

QUALITY MANAGEMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN VIETNAM: RESULTS FROM PROGRAM ACCREDITATION

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ABSTRACT

Accreditation has been implemented as the key approach for quality management in Vietnamese higher education. This paper focuses on investigating quality management of Vietnamese higher education programs by employing inclusion criteria in quantitative research for all 19 accredited programs. Through the analysis of the results of these programs, the study reveals that although the programs met quality standards required by the government, there are many areas that the programs need to work for improvement. Moreover, 5 is the maximum score in the 7-level scale that the programs were rated. Obviously, Vietnamese universities need to allocate more human and material resources in their programs.

Keywords: Quality assurance, Assessment, Evaluation, Standards and criteria, University

INTRODUCTION

Quality management in higher education has been a great attention across the world during the past few decades. A variety of quality management approaches have been implemented, including modern quality assurance (Botezatu et al., 2019), total quality management (TQM) (Hawi & Alzyadat, 2019), formative assessment (Adnan et al., 2019), and accreditation (Nguyen et al., 2017). The main purpose of these approaches is for quality control, accountability and quality improvement (Martin & Parikh, 2017).

Located in the dynamic region; the Asia-Pacific, Vietnam is not an outsider of this global higher education quality management trend. Accreditation as the key quality assurance approach was officially established in Vietnam in 2003 (VQA, 2019a). By law, all Vietnamese higher education institutions and programs must undergo accreditation exercise. As of the end of August 2019, 122 (out of 236) universities and 19 (among over 5000) programs were accredited (VQA, 2019a; VQA, 2019b). It appears that the number of higher education programs that received accreditation status is accounted for a very tiny percentage among all programs delivered by Vietnamese universities. Obviously, the quality control and quality assurance of Vietnamese higher education in general and programs in particular need to be significantly paid attention to. There are several studies undertaken to investigate the

implementation of higher education quality assurance and accreditation in Vietnam. For example, Nguyen et al. (2017), Pham & Nguyen (2019) and Tran & Vu (2019) highlight the establishment and development of the Vietnamese quality assurance system. Nguyen (2017), Nguyen and Ta (2018) and Pham (2018) analyze impact of accreditation on Vietnamese higher education institutions. In addition, Nguyen (2019) discusses capacity building for quality assurance personnel in Vietnam. It seems that little research focuses on quality assurance and accreditation of programs. Consequently, this paper looks into quality management of Vietnamese higher education programs through analysing results of accreditation to fill part of this research gap.

RESEARCH SETTING

In Vietnam, accreditation procedure at both institution level and program level consists of four steps: self-evaluation conducted by institutions, registration for external evaluation with an accrediting agency, external evaluation (including site visit) conducted by accrediting agency and recognition of accreditation outcomes by accrediting agency. There are now five accrediting agencies established by the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET). These agencies use the same evaluation standard sets promulgated by the Minister of MoET to accredit all Vietnamese higher education institutions and programs. For program accreditation, they use the assessment standards for higher education programs issued with Circular 04/2016/TT-BGDDT (shortly called Circular 04/2016/TT-BGDDT) (MoET, 2016). This quality assessment standard set consists of 11 standards and 50 criteria as summarising below:

- Standard 1: Objectives and expected learning outcomes (3 criteria)
- Standard 2: Program specification (3 criteria)
- Standard 3: Curriculum structure and content (3 criteria)
- Standard 4: Teaching and learning approaches (3 criteria)
- Standard 5: Assessment of students' learning outcomes (5 criteria)
- Standard 6: Academic staff (7 criteria)
- Standard 7: Supporting staff (5 criteria)
- Standard 8: Students and student support (5 criteria)
- Standard 9: Facilities and infrastructure (5 criteria)
- Standard 10: Quality enhancement (6 criteria)
- Standard 11: Outcome (5 criteria)

Each criterion is rated with the 7-point scale with the description in Table 1 below:

Rating	Description
1	Absolutely inadequate. Immediate improvement must be made
2	Inadequate and improvement is necessary
3	Inadequate but minor improvement will make it adequate
4	Adequate as expected
5	Better than adequate
6	Much better than adequate
7	Excellent

By law, to be awarded the accreditation certificate, a program must satisfy at least 50 per cent of all criteria in each standard and at least 80 per cent of all 50 criteria. A criterion is considered to meet quality when it is rated at least point 4.

METHODS

As mentioned above, until August 31st, 2019, 19 programs of 9 universities were assessed and recognized by 3 accrediting agencies as meeting quality standards required in the Circular 04/2016/TT-BGDĐT. This information is publically published on the website of MoET (www.moet.gov.vn) in the quality management section. Among these 19 programs, 10 ones were assessed by the Vietnam National University Hanoi-Education Accreditation Center (VNU-CEA, website: www.cea.vnu.edu.vn), 8 ones were assessed by the Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City-Education Accreditation Center (VNH-HCM CEA, website: www.cea.vnuhcm.edu.vn) and 1 program was assessed by the Center for Education Accreditation of the Association of Vietnam Universities and Colleges (CEA-AVU&C, website: cea-avuc.edu.vn). Detail regarding assessment results of each accredited program in the form of Accreditation Council Resolution is officially published in the accreditation agencies' website.

This study employed inclusion criteria in quantitative research for data collection and data analysis. Specifically, all higher education programs accredited by Vietnamese accrediting agencies were included for data collection. As a result, the researchers accessed the websites of accreditation agencies and downloaded 19 resolutions recognizing accreditation results of 19 programs. For data analysis, criteria included results of each program regarding score for each criterion, average score for each standard, the number and percentage of criteria rated score 4 or above and other related data. All of those above data were then put into Excel for analysis.

RESULTS

The first finding reveals that 18/19 accredited programs are at bachelor level while only one program is at masters level. These programs cover 9 areas as illustrated in Table 2.

No.	Areas	Number of accredited program
1	Education	6
2	Transportation	3
3	Construction	3
4	Banking and finance	2
5	Linguistics	1
6	Business	1
7	Health	1
8	Psychology	1
9	Social sciences	1
Total		19

As discussed previously, to be awarded the accreditation label, a program must satisfy at least 80 per cent of all 50 criteria. It means the program must have at least 40 criteria that

are rated from point 4 to point 7. Table 3 presents the number of programs with the number and percentage of adequate criteria.

TABLE 3 PROGRAMS WITH ADEQUATE CRITERIA		
Number of adequate criteria	Percentage	Number of programs
40	80	2
41	82	1
42	84	1
43	86	6
44	88	2
45	90	2
46	92	2
47	94	1
48	96	2

Additionally, the average score of each program is between 3.88 to 4.50 (Figure 1).

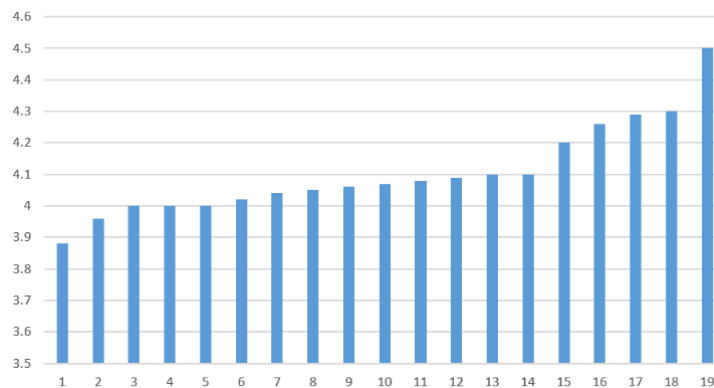


FIGURE 1
AVERAGE SCORE OF 19 PROGRAMS

Among 50 criteria, 15 criteria received the average score below 4 and criterion (CR) 9.2 had the lowest score of 3.32 (Figure 2).

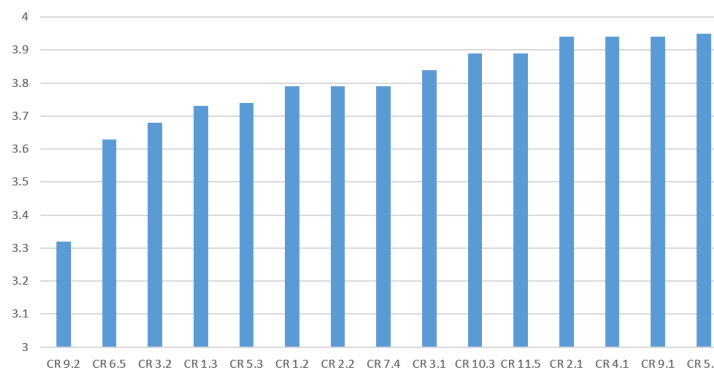


FIGURE 2
CRITERION WITH AVERAGE SCORE BELOW 4

Meanwhile, 14 criteria got the average score from 4.26 and criterion 8.1 had the highest score of 4.68 (Figure 3).

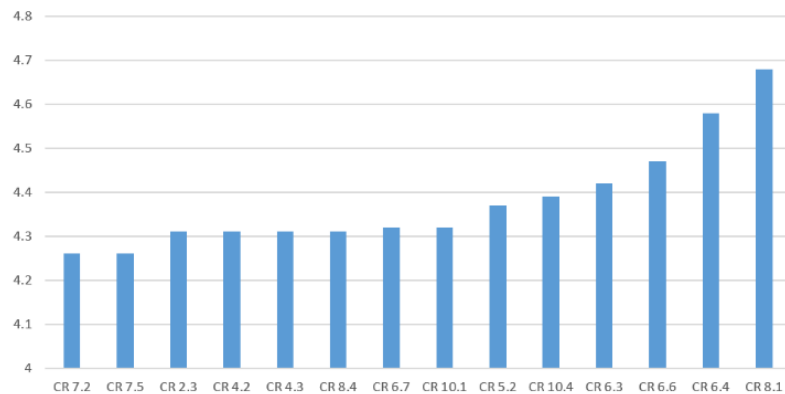


FIGURE 3
14 CRITERIA WITH HIGHEST SCORE

In the 7-point scale, the lowest point for a criterion among these 19 programs is 3. The programs that have the most criteria rated point 3 are presented in Table 4.

Number of programs	Number of criteria rated 3
2	10
1	9
2	8
5	7
3	6

Meanwhile, the highest point for a criterion among these programs is 5. The programs that have the most criteria rated point 5 are highlighted in Table 5.

Number of programs and area	Number of criteria rated 5
1 (Finance & Banking)	27
1 (Psychology)	21
1 (Transportation)	20
1 (Construction)	17
1 (Education)	16

The findings above help comprehend certain aspects regarding quality of 19 accredited programs, which will be discussed in detail in the next section.

DISCUSSION

It can be seen that among 19 accredited programs, the field of education has the most programs (6). This result can be explainable and is consistent with the policy from MoET.

The higher education accreditation strategic plan 2017-2020 issued by MoET set priority for the accreditation of pedagogy institutions and teacher training programs (MoET, 2017; Nguyen, 2018). Apart from this, 11 universities of pedagogy and 5 teacher training colleges were awarded accreditation certificates (VQA, 2019b).

By law, the minimum requirement for a program to be recognized as meeting the quality standards is that it must satisfy at least 80 per cent of all 50 criteria (MoET, 2013). It can be observed that among 19 programs, two programs are at the lowest level of this requirement while one program achieved 82 per cent, one program satisfied 84 per cent, and six programs achieved 86 per cent. It means that more than a half of the accredited programs only satisfied from 40 to 43 criteria (out of 50 criteria). Meanwhile, the number of programs achieved from 92 per cent (46 criteria) is quite small with only 4. These findings are consistent with Ta et al. (2019) research which analysed the first 8 accredited programs. The findings also reveal that there are two programs having their average score under point 4 with the lowest average score of 3.88. This belongs to a bachelor English teacher training program, which also met the lowest level of requirement for accreditation. The second lowest average score is for a bachelor History teacher training program with 3.96. Only two programs received the average score of 4.00 and they are both primary teacher training programs.

The lowest average score for one criterion is 3.32 and it belongs to criterion 9.2 which says "The library and its learning resources are sufficient and updated to support teaching and research activities" (MoET, 2016). Libraries and learning materials are the most crucial conditions for the operation and development of a higher education institution. However, in the context of Vietnam, universities are always short of financial resources to invest in facilities in general and learning resources in particular (Nguyen & Ta, 2018). The criterion with the second lowest average score is 6.5, which focuses on training and professional development needs of academic staff. The associated literature points out that training and professional development are an effective way teachers, researchers and educational managers can learn so that they are able to better their performance (Mizell, 2010). In the Vietnamese setting, training and professional development also received great concern from the government and higher education institutions. However, related programs and activities were not implemented systematically and effectively in many universities. This can be the reason why this criterion received quite low point. The third lowest average score for a certain criterion is 3.2, which says "The contribution made by each course to achieve the expected learning outcomes is clear" (MoET, 2016). It is believed that many Vietnamese universities are still confused about the processes of curriculum and expected learning outcome development.

Criterion 8.1 got the highest average score with 4.68. It is about the clarity, public announcement and update of student admission policy. The next three highest average score criteria are all in standard 6 with criterion 6.4 (4.58), 6.6 (4.57) and 6.3 (4.42). Criterion 6.4 focuses on competencies of academic staff, which is defined and evaluated (MoET, 2016). Criterion 6.6 says "Performance management of academic staff (including reward and recognition) is implemented to motivate and support training, research and community service" (MoET, 2016). Criterion 6.3 regulates the determination and public announcement of recruitment and selection criteria including ethics and academic freedom for appointment, deployment and promotion. Vietnamese higher education institutions are becoming more and more autonomous. Therefore, they can have more policies to attract new students as well as supporting their academic staff (Dang & Ta, 2019).

According to the Circular 04/2016/TT-BGDĐT, each criterion shall be rated from 1 to 7 (MoET, 2016). Among 19 accredited programs, each single criterion was actually rated 3, 4 or 5. There are two programs that have 10 criteria rated point 3. They are bachelor English teacher training program and primary teacher training program. These are also two programs that satisfy only 80 per cent of all criteria. One program has 9 criteria rated point 3 and it is the bachelor program of Vietnam studies. This program satisfies only 82 per cent of all criteria. There are two programs that have 8 criteria rated point 3. They are bachelor program of History teacher training and bachelor program of Chemistry teacher training. They also satisfy 86 per cent and 84 per cent of all criteria respectively. There are five programs that have 7 criteria rated point 3. They are primary teacher training program, bachelor of accounting program, bachelor program of transportation and construction. These programs all satisfy 86 per cent of all criteria. It appears that teacher training programs are below expectation though they have received great concern from the government and society (The World Bank, 2016).

On the contrary, there is one program that has 27 criteria rated point 5. It is the bachelor program (merit) of finance and banking. This program also achieves 96 per cent of all criteria- the highest level among 19 accredited programs. One program has 21 criteria rated point 5. It is the bachelor program of psychology. This program satisfies 90 per cent of all 50 criteria. There is one program that has 20 criteria rated point 5. This bachelor program is in the area of transportation and satisfies 86 per cent of all criteria. It seems that these above three programs satisfy most of assessment criteria. However, there is substantial room for quality improvement in the management of these programs (Ta et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

Quality management and quality assurance of higher education programs in Vietnam has been a central attention during the past few years. Program accreditation has been implemented as one of the primary approaches to ensure and enhance the quality of training programs (Do et al., 2017). However, to date, only a very small number of programs have satisfied requirements to be recognized as meeting quality standards regulated by MoET. By employing inclusion criteria for data collection and data analysis focusing on analyzing 19 accredited programs, this study found out that despite being awarded the accreditation certificates, many programs lacked essential conditions and resources for survival and growth. Around a half of these programs did not satisfy important requirements related to the operation of a higher education program such as curriculum development, methods for student assessment, professional development for academic staff and support staff, libraries, teaching and learning facilities, and the continuous review and evaluation of the teaching and learning processes and student assessment. Even programs achieving most of accreditation criteria still need strategic plans for quality enhancement.

Education in general and the teacher training program in particular are always stated to be on the top priorities in Vietnamese higher education system (Garavan & Akdere, 2016). There are 6 education programs among 19 accredited programs. However, these education programs were rated the lowest scores. In fact, two teacher training programs satisfied the minimum criteria to be awarded the accreditation certificates. It is suggested that those who are involved in these programs should be aware of the program quality management and quality assurance. Particularly, institutional leaders and faculty managers should follow recommendations of accreditors to develop detailed plans to change their programs.

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