



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Values of Recommendations by Quality Assurance Papers: The Case of Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Many scientific articles on quality in higher education are published every year. Ideally, these articles are read, studied and moreover used by others. However, the usability of articles on quality in higher education by scholars and quality responsible staff in institutions is not obvious. Do the right people read the articles? And moreover, are the recommendations of these articles transportable to the different contexts they are working in? This article summarizes some of the lessons learned from the articles published in the journal *Quality in Higher Education* from September 2021 to October 2022. It also relates the results to the Vietnamese higher education context. In doing so, the article presents a set of useful findings of international research for higher education in Vietnam and maybe in other Asian countries in comparable contexts. Furthermore, the authors propose a way to determine the usability of research results in another context.

1. INTRODUCTION

Every year, a myriad of scientific articles is published. Most of the time, the research has practical implications, often mentioned in a specific chapter in the article. The results or findings of the research are read and used by others towards the improvement of their products and services. Yet, not every result is useful for or transportable to every context. Ideally, the applicability of the results is discussed, for instance in the conclusions. In fact, the applicability of quality assurance research results, particularly those in developed countries to quality assurance systems in developing countries was well-documented (Nguyen et al, 2021; Pham & Nguyen, 2021; Pham et al., 2021).

In two literature reviews on quality management paradigms, one in healthcare (published in the *International Journal for Integrated Care*) by Van der Vlegel et al. (2020) and one in quality management (in the *Journal of Total Quality Management*) by Van Kemenade (2022), a bycatch of the findings was that researchers were seldom clear about the context in which the study was executed. That raises a preliminary research question: How can all these valuable findings in quality management research actually be used in the daily practice of organizations to increase the quality of their processes? Consequently, this study focuses on synthesizing research results of current quality assurance articles to propose recommendations for Vietnam's emerging quality assurance system.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Quality assurance in higher education is a global phenomenon, with a wide range of organizations and agencies responsible for monitoring and evaluating the quality of institutions and programs. According to Suvin (2023), quality assurance in higher education refers to the methodical assessment and supervision of the standard of instruction being delivered by higher education institutions. It is a method to guarantee that the education offered by these institutions complies with particular criteria and expectations and that students are able to gain the expertise

they need to succeed in their chosen professions. In order to guarantee that students obtain a high-quality education that satisfies industry and social needs, quality assurance in higher education is essential. It ensures that institutions' educational offerings adhere to predetermined criteria, are reliable, and are continuously improved. The value and reputation of the institution and its credentials are safeguarded, and quality assurance makes sure that graduates are adequately prepared for the workforce. In general, quality assurance in higher education promotes responsibility, openness, and academic success.

Vietnam has its own history regarding quality assurance in higher education (Nguyen et al., 2017). Since 2005, the discussions and activities have started with the longing for internal quality assurance and external accreditation supported by the General Department of Education Testing and Accreditation – GDETA (now called Vietnam Education Quality Management Agency – VQA), and often with the participation of international projects (HEP1, HEP2, ProfQim) (Nguyen, 2012). The evaluation of the ProfQim project shows how much progress was made in a limited period of time (Van Kemenade et al., 2009). With the support of these projects and other international collaboration in quality assurance, the accreditation process in Vietnam's higher education has been speeded up with more and more internal quality assurance centers being established in the universities (Nguyen et al., 2017).

The findings from Nguyen (2012) indicate that the international training activities for a group of beneficiary universities have created core people with knowledge about quality assurance to support quality assurance activities in their universities. Recent research (Nguyen, 2021), however, states that the main obstacles for quality assurance personnel in Vietnam were still connected to their shortage of experience, knowledge and skills in the field of quality management. History has shown how eager Vietnamese staff have been to learn. That supports the assumption that it is important to find out whether international experiences like those reported in Quality in Higher Education that have been successfully applied in other countries can also be effective in the context of Vietnam (Nguyen, 2012). International projects help, but does international research have value in daily practice? That relates back to the above-mentioned preliminary research question in the Vietnamese context: How can all these valuable findings in quality management research on higher education actually be implemented in the daily practice of higher education institutes in Vietnam to increase the quality of their internal quality assurance processes?

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

To answer the research question, we choose a rapid review method. Rapid reviews are a type of knowledge synthesis where elements of the systematic review process are condensed or left out in order to provide information quickly (Khangura et al., 2012). In this research, the rapid review method from Virginia Commonwealth University (2021) was used. Specifically, it consists of seven steps, including, step 1: Forming/refining question, step 2: Defining parameters, step 3: Identifying biases, step 4: Planning and executing search, step 5: Screening and selecting, step 6: Quality appraisal, and step 7: Evidence synthesis (Virginia Commonwealth University, 2021).

As a resource for our search, we chose only one journal: Quality in Higher Education. This journal has a SCImago Journal Rank (SJR) of 0,809 and an impact score of 1.87. Its latest Journal Impact IF for 2021-2022 is 1.182 and shows an increase of 0,9%. Furthermore, the research question above fits with the aim of the journal. The editor “especially wishes to encourage papers -among other topics- on theoretical analyses of quality and quality initiatives in higher education; comparative evaluation and *international aspects of practice and policy with a view to identifying transportable methods, systems and good practice*” (Aims and scope of Quality in Higher Education) (italics written by the authors of this article). In a sense, the journal can be considered to be a case study (Yin, 1994).

A search was executed in the database of the journal by one of the two researchers. A first search was done with the key term *internal quality assurance*, a second with *quality assurance*, and a third with *lessons learned*. Included were the articles from September 2021 to October 2022. The first search led to 34 documents, of which 21 were excluded. Excluded were articles on external quality assurance and specific topics like performance indicators, data collection, and learning outcomes-based assessments. The second search on *quality assurance* brought about one useful article that was not shown in the first search. It was added to the selection. The third search on the terms of *lessons learned* did not bring any new articles. For the analysis of the 15 articles, the method of thematic analysis was used. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), thematic analysis is a suitable and effective technique to apply when attempting to comprehend a group of events, ideas, or actions spread throughout a data collection. The method as designed by Braun and Clarke (2006) consists of six steps:

Step 1: Familiarizing yourself with the data

Step 2: Generating initial codes

Step 3: Searching for themes

Step 4: Reviewing themes

Step 5: Defining and naming the themes

Step 6: Producing the report/manuscript

The findings of the thematic analysis have been analyzed by both researchers for their use in the Vietnamese context. Literature in the Vietnamese context was used to support the conclusions about the usability of the themes. In the discussion, two ways are presented how data like this can be implemented.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Stakeholder involvement

Several articles in the sample discussed the importance of one or more stakeholders (Ministry of Higher Education officials, managers, academics and students of private higher education institutions) (Cheng & Shukiali, 2022). Moreover, Bloch et al. (2022) mentioned the key stakeholders, namely students, teachers, administrative staff and managers and endorse the importance of everyone's vision of quality.

Tang and Tung (2022) stressed the importance of students' perceptions of teacher care. Lim et al. (2022) focus on the evaluation of teacher behavior from the perspective of students. Dziminska (2022) asked students in Poland about their vision of an ideal university. This vision strongly embraces the concept of quality as transformation. Quality culture and transformative pedagogies form important enablers for operationalizing quality as transformation. Harvey (2022a) added that new innovative ways of teaching and learning, transformative learning are needed. Harvey (2022b) warned us that "student feedback is inappropriate for constructing rankings but crucial for institutional improvement at all levels. Do it properly and close the loop and the enhancement of the student experience is immense; do it ritualistically and the whole potential is lost on the altar of rankings" (p. 5).

Weenink et al. (2021) looked into the perspective of managers by conducting an examination of the structuring of in-depth interviews with bachelor program directors in Dutch social science departments to determine how they perceive and practice quality. The importance of (multiple) stakeholders in higher education is long-time acknowledged (e.g. Kotler & Fox, 1985). It is also taken into account in Vietnamese universities (e.g. Bui, 2017; Pham, 2019) just as elsewhere. The recommendations in the above mentioned articles can improve the quality of stakeholder involvement in any higher education institute, also in Vietnam. We think that Vietnam's higher education passed the line mentioned by Nguyen and McInnis (2002) that it is not suitable to evaluate teachers as freely as in Western systems since teachers in Vietnam are held in higher regard than their colleagues in the West.

4.2. Quality assurance training

When creating a training program centered on quality assurance in higher education, Greere (2022) explains important factors to take into account and proposes potential success metrics for training delivery. Table 1 shows the topics she proposes.

Table 1. Topics to be considered in designing quality assurance training programs (at advanced and initial levels) (Greere, 2022, p. 9)

Content blocks	Topics
A. Setting the scene	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Understanding quality in higher education (What constitutes quality? Where can it be observed? How is it manifested?) ● Aims, objectives and approaches to quality assurance (What is quality assurance trying to achieve and why? Who should engage and how?) ● Features of quality assurance systems or frameworks. The assurance continuum (What is compliance? What is assurance? What is enhancement? What is excellence? What is a quality culture?)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consideration of national contexts (What are national/regional/international motivators? Who influences sectoral directions? What requirements do institutions need to comply with? What standards are expected? How do institutions compare at the system level?) ● Consideration of institutional contexts (What is specific about the institutions represented? What is the interplay between various structures and roles in driving quality)
B. Internal quality assurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Overview of areas in focus for internal quality assurance (What is subject to internal quality assurance? How are interdependencies accounted for?) ● Benefits and challenges of internal quality assurance procedures (What structural set-ups are available? How can quality assurance support institutional development? What quality assurance instruments can render effective outcomes?) ● Detailed analysis of problematic areas (How are standards/expectations increasing? What must be addressed?) ● Context-specific solutions available for institutional implementation [...] (What are effective ways of addressing problematic areas?) ● Involvement of stakeholders in internal quality assurance (How to involve various stakeholder groups? What contributions may be expected? What impact may such contributions have?)
C. External quality assurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Overview of areas in focus for external quality assurance (How are areas clustered? What reference points are applicable?) ● Benefits and challenges of external quality assurance procedures (What is the rationale for external review/assessments? What contributions can they make institutionally/nationally/regionally/internationally?) ● External quality assurance methodologies for institutional or program review/assessment (What are defining features? What is likely to happen during a review? What are reviewers likely to focus on? What standards are used and how?) ● Outcomes from external quality assurance methodologies (How are outcomes arrived at? What outcomes are possible and what consequences do they carry? What is frequently commended/recommended?) ● Involvement of stakeholders in external quality assurance (How to involve various stakeholder groups? What contributions may be expected? What impact may such contributions have?)
Conclusions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Discussion of the synergies between internal and external quality assurance. ● Summary of key messages relevant for quality assurance development. ● Summary of expectations of roles involved with quality assurance.

As stated above by Nguyen (2021), the challenges for quality assurance practitioners in Vietnam's higher education were still mostly related to their lack of experience, knowledge and skills in the field of quality management. He mentions knowledge on quality assurance, but also more specifically on data collection and data analysis. Recommendations on capacity building like these for quality assurance in Vietnam are more than welcome.

4.3. From numbers to narratives

In a sense, the article of Huisman and Stensaker (2022) supported the findings of Harvey (2022a). We just mentioned that Harvey recommends not to use (standardized) student feedback for ranking purposes. Hoare and Goad (2022) stated how the postsecondary education systems in the northwest United States and Western Canada are dominated by a quantitative bias that limits how student success is defined and assessed. Specifically, Huisman and Stensaker (2022) studied documentation, measurement and dissemination of performance governance. They also

stressed the dominance and disadvantages of performance metrics, notably the unfavorable consequences they may have on researchers (mental health problems, drop-out and intention to leave). They see however a positive trend where performance metrics are given significantly less weight than narratives and impression management. Interesting is their remark that there is significant and expanding room for higher education institutions to act independently of external constraints, although performance reporting at the institutional level has surely increased as a result of external accountability expectations. A need for autonomy is also mentioned by Keykha et al. (2021) regarding the higher education system in Iran. Quantitative bias, performance indicators, numbers, directive leadership, and lack of autonomy are characteristics of what Van Kemenade and Hardjono (2018) call the Empirical Paradigm with the definition of quality as conformance to requirements (Crosby, 1979). The Empirical Paradigm registers and controls. The government and management are in control. One of its risks is bureaucracy. The empirical paradigm still is paramount in many higher education institutes and in the quality management systems of many countries in the world. Interestingly, Petrusic et al. (2022) analyzed the (external) accreditation process in Croatia. They drew a conclusion that underlines the trend and importance from fewer standards to more freedom, in this case for reviewers. While established standards and criteria for re-accreditation heavily affect compliance parts, open sections give evaluators the chance to think about the institutional quality and its improvement in a "standard-free" setting. They conclude that "despite increasing standardization of external and internal quality procedures, peer review has a lot to offer" (Petrusic et al., 2022, p. 13).

Also in Vietnam, the Empirical Paradigm is dominant. The accountability versus independence/autonomy discussion is still ongoing (Hayden & Lam, 2007; Madden, 2013; Quang, 2019; Ta et al. 2022; Van Kemenade, 2020). The recommendations regarding the relative value of ranking, numbers and performance indicators might be interesting to bring to the discussion.

4.4. *Quality assurance centers*

Erittu and Turri (2022) looked into the features of internal quality assurance organizations in Italian universities in regard to their makeup, activities, and other elements seen to be essential for the implementation of quality assurance in higher education institutions. They discern five categories of critical success factors (p. 10):

Commitment: the presence of strong engagement of the university Governance intended as the ability of the PQA to steer the attention of the university's top management and to obtain support for its quality assurance initiatives.

Involvement: ability of the PQA to involve staff working in degree courses and departments by creating a widespread culture of quality capable of supporting local quality assurance processes in a pervasive way while being adaptive and flexible to local needs.

Accuracy: ability to design quality assurance activities at a micro level, accurately scheduling and designing the different activities in order to ensure consistency in quality assurance activities also through pervasiveness in administrative processes and the use of information systems, web and databases.

Hybridisation: the ability to let different groups dialogue among each other, favouring information exchange between academics and higher education institution's administrative staff, between students and professors, as well as internal and external needs plus institutional exogenous and endogenous logics.

External quality assurance: interaction with the external quality assurance process, intended as the ability to positively exploit external evaluation to focus effort and attention on quality assurance activities.

Quality assurance units or quality assurance centers as they are called in Vietnam have been a building block of the internal quality management system in Vietnam from the beginning. Their number as well as their quality had increased (Nguyen, 2012; Nguyen, et al., 2017). However, their duties and tasks have rarely been defined clearly. Even the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) does not have guidelines for the operation of QA units. The critical success factors mentioned by Erittu and Turri (2022) might be interesting for the Vietnamese context as well.

4.5. *Emergence*

Erittu and Turri (2022) make an interesting plea for developing mechanisms and chances for conversation and learning that supplement and minimize the management hierarchy. To make that possible, predefined recipes for assessing the effectiveness and efficiency of internal quality assurance operations must be absent. Pohlenz (2022) talks about the importance of new ideas that have been introduced, professionalism and assessment for higher education quality assurance. He states that with the emphasis on established quality indicators, assessment practice

in higher education might, in the worst scenario, obstruct educational innovation, which calls for more openness and error tolerance. Required is a context-sensitive, flexible, and adaptable platform for quality management.

Also, in the five principles that Hoare and Goad (2022) developed for culturally responsive postsecondary performance measurement, a wind of change is tangible. Their performance measurement includes procedures that are inclusive, spontaneous, and appreciative as well as qualitative assessment techniques. This is no longer the Empirical Paradigm of planned change. According to Van Kemenade and Hardjono (2018), the notions of Erittu and Turri (2022) and those of Hoare and Goad (2022) belong to the Emergence Paradigm. In the Emergence Paradigm, quality can only be determined for a certain amount of time, intersubjectively. The focus is not on rules and control, but on flexibility and values. Stakeholders together are in control. Leadership is participative. The risk might be chaos. Change in this paradigm is not planned, but occurs, and emerges.

Van Kemenade (2021) describes how Vietnamese higher education and quality assurance systems are strongly influenced by the Empirical Paradigm. He states, however, “that the emergent paradigm could be the next step for this moment, giving way for the autonomy of the higher education institutions in Vietnam (since it focuses on self-organization) and more influence of the academics as well (Van Kemenade, 2009b; Rosa et al., 2019). It would mean a breakthrough in the way Higher Education is led. It would be the collective that co-creates new solutions” (p. 8). The examples from Erittu and Turri (2022), Hoare and Goad (2022) and Pohlenz (2022) might be helpful to understand what the emergence paradigm entails and why it is so important for 21st century higher education. The emergence paradigm also requires a shift in leadership behavior. That might be called inclusive leadership (Hoare, Goad, 2022). Van Kemenade (2021) calls it emergent leadership.

Our conclusion is that articles on internal quality assurance published in the journal *Quality in Higher Education* in the period from September 2021 to October 2022 can be useful for Higher education in Vietnam. Especially articles on quality assurance training, quality assurance centers and emergent quality processes.

5. CONCLUSION

In the findings section we presented the outcome of our search for quality recommendations in one journal. These recommendations were analyzed for their use in the Vietnamese context. That led to five themes: stakeholder involvement, quality assurance training, from numbers to narratives, quality assurance centers and emergence. That brings us to the question “How can all these valuable findings in quality management research on higher education actually be implemented in the daily practice of higher education institutes in Vietnam to increase the quality of their internal quality assurance processes?”. We identify two possibilities: create a learning community within your own university or together with other universities in the region.

In the first place, the findings presented and valued for the Vietnamese context might not be useful for every university within the country to the same extent. A more specific needs assessment (e.g. Kaufman & Fenwick, 1979) or audit might be needed, that provides each higher education institute with an insight into their specific strengths and weaknesses. Then, a group of people, e.g. the members of the quality assurance center could form a professional learning community. “A professional learning community is an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of *collective inquiry and action research* to achieve better results for the students they serve” (DuFour et al., 2016, p 22; italics by the authors of this article).

That quality assurance center should do its own research for recommendations, using its own keywords based on the needs assessment in the search. The findings of this article are only based on one-year publications of one quality magazine namely *Quality in Higher Education*. More findings regarding the recommendations from other journals should be investigated. A search could be done in databases like Business Source Elite and Academic Search Premier. The rapid review method used in this case could be very helpful to do so. It is not too time-consuming and practical. Of course, a rapid review like this is less scientifically robust than a systematic review or an integrative review.

Do your own research but it might be more effective to create a regional professional learning community. We do not prefer national professional learning communities, because interests and issues can be very different in local contexts. Quality Assurance centers of different universities could cooperate to improve outcomes for the students they serve via recurrent cycles of collective inquiry and action research. The universities should combine forces if they have the same interests and issues for quality improvement. This could lead to the description and analysis of Vietnamese best practices.

Even when Western recommendations can be of use in other countries like Vietnam and the scholars are willing to accept these for studying, the results should be adjusted to the specific culture. As Cheng and Shukaili (2022) state in their study on ensuring the quality of offshore programs that “there is a need to balance Omani values and norms with internationalization” (p. 15) (in developing appropriate offshore programs). Experiences from other countries can be of some interest. Yet, to put it even stronger, scholars in non-Western countries like Vietnam should also collect their own best practices and develop their own body of knowledge on internal quality assurance systems. A professional learning community can do just that, becoming a learning community.

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