



Exploring Student Assessment Practices in Vietnamese Teacher Training Universities through Naturalistic Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative research has gained increasing attention in Vietnamese education, yet the application of Naturalistic Inquiry to study educational assessment practices remains relatively underexplored. This ethnographic study investigates the beliefs, values, and attitudes of lecturers and academic managers toward student assessment practices in Vietnamese teacher education universities, employing Lincoln and Guba's (1985) Naturalistic Inquiry paradigm. Through in-depth interviews and document analysis, the research uncovers a spectrum of perspectives - from traditional, summative-focused approaches to reform-oriented, formative practices - shaped by institutional, cultural, and personal factors. The findings highlight the tension between entrenched norms and emerging progressive ideals, offering insights into how these dynamics influence assessment practices critical to teacher education. By demonstrating the methodological rigor of Naturalistic Inquiry through its operational characteristics and trustworthiness criteria, this study not only enriches understanding of student assessment practices within Vietnam's educational context but also offers novice researchers a practical model for applying this approach in educational studies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Assessment practices in higher education play a crucial role in shaping student learning outcomes, guiding pedagogical strategies, and preparing graduates for evolving professional demands. In Vietnam, a nation undergoing significant educational transformation influenced by Confucian traditions, socialist governance, and globalization, teacher education institutions face unique challenges in developing effective assessment systems (Nguyen & Hall, 2016). Despite national policy calls for reform since the 2012 educational strategy (Government of Vietnam, 2012), empirical studies show that Vietnamese universities still rely heavily on summative assessments, particularly standardized exams (Hayden & Le, 2013; Luong, 2016; Yen et al., 2023). This traditional approach limits opportunities for formative feedback and the development of adaptive, lifelong learning skills - qualities increasingly valued by employers in a globalized economy (Nguyen & Shah, 2019). The gap between conventional assessment methods and the evolving educational needs underscores the importance of understanding assessment practices in Vietnam's teacher education institutions. With 111 such institutions, they play a pivotal role in shaping the nation's education system and driving reform (Nguyen & Pham, 2022, p. 859).

This study aims to explore the values and beliefs of academic staff and managers regarding student assessment in Vietnamese teacher education institutions. As Pajares (1992) highlights, beliefs are deeply influenced by personal experiences, cultural contexts, and professional training, shaping how educators approach teaching and assessment. The central research question is: How do the beliefs, values, and attitudes of lecturers and educational managers at teacher education institutions influence their assessment practices? While qualitative methods have been recognized

for exploring the socio-cultural aspects of education (Gonzales et al., 2008; Lichtman, 2023) and assessment practices (Nguyen, 2013; Yen et al., 2023), the use of Naturalistic Inquiry in this context remains limited (Luong, 2016).

To address this gap, the study adopts Naturalistic Inquiry, a qualitative methodology developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which examines phenomena within their real-world contexts. Gonzales et al. (2008, p. 3) emphasize that qualitative research offers deep insights into meanings, actions, observable and non-observable phenomena, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors, making Naturalistic Inquiry particularly suitable. This approach is also well-suited to exploring assessment practices in Vietnamese teacher education universities, as it considers the cultural, institutional, and pedagogical dynamics at play (Luong, 2016). By focusing on the perspectives of lecturers and academic managers in their natural settings, the study aims to uncover how personal beliefs and institutional contexts shape assessment practices, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of these practices in Vietnam and offering a qualitative perspective to educational research. The term ‘Naturalistic Inquiry’ is capitalized to highlight its status as a formal methodology, underscoring its relevance to this study.

The study is structured as follows: The first section provides a literature review to establish the theoretical foundation, followed by a discussion of research methodology. The findings are then presented and analyzed, with examples, before discussing and concluding with reflections on methodological insights, contributing to the scholarship on teacher education assessment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Student assessment plays a pivotal role in enhancing teaching and learning quality in higher education. Over recent decades, global educational systems have increasingly emphasized the transformative potential of effective assessment practices to improve learning outcomes (Biggs, 1996; Boud, 2007; Carless, 2015; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Early research in the 1970s and 1980s laid the foundation by exploring how assessment shapes student learning behaviors (Marton et al., 1984; Rowntree, 1987), revealing limitations in traditional, norm-referenced assessments. These assessments, which rank students against one another, sparked interest in alternative approaches that prioritize individual growth and the achievement of learning objectives.

A robust body of scholarship has since emerged, advocating for standards-based assessments as a more equitable and effective alternative to traditional methods (Chen et al., 2014; Carless, 2015; Moore & Teather, 2013). Central to this approach is the integration of formative assessments, which provide ongoing feedback to foster student development, as opposed to measuring achievement at a single point in time (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Research shows that formative assessments, including peer assessments, self-assessments, and tasks like group projects, promote deeper engagement and critical thinking (Carless, 2015; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Feedback has been identified as a critical component, with its effectiveness depending on timeliness, specificity, and its ability to guide students toward improvement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). These practices have become integral to advanced education systems worldwide, fostering both academic achievement and personal development.

In the context of teacher education, assessment practices are crucial not only for evaluating pre-service teachers' competencies but also for modeling effective pedagogical strategies for their future classrooms (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000). Effective assessment in teacher education programs is thus not only a tool for certification but also a means of preparing teachers to implement innovative and student-centered approaches. However, the adoption of modern assessment practices in teacher education varies widely, influenced by cultural and systemic factors, as institutions navigate the tension between traditional and progressive approaches (Brown et al., 2019). Nguyen & Hall (2016) argue that achieving meaningful transformation requires a focus on teacher educators, who need to be equipped with the skills to effectively model and implement these contemporary methods. This reorientation is critical to driving lasting changes in teacher education.

In Vietnam, the government has promoted educational reforms encouraging teachers to shift from traditional, teacher-centered methods to constructivist pedagogies (Nguyen & Hall, 2016). However, teacher education practices remain largely anchored in conventional summative assessments, such as multiple-choice tests and written exams (Lam, 2006). These assessment methods, deeply embedded in a culture of rote learning and memorization, emphasize factual recall rather than critical thinking (Nguyen & McInnis, 2002). Despite global shifts toward standards-based and formative assessments, Vietnam's heavy reliance on summative assessments hampers the ability to assess complex competencies like problem-solving and collaboration (Nguyen, 2013). Although national policies advocate

for a shift toward formative assessments to better prepare students for an increasingly dynamic world, implementation has been inconsistent, particularly in teacher education programs (Luong, 2016; Luong et al., 2018).

Factors contributing to this gap include institutional constraints such as large class sizes, limited resources, and insufficient professional development opportunities for educators (Luong et al., 2018; Le et al., 2019). Additionally, Vietnam's Confucian heritage plays a significant role in shaping assessment practices (Luong, 2016), with deep respect for authority and a preference for passive learning inhibiting the adoption of more active, student-centered assessment strategies (McCornac & Phan, 2005; Nguyen & McInnis, 2002). Individual beliefs also contribute to the persistence of traditional methods, as many educators perceive these approaches as more reliable and objective (Luong et al., 2018; Yen et al., 2023). To address these interrelated challenges, a context-sensitive approach like Naturalistic Inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) is essential for exploring the lived experiences of lecturers and academic managers, providing insights into the complexities of assessment practices in Vietnamese teacher education.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. *Naturalistic Inquiry Framework*

Naturalistic Inquiry, developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), is a qualitative methodology that examines phenomena in their natural contexts without manipulation. It is particularly suited to educational research, where understanding subjective, context-specific teaching and learning dynamics is essential (Cohen et al., 2011). By prioritizing participant perspectives and emergent design, it offers a robust framework for studying educational practices in real-world settings.

Rooted in constructivism and interpretivism, Naturalistic Inquiry excels at unpacking beliefs, values, and attitudes in dynamic educational systems, providing depth beyond what quantitative methods can achieve (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This approach captures real-time classroom and cultural dynamics, preserving the integrity of educational experiences (Erlandson et al., 1993). Studies like Le (2016) on Vietnamese lecturers' academic identities and Olbertz-Siitonen (2021) on intercultural education highlight its capacity to reveal complex dynamics. Le et al. (2023) also demonstrate its value in examining research cultures at Vietnamese universities, offering context-rich insights into academic practices. In the realm of educational assessment, Naturalistic Inquiry goes beyond evaluating outcomes, focusing also on the processes and perceptions that shape them. For instance, Luong (2016) used it to study assessment reforms in Vietnamese teacher education institutions, revealing how institutional culture and policies influence assessment practices.

One of its key strengths is contextual sensitivity, which is especially valuable in settings like Vietnam, where educational practices are deeply embedded in socio-cultural frameworks. It sheds light on the tensions between traditional and reform-driven assessment methods, offering locally relevant insights into reform challenges (Luong, 2016). However, Naturalistic Inquiry has limitations, including its lack of standardization, which can affect replicability and generalizability, a critique noted by Shavelson and Towne (2002). Its subjective nature also requires rigorous trustworthiness measures, such as triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and its time-intensive approach may limit feasibility for large-scale studies, as noted by Agostinho (2005) in the context of e-learning. Despite these limitations, Naturalistic Inquiry's interpretive depth makes it ideal for studying assessment in context, as Patton (2002) asserts, especially in settings where social practices carry significant meaning.

For this study, Lincoln and Guba's Naturalistic Inquiry paradigm (also referred to as Constructivist Inquiry, Lincoln & Guba, 2005) was applied to provide a 'thick description' of the beliefs, values, and assumptions of lecturers and educational managers regarding student assessment practices in Vietnam. This methodology integrates constructivist epistemology, an interpretive theoretical perspective, and ethnographic data-collection methods, offering a robust framework that ensures rigor while prioritizing context, meaning, and behavioral complexity.

Naturalistic Inquiry, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), is grounded in five key axioms -multiple realities, researcher-participant interdependence, context-specific findings, holistic causality, and value-bound inquiry - that distinguish it from positivist approaches. These axioms are supported by fourteen operational characteristics that guide the research process, offering a flexible, context-sensitive framework for inquiry. Key features include the use of natural settings for authentic data collection, the researcher as the primary instrument who adapts to field dynamics, and the capture of tacit knowledge beyond explicit language. Data collection methods are flexible, fostering a dynamic relationship between researcher and participants. Purposive participant selection ensures a representation of

multiple realities, enhancing data depth. Inductive data analysis allows theories to emerge organically, ensuring transferability to similar contexts. The research design evolves as new insights emerge, with meanings negotiated with participants to ensure accuracy. Additional characteristics, such as case study reporting, idiographic interpretation, and trustworthiness criteria, further enrich the methodology.

3.2. Research Design

Sites and participants

The study utilized purposive sampling to select its sites and participants. The research was conducted at three universities in Vietnam that offer teacher education programs: two large universities, one in the north and one in the south, and a smaller regional university in the southeast, ensuring diverse regional representation. These universities were chosen as research sites because they collectively provided a sample likely to be representative of similar teacher education institutions in Vietnam and were expected to offer valuable insights into the prevailing culture of student assessment.

At the three selected sites, 24 lecturers and educational managers were selected for interview using a combination of snowball sampling (Patton, 2002, p. 237) and convenience sampling (Patton, 2002, p. 241) to ensure the feasibility of conducting the study in Vietnam. Purposive sampling was employed to maximize the collection of rich, detailed data that could reveal emerging themes. Participants were drawn from various academic disciplines and selected based on their extensive experience with student assessment practices in teacher training universities. They needed a strong grasp of regulations, the ability to articulate experiences, a willingness to share underlying beliefs, and direct experience in assessment design or implementation.

Data Collection Methods

The study sought to amplify participant voices through semi-structured interviews, the primary method, supplemented by documentary analysis.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured, ethnographic interviews enabled the researcher to document and richly describe (Spradley, 1979, p. 5) multiple issues, claims, and concerns regarding the experiences of student assessment cultures reported by the participants in relation to student assessment. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 269) emphasize that in Naturalistic Inquiry, questions and answers in semi-structured interviews should adapt as new themes arise based on participant input. Similarly, Patton (2002, p. 348) highlights that open-ended questions allow researchers to gain deeper insights into participants' experiences. This approach enables participants to articulate their thoughts, feelings, and perspectives in their own words. As a result, semi-structured interviews offer participants significant flexibility to provide honest and comprehensive responses.

The design evolved, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) note, due to unpredictable outcomes, emerging realities, and researcher-participant interactions. Although participants received the interview schedule beforehand, the emergent design allowed for spontaneous questions during interviews. Over the three-month interview period, questions became progressively more focused as recurring themes emerged. The interview schedule was designed with the expectation that participants could articulate the beliefs and assumptions underlying their assessment practices and provide insights into those of their colleagues.

The participant interviews were conducted over a three-month period across the three university sites so that the researcher was able to capture the authenticity of their experiences and to achieve the fullest possible understanding of the phenomenon of interest to the research study. As Patton (2002, p. 39) emphasizes, naturalistic research involves interviewing participants in settings that are comfortable and familiar to them. Accordingly, most interviews in this investigation were held in participants' offices during their regular academic routines. For added convenience and comfort, four participants were interviewed at coffee shops and two at their homes. To help participants prepare, the interview schedule was shared with them in advance, allowing time to reflect and organize their thoughts. Each interview lasted around one hour, often followed by informal discussions. Interviews were recorded with participants' consent. Following Spradley (1979, p. 58), interviews unfolded as conversations, starting with rapport-building questions and progressing to broader inquiries, with attention to cultural norms like 'saving face' (Nguyen et al., 2005). The researcher varied questioning to encourage open discussion and closely observed non-verbal cues, which provided valuable insights for data interpretation.

Documentary data

In addition to semi-structured interviews, participants were also asked to provide documentary materials, which served as a valuable source of supplementary data and helped triangulate the participants' comments. The selection criteria for relevant documents in this study were based on Scott's (1990, p. 6) recommendations, which state that documents should be: authentic (genuine and of unquestionable origin), credible (free from error or distortion), representative (typical of its kind or with known deviations), and meaningful (clear and understandable). Using these criteria, various types of documents were chosen for analysis, including government regulations, institutional policies, assessment guidelines, course syllabi, assessment task examples, lecturers' grading books, and other records related to student assessment practices or grade awarding. These documents offered rich additional insights into student assessment practices at participating institutions and often provided valuable discussion points during the interviews.

3.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis followed an inductive approach. All interview data were examined to identify key themes using the constant comparative method, as outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 339). According to Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 105), the constant comparative method involves a basic rule: "while coding an incident for a category, compare it with previous incidents in the same category". Using Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparative method, the analysis progressed through four stages - comparing incidents, integrating categories, delimiting theory, and theorizing - supported by NVivo 9 for coding and retrieval. In this study, the researcher aimed to reconstruct the participants' perceptions of their realities within their own contexts. The initial interpretations from the thematic analysis were verified with each participant to ensure, as Patton (2002) recommends, that the data set for each participant was a negotiated document. This process ensured that each participant felt confident that the researcher had accurately represented the information they had shared.

3.4. Addressing Methodological Rigor and Trustworthiness

This investigation aimed to empower participants by highlighting their views on student assessment practices. Thus, semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis were employed, with semi-structured interviews being the main data collection method.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured, ethnographic interviews enabled the researcher to document and richly describe (Spradley, 1979, p. 5), multiple issues, claims and concerns regarding the experiences of student assessment cultures reported by the participants in relation to student assessment. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 269) emphasize that in Naturalistic Inquiry, questions and answers in semi-structured interviews should adapt as new themes arise based on participant input. Similarly, Patton (2002, p. 348) highlights that open-ended questions allow researchers to gain deeper insights into participants' experiences. This approach enables participants to articulate their thoughts, feelings, and perspectives in their own words. As a result, semi-structured interviews offer participants significant flexibility to provide honest and comprehensive responses.

Aligned with the principles of Naturalistic Inquiry, the research design evolved throughout the investigation. As noted by Lincoln and Guba (1985), it is impossible to predict even interim outcomes or the multiple realities likely to emerge, as well as the interactions between participants and researchers that influence the study's direction. Although participants received the interview schedule beforehand, the emergent design allowed for spontaneous questions during interviews. Over the three-month interview period, questions became progressively more focused as recurring themes emerged. The interview schedule was designed with the expectation that participants could articulate the beliefs and assumptions underlying their assessment practices and provide insights into those of their colleagues.

The participant interviews were conducted over a three-month period across the three university sites so that the researcher was able to capture the authenticity of their experiences and to achieve the fullest possible understanding about the phenomenon of interest to the research study. As Patton (2002, p. 39) emphasizes, naturalistic research involves interviewing participants in settings that are comfortable and familiar to them. Accordingly, most interviews in this investigation were held in participants' offices during their regular academic routines. For added convenience and comfort, four participants were interviewed at coffee shops and two at their homes. To help participants prepare, the interview schedule was shared with them in advance, allowing time to reflect and organize their thoughts. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, with many followed by informal discussions. With the consent of all participants, interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder, and no objections were raised regarding the recording process.

The interview process adhered closely to Spradley's (1979, p. 58) approach, which describes interviews as a "series of conversations" where the researcher gradually introduces new elements to guide participant responses. Before each interview, the researcher greeted participants to establish rapport and make them comfortable. The purpose of the investigation was then explained in detail, and participants were invited to ask any questions about its goals and methods. To begin, participants were asked friendly questions about their work and responsibilities, easing into the discussion before introducing the 'grand tour' questions (Spradley, 1979, pp. 86-91), designed to explore the topics of interest. Cultural sensitivities, such as the importance of saving face and maintaining harmony (see, Nguyen et al., 2005), were carefully considered. These factors could influence participants to avoid openly sharing concerns about assessment practices or being critical of colleagues, potentially leading them to provide only favorable responses. To mitigate this, the researcher varied the questioning approach to encourage open discussion of professional practices without making comments or judgments. Additionally, the researcher paid close attention to non-verbal communication during the interviews, as these cues offered valuable insights and added depth to the interpretation of the data.

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3.5. Data Analysis

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Addressing Methodological Rigour and Trustworthiness

Ensuring rigor is essential in qualitative research to prevent unconscious bias and subjectivity from influencing data analysis and interpretation (Patton, 2002). Lincoln and Guba (1985) emphasize four criteria for rigour in naturalistic inquiry, including dependability (consistency), transferability (applicability), credibility (truth value), and confirmability (neutrality). In the research study, trustworthiness was established using strategies recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 301) such as triangulation, prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, member checking, thick description, reflexive journaling, and an audit trail. Each technique was carefully applied among four criteria for rigour to ensure the quality of the study.

Credibility (truth value)

The research study utilized several strategies to ensure credibility and establish confidence in the accuracy of the data. First, key methods included adhering to ethical standards, where ethics approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee, and informed consent was obtained from participants, ensuring confidentiality through

pseudonyms and codes. Second, purposeful sampling was used to select participants from diverse academic disciplines across three universities in Vietnam, ensuring the findings were relevant to the context of student assessment in teacher training institutions. Third, the researcher engaged in prolonged engagement, spending three months building trust with participants, with informal interactions during their workdays, which provided deeper insights into their perspectives. Fourth, member checking was employed, with participants reviewing their interview transcripts and thematic summaries to verify data accuracy. Fifth, data verification involved transcribing interviews verbatim, checking them against audio recordings, and using thematic analysis. Sixth, triangulation was also implemented by using multiple data sources, including interviews and documentary data, to confirm findings and mitigate bias. Finally, peer debriefing sessions with academic supervisors and fellow PhD candidates helped refine interpretations, reduce bias, and enhance the study's rigor.

Transferability (applicability)

Transferability refers to the extent to which findings from a naturalistic study can be applied to other contexts (Lincoln and Guba 1985). To enhance transferability in this research, the study employed 'thick description' strategy by providing detailed accounts of the culture of assessment, participants' perspectives, and key elements for effective student assessment in Vietnamese teacher training institutions. This 'rich description' enables readers to identify parallels with similar settings. Additionally, the researcher clearly outlined the participants, study settings, recruitment strategies, and analytical methods, offering sufficient context for readers to evaluate the relevance and applicability of the findings to other situations.

Dependability (consistency)

Dependability, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), ensures that the research process is consistent, logical, and traceable. To establish dependability in the study, various strategies were employed, aiming to create a transparent and rigorous framework for assessing the research findings. These strategies ensure that the research process can be followed and verified, promoting reliability in the conclusions drawn from the study. An audit trail was maintained, including all field notes, interview transcripts, identified themes, reflective journals, and analytical processes, securely stored electronically for easy access and review. Given the translation of data from Vietnamese to English, the back-translation method (Brislin, 1980) was employed, with an independent bilingual auditor verifying the consistency and accuracy of the translation. Reflective journaling was used to address potential researcher bias, particularly since the researcher was also a practitioner, documenting thoughts and observations to manage subjectivity. Furthermore, additional strategies such as triangulation, prolonged engagement, peer debriefing and member checking were employed to reduce bias and enhance the consistency of data interpretation.

Confirmability (neutrality)

Confirmability is a key criterion of trustworthiness in qualitative research, ensuring that findings are based on participants' narratives rather than researcher biases. In this study, confirmability is achieved by triangulating data from multiple sources, maintaining reflective journals to document biases and decisions, and accurately representing participants' perspectives. The researcher regularly reflected on data collection and interpretation, recording insights in a diary and sourcing data from diverse settings as well as locations.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results

The study identified three distinct categories of participants based on their attitudes and approaches to student assessment practices: eight 'Adaptive Implementers,' enthusiastic reformers; 13 'Changing Pragmatists,' supportive yet constrained; and three 'Defending Denialists,' resistant to change and committed to norm-referenced assessment.

The Adaptive Implementers

The Adaptive Implementers were notable for their forward-thinking approach to student assessment, emphasizing formative over norm-based methods. They advocated providing effective feedback to motivate student learning, as illustrated by one of the participants, who highlighted the value of regular assessments coupled with constructive feedback.

"I think we would be better to have regular assessment that can motivate and encourage the students to learn through effective feedback" (Hong).

The Adaptive Implementers' dedication to reforming traditional assessment practices extended to their personal efforts in integrating innovative methods into teaching to improve their students' learning. One typical example was:

I assign group projects with progress reports, followed by peer feedback - two praises, one comment, one suggestion, one question - then provide my own feedback on improvements needed. (Huyen).

This participant implemented group projects that involved peer evaluation and feedback, promoting collaborative learning and self-reflection among students. This aligns with Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006), who stress peer dialogue for enhancing self-assessment.

Despite the increased workload, these participants remained committed to offering formative feedback, even outside of working hours, because they believed it essential for encouraging deeper student engagement. As one participant explained: *"I take every opportunity to provide feedback to all of my students, even late at night from home"* (Tuan).

Overall, Adaptive Implementers adopted a student-centered approach, prioritizing motivation over control and advocating formative assessment as key to learning enhancement. Their efforts to integrate such methods, despite challenges, distinguished them from conventional classroom practices in Vietnam, showcasing a progressive commitment to educational improvement.

The Changing Pragmatists

The Changing Pragmatists aligned closely with the Adaptive Implementers in their perspectives on the purpose of student assessment. They reported that the principal purpose of student assessment is to judge the quality of student learning in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes based on intended learning outcomes. A typical comment was:

[...] the main purpose of assessment is to determine what knowledge students have learned, what attitudes students have formed and what skills students are able to perform [...]. These need to be comprehensively assessed. (Tien)

The Changing Pragmatists also viewed the important role of student assessment in preparing skills for future employment. A widely shared perspective was that:

I want student assessment to be a process to support student learning and the development of higher-order thinking skills [...], to enable the students to satisfy their future work requirements. (Thinh)

As with the Adaptive Implementers, the Changing Pragmatists reported on the use of formative assessment with various assessment methods and feedback during the teaching process to guide and motivate students beyond mere grades. For example, one of these participants explained:

Students are also required to engage in group discussions and presentations and solve practical exercises in small groups. Thanks to those opportunities, I can correct my students' mistakes and give them constructive feedback [...], and the students also have opportunities to receive feedback from their peers. (Tien)

However, Changing Pragmatists encountered significant barriers that constrained their ability to fully integrate formative practices. One participant crystallized the sentiments held by many of the Changing Pragmatists when he said: *"[...] change is a challenging task for them [other teachers] as for myself when we are not being able to survive on my single salary. [...]"* (Thinh). Changing Pragmatists also reported that institutional challenges further inhibited their efforts to introduce better student assessment practices. One participant reflected the views of many when he commented:

[...] the overcrowded classes, the constraints of time, the lack of teaching facilities, the inappropriate curriculum content [...] and the most important thing is the lack of financial incentives and low salary. These barriers have extinguished my personal enthusiasm and effort to make changes. (Tien)

Although aware of the shortcomings of a summative assessment culture, practical constraints left many Changing Pragmatists feeling powerless, with minimal motivation to drive meaningful change. These demands significantly limited the resources available for implementing reforms among Changing Pragmatists.

The Defending Denialists

The three participants classified as Defending Denialists were uniformly committed to maintaining a traditional, norm-referenced approach to student assessment, focused on ranking student performance. One of them commented:

[...] students have to understand that if they engage with a university, they have to do examinations. If they cannot do the work, they should not be there. (Quyêt)

Defending Denialists also expressed little interest in providing formative feedback to their students. As far as they were concerned, feedback to the students involved giving them their grades. Determining final grades for students was seen to be an important responsibility for lecturers to inform them about the success of the instruction. As one participant reported: *“Based on grades given to the students through their exams, I am able to know how effectively my students learn”* (Tran).

The Defending Denialists were clear in their belief that lecturers should be authoritative and directive in their approach to teaching and student assessment. One participant explained:

In my opinion, lecturers are people who determine the amount of knowledge in each unit that the students should gain; decide the content and the assessment criteria and assessment methods. (Tran)

This participant strongly believed that lecturers should maintain absolute authority over teaching and student assessment practices. He did not consider it appropriate for students to take an active role in their own learning, or to make any suggestions about content or assessment.

Overall, Defending Denialists exhibited limited appreciation of how interactive dialogue between lecturers and students might enhance learning. They primarily viewed student assessment as a tool for objective measurement, aligning with the narrow, “scientific” approach critiqued by Hager & Butler (1996, p. 376).

4.2. Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate the intricate relationship between the values, beliefs, and attitudes of academic staff and managers in Vietnamese teacher education institutions and their approaches to student assessment. The identification of three distinct participant categories - Adaptive Implementers, Changing Pragmatists, and Defending Denialists - underscores the diversity of perspectives within this context and their implications for educational reform. These findings align with Pajares’ (1992) assertion that beliefs, shaped by personal experiences and cultural contexts, profoundly influence educational practices, while also reflecting Vietnam’s broader tension between traditional assessment norms and modern pedagogical imperatives (Nguyen & Hall, 2016).

The Adaptive Implementers exemplify a progressive, student-centered orientation, prioritizing formative assessment to enhance learning over mere evaluation. Their emphasis on regular feedback and innovative methods, such as peer dialogue in group projects, resonates with Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick’s (2006) framework, which highlights peer interaction as a catalyst for self-regulation and deeper understanding. Adaptive Implementers also prioritize individualized formative feedback, despite the significant time and effort involved, recognizing its critical role in improving student learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). This group’s commitment to reform, despite increased workload, reflects a value system that privileges student development and aligns with global trends in teacher education (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000). Their practices challenge Vietnam’s entrenched summative culture, suggesting a belief in assessment as a dynamic tool for motivation rather than control. However, their limited number indicates that such transformative attitudes remain a minority, potentially constrained by institutional resistance or lack of systemic support.

In contrast, the Changing Pragmatists, the largest group, embody a pragmatic yet conflicted stance. They share the Adaptive Implementers’ belief in assessment’s role in fostering knowledge, skills, and attitudes and its potential to prepare students for employment. Their use of formative methods, such as group discussions and constructive feedback, signals an openness to reform consistent with Vietnam’s educational policy shifts (Government of Vietnam, 2012). Yet, their efforts are curtailed by practical barriers - overcrowded classes, inadequate resources, and low salaries - echoing findings by Nguyen (2013), Luong (2016), and Le et al. (2019) on the institutional challenges hindering assessment innovation in Vietnam. This group’s pragmatism reflects a value of adaptability tempered by a belief that systemic constraints outweigh individual agency, resulting in a reluctance to fully embrace change. Their position highlights a critical tension: though ideologically aligned with reform, their capacity to enact it is stymied, perpetuating a gap between aspiration and practice.

The Defending Denialists, though the smallest group, represent a staunch adherence to traditional, norm-referenced assessment, viewing it as an authoritative tool for ranking and certifying student performance, as seen in similar studies by Chen et al. (2014) in China. Their rejection of formative feedback and preference for lecturer-

driven assessment align with a Confucian-influenced belief in hierarchical control and objective measurement, critiqued by Hager and Butler (1996) as overly reductive. This group's values prioritize stability and authority over student engagement, reflecting a resistance to the learner-centered paradigms advocated in contemporary educational discourse (Nguyen & Shah, 2019). Their limited appreciation for interactive dialogue suggests a static view of assessment as an endpoint rather than a process, starkly contrasting with the other groups and underscoring a cultural inertia that reform efforts must address.

These findings reveal how values and beliefs shape assessment practices in Vietnamese teacher education institutions, with implications for educational reform. The Adaptive Implementers' proactive stance suggests that exposure to advanced educational systems can shift beliefs toward innovation, yet their minority status indicates a need for broader professional development to amplify such perspectives. The Changing Pragmatists' constrained enthusiasm points to the necessity of addressing systemic barriers - financial incentives, class sizes, and infrastructure - to translate reformist values into action. Meanwhile, the Defending Denialists' resistance highlights the enduring influence of cultural norms, necessitating targeted strategies to challenge entrenched beliefs.

This study effectively employed a Naturalistic Inquiry approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to explore the perspectives of academic staff and managers on student assessment in Vietnamese teacher education institutions. By capturing nuanced viewpoints through ethnographic interviews, the study provided rich, contextual insights into how personal beliefs, cultural norms, and institutional contexts shape assessment practices. The use of this methodology allowed the researcher to immerse in participants' professional environments, facilitating a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of lecturers and academic managers, and aligning with Schwandt's (1994, p. 118) emphasis on capturing "worlds of lived reality." The categorization of participants into Adaptive Implementers, Changing Pragmatists, and Defending Denialists further enriched the findings, offering a nuanced understanding of the diverse approaches to assessment.

One of the strengths of this study was the interactive nature of the interviews, which allowed participants to actively engage with the research process and share their perspectives openly. This collaborative approach fostered a judgment-free space for participants to reflect on and discuss assessment practices, which is in line with the principles of open dialogue (Lincoln & Cannella, 2004). The researcher's emphasis on building rapport and maintaining a flexible interview design allowed for an organic flow of ideas, leading to rich, context-specific insights into assessment practices and potential reforms.

Additionally, the study's qualitative approach provided valuable insights into complex phenomena, such as beliefs and values, which quantitative methods may overlook (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The in-depth exploration of participant perspectives allowed for a detailed understanding of how assessment practices align with institutional goals and the broader educational context, which is critical for fostering educational reform. The reflexivity employed throughout the research enhanced the ethical and transparent nature of the study, contributing to trust-building with participants and improving the overall quality of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

However, several limitations must be addressed in future research. First, the exclusion of student perspectives was a notable gap in this study. While lecturers and academic managers provide valuable insights, students' experiences with assessment practices are equally important for understanding the full scope of assessment systems. Future research could incorporate student perspectives through focus groups or narrative accounts, which would offer a more comprehensive view of assessment practices and support Fullan's (2007) call for amplifying student voices in educational reform.

Second, the study's relatively small sample size (24 participants) limits its generalizability to the broader population of Vietnam's 111 teacher education institutions (Nguyen & Pham, 2022), a noted qualitative research challenge (Shavelson & Towne, 2002). While purposive sampling allowed for in-depth exploration of diverse perspectives, expanding the sample size and diversity in future studies would improve transferability. Employing techniques such as maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002) or stratified sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2016) could ensure a more representative sample. Virtual interviews (Irani, 2019) could also address geographic constraints and expand the scope of the research, ensuring that categories like Adaptive Implementers, Changing Pragmatists, and Defending Denialists are more widely validated across diverse settings.

Another limitation was the lack of direct classroom observations, which could have provided valuable insights into how assessment practices are implemented in real-time. Observations can reveal discrepancies between reported and

actual practices, highlighting the impact of classroom dynamics and institutional constraints on assessment strategies (Cohen et al., 2011). Future research could integrate observational methods alongside interviews and document analysis to triangulate data and provide a more complete picture of assessment practices. As Patton (2002) notes, the richness of data gained through observation helps develop a well-rounded picture of how educational practices evolve, especially in settings where there may be contradictions or inconsistencies between theory and practice.

The cultural context of Vietnam also poses unique challenges in educational research. Cultural norms, such as the importance of maintaining harmony and avoiding critique of authority figures (Nguyen et al., 2005), can influence participants' willingness to openly discuss issues related to assessment. The researcher's awareness of these cultural sensitivities helped mitigate potential biases, but future studies could further address this by involving co-researchers who are familiar with the cultural context or by employing bilingual co-analysts to preserve linguistic and cultural fidelity during data analysis.

Finally, while the Naturalistic Inquiry approach provided deep insights, it requires considerable time (Agostinho, 2005), resources, and commitment (Luong, 2016, Le, 2016; Le et al., 2023). Extended engagement with participants and rigorous data collection and analysis can be challenging in educational contexts, where logistical barriers and institutional schedules may limit access to diverse groups. Future research should plan for these complexities and allocate resources effectively to ensure robust and comprehensive data collection.

5. CONCLUSION

This study employed Naturalistic Inquiry to explore student assessment practices in Vietnamese teacher education institutions, providing valuable insights into the values, beliefs, and practices of lecturers and educational managers. By situating assessment within Vietnam's cultural and social context, the research uncovers the complex factors shaping these practices. The Naturalistic Inquiry approach facilitated an authentic, context-specific understanding of participants' lived experiences, supported by a rigorous methodological framework that adhered to trustworthiness criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This methodology laid a strong foundation for qualitative educational research.

The findings highlight the importance of understanding how assessment practices are influenced by the beliefs, values, and institutional contexts of lecturers and managers. They emphasize the need for contextually relevant reform, informed by the diverse approaches participants bring to assessment. Moreover, the study advocates for the inclusion of student perspectives, as their experiences are crucial for evaluating the true impact of assessment practices. It also calls for the integration of classroom observations in future research to offer a more comprehensive view.

Contributing to the field of educational assessment, this research demonstrates how qualitative methodologies like Naturalistic Inquiry can illuminate culturally specific practices, providing valuable lessons for countries with similar socio-cultural dynamics undergoing reform. It underscores the importance of context and methodological rigor in educational research. Future studies should investigate the discrepancies between reported and actual practices and further explore the interplay between cultural and institutional factors in shaping assessment policies.

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