

Higher Education Accreditation in Vietnam and the U.S.: In Pursuit of Quality

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Abstract: The paper begins with a discussion of globalization, policy attraction, and the confluence around assessment of higher education internationally. It then examines the literature on Vietnam's efforts to develop an accreditation system for higher education and key aspects of accreditation development in the United States (U.S.). The historical picture of U.S. higher education accreditation and assessment is held up against Vietnam's current situation to identify potentially useful concepts and processes that can be drawn from the U.S. experience. The paper concludes with insights that may be useful to Vietnam, as well as other developing countries that are experiencing rapid growth in their higher education systems, and are seeking funding support from international agencies.

Keywords: accreditation, assessment, higher education, Vietnam, the U.S.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the development of higher education accreditation in Vietnam and to highlight aspects of accreditation history in the U.S. that may be informative to Vietnam's future efforts. The significance of this comparative analysis goes beyond these two countries as a result of globalization. The paper is divided into four sections: (a) a discussion of globalization, cross-national attraction, and the confluence around assessment of higher education internationally; (b) an examination of literature and related government documents concerning Vietnam's efforts to develop an accreditation system for higher education; (c) a brief review of literature that highlights key aspects of accreditation as it has developed in the U.S.; and (d) conclusions concerning concepts and processes of U.S. accreditation that may be useful to Vietnam.

Globalization, Internationalization, and Cross-National Attraction

Three important theoretical constructs related to development of higher education accreditation internationally are globalization, internationalization, and policy attraction. Globalization involves economies, technologies, people, and ideas that move across national borders, and it affects individual countries differently due to their unique contexts (Knight, 1999). In education, "globalization also refers to the closely intertwined economic and

education agendas promoted by the major international donor and technical assistance agencies—namely the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and national overseas aid agencies” (Arnové & Torres, 2003, p. 2). Internationalization of higher education is the way that a country deals with the impacts of globalization while maintaining its own national identity (Knight, 1999). With regard to “cross-national attraction,” Phillips (2004) lists several categories of stimuli that catalyze policy borrowing, including internal dissatisfactions (e.g., by parents, teachers, and students), negative external assessments or perceptions, new models and alliances, and advances in knowledge and skills (especially technology).

The World Bank has strongly encouraged Vietnam and other developing countries to diversify their institutions in terms of funding and types (Oliver, 2002), but there can be some negative results in the absence of a quality assurance system. Vietnam's higher education system has been growing and diversifying rapidly; this has led to concerns regarding quality that are shared by many of Vietnam's academics, the government, and the public. Although this comparative analysis focuses on Vietnam's efforts to develop an accreditation system and relevant aspects of the U.S. experience, the findings also may be informative to other developing countries that have quality concerns. As argued by Mollis and Marginson (2002) there appears to be an international “convergence” around assessment of higher education that is a form of globalization (p. 313).

Thus the point of this comparative review regarding accreditation in Vietnam and the U.S. is to build upon the constructs of globalization, internationalization, and cross-national attraction by suggesting that challenges in the history of U.S. higher education addressed through accreditation may provide useful insights to the further development of accreditation in Vietnam. The U.S. was selected because it likely has the longest tradition of institutional and programmatic accreditation and is often held up as a model in the case of diversified education systems (Teichler, as cited in Amaral & Magalhaes, 2004). The view into Vietnam's thought and movement toward developing an accreditation system also is significant because information published in English concerning Vietnam's higher education system is relatively rare.

Accreditation in Vietnam

The Beginning of Higher Education Accreditation in Vietnam and the Goals

Vietnam's higher education system is in a state of rapid diversification, expansion, and change. After 1986, when Vietnam began its renovation (*Doi moi*) to implement a socialist market economy, there was a realization that limited student access was one of the most challenging problems facing the Vietnamese higher education system. A new direction was taken through diversification of funding and types of institutions to increase the system's capacity. Higher education institutions (HEIs) began charging tuition and in December 1988 the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) authorized establishment of the first nonpublic HEI in Vietnam. Although definitions are in transition, it can be said that the

nonpublic sector includes (a) private, (b) people-founded, (c) open, and (d) foreign owned HEIs. As of May 2006, the higher education system comprised 255 universities and colleges (104 universities and 151 junior colleges) (Nguyen, T.L.H., personal communication, August 16, 2006). Between academic year 1999-2000 and academic year 2004-2005, the total higher education enrollments grew by 148% (from 893,754 to 1,319,754) (MOET, 2006b). Perhaps even more striking is that enrollments between 1993 and 2003 increased by 600% and the number of higher education institutions doubled (MOET, 2006a).

With regard to the speed and frequency of change, "the education system in Vietnam continues to undergo significant change at every level on an annual basis" (IIE, 2001, p. 3). Whether accreditation can assure quality within the system is open to argument, but Vietnam is moving in that direction. In 1996, the Government Higher Education Project (GHEP) was established with funding from the World Bank to conduct active research on internal quality assurance processes (K. D. Nguyen, 2002). Currently, the lessons from GHEP 1 are being factored into the planning for the follow-on GHEP 2 (MOET, 2006b). The GHEP's impact on Vietnam lends strength to Mollis and Margison's (2002) argument that "worldwide convergence around particular systems of university assessment . . . [is] expressed through direct intervention of international agencies such as the World Bank " (p. 313).

Only in 2000 when the National Workshop on Quality Assurance in Higher Education was held in Dalat was quality defined and matched with the higher education system's goals and objectives (K. D. Nguyen, 2000). At the same time, Quality Assurance Centers were established at Vietnam National University (VNU)-Hanoi and VNU-Ho Chi Minh City. Additionally, 36 Vietnamese universities received GHEP quality improvement grants, VNU-Hanoi (2001) developed 10 criteria for institutional assessment, and on December 28, 2001, the Prime Minister approved the Strategy for Educational Development in 2001-2010. These events marked a renewal of the quality movement's initial 1996 efforts.

The Strategy for Educational Development in 2001-2010 was divided into two parts: (a) Stage 1 from 2001-2005 and (b) Stage 2 from 2006-2010. The goals stipulated for Stage 1 with regard to assessment were "to urgently establish and implement the accreditation system at all levels of education" (Ly, 2002, p. 9). Stage 2 would then build upon this by focusing "on pushing the development and enhancement of the quality in education to achieve the strategic objectives and concrete criteria" (Ly, 2002, p. 9). As a result of this strategy, a new office, the Quality Accreditation Division, was established in 2002 within MOET's Department of Higher Education (Pham, 2002). In 2003, this division was elevated and became the General Department for Educational Testing and Accreditation (GDETA). A provisional regulation on higher education accreditation was issued in December 2004 comprising 10 standards and a three-stage process (self assessment, external evaluation, and accreditation decision) (Ngo, 2005). Director, Doughty, Gray, Hopcroft, and Silvera (2006) commented that the current standards seem to be more concerned with compliance than with the assessment of student

learning and continuous improvement. However, compliance may be the starting point, as it was in U.S. HE accreditation, because institutional management is recognized as an area that requires substantial improvement in Vietnam, particularly as HEIs move toward greater autonomy and accountability.

Ten pilot institutions carried out and completed their self-studies between March 2005 and December 2005. Another cohort of 10 pilot institutions is expected to complete their self-studies in 2006 (Kieu, 2005). Peer review of the first 12 universities are in progress and should be completed by December 2006. Between 2007 and 2020, the rest of the institutions in Vietnam are expected to complete their self-assessments.

Additionally, in November 2005, the Prime Minister signed the Resolution on Fundamental and Comprehensive Reform of Higher Education in Vietnam 2006-2020, also referred to as the Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA). The HERA recognizes achievements under Phase 1 of the Strategy for Educational Development in 2001-2010, but identifies the need to systematize and integrate recent changes, as well as address other reforms, including international approaches to advancing higher education. One of the specific objectives in the HERA is to “establish and develop quality assurance mechanisms and a HEI accreditation system” (Resolution, 2005, ¶ 2.b.2). This is important because the plan is to triple or quadruple the student enrollment rate by 2020 (MOET, 2006a). From October to November 2006, MOET plans to have an evaluation of short-term impact of the Quality Improvement Grants, Higher Education Project conducted on teaching, learning, and researching at 36 universities (Doan, personal communication, August 23, 2006).

The Current Assessment Process

Except for the pilot institutions, the current method of assessment is based on one used prior to *Doi moi* (Pham, 2000), when the higher education system supported a centralized 5-Year Plan emulating the former Soviet model. Pham (2000) states that academics are “accustomed to the old managerial system, all the inputs were controlled centrally and all the quality conditions were provided centrally” (p. 260). Although Vietnam's higher education system remains centralized, increased diversification has meant that inputs are from different sources, and Pham (2000) argues that “the use of set evaluative performance criteria is necessary and urgent if we would like to manage the control of higher education quality” (p. 260).

Accountability through quality control is the main form of evaluation. The primary evaluative tools are examinations and financial audits to ensure that institutions strictly observe rules and regulations. Pham (2000) says HEIs do not solicit feedback from graduates and employers; consequently, what students are learning may not be relevant to workforce needs.

Traditional mechanisms used by Vietnamese universities for assuring teaching quality are self-evaluation of academic staff and peer evaluation within a discipline. At the national level, MOET has issued regulations and evaluation criteria for universities to use in controlling the quality of teaching. For assuring the quality of learning in higher education, there are three main types of examinations: (a) entry, (b) end of course, and (c) graduation (K. D. Nguyen, 2002). However, many students think "that the lecturer's evaluation of their assignments and examinations are based too much on evidence of knowledge which has been learnt by heart; and . . . lecturers pay inadequate attention to . . . creativity and the development of critical thinking" (Pham & Sloper, 1995, p. 106).

This shows that assessment in Vietnam is deeply rooted in the positivist perspective as described by Gray (2002): learning outcomes are evaluated in terms of student behaviors that are primarily determined by "norm-referenced or criterion-referenced tests, performance measures, and other forms of objective testing" (p. 53). The teaching methods are directed at teaching students what to think without also teaching them how to think. The standardized and summative tests tend to reinforce this approach, although the government has indicated that it wants students to be able to problem solve and function in the global economy (M. H. Nguyen, 2001). There is a need to develop broader evaluative criteria for the assessment of student learning (Pham, 2000). Director et al. (2006) found that there is a lack of systematic evaluation of student learning, of programs, and of institutional effectiveness: "at the foundation of these concerns and issues is an apparent lack of clearly articulated and coordinated student learning outcomes at the institutional, departmental, and course levels" (p. 21).

Problems Faced by the Quality Assurance Movement

An important factor in developing an understanding of Vietnam's higher education context is to be aware of the problems that it and its efforts toward quality improvement face. One formidable problem is the budget. Inadequate funding results in low staff salaries, low quality instructional methods, inadequate technology and administrative support, and poorly stocked libraries. Other problems include "lack of qualified faculty, low secondary education standards, . . . graduate unemployment, lack of autonomy, lack of good management, lack of accountability, and a brain drain out of rural regions" (Oliver, 2002, p. 110). Although accreditation cannot address all the problems, the associated quality improvement processes could help HEIs to be more effective in using existing resources. Additionally, according to the HERA, universities will be granted increased operational autonomy, and this will elevate the need for accountability measures.

In brief, the literature shows that little has been written about higher education assessment and accreditation in Vietnam; nevertheless, six themes can be identified. First, Vietnamese terms and concepts are not consistent; several authors defined the term "quality" differently.

Second, the literature shows that the government, educators, and researchers are making an effort to establish and implement an accreditation system as soon as possible (Duong, 1998, 1998a; Lam, 1998a; Ly, 2002; MOET, 2006a; Ngo, 2005; Pham, 2000). This effort has advantages as well as disadvantages. The advantages are that the process of establishing a national quality assurance system through accreditation helps institutions become more aware of the quality of services they provide and it may motivate them to put additional effort into improvement. The disadvantages include the danger of increasing public doubt concerning the quality of HEIs if [the accreditation system fails or becomes too costly to implement or maintain](#). Additionally, because of the desire to use experiences from other countries, quality assurance methods may be adopted without giving careful consideration to their suitability for Vietnam's context. In actuality, there are three main factors that will potentially affect implementation of any other country's quality assurance system in Vietnam: (a) inexperience, (b) cultural differences, and (c) a lack of appropriate mechanisms for quality assurance (K. D. Nguyen, 2002).

Third, a few institutions have demonstrated initiatives in carrying out quality assurance measures. Vietnam National University – Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM) carried out a pilot study using six standards of the ASEAN University Network (AUN), to conduct program reviews (at department undergraduate level) at its affiliates from June 2004 to June 2006 (D. N. Nguyen, 2006). Additionally, several centers within institutions have been established to conduct research on criteria for internal institutional quality assurance (MOET, 2006a; K. D. Nguyen, 2002).

Fourth, there is a heightened awareness of the important impact that an “accredited” status has on foreign universities (Dieu, 2002; Nhom PV Giao duc, 2002; D.N. Nguyen, 2006; Vu, 2006; D.T. Vu & V.N. Nguyen, 2006). In the context of increasing globalization, Vietnam needs an accreditation system to ensure that its higher education system and students are accepted internationally.

Fifth, the literature shows a great concern for improving the quality of higher education, especially as Vietnam strives to meet the increasing demand for access by expanding the public and nonpublic higher education sectors. One important higher education issue is the shortage of highly qualified teachers (K. D. Nguyen, 2000), and most institutions do not have adequate staff development plans. Some senior faculty members in Vietnam's universities are conservative, Soviet trained, and comfortable with the former centralized planning system (Oliver, 2002). Additionally, there is a lack of coordination in the use of existing teaching staff between institutions.

Other significant problems relate to teachers' attitudes toward changing their teaching methodologies and their motivation to improve teaching quality. It is reported that, in general, teachers' attitudes toward methods of quality improvement in teaching are relatively negative.

Teachers tend to give low grades for any improvement efforts that do not match their traditional expectations (Berlie, 1995; Dang, 1997; Lam, 1998). The literature places a great emphasis on the importance of training the teaching faculty as an essential task in improving quality (Dang, 1997; Director et al., 2006; Minh, 2002; MOET, 2006a; Vo, 2002). Going beyond most writers who seem to stop at this point, Director et al. (2006) make recommendations on how in-service training and assessment can be included in the accreditation process (e.g., conducting professional development programs in pedagogy and research skills).

Two final points drawn from the literature relate to the law and management practices. Vietnam must develop the legal foundation necessary for carrying out the accreditation process; an interim regulation has been drafted and progress is evident in addressing this requirement. Additionally, Nguyen Minh Hien (1998), MOET, argued that lax management is a major culprit in the quality problems faced by Vietnam's higher education system. Quality accreditation may facilitate some improvement by providing a minimum level of expectations and standards.

Development of the U.S. Accreditation System

Two questions were particularly pertinent in understanding the relationship between U.S. accreditation and Vietnam: (a) what is the connection between accreditation and assessment, and (b) what is the history of thought and action regarding U.S. higher education accreditation and assessment?

The Relationship between Accreditation and Assessment

Hacleroad (1980) traces the first accrediting agency back to the State University of New York in 1787, but the assessment movement did not begin until 1985 (Ewell, 2002). Assessment for the purpose of facilitating student learning and institutional improvement were new, and had to be included by revising the accreditation standards (Mentkowski & Loacker, 2002). Importantly, assessment enabled accreditation to focus on “the crux of the matter, student learning, after decades of fixation on surrogates: the resources and processes that were assumed to lead to quality” (Wright, 2002, p. 242).

A History of Thought and Action in Accreditation

The context of higher education during the late 19th century was marked by confusion that gave impetus to action. New disciplines were developing, there were challenges to the classical curriculum, the higher education system was diversifying into different types of institutions, and the number of institutions was increasing rapidly (Hacleroads 1980; Brint & Karabel, 1989). To address these problems the educators formed six regional accrediting agencies. The U.S. approach to regulating colleges and universities took root from two quite different traditions, French and “English” (Tobin, 1994, p. 26). The U.S. adopted characteristics from both approaches: an extrinsic requirement to protect the public through accountability and an

intrinsic quest for improvement through peer review. Thus, as the U.S. began to develop an accreditation system, it exhibited two characteristics that are evident in Vietnam today: (a) the higher education system was undergoing diversification and rapid growth resulting in government and public concern about quality, and (b) the examination of accreditation systems of other countries leading to adoption of selected characteristics suitable for its own context.

Four persistent problems have affected the development of accreditation in the U.S.: (a) confusion over definitions, (b) the need to deal with an increasingly diversified higher education system, (c) the need to protect consumers from “diploma mills” (institutions that document degrees for payment rather than for academic work by the student), and (d) concern that the state and federal governments would assume greater authority over accreditation (Harclerod, 1980, p. 24). The first three are particularly relevant to Vietnam’s situation.

In 2000, U.S. regional accrediting agencies began major renovations. One of the agencies, the North Central Association revised its standards based upon a paradigm shift from “assuring teaching of students to one of assuring student learning” (Crow, 2002, p. 20). This is an important paradigm change for Vietnam to consider. However, despite the fact that accrediting agencies are now emphasizing learning, “few phrases are more vexing to institutions and accreditors than student learning outcomes, partly because of confusion about just how the phrase is used” (Eaton, 2001, ¶ 3). The problem of variation in meanings and evolution of terms also is evident in Vietnam’s literature on accreditation and quality improvement.

Diversification continues to increase with virtual institutions, corporate education providers, degree or non-degree granting institutions, as well as for profit and nonprofit HEIs (Eaton, 2001). The need for quality assurance and the emerging variety of institutional and programmatic models have forced institutional accreditation to focus on process and performance (Harclerod, 1980). Although Vietnam’s system is highly centralized, it has a variety of HEIs; therefore, a process and performance oriented accreditation model may be more beneficial than set national standards.

The third problem, concern over diploma mills became acute in the 1930s and led to discussions regarding the establishment of state standards and accrediting (Harclerod, 1980). With the rapid increase of private HEIs in Vietnam and the international reputation they have been developing for poor quality (Lopatin, 2001), Vietnam could also soon be faced with a difficult diploma-mill problem.

Since the 1930s there have been periods of strong pressure to increase the federal and state governments’ roles in accreditation but the voluntary agencies have succeeded in maintaining their positions by periodically reforming the accreditation concepts and methods. Of the six regional accrediting bodies, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools – Commission on Colleges (SACS-COC) has been the most recent to reform its approach beginning with pilot

institutions in 2001 and finalizing the new *Principles of Accreditation* (the *Principles*) in 2004. This new approach affected about 800 institutions in 11 southern states. The change “is characterized as a move from a fairly prescriptive set of standards with which institutions needed to demonstrate minimal compliance, to more generic standards that encourage institutions to tailor their reviews to meet specific institutional needs” (Eaton, 2001, p. 1).

Nguyen’s (2005) detailed case study of a university’s reaccreditation under the *Principles* explains that the new approach comprises a Compliance Certification with 72 requirements (replacing 440 “must” statements), for which the HEIs have greater flexibility in customizing their responses, plus one separate standard, Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) (p. 188). “The QEP describes a carefully designed and focused course of action that addresses a well-defined topic or issue(s) related to enhancing student learning” (SACS-COC, 2003, p. 21); it is specific to and initiated by the institution. Perhaps this type of approach would address the concern expressed in MOET (2006a) concerning the effort to set standards, which does not “make a distinction according to the type of institution and the degree of its autonomy” (Annex 2, p. 9).

The SACS-COC reaccreditation process involves three reviews: (a) internal review (self study) by the HEI, (b) Off-Site Peer Review (examines the results of the Compliance Certification and gives the HEI an opportunity to respond to any concerns), and (c) On-Site Peer Review (examines the QEP and any remaining issues from the Off-Site Review) (P.T.T. Nguyen, 2005). The Commission Review includes the Off- and On-Site Review reports as well as the HEI’s Reaction Report and results in a final decision. This review process is thorough and efficient because the Off-Site Review results in better preparation for the On-Site Review. Although reaccreditation is for 10 years, the QEP must be reported on in five years. As a final note, one of the most common reasons for an institution not being successful in achieving reaccreditation is an inadequate institutional effectiveness program to ensure ongoing quality improvement (e.g., program reviews, strategic plan, and measures for improving learning outcomes).

Conclusions

Eight insights can be drawn from the examination of Vietnamese and U.S. literature on accreditation. First, common definitions need to be established and updated as accreditation and assessment models evolve. MOET might consider developing, distributing, and periodically updating standard terms and definitions for Vietnam’s accreditation program.

Second, as the higher education system diversifies, the accreditation system must be more dependent upon assessment models that focus on process and performance in relation to learning outcomes rather than merely on a set of finite, positivist criteria.

Third, a rapidly expanding higher education system that is simultaneously diversifying and increasing institutional autonomy must protect students against poor quality programs and

diploma mills by conducting periodic assessments to ensure a sustained acceptable level of quality once the government approves an institution to operate.

Fourth, in Vietnam, more research on assessment will be needed to develop an indigenous body of literature and instruments, as was done in the U.S. during the 1980s. It is important that research be conducted to identify the specific characteristics of various assessment models and the characteristics be evaluated based upon how well they fit Vietnam's context. Vietnam might also consider encouraging some of its graduate students who are studying abroad to develop expertise in accreditation and assessment.

Fifth, a gap often exists between assessment planning and implementation because only a few, usually positivist, administrators do the planning. This problem can be effectively addressed by including administrators, faculty, and staff in the entire process and by rewarding those who actively participate, especially the faculty, with incentives such as lower teaching loads or additional monetary compensation.

Sixth, there are a variety of ways to formulate an approach to the accreditation process. The SACS-COC's *Principles* is one example. Innovative approaches to accreditation and assessment need to be piloted and evaluated to determine if a more nontraditional, quality improvement focused approach is effective.

Seventh, accountability and increased autonomy are linked; the former is essential to having the latter. Accreditation has helped to maintain a substantial level of autonomy for HEIs in the U.S. Institutions in Vietnam desire and, according to the HERA, will receive more autonomy thus an accreditation process with self assessments and periodic reviews by an independent government accrediting body will become even more important.

It is unlikely that an existing higher education accreditation model in another country would be entirely effective in Vietnam. But by conducting comparative education research, Vietnam can better understand the experiences of other countries and use these insights in further developing an accreditation system that is tailored to its own unique requirements and documents regarding the progress of Vietnam's HEIs as they continue down the path toward achieving international standards. Thus we return to the concept of an international "convergence" in the area of higher education assessment that is a form of globalization (Mollis & Margison, 2002, p. 313).

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