quality assurance, quality accreditation, educational program, higher education, job market*

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1. Introduction

Recently, higher education institutions have considered quality assurance and quality accreditation as activities to provide quality human resources to meet the needs of the labor market in many different areas. In order to best meet the market's needs, a management solution that can help higher education institutions develop resources and grow is to adopt a total quality management strategy.

Quality assurance and quality accreditation systems help higher education institutions solve activities in the chain of "input-implementation process-output-feedback". Continuous quality assessment is very important because it will motivate higher education institutions to regularly review their programs, processes, and activities to find strengths and weaknesses, thereby improving situations based on objective data to ensure the higher education institution's ultimate goal is to develop and serve the community well. The labor market is an important external environment for higher education institutions because it creates jobs for graduates. Thus, the satisfaction

of the labor market is the goal that higher education institutions need to aim for [1]. However, the ability to work is not the only factor that can be used to assess the value of higher education. Some educators argue that concern about working life is reflected in the attitude of community service [2]. Therefore, higher education aims to form the personality and intellectual ability of graduates, along with satisfying the job market.

In the 20th century, there was a strong development in the field of higher education, whereby higher education was transformed from an elite organization into a large system. More and more people sought higher education with the desire to have a better career and increased job opportunities. In the past few decades, the number of students in developing countries increased from 13 million in 1960 to 72 million in 1999 and about 132 million in 2004, which indicates a 10-fold increase in forty years. In China, the overall enrollment rate in higher education increased significantly from 9.8% in 1998 to 21% in 2005. The number of universities and higher education institutions also increased more than ever. In Latin America, the number of higher education institutions increased from only 164 in 1960 to over 7500 in 2002. In Vietnam, there

were 235 higher education institutions in 2017. This is an increase of 62 institutions compared to 2007. There were a total of 1.8 million students, which is a 7.3% increase compared to 2007.

Most universities in Vietnam are basically low-ranked or not listed in the international university rankings. Only a few (07/236) universities in Vietnam are ranked in top 500 universities in Asia. There are no Vietnamese universities in the top 1000 in the world (according to the 2018 rankings by Quacquarelli Symonds of the UK). In Vietnam, there are too many educational services provided by higher education institutions, all of which are quite similar in form and content. This has created fierce competition in enrollment among universities in Vietnam, leading to some higher education institutions to only enroll students with an average score of 3 of 10. Competition in examinations that create huge pressure for learners takes place in most developing countries, including large countries like China. Therefore, for developing countries, the quality control and quality accreditation system needs to be applied fully and seriously. They are two activities that can help expand the scope and capacity of universities to a higher level, improve and increase resources in order to apply regional and world quality assurance criteria, motivate the improvement of the quality of training, provide high-quality human resources to serve development, and respond to the labor market. This study explores the role of quality assurance and quality accreditation for higher education institutions, analyzes some theoretical issues, and gives some recommendations for higher education institutions of developing countries and Vietnam. It is also expected to provide more information for researchers in this field of study.

2. Contents and Results of the Study

2.1. Quality Assurance

Quality assurance has now become a general solution for organizations that seek to develop and improve labor performance. 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 the product or service it provides meets acceptable quality standards. Quality assurance is part of quality management, providing society and the community with the belief that quality requirements will be met [3]. Quality management in higher education institutions mainly focus on the evaluation of educational institutions to develop and improve them. Using the principles and ideas of quality management in the education institutions system will bring many benefits to universities, which will lay the foundation for a vision of their goals and mission. Some educational theorists have pointed out that total quality means that an education system is positive when it brings good *output* through *inputs* that enhance development and community service.

In quality accreditation, two common concepts are internal quality assurance (IQA) and external quality assurance (EQA). IQA relates to the policies and mechanisms of each educational institution or training

program to ensure that they guarantee the objectives and standards that apply to educational institutions in general or to each career field in particular and satisfies the market's needs. EQA relates to the activities of an organization. For example, a Quality Accreditation Organization was established to assess the activities of educational institutions or training programs to decide whether or not the institution or its training programs meet pre-defined standards. IQA and EQA always exist in parallel, EQA performs accreditation to support, advise, and encourage IQA activities. In the 90s, quality assurance was described as a "decade of quality concern in higher education. Many people participated to investigate, research, audit, apply, analyze, control and evaluate quality assurance activities. This led to a deeper understanding of quality policies and practices in the field of higher education" [4]. In Vietnam, the quality management and enforcement of higher education institutions to implement quality accreditation has only been implemented strongly in the period from 2013 to the present. After 2020, universities will be enforced to implement the quality accreditation of higher education institutions.

The concepts of quality were originally derived from business practices. Many concepts were borrowed directly from businesses, such as continuous improvement, total quality management, etc. However, while business organization processes can be measured and controlled, the process of education, especially at the university level, takes place deep within the hearts of those involved and is difficult to measure and/or control [5]. Deming's quality management philosophy is based on the premise that the productivity and quality of an organization always increases with increasing empowerment to employees. However, it also shows that, at work, employees need to be responsible for saving resource use and providing an appropriate organization's response to market conditions [6].

When applied higher education institutions, quality assurance can be summarized as follows.

(1) Strategic management assesses the development and management of development plans of an educational institution. Managers must determine the situation, assess the advantages and disadvantages, and thereby devise a strategic plan including educational vision, mission, and goals to orient the operation of the institution.

(2) How to manage quality assesses the ability of the educational institution to provide an assurance service that meets the expectations of the community and society.

(3) Appropriate labor market management defines the needs of society, the trend of the labor market, and the trend of learners to provide effective and appropriate training services.

(4) Human resource development includes ongoing training to perform work efficiently and with high productivity.

(5) Equal opportunity between educational institutions and the labor market to increase the satisfaction of employees and employers, leading to improved productivity and quality of labor.

(6) Health and safety ensures a healthy and safe environment for all learners and employees of the educational institution.

(7) Contact management is done to allow educational institutions to meet the needs of students and employees and transmit information at different levels and dimensions.

(8) Consulting services focuses on the organization's governance activities to determine the different needs of learners and implement.

(9) Curriculum design and implementation dictates that the curriculum should be built on the requirements of the labor market, as well as being focused on learners' needs.

(10) The qualification certificate confirms that the learner has met the requirements necessary to be issued with a certificate of eligibility that matches his/her qualifications.

The integration of all the above criteria will be done through a set of indicators (KPIs), which is a scientific method of implementing quality assurance in universities to meet the needs of society and the labor market.

2.2. Quality Accreditation

Quality accreditation is maintained by education agencies. The terms "recognition" and "confirmation" are often used interchangeably, however, for some associations and agencies, there are significant differences between the two terms. The emphasis in "confirmation" is primarily concerned with "output" criteria, with an accreditation emphasis on "input" criteria such as contents of the curriculum, quality and quantity of teaching staff, technical information, and resources. "Recognition" is the official accreditation of a person or an organization that has met a standard or criterion set as a benchmark for comparison. "Recognition" implies progress and demonstrates quality improvement beyond the minimum standards set by the accreditation agency. Quality accreditation in education is a process by which an association or agency evaluates an educational institution or a curriculum and officially recognizes that it has met and satisfied, or exceeded, the predetermined educational quality requirements and standards.

Accreditation has two basic purposes: first, to ensure the quality of a higher education institution or a training program and, second, to support the improvement of the higher education institution or program. Thus, there are two basic types of education accreditation: (1) institutional accreditation and (2) specialized accreditation.

Institutional accreditation is an accreditation according to specific criteria for the adequacy of facilities, organization, human resource, the provision of academic services and student support, curriculum, the achievement level of students, academics, and other components of the educational institution. Program accreditation is an evaluation of the institution's program to confirm that the quality of this program is in accordance with the level of the certificate issued to learners. The level "recognition" has facilitated the guaranteed learning transformation of students. For students who want to study elsewhere in the world, accreditation provides support in transferring credits among training institutions or receiving higher education students through the general acceptance of training institutions. It also provides students with international exchange opportunities among universities. Currently, Vietnam has very few universities that have the same level of accreditation, in terms of degrees and credits, as universities around the world.

Specialized accreditation often refers to an evaluation of specific programs or divisions that constitute an

institution. An accredited division may be as large as a college or a school in a university or as small as a curriculum in a specific academic discipline. Specialized accreditation focuses on a narrower set of standards dedicated to the field of study under consideration. It is often associated with specialized associations (such as technical, medical, and law associations) or with specific disciplines (such as business, education, psychology, or social work).

Although quality accreditation has the advantages and benefits of educational institutions, the search for evaluations and external recognition of accreditation agencies also has limitations and criticisms. Some educational researchers argue that the approach to quality protection and testing is a mistake. According to Rickett [7], the disadvantages of bureaucracy, the costs, and the use of much effort towards quality accreditation instead of focusing on the institution's effective operation is actually a risk to the academic freedom inherent in higher education institutions, and the risk is greater than the benefits it receives from accreditation. Alderman states that quality accreditation is no longer important, compared to the focus on activities to ensure good education [8]. Several external evaluation processes have made "document production", writing quality assurance plans, and writing policies to provide sufficient documentation for accreditation a priority instead of deploying effective means to ensure academic quality. Certainly, students and employees at some higher education institutions, where quality assurance reports have been produced, will claim that they see little evidence of these "active" plans [1].

Some other critics argue that the importance of quality evaluation systems is that they must be operated by universities themselves, not an external agency, and must be proactive according to their own evaluation process. The Netherlands has a very detailed evaluation system for quality accreditation, creating an initiative for individual institutions when organizing their own evaluations [9]. Universities will designate their own evaluation teams, including members outside the university, as well as national and international members. These evaluations should consider both research and teaching activities. Currently, for developing countries, such as those in the Asia-Pacific region, many countries have quality accreditation agencies. The oldest of these is the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA), which is an agency established under the 1990 HKCAA Ordinance [10]. In 2014, the Asia-Pacific region had 15 active national-level QA organizations. Currently, Vietnam has one state management organization on quality assurance and quality accreditation (i.e., the Department of Quality Management, under the Ministry of Education and Training), five organizations implementing the task of quality accreditation (including two quality accreditation centers under the Vietnam National University, Hanoi and the Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City), one quality accreditation center under the Association of Vietnam's Universities and Colleges, and two quality accreditation centers under Da Nang University and Vinh University. These quality accreditation organizations have the common task of performing quality accreditation of the curriculum or higher education institutions in their country.

2.3. Actual Situation of Quality Accreditation of Universities in Vietnam

Vietnam has issued mandatory laws that higher education institutions to implement the quality accreditation of educational institutions and training programs to support learners' interests. The Department of Quality Management of the Ministry of Education and Training have issued a set of evaluation criteria created according to the criteria for evaluating higher education institutions established by the ASEAN University Network-Quality Assurance (AUN-QA), including 25 standards and 111 criteria.

In the system of universities in Vietnam, there are a few universities that try to change in order to achieve international accreditation and demonstrate capacity to society and employers, including four universities accredited by the High Council for Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (HCERES) and three universities accredited according to AUN-QA standards. As of May 2018, Vietnam had 117 out of 236 universities and two colleges accredited by Vietnam's Quality Accreditation Centers. Many universities are currently completing their applications for registration of their accreditation [11].

However, the quality accreditation for universities in Vietnam is generally very difficult, especially universities in the Northwest, Central Highlands, and Southwestern regions, which are the most difficult socio-economic regions in the country. Local universities are managed by provinces and cities, directly contributing greatly to the socio-economic development of localities and regions and serving the community well. However, like many other universities, the implementation of quality assurance and quality accreditation in these institutions has encountered many difficulties:

(1) Many content and jobs have been taken care of and implemented well by higher education institutions, but documentation was not saved for evidence purposes.

(2) Implementation of the basic tasks of the institution often does not constitute a process and a storage system.

(3) The connection of enterprises is often quite faint, because the local socio-economic conditions are still poor. Thus, the evidence is often weak.

(4) Local higher education institutions often have many difficulties, so most of their resources are only enough to focus on performing the evaluation during the quality accreditation period.

(5) The set of standards set according to the AUN-QA standards has criteria that are not really relevant to the actual operation of universities in Vietnam, and the interpretation of criteria is not really clear.

(6) Many managers, lecturers of higher education institutions, and local state management agencies do not really appreciate and understand the value of quality assurance and quality accreditation.

The interest and search for accreditation of quality accreditation institutions are a positive phenomenon in the university system of Vietnam, but it is not so from another perspective. Among 236 universities and academies of Vietnam, only seven are among the top 500 universities in Asia, according to Quacquarelli Symonds of the UK in the Asia 2018–2019 ranking. Thus, international accreditation (for large, traditional, and strong resource universities) or national accreditation is the desire of all universities in

Vietnam, and this desire has urged many higher education institutions in Vietnam to seek accreditation from accreditation councils at any cost, including universities still lacking in resources. However, the search to gain accreditation for quality assurance which meets international standards, such as the new set of standards, will be useful for higher education institutions in the process of development to serve the community and society. Moreover, it should be added that all quality assurance efforts of higher education institutions must have a great determination of the whole system, because total quality management, quality assurance, and quality accreditation are now inevitable trends in education in Vietnam and worldwide. It is necessary to equip the knowledge of quality assurance for the new generation of leaders or those expected to take the leading positions of higher education institutions and state management agencies in education. This is so that they understand and see the essential importance of quality assurance and quality accreditation. Many leaders of higher education institutions, state management agencies in education, and the majority of people working in educational institutions do not correctly recognize quality assurance work and consider the process of quality assurance and quality accreditation or total quality management of educational institutions a waste of time, effort, and money.

3. Conclusions

Education quality assurance and quality accreditation are no longer a luxury in today's world, when improving the quality of education has become a universal goal. Current quality assurance in higher education institutions is encouraged through continuous self-assessment and the search for some forms of internal or external confirmation or recognition of independent accreditation organizations. Quality accreditation also provides confidence to the community and recognizes the similarities of professional qualifications and facilitates student mobility to be transformed from developing countries to developed countries. Quality accreditation also contributes to the consistency of careers by gathering learners and lecturers in an activity to improve professional preparation and professional practice. For developing countries, the study gives some recommendations: (1) Higher education institutions should apply quality assurance and quality accreditation as a tool to achieve goals and standards at the global level; (2) It is necessary to disseminate the overall quality culture in higher education institutions; (3) Universities, especially local universities, should seek a variety of means for internal quality assurance for educational services they provide to their customers; (4) Continuous improvement of internal quality assurance activities is a basis for achieving high levels of independence, stability, and trust of educational institutions. (5) Orient development by creating a strategic plan with a clear mission, vision of quality assurance, and quality accreditation to find strengths and weaknesses, difficulties, and shortcomings in educational institutions.

Internal quality assurance ensures that educational institutions' goals and standards meet the requirements of society and the community. Quality accreditation is an

external quality assurance activity, giving accreditation decisions about the progress of internal quality assurance. Quality assurance is inseparable from quality accreditation; they always exist in parallel to support the development of educational institutions and to serve the community.

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