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Quality assurance in Vietnamese higher education

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Abstract

Although Vietnam has millennia of experience with higher education, its systems have been totally redesigned twice in the last 200 years. Now comes the third reorganisation, based in the on-going renovation ('doi moi') of the country's social organisation so as to fit into a socialist market economy. In such conditions, with meagre resources but a high commitment to education, western 'quality' systems retain a freshness that might no longer be felt in more developed market economies. Therefore, Vietnam is now considering an opportunity to choose among alternatives, which have already been worked through and evaluated by developed countries, seeking to combine effective methods from different systems.

Outline

The first part of this paper sketches the history of major changes in the Vietnamese higher education system from Confucian to French Colonial to socialist organisations. After the momentous 1985 government decision to 'renovate' ('doi moi') Vietnamese society by moving to a socialist-driven market economy, the education systems have again been redesigned, starting especially with the primary grades and with a concerted, highly effective attack upon illiteracy. With illiteracy now greatly reduced, the primary and secondary systems have continued to evolve, and the universities have begun to think out their own reorganisation.

The first stages of university redesign have produced two national universities, one in Hanoi (VNU–Hanoi) and one in Ho Chi Minh City (VNU–HCMC). These National Universities make an especially interesting case, because they have been granted a significant measure of autonomy by being placed directly under the prime minister of Vietnam's government. This arrangement puts the universities into a position favourable for influencing the organisation and development of the entire tertiary education system in Vietnam for purposes of quality assurance. The accreditation system could eventually include all of the 153 universities and colleges in Vietnam, and it currently counts more than 50 members, all of which are universities.

During the past several years, one of the research institutes at VNU Hanoi, the Centre for Education Quality Assurance and Research Development (CEQARD), headed by one of the two vice-presidents of the entire university, has been engaged in an extensive quality-assurance project, which it undertook after submitting a winning research proposal to the government. This project has already produced an agreement among Vietnam's leading universities to engage in evaluation based on nine subject categories, which are articulated by 43 evaluative criteria. Most of the nine subject categories will be familiar to educators who have been engaged in various types of quality assurance and accreditation. They include evaluation of institutional governance, staff, students, teaching and learning, research, facilities, finance, consultancy and technology transfer, and international relations. Only the last two areas might require some special explanation. They are rationally included because the dissemination of technology is of critical importance to a developing economy. Relationships with educational and technological contacts outside Vietnam, especially with donor nations, are critical to the speed of reorganisation for which Vietnam is increasingly prepared.

The nine areas of assessment and the 43 specific criteria for evaluation have been carefully worked out and agreed upon in the context of quality initiatives being developed in universities throughout Vietnam. Moreover, they appear to fit well into discussions of quality assurance being conducted in Southeast Asia generally, largely through the new ASEAN University Network (AUN) organisation of Chief Quality Officers. These officers have been appointed by seventeen ASEAN universities pursuant to the 'Bangkok Accord on AUN – QA,' which was adopted in November, 2000. The Accord has, as its ambitious goal, the construction of 'standards and mechanisms for quality assurance in higher education, which could consequently lead to mutual recognition by member universities' (this comes from the Bangkok Accord cited above). This would presumably allow students to transfer freely among the member universities, at least insofar as academic qualifications are concerned. The Bangkok Accord was adopted by AUN's board of trustees, and it therefore provides a great deal of momentum at this point. The first workshop of chief quality assurance officers has been organised by the University Malaya in Kuala Lumpur for 18-20 April, 2001. ¹

The next step in CEQARD's quality project is to devise a plan for implementing evaluation on the nine 'subjects', which have been agreed upon. CEQARD is currently looking at a variety of models, but most especially at the models of 'self-regulation', which would have the universities voluntarily submit to systematised cycles of examination, each of which is based on a comprehensive self-assessment. That self-assessment would then be validated and vetted by a visiting team of peer examiners, which would report to the central quality or accrediting organisation. Should this mechanism be adopted, it would be similar to the advanced models of educational self-regulation used in several parts of the world, although it would be adapted to Vietnam's developing tertiary education system.

Pursuant to this plan, the next conference of the Vietnam University Network will begin specific deliberations concerning its preferred way of organising the system of higher education quality assurance in Vietnam. That meeting is currently scheduled for Da Lat (Vietnam) in May, so an appendix to this paper will be written following the Da Lat conference as well as the AUN workshop in Kuala Lumpur. We will therefore be able to report on achievements made by these two major consultations.

Our paper seeks to describe the process by which a national tertiary educational system adopts quality assurance mechanisms. The paper lays the groundwork for further studies, which will be able to describe the development and assess the effectiveness of the adopted system. The study is especially interesting because it is being undertaken in a developing country, which nonetheless has a particularly strong allegiance to formal education. This is, therefore, a study of a system *in medias res* — a system that has the capability of highlighting further, yet-unexploited usefulness in applying the concepts of education quality assurance.

References

¹ VNU–Hanoi is one of the seventeen members of the ASEAN University Network, and Dr. Nguyen Phuong Nga, co-author of this paper, is the Chief Quality Officer of VNU, as well as Deputy Director of CEQARD. The other author of this paper, Dr. John J. McDonald, is a Fulbright Scholar with fifteen years of experience in accrediting colleges and universities in the United States. He is working with CEQARD as it prepares reports that may lead to the adoption of a country-wide quality assurance system in Vietnam in the very near future.