WHAT HAS ACCREDITATION IMPACTED ON VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITIES? A QUALITATIVE DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

While there can be little doubt of the purpose of quality assurance and accreditation in developed countries particularly as a means to demonstrate quality improvement, the question remains as to whether or not accreditation results in quality enhancement in developing countries. In order to find the answer, this paper presents an analysis of 20 institutional quality assurance reports from 20 Vietnamese universities. In this regard, the study reveals that there are a number of notable impacts resulting from the introduction of accreditation in higher education institutions in Vietnam. Key impacts are reported in relation to: establishment of the quality assurance unit, mission and purpose; leadership and management; staff members and lecturers; students and student support; curricula; training activities; research; international cooperation; facilities; finance; and future plans.

Keywords: Accreditation, quality assurance, evaluation, impact, higher education, Vietnam.

INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance (QA) and accreditation in Vietnam was taken to the formalised level in 2003 with the establishment of the General Department of Education Testing and Accreditation (GDETA), a unit of the Ministry of Education and Training (Kristoffersen, 2010; Nguyen & Pham, 2009). Therefore, it can be said that accreditation is still in the nascent stage in Vietnam; however, it has been attended to and directed actively by the government and implemented promptly by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET).

   In order to find out the impacts that accreditation has had on Vietnamese universities, this study relies on the analysis of documents taken from 20 institutional QA reports. Before presenting the findings from data analysis, the paper outlines the background of the study, followed by the research methodology. The paper also highlights discussion as an important section of the research.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

QA and accreditation has been defined in the Law of Education, Law of Higher Education and Decrees of the Government, which stipulates that:
- Accreditation is compulsory for all educational institutions in all levels of education and training (from pre-school to higher education).
- Accreditation should be conducted in both educational institutions and education programs.
- Accreditation outcomes should be made available to the public for informational and oversight purposes.
- At each and every education level, education program should share a common set of education quality accreditation standards promulgated by MOET.
- The accreditation procedure of Vietnam is similar to that of other countries,

including: self-evaluation by educational institutions; external evaluation by accrediting agencies; and recognition of accreditation outcomes (National Assembly, 2005; National Assembly, 2012; The Government, 2006).

In the academic year 2013-2014, there were 207 universities in Vietnam. The first universities started applying accreditation procedures in 2005. The achievements of accreditation among universities to 30 April 2014 are summarised as followings:

- 20 universities completed their self-evaluation reports, received external evaluation and had the National Council for Education Quality Accreditation appraise their outcomes (referred to Group A in this study);
- 20 other universities completed their self-evaluation reports and received external evaluation (referred to Group B in this study);
- 141 other universities completed their self-evaluation reports and submitted to MOET (referred to Group C in this study);
- All remaining universities (26) are currently undertaking their self-evaluation exercises (referred to Group D in this study) (GDETA, 2014).

In order to comprehend the situation of implementing accreditation in universities, every year MOET sends official letters to all universities requesting that they report on the status of conducting QA activities based on a format. The report has to contain these main elements: establishment of QA unit; personnel specialising in QA tasks; working conditions for QA unit; QA activities which are planned, approved and conducted at present and previously; results of QA activities which have influenced and changed the school's management and achievements; status of conducting self-evaluation; advantages and disadvantages of conducting the school's self-evaluation; and recommendations (MOET, 2009).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
Method

The research was undertaken using a qualitative method of document analysis, in which the approach of content analysis was in major use. The literature states that content analysis has objectivity, has generality and is systematic (Bowen, 2009; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Rapley, 2007; Whitt, 1992).

Sampling and Coding

The study used purposeful and representative sampling. According to Miller and Alvarado (2005), there are three types of sampling strategies for qualitative method with documents. They include representative sampling, purposeful sampling, and purposeful but non-sampling selection. For this research, the author uses purposeful sampling and representative sampling. Purposeful sampling meant that documents were divided into four groups of universities based on their accreditation status while representative sampling meant five institutional reports were selected from each group. In this way the five universities were representative of their group. This means that the research analysed 20 reports in total. Bowen (2009) argues that as there are a variety of forms of documents and the number of documents in each form is normally in a very large number, the researcher should carefully select enough documents for his purpose. In this study, with 5 reports out of around 20 in Group A, Group B and Group C (25%), the representation is extremely good; with 5 reports out of 141 in Group, the representation is also good with a qualitative method study.

For coding, in order to protect the identity of each institution, the research uses the symbols in form of letters in capital for the names of institutions.

Research Questions

This research analyses the reports submitted by universities from 2011 to 2013 to evaluate the impacts of accreditation on the university's QA activities. Therefore, the study aims to answer the question: "What impacts has the introduction of accreditation had on Vietnamese universities?", in which four following sub-questions are addressed. They include:

- What areas have been impacted on by the implementation of accreditation?
- What changes in institutional quality assurance activities have occurred as a result of the implementation of accreditation?
- What are universities' future directions in improving the quality of teaching, learning and research?
- What differences in the effect have resulted in universities with different durations in implementing accreditation?

FINDINGS

The analysis revealed that there were a number of factors impacted on by the introduction of accreditation on higher education institutions in Vietnam. These factors include: establishment of QA unit, mission and purpose, leadership and management, staff members and lecturers, students and student support, curricula, training activities, research, international cooperation, facilities and others. Moreover, QA and accreditation are also a major part of the universities' future plans. These factors are consistent with MOET accreditation standards and criteria when evaluating universities with good quality (MOET, 2007).

Establishment of QA Unit

The establishment of a unit specialising in QA is one of the impacts that could be seen clearly. In accordance with the regulation that: *"Each school shall establish a centre (or a division) for quality assurance in collaboration with the in-charge divisions within the school to implement the school's plan"* (MOET, 2007: p.18), all universities in every group have all established such units.

The universities named the QA Unit differently such as Office of Testing and QA, QA Centre, Group of QA, and Office of Inspection, Testing and QA. The number of staff working in these units also varied, including both part-time and full-time employees, and ranged from 3 to 17.

Even though the names of the QA units were different, they were all established for the purpose of being a focal point unit in implementing the QA activities at the university. All the QA units shared the core functions, which can be summarised as follows:

- Recommending institutional leaders in implementing policies related to QA at the university;
- Developing and issuing documents on implementing QA activities in the university;
- Developing and building a quality culture for all staff members, lecturers and students.

Therefore, it can be seen that the QA units played an important role in conducting self-evaluation processes and implementing QA activities. The universities saw the necessity of setting up a unit in charge of QA. One of them stated that: *"The establishment [of the QA*

Unit] has marked a significant achievement in conducting the institutional QA activities systematically." (VIMARU)

Mission and Purpose

It is clear that every educational institution must have mission and purpose. However, these terms have only been used in the educational settings in Vietnam since the introduction of accreditation. Before that the common words were functions and responsibilities (Kristoffersen, 2010). Consequently, it is true to say that accreditation created an opportunity for Vietnamese universities to develop their mission and objectives, because one of the standards for university accreditation focused on mission and purpose.

Accordingly, a number of universities reported that their institutional mission and purpose had been defined. They stated that:

> *The mission of university has been defined in line with functions, tasks, resources and development orientations of universities.* (FTU)
> *The mission is defined suitably with and cohesively to local and national socio-economic development strategies.* (HPU)

In addition, several universities mentioned that their mission and purpose had been announced to all staff members, lecturers and students, and declared publicly. The universities also paid attention to reviewing and adapting their mission and objectives. For instance, one university pointed out that: *"The university mission and purpose were regularly reviewed, added, modified and implemented."* (HUFLIT)

Leadership and Management

One of the most significant impacts that accreditation created was the awareness amongst the universities' leaders and managers. They stated that they gained a better understanding of the importance of QA in institutional development, and QA helped enhance management capacity and expertise of leaders and managing staff. They considered QA *"the major method for the improvement of quality in teaching, learning and research activities"*. (HUT)

Additionally, the organisation and structure of the universities were also adjusted to fit the requirements of accreditation standards and criteria. For example, ULIS reviewed and adjusted functions, and organisational structure of some units in the direction of standardisation and to avoid overlapping. HCE renamed some units to describe their functions and responsibilities more accurately. HDU reported that their organisational structure was adjusted periodically to ensure effectiveness of management. Also, DHHP contended that they obtained better results in management because *"the functions, responsibilities and powers of divisions, managers, lecturers and staff members are clearly defined."*

Furthermore, QA and accreditation also affected the document management at institutions. HCE stated that they revised and issued new institutional regulation documents. HUFLIT issued some documents to revise the functions, duties, responsibilities and powers of the management system. MKU reported that *"the university has a documentation system in place to organise, manage the university's activities effectively."*

It was also for the purpose of QA management that several universities designed website specialising in QA and accreditation or opened a section for QA on the institution's website.

The main aim of this activity was to receive feedback and provide information about QA. This was also an impact of accreditation on the universities' leadership and management.

Staff Members and Lecturers

The introduction of accreditation also had great effect on staff members and lecturers at the universities. A large number of institutions syndicated that their employees and teachers had participated in workshops on QA and accreditation. Through those workshops they gained knowledge about and information on self-evaluation, QA and accreditation. They developed an awareness of the importance of QA in teaching improvement as well as their role in the QA processes.

Moreover, as a result of the QA programs, they prepared lesson plans more carefully and discovered new methods for delivering lectures. The main reason for this improvement was that under the impact of accreditation, the universities implemented many professional development programs. For instance, DHHP explained that:

> *The university has policies, measures to create favourable conditions for staff members and lecturers to participate in professional and teaching activities both domestically and overseas.*

Another impact was that lecturers in Vietnamese universities agreed to be evaluated on their teaching performance by students. This was a significant change because according to Vietnamese culture, teachers have always been respected and students have had no right to evaluate teachers. A lot of institutions expressed that it was teacher evaluation activities that helped develop a quality culture.

Students and Student Support

The first way that accreditation had impact on students was that students were provided basic concepts and understandings about accreditation. They were also made aware of their role in the QA processes. A majority of universities stated that their students participated in evaluating courses, teachers' performance and student support services actively. These activities also contributed to development of the quality culture at the university.

Secondly, students were informed clearly of the objectives of the programs, especially the guidance of the courses. For example, HANU reported that:

> *Learners are given adequate guidance on education programs, testing and evaluation and provisions in the training regulations promulgated by Ministry of Education and Training.*

Thirdly, students were provided with other support and services. DHHP said that their students were supplied with better conditions for practicing in art performance and sports. UEH mentioned that the students were ensured safety in university campuses. CTUPM stated that they provided specific measures to support learning and social life of learners. HDU assisted students in finding jobs by organising forums between learners and agencies, businesses and employers. They pointed out that: *"Through these activities [forums], learners had more opportunities to find employment after graduation."* (HDU)

Curricula

In terms of the impact on curricula, several universities mentioned that their curricula obtained proper structure and was clear in objectives. For instance, VINHUNI reported that:

> *The curricula have clear and specific objectives, be properly structured and systematically designed, responsive to requirements knowledge, skill standards for higher education level and to human resources needs in the labour market.*

In addition, the review, adjustment and evaluation of curricula were also reported by universities as one of the impacts of accreditation. For example, HUT stated that:

> *The curricula have been added and adjusted regularly on the basis of consulting international state-of-the-art programs, feedback from employers, graduates, educational organisations and other organisations with an aim to satisfying human resources needs for local or national socio-economic development.*

These are achievements in designing and developing curricula of universities. According to MOET (2007), the curricula need to be developed based on MOET's framework and relevant to university mission and purpose; it should also be designed in a way that ensures articulation with other training levels and education programs. Moreover, the curricula should be developed with participation from lecturers, managers, representatives of organisations, professional bodies and employers.

Training Activities

Training is one of the areas that saw the most impact. First of all, a number of institutions stated that they designed and declared the outcome standards for training programs. For instance, FTU talked about the advantage of this as: *"The development and issue of outcome standards has contributed to assist the training to meet the public demands."*

Secondly, it was during the training activities that universities conducted surveys and evaluation. They comprised: course evaluation, teacher evaluation, facility evaluation, learning environment evaluation and student support evaluation. These evaluation programs were reported to help develop quality culture and improve the training quality.

Thirdly, innovation of teaching methods and student assessment methods was also reported by universities. Several institutions paid attention to the variety of lecturing modes. DHHP, for instance, stated that: *"the university diversifies training modes to respond to diverse learning needs of learners".*

Fourthly, many universities mentioned that for the purpose of enhancing the quality of training activities, they carried out self-evaluation of the programs (ULIS). Other institutions focused on the transfer from yearly training system to credit training system (for example, HANU, HCE, HUAF).

Research

It is argued that research is not a strength area for Vietnamese higher education institutions (Nguyen, Oliver & Priddy, 2009). However, this field has experienced certain positive changes since the introduction of accreditation into Vietnam. In this respect, the majority of universities reported that they had established new policies and measures to encourage lecturers and students to carry out research. Especially, the number of research projects (HDU), articles published in international newspapers and journals (HANU), and income from research activities and technology transfer (HUT) had increased.

In addition, several universities reported that as a part of the research activities, they organised seminars and/or workshops on QA and accreditation. Other institutions such as

UEH pointed out that they conducted research on QA and developed evaluation instrument system including questionnaires, surveys and interviews. The universities agreed that their research activities were linked to training and industries.

International Cooperation

The most popular international cooperation activity of Vietnamese universities was overseas study visits. Many institutions said that they organised study visits for vice-rectors, deans and senior lecturers to high-ranked universities in Australia, Europe and the USA. One university (VINHUNI) organised overseas study visits for the staff of Quality Assurance Centre. Furthermore, the universities also prioritised staff exchange and student exchange with foreign higher education institutions. Through these activities, the universities learned good things from the overseas institutions in terms of governance and management, broadened the relationships and increased the opportunities for joint programs.

Additionally, participation in international workshops and conferences, especially those on QA, was also reported a common activity in international cooperation. Some institutions, for example ULIS even organised international workshops and conferences on their campus.

Moreover, several universities cooperated with foreign institutions or agencies to conduct QA activities. The common programs included: training about QA and accreditation by international experts (FTU), implementing international standards such as the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology ABET or the ASEAN University Network Quality Assurance AUN-QA to evaluate the programs (HCMUTE, HUT). Some universities (HCMUTE, for instance) obtained International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) certificate from foreign agencies.

Another activity in international cooperation mentioned by a number of universities was that they cooperated with overseas higher education institutions to operate joint-programs in Vietnam. However, several universities (HPU, for example) stated that they were still in the process of seeking the partners.

Facilities

Accreditation impacted on facilities in the way that teaching, learning and research materials and equipment were upgraded or provided at a sufficient standard. The universities reported that:

> *There is sufficient quality teaching and learning equipment used effectively to support training activities and science research, meeting requirements of current training areas.* (PYU)
> *There are sufficient reading rooms, big halls, practice rooms, laboratories serving teaching, learning and science research activities, meeting requirements of each training area.* (HCMUTE)

In addition, the institutions stressed the importance of facilities in libraries and laboratories, especially informatics facilities. For example, HUT pointed out that: *"There is an e-library with internet connection, which has served teaching, learning and science research activities effectively."*

Furthermore, plans for improvement of facilities were also mentioned by the institutions. For instance, HDU pointed out that they had approved a master plan for infrastructure

development; and UEH reported that they had overall planning on infrastructure utilisation and development in the university's strategic plan.

Finance

Finance and financial management at Vietnamese universities were also impacted on by accreditation. Many institutions stated that they obtained financially autonomous solutions and plans from the government. For example, UEH said that:

> *The university has solutions and plans to be autonomous in finance, generate legitimate financial income sources, supporting training activities, science research and other activities.*

Moreover, several universities mentioned the standardisation and transparency in financial planning and management. They reported that: *"financial planning and management in the university are standardised, made public, transparent and in accordance with regulations."* (HUAF)

Additionally, the effectiveness and transparency in using and allocating budget were also referred by some of the universities. For instance, UETI pointed out that: *"The university has made transparent and effective financial allocation and utilisation for various divisions and activities of the university."*

Other Impacts

In addition to the 11 factors that affected by accreditation as mentioned above, the universities also reported other impacts. Firstly, a great number of universities stated that they achieved improvement in information storage and documentation activities. For example, HANU pointed out that:

> *The university has opportunity to review and collect documents and evidence relating to all activities to standardise the quality of education.*

Secondly, several institutions said that they surveyed alumni, employers and industries about the quality of education services of the university. With the feedback from those activities, they planned strategies to adjust training activities to improve the quality of teaching and learning (HUT, ULIS, DHHP).

Thirdly, some other universities mentioned achievements in examination management and administration. They reported that the examinations were organised following regulations and schedules (MKU), or students' papers were centrally marked by the Office of Testing and QA (DHHP), or items for Item Bank Centre were developed (UETI).

In general, the universities acknowledged that thanks to the implementation of accreditation, they had chance to review and adjust the training and management activities. One institution stated that:

> *[QA] helps the university adjust training and management activities, orient future development to improve training efficiency and meet evaluation criteria.* (TGU)

Future Plans

Since conducting self-evaluation and applying for accreditation, Vietnamese universities had included QA activities in their future plans. First, the institutions made plans for capacity building in QA and accreditation for staff members and lecturers, especially those working in QA Unit. They intended to continue organising workshops to raise people's awareness of the

importance of QA (TUAF, PYU, ULIS, UETI) and/or organise study visits to other universities to learn from the processes of implementing QA (DHHP, PYU, HANU) and/or send staff to participate in workshops and conferences on QA and accreditation (FTU) and/or send young staff to apply for postgraduate programs of assessment and evaluation in domestic or overseas universities (ULIS). Some other universities planned to employ more staff working in their QA units (HANU, HPU, HCE).

Second, the universities had the intention of conducting quality management activities. They made a plan to implement the ISO model (DHHP, HUT, TGU). Moreover, they intended to carry out accreditation for the programs (DHHP, HUT). Additionally, they planned to develop a QA network for all units of the university (HUAF) or evaluate the capacity of management staff regularly (HCE).

Third, universities reported on plans related to training activities. Some were going to develop and issue outcome standards for the training programs (HUAF, UEH). Furthermore, they intended to design instruments to receive feedback from students, alumni, employers and industries about the university's quality of education (HCMUTE, UEH, VIMARU).

Fourth, some institutions also mentioned other plans. For example, PYU stated that they would invest more in budgets for QA activities. HCE planned to establish and operate effectively a communication system between the college and prospective employers. MKU focused on facility construction. They intended to build an electronic library, a multi-purpose gymnasium, a dormitory and more classrooms.

DISCUSSION

As discussed above, there were four groups of universities in terms of accreditation in Vietnam in 2014. How did the implementation of accreditation affect each group? The analysis discovered that different groups experienced different impacts. The longer since the universities had obtained accreditation, the more they were impacted on by accreditation.

Universities in Group A and Group B (especially Group A) had the most areas affected by accreditation. Their reports showed that the impacts were in depth and detail. They conducted a number of QA activities to improve the quality of teaching, learning and research. Moreover, they planned specific future directions related to QA and accreditation to develop a quality culture in their institution. The main reason for this achievement was that universities belonging to these groups were externally evaluated. The external evaluation team delivered recommendations for the university's improvement. The universities followed the recommendations and saw that accreditation was beneficial for them to improve quality and gain reputation.

On the other hand, accreditation only affected several factors of universities in Group C and Group D (especially Group D). The impacts were normally on the awareness of accreditation and the universities had only carried out some management activities related to QA. In addition, their future plans were mainly for facility building, human resource preparation and raising awareness of QA. These activities were involved in the initial stage of implementing accreditation. The reason for this was that the universities in these groups had only completed their self-evaluation reports or were in the process of conducting self-evaluation. They had not been visited by external evaluation teams, and neither had they received

recommendations for improvement. It means that they did not experience benefit of accreditation like institutions in Group A and Group B.

Therefore, it could be concluded that accreditation had effect on almost every area of institutions in Group A while it impacted on only the major fields of universities in Group D.

CONCLUSION

The evaluation discovered that although accreditation has only been implemented in Vietnam for just under ten years, it has brought positive changes to Vietnamese universities in terms of enhancing the quality of learning, teaching, research and educational management. The institutions followed the legal documents and guidelines to undertake QA programs. Based on the results of the self-evaluation report, many of the university activities have been revised or supplemented in a way that leads to a quality culture for the whole institution.

It appears that this is only an exploratory study which represents the first qualitative method research on the impact of accreditation in Vietnam. It is proposed additional, large-scale evaluations should be undertaken with other focuses on the introduction of accreditation on Vietnamese universities such as the professional development for QA staff, policy-makers or the role of the Government in this field.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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