



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Academic Program Evaluation: A Constructive Alignment Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Evaluation is the core component of the cyclical process for academic program administration. This paper aims to investigate learners' evaluation of the constructive alignment (CA): alignment of learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessment tasks of a Master's program in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in an ASEAN University Network (AUN) member university in Vietnam. As direct beneficiaries, learners' feedback and recommendations are valuable for proper actions towards programs' quality assurance (QA) and administration. To achieve its aim, this research study adopts a descriptive mixed-methods study, using a questionnaire and focus group interviews to collect relevant information. Thirty-four graduates from the program completed the questionnaire adapted from the AUN-QA program assessment framework. Twelve of these participants joined two focus group interviews, which helped to gain in-depth understanding of the participants' feedback and recommendations regarding curriculum development and implementation. The findings reveal that the participants were satisfied with the program's CA, viewing it as 'an example of best practices' - the AUN-QA's top second quality level, and that the AUN-QA framework and CA help improve the quality of programs. It was, however, suggested that the CA should be enhanced to better serve the program's QA plans and administration.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Vietnamese government has implemented the National Foreign Languages Project (NFLP) to enhance English proficiency of Vietnamese people (Le et al., 2019). However, after its implementation, the outcomes still fall short of the expectation. The quality of human resources in the language teaching sector has been considered the leading cause of such unsatisfactory results (Le & Le, 2020). In light of this issue, policymakers and educators focus more on human resource development via higher education. As a result, postgraduate education has attracted many teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) who desire to enhance their competencies. Therefore, graduate study programs, which are only available at some major universities (Kelly, 2000), play an essential role in the professional development of EFL teachers in Vietnam.

To fulfill the mission of developing these teachers' competencies, the quality of graduate study programs should be ensured. Fullan (1996) suggested that the quality of an educational institution's program should be evaluated by checking whether the institution provides sufficient preparation for its learners to deal with real-life problems.

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Although quality assurance (QA) is considered an urgent need (Pham & Nguyen, 2020), it is still a new concept in Vietnam (Pham, 2019).

Stakeholder engagement has become a norm in QA as their diverse expectations and experiences can contribute to a more effective and comprehensive QA system (Beerens & Udam, 2017; ASEAN University Network, 2020). The two educational stakeholders who know best about the quality of studied programs can certainly not be anyone other than the lecturers and the learners. Therefore, these internal stakeholders' voices are indispensable and should always be present in any program evaluation agenda.

For the aforementioned reasons, this study investigates the constructive alignment of a Master's program in Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) offered by a public university in southern Vietnam (also a key member of the ASEAN University Network since 2013). Specifically, the study analyzes learners' feedback and reflections to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent are the learners satisfied with the program, considering AUN-QA criteria and CA?
2. What key aspects of the program are highly valued by the learners?
3. What are the learners' recommendations to improve the program's quality?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the definition of curriculum in ELT, sketches the MA program under investigation and Bigg's Constructive Alignment approach, introduces the ASEAN University Network and its thematic network for quality assurance, and discusses key related studies.

2.1. The Curriculum in ELT

Many authors have defined the concept of "curriculum." Thijs and Akker (2009) define curriculum as a course for learning. This definition was previously mentioned by Taba (1962), who describes a curriculum as a plan for learning. This seemingly simple definition signifies the concept and matches every educational context well. Therefore, the curriculum in ELT could be described as a plan for teaching and learning English. Besides, Thijs and Akker (2009) propose a cyclic process of five elements concerning curriculum, including development, implementation, design, analysis, and evaluation, which plays the central and essential role (see Figure 1).

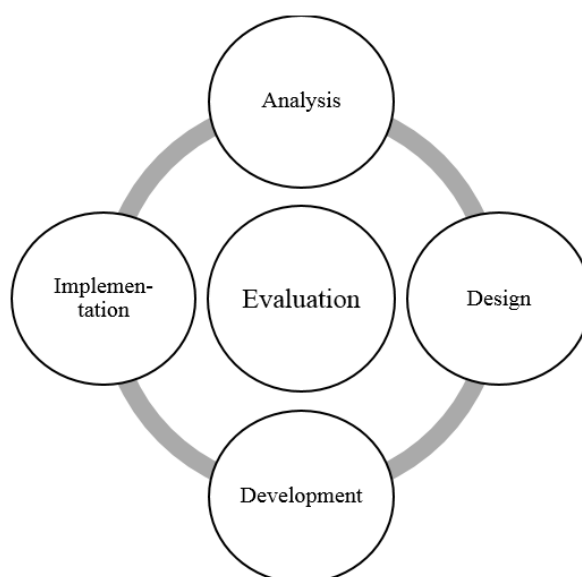


Figure 1. Core elements in a curriculum (Thijs & Akker, 2009)

Need analysis, design, and development

According to Richards (2013), language curriculum development involves principles and procedures for teaching plans, course management, and learning evaluation that can employ the Forward, central, and Backward designs. The Backward design starts from the specification of learning outcomes, from which decisions on methodology and

syllabus are developed. This process includes needs analysis, goal setting, syllabus *design*, teaching methodology, and student assessment.

Implementation

Curriculum implementation includes the prescribed courses of study and syllabi. Fullan (2001) claims that curriculum implementation and educational reforms are closely linked. Therefore, educational reforms require teachers to change their teaching beliefs, acquire more knowledge, and improve their practices (Adam, 2000). Curriculum implementation is influenced by teachers, learners, resource materials and facilities, groups' interests, school environment, culture and ideology, instructional supervision, and student assessment (Kwatizhe, 2015).

Evaluation

Bharvad (2010) defines curriculum evaluation as investigating the advantages of a particular aspect of the whole curriculum. This process monitors and examines a program's teaching and learning quality. To evaluate whether a program is successful, it is essential to examine the relationship between students' performance and the course's objectives (Hall, 2014).

2.2. The MA's program

General information

The program consists of 33 courses delivered through 60 academic credits. An academic credit comprises fifteen 50-minute theoretical class sessions, thirty to forty-five 50-minute practical sessions, or 60 to 90 hours of fieldwork time. At the beginning of every course, lecturers contact and inform learners about course objectives and expected learning outcomes, number of credits, requisite conditions, contents, organizational form of teaching, assessment criteria, as well as teaching and learning materials.

Educational objectives

During the program, learners are educated and trained to be able to:

- Gain in-depth knowledge of principles and methods in TEFL;
- Apply pedagogical knowledge and skills;
- Conduct research in TEFL; and
- Practice lifelong learning and global citizenship.

Expected learning outcomes

After completing the program, the learners can:

- Evaluate and apply theories, basic principles, and resources for TEFL appropriately and creatively in specific teaching contexts;
- Conduct research and propose expert-level solutions to problems in the field of TEFL;
- Develop expertise, a sense of professional ethics, and lifelong learning; and
- Demonstrate required competence and commitment to attending higher education.

Teaching methods

The program employs various teaching methods to fulfill the course objectives and facilitate learners to achieve the aforementioned expected learning outcomes.

Learning assessment

Based on each course's objectives and expected learning outcomes, the lecturers can either utilise a single type of assessment, such as formative or summative, or mixed approaches by combining the different above mentioned types of learning assessment, if necessary. Learning assessment aims to measure the learners' achievement of the program's expected learning outcomes, reflecting their teaching and research competencies and professional ethics.

2.3. Biggs' constructive alignment

In light of Biggs (1996), the CA approach comprises two significant aspects: constructive and alignment. The idea that students construct knowledge through meaningful learning activities is the focus of the constructive aspect, and the alignment aspect centers on what the teacher does. The use of this aligned process ensures that there is consistency between intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessment tasks and

feedback. This aligned process is believed to positively affect students' academic achievement. In other words, the correlation between teaching and learning, intended learning outcomes, and assessment contribute to a more transparent and meaningful overall learning experience for students. Aligning the assessment with the intended learning outcomes also means that students know how their achievement will be assessed and measured.

Despite Biggs (1996)'s introduction of a constructive alignment of a program's intended learning outcomes and student assessment, many programs still encounter genuine relevant tension (Hall, 2014).

Figure 2 displays the principle of constructive alignment proposed by Biggs (1996):

2.4. AUN-QA

AUN-QA system

ASEAN University Network (AUN), established in 1995, is a network of higher educational institutions to develop cooperation among major universities across ASEAN. It promotes cooperation and solidarity among scholars, develops academic and professional resources, and disseminates information to the academic community. In 1998, ASEAN University Network - Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) was established to develop a QA framework to examine the quality of higher education in the ASEAN community.

AUN-QA models

ASEAN University Network (2020) defines QA in higher education as a system used to manage and assess the performance of higher educational institutions. According to the AUN-QA model version 4.0, a program's quality cannot be achieved with academic quality alone because it is a multidimensional concept focusing on stakeholders' needs and satisfaction levels (e.g., AUN-QA Requirement 8.5). Satisfaction levels of the various stakeholders are shown to be established, monitored, and benchmarked for improvement (ASEAN University Network, 2020).

The current study used the fourth version of the AUN-QA model at the program level to investigate M.A. learners' satisfaction with the courses and the program they attended, as displayed in Figure 3.

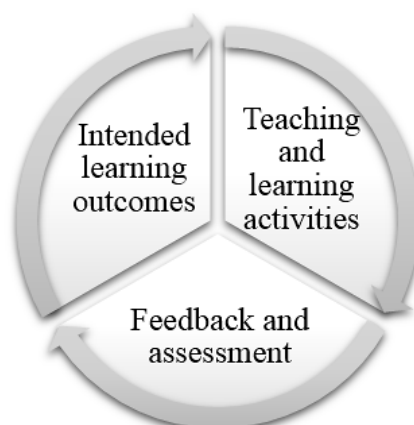


Figure 2. Constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996)

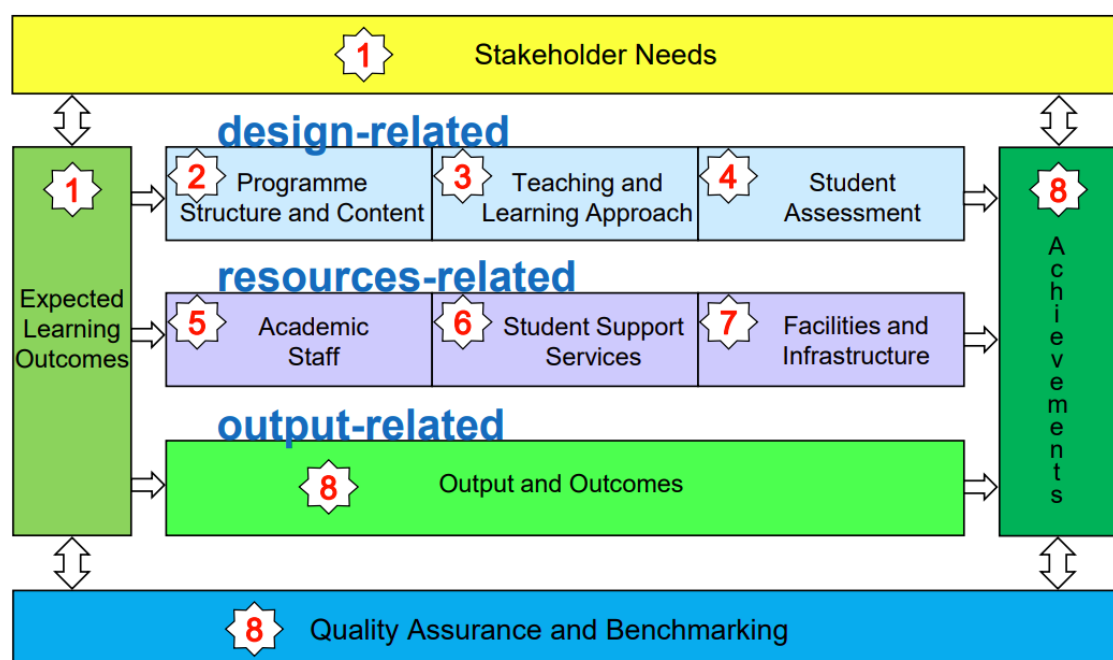


Figure 3. AUN-QA Model for Program Level (Version 4.0) (ASEAN University Network, 2020)

In Figure 3, Biggs' CA approach is reflected across Criteria 1, 2, 3, and 4. The entire set of criteria, however, also makes up a CA block with the key components Stakeholder Needs (part of Criterion 1), Expected Learning Outcomes (ELOs, referred to as intended learning outcomes in Biggs' CA approach) (part of Criterion 1), Achievement (part of Criterion 8), and QA and Benchmarking (part of Criterion 8).

AUN-QA Seven-point Rating Scale in Program Assessment

Figure 4 presents the seven levels of academic programs quality applying AUN-QA program assessment framework, namely (1) absolutely inadequate, (2) inadequate and improvement is necessary, (3) inadequate but minor improvement will make it adequate, (4) adequate as expected, (5) better than adequate, (6) example of best practices, and (7) excellent. At each level, the scale describes the QA practice (ASEAN University Network, 2020; Dao & Nguyen, 2021). The program's better alignment with its stakeholders' needs and evidence of high satisfaction will help achieve high results in the AUN-QA program assessment.

<p>①</p> <p>Absolutely Inadequate QA practice not implemented. No plans, documents, evidences or results. Need immediate improvement.</p>	<p>②</p> <p>Inadequate and Improvement is Necessary QA practice at planning stage or inadequate. Little document or evidence. Little or poor results.</p>	<p>③</p> <p>Inadequate but Minor Improvement Will Make It Adequate QA practice defined and implemented. Need minor improvement. Documents available but no clear evidence of full use. Inconsistent or some results.</p>	<p>④</p> <p>Adequate as Expected Adequate QA practice. Evidences of full implementation. Consistent results as expected.</p>	<p>⑤</p> <p>Better Than Adequate QA practice better than adequate. Evidences of efficient implementation. Good results and positive improvement trends.</p>	<p>⑥</p> <p>Example of Best Practices QA practice as example of best practices. Evidences of effective implementation. Very good results and positive improvement trends.</p>	<p>⑦</p> <p>Example of Excellent / World-class or Leading Practices QA practice as excellent or example of world-class. Evidences of innovative implementation. Excellent results and outstanding improvement trends.</p>
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Figure 4. AUN-QA Seven-point Rating Scale (ASEAN University Network, 2020)

2.5. Related studies

The following are key studies related to this research topic. They provide insights into how the quality of a study program can be evaluated, showing the significance of measuring student satisfaction with different aspects of the program as recommended by the AUN-QA Model (Figure 3) and how data collection methods can complement each other to help arrive at sound findings.

Peacock (2009) presents a new procedure for evaluating EFL teacher-training programs based on principles of program evaluation and foreign-language teacher education. The study investigated the program's strengths and weaknesses and how well it meets the students' demands. The study used a combination of several data collection instruments, including interviews, questionnaires, essays, and document analysis. The teaching of pedagogic skills and the promotion of reflection and self-evaluation were highly appreciated. However, it was suggested to increase the amount of teaching practices and input in specific areas, such as teaching knowledge within the local sociocultural context and classroom management.

Butt and Rehman (2010) examine students' satisfaction with higher education in Pakistan. Three hundred fifty students from private and public universities responded to a questionnaire to investigate what factors affect students' learning satisfaction. The results reveal that teachers' expertise is the most influential factor. This finding receives special attention from policymakers and institutes.

Hanaysha et al. (2011) evaluate students' satisfaction with services provided by institutions. Specifically, the study found a significant relationship between the five service quality dimensions (i.e., tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy) and students' satisfaction. Three hundred and sixty participants took part in the study. The findings indicated that almost all students were satisfied with the facilities of their universities.

Shaltoni et al. (2015) investigate the factors affecting students' satisfaction with university portals in developing countries. The factors examined were educational services availability, user ability, system quality, and information quality. A self-completion questionnaire was administered to 500 students in the educational institutions. The results show that educational services availability, system quality, and information quality influence students' satisfaction, and services availability is the leading determinant.

Kara et al. (2016) examine the relationship between educational service quality and student satisfaction in public universities in Kenya. The study aims to determine the relationship between educational service quality dimensions and students' satisfaction. It was designed as cross-sectional research. One thousand and sixty-two third- and fourth-year undergraduate students from eight universities partook in the study. It was found that the quality of teaching facilities determines the quality of educational services in universities. Independently, the quality of teaching facilities, availability of textbooks in libraries, administrative service quality, reliability of university examinations, perceived learning gains, and quality of students' welfare services are significantly and directly related to student satisfaction. The quality of the library environment, lecturer quality, and quality of instructional practices are directly but insignificantly related to students' satisfaction.

Shurair and Pokharel (2019) conducted a study investigating university students' perceptions of service quality in their institutions. A questionnaire with sixty-five items was used to collect data from three hundred and ninety-seven students. Seven dimensions of service quality (reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, tangibles, image, and culture/value) were used to examine the perceptual context of service quality concerning students' loyalty behavior, the image of the university, and culture/values. The study ascertains a significant positive correlation between service quality and student loyalty.

Each of the studies reviewed above focuses on a particular area of evaluation. However, they generally address learners' satisfaction with the quality of programs, services provided, and trainer qualifications. As part of constructive alignment, the assessment practice tends to lose sight of its significance in these studies. Therefore, the current study, while focusing on a contextualized environment (a Master's level program in Vietnam), aims to attain a holistic evaluation by the learners, framed in an integration of Biggs' (1996) Constructive Alignment Principles and AUN-QA criteria.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Research Design

The current study is designed as a mixed-method approach, using a questionnaire and focus group interviews to collect data. The qualitative and quantitative information supplement each other in answering the research questions.

3.2. Participants

The participants are thirty-four graduate students who have completed the TEFL program at a public university in the Mekong Delta (also a key AUN member university in Vietnam). The selection of participants was based on convenience and willingness. All participants had graduated from the studied program so that they could provide insightful and radical feedback. The sample in this study ($n = 34$) represents about 30% of the population (with 120 students enrolling in the program each year). The demographic information of the participants is classified by gender (9 males and 25 females), age (16 in their 20s, 13 in their 30s, and 5 in their 40s), years of teaching experience (15 less than five years of teaching experience, 11 within five to ten years of teaching experience, and 8 with more than ten years of teaching experience), undergraduate major (28 with TEFL degrees and 6 with English linguistics and literature degrees), and workplaces (14 working in public upper-secondary schools, two teaching at public secondary schools, two serving in public language centers, 12 working in private language centers, and four teaching in higher education institutions).

For qualitative data, 12 out of 34 participants were invited to participate in two focus group interviews. Availability and readiness are the selection criteria for the interview participants. The relevant information of the focus group interviews is described in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants for the interviews

Participants	Gender	Age	Teaching Experience	Undergraduate Major	Workplace
A	Male	26	4	TEFL	Language center
B	Female	30	8	TEFL	Upper-secondary school
C	Female	35	13	English linguistics and literature	Language center
D	Female	33	10	TEFL	Upper-secondary school
E	Female	26	3	TEFL	Upper-secondary school
F	Male	42	21	TEFL	Upper-secondary school
G	Male	26	3	TEFL	Language center
H	Female	26	4	TEFL	College
I	Male	34	11	English linguistics and literature	Upper-secondary school
J	Female	41	12	English linguistics and literature	Upper-secondary school
K	Female	34	11	English linguistics and literature	College
L	Male	26	3	TEFL	Language center

3.3. Instruments

The primary data collection instruments are a 53-item self-rating questionnaire and two group semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire consists of eight evaluation areas: (1) expected learning outcomes, (2) program structure and content, (3) teaching and learning approach, (4) student assessment, (5) academic staff, (6) student support services, (7) facilities and infrastructure, and (8) output and outcomes. These areas derive from AUN-QA Version 4 (Figure 3). Each item is supposed to be rated on a 7-level scale corresponding to the rating scheme presented in Figure 4. For the complete questionnaire, see Appendix A.

Two focus group interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data from twelve interviewees. Each interview involved 6 participants and lasted approximately 60 minutes. The interviews were arranged based on the participants' availability, and the interviewees signed a consent letter stating their agreement to participate. The focus group questions aimed to investigate the interviewees' identification of their learning needs, satisfaction with the program, and suggestions for further improvements. The interview questions are presented in Appendix B.

3.4. Procedures

The study procedures consisted of twelve steps, as shown in Figure 5.

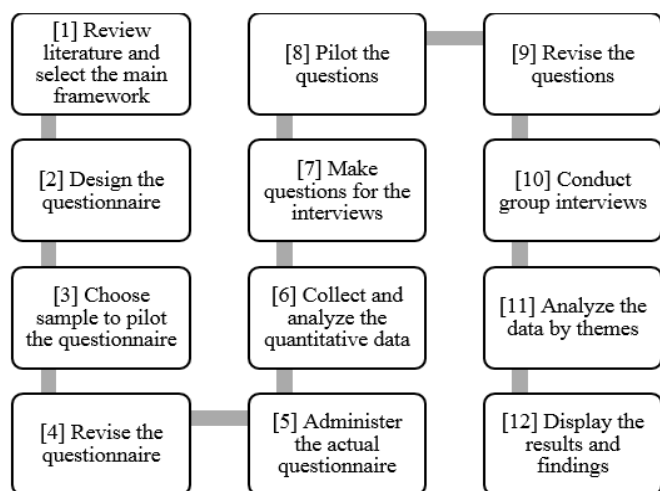


Figure 5. The Research Procedures

In Step 2, the research team employed the 7-level self-rating scheme (Appendix A), a piloted the questionnaire (Step 3) and the questions (Step 8; Appendix B) among a group of Master students. Step 4 and Step 9 were quickly completed in support of Step 6 and Step 10.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Before displaying the study's quantitative results, a scale test was run on the questionnaire using SPSS version 22 to check its validity and reliability. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient $\alpha=.96$ was yielded, indicating that the questionnaire data are acceptably reliable to confirm the current study's findings. Descriptive and T-test results were presented. Interview data was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed employing thematic analysis.

4.1. Results from the questionnaire

The descriptive statistics test results were reported in the following tables, including the minimum, maximum, and mean values. These figures collectively indicate the level of participants' satisfaction with the program. Table 2 displays the overall average while Table 3 provides the means in eight evaluation areas.

Table 2. Overall participants' satisfaction

	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Average mean of all items	34	4.61	7.00	5.93	.67

The mean score ($M=5.93$) is between *Better Than Adequate* (level 5) and *Example of Best Practices* (level 6). A one-sample t-test was run and no statistically significant difference was observed between this mean score $M=5.93$ and test value 6.0 (with $t=-.60$; $df=33$; $p=.56$). It can be concluded that the participants perceived the program as an example of best practices (level 6 out of 7 on the AUN-QA rating scale, as presented in Figure 4). In other words, they showed high satisfaction with the program.

A more detailed analysis of each evaluation area indicated various degrees of satisfaction in the eight clusters of the questionnaire. This shows what criteria the participants felt most and least satisfied with. Table 3 displays the test results in descending order according to cluster means.

Table 3. Participants' satisfaction across eight evaluation areas

Criteria	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Facilities and infrastructure	34	4.00	7.00	6.13	.76
Output and outcomes	34	4.00	7.00	6.08	.72
Program structure and content	34	4.20	7.00	6.00	.67
Expected learning outcomes	34	4.30	7.00	5.99	.77
Academic staff	34	3.00	7.00	5.97	1.09
Students assessment	34	3.50	7.00	5.81	.86
Teaching and learning approach	34	3.50	7.00	5.81	.83
Student quality and support	34	3.00	7.00	5.65	.99
Total	34	4.61	7.00	5.93	.67

As seen in Table 3, the highest mean score belongs to facilities and infrastructure ($M=6.13$), followed by that of output and outcomes ($M=6.08$), program structure and content ($M=6.00$), expected learning outcomes ($M=5.99$), academic staff ($M=5.97$), student assessment ($M=5.81$), teaching and learning approach ($M=5.81$), and student quality and support ($M=5.65$). In short, the participants felt most satisfied with the facilities and infrastructure. They felt least satisfied with the quality of student services and the program's support. Overall, the participants had positive ratings for all eight areas of the program, which is evident in all the cluster means being far above the midpoint value of 3.5 on the 7-point scale.

4.2. Results from the group interviews

4.2.1. Concrete benefits of the TEFL master's program: Changes in attitude, confidence, and pedagogical practices

The participants claimed some program elements that met their expectations during the learning process. First, they experienced an impressive change in their perceptions of life, resulting in a deeper awareness of pedagogy. This entailed a greater love for teaching, making the participant teachers more passionate and confident in their careers. One participant stated,

I couldn't agree more when others told me I changed greatly after attending the master's program. Two significant changes are easy for me to notice. The first is maturity. I can recognize my maturity through my multidimensional thoughts about a problem, my solutions to a difficult situation, or my expression when encountering troubles. They are so different from what I did in the past. Secondly, I became more confident in myself after taking the course. (*E; Female; 26; 3 years of teaching English; TEFL; upper-secondary school*)

To add to the idea above, another interviewee also considered this program a valuable experience to learn, to develop, and ultimately to share with his students. He said,

I feel so much more confident in myself after completing the course. Also, when I returned to teach in high school and shared what I had learned in the program, my students were motivated. This also made me proud of myself. (*F; Male; 42; 21 years of teaching English; TEFL; upper-secondary school*)

In line with the findings of Peacock (2009), the quality of the academic staff also played an essential role in the participants' high satisfaction. They thought the lecturers were professional and knowledgeable. One interviewee confessed,

The lectures, driven by professional and knowledgeable lecturers, help enhance my knowledge of the subjects, teaching methods, types of assessments, and so on. (*A; Male; 26; 4 years of teaching English; TEFL; Language Center*)

Besides, the participants were impressed by the academic staff's professionalism and their respect for the faculty's care and lesson preparation. One of the participants admitted,

That was so impressive when I studied in some classes. The lecturers are so friendly, enthusiastic, and knowledgeable. They share pedagogical knowledge, personal concerns, and experience in dealing with problems. Besides, they prepare the lessons well, even though they have much work to do. (*B; Female; 30; 8 years of teaching English; TEFL; upper-secondary school*)

Additionally, various types of lecturers bring different teaching methods into their classes. This gave the participants new knowledge about teaching techniques, methods, and student assessment. One participant said,

I was surprised that teaching methods could be this varied. Significantly, some lecturers are very friendly and caring. They give many scaffolds to help learners complete the tasks. On the other hand, some instructors want to challenge their learners by asking them to search for knowledge. It is fascinating, I think. I can apply these new things to my teaching. (*C; Female; 35; 13 years of teaching English; English linguistic and literature; Language Center*)

The alignment of the findings in Peacock's (2009) study and the current one is different from what Kara et al. (2016) and Butt and Rehman (2010) found. Specifically, lecturer quality did not significantly affect students' satisfaction in those studies.

Furthermore, the lesson sequence highly satisfied the participants. One participant remarked,

The lecturers are very professional in the way they run lessons. The lessons are easy to understand through a logical process. (*A; Male; 26; 4 years of teaching English; TEFL; Language Center*)

Lastly, almost all participants affirmed that they became more determined, attentive, and empathic. These acquired characteristics help them build new, healthy relationships where learners share their happiness and difficulties.

Reflecting on what I have been through, I feel like I can do whatever in my life. Nothing can hold me back, for sure. My classmates and I did work under high pressure and got used to that. We are more robust and even more potent when we are together. I love that. (*G; Male; 26; 3 years of teaching English; TEFL; Language Center*)

Providing the learners an opportunity to interact and participate in events that strengthen their relationships can help boost their satisfaction with the program (Shurair & Pokharel, 2019).

4.2.2. Growing knowledge and skills in integrating ICC, ICT, and research competence to enhance instructional quality

In the interviews, the participants appreciated the program's aspects: international cultural communication (ICC), information and communication technologies (ICT), facilities and infrastructures, research methodology, apart from course design, handling of pedagogical situations, testing and assessment, and academic writing. One participant commented as follows:

I am interested in ICT because I benefit from this subject to enhance ICT use in my teaching and online classroom management. Furthermore, it is helpful in case the COVID-19 epidemic breaks out again. (D; Female; 33; 10 years of teaching English; TEFL; upper-secondary school)

Besides, the lecturers in the program also proved their abilities and flexibility when unexpected situations suddenly occurred. As a piece of evidence, during the lockdown due to COVID-19, they turned the on-site teaching into online teaching effectively. An interviewee said,

I was surprised that the lecturers seemed so OK when we had to study online because of the pandemic. They were confident and professional. Furthermore, of course, they were funny and creative. (L; Male; 26; 3 years of teaching English; TEFL; Language Center)

Another factor enhancing the participants' satisfaction is the facilities and infrastructure in the program. The participants were satisfied with the availability of devices provided for classroom use, such as projectors, Wi-Fi connection, or the library. One participant said,

The facilities in the institution are OK. Every classroom has its TV or projectors to help lecturers show slides. Besides, Wi-Fi is always available to search for information whenever we need it. (A; Male; 26; 4 years of teaching English; TEFL; Language Center)

The above interviewee also pointed out the usefulness of the ICC subject related to the need for widening acknowledgment of pedagogical reforms. She remarked,

The ICC subject helped me widen my horizons regarding changes or reforms in pedagogy by showing me the trends in communicating in an international context. Therefore, when the Vietnamese educational system changes to fit the needs of globalization, I feel okay without any severe problems. (D; Female; 33; 10 years of teaching English; TEFL; upper-secondary school)

In line with the satisfaction of some specific subjects, the participants also perceived that their research skills had improved a lot. One participant said,

I used to think I had no talent for research and could not conduct a study. However, everything has changed since I took part in the research methodology subject. I am more confident in my research skills now, and I greatly desire to continue conducting more studies in the future. (E; Female; 26; 3 years of teaching English; TEFL; upper-secondary school)

Moreover, the participants also shared their satisfaction with the other subjects in enhancing their students' assessment skills and course design skills through the following quotes,

I am the leader of the English department in my upper-secondary school, so I think the course design subject is relatable to my background. As expected, I finished the course satisfactorily by applying what I had learned in my context. (D; Female; 33; 10 years of teaching English; TEFL; upper-secondary school)

When I used different student assessment techniques that I learned from my observations during the program, I was so happy to find them useful for my students' learning progress. (E; Female; 26; 3 years of teaching English; TEFL; upper-secondary school)

The role of facilities in educational institutions are also confirmed in the studies of Hanaysha et al. (2011) and Shaltoni et al. (2015). Furthermore, similar findings in these studies indicate the impact of service quality on students' views of a program. Therefore, every academic unit should develop its support system, covering the school's support staff and facilities, before designing a program.

4.3. Participants' suggestions

According to the results of the open-ended question in the interviews, the common suggestions aiming for better quality of the program were (a) improving the quality of some courses (including refinement of course names and sequence of delivery); (b) organizing field trips, seminars, and workshops for learning and sharing pedagogical knowledge; (c) offering practical orientations and supports; and (d) establishing a better connection between the supporting staff and the learners.

The data collected from the focus group interviews helped the research team gain insightful information about how the participants wanted the program to change and develop. Specifically, the data analysis revealed important findings and learner suggestions, as categorized above. First, the learners suggested that pre-course orientation events should be organized carefully and on time. One interviewee stated,

You know what? Even though we are alumni of this university, it has been a long time since we last used the services here. Therefore, there are many new things that we do not know. Consequently, I want to be carefully oriented by the supporting staff before the course commences..." (D; Female; 33; 10 years of teaching English; Teaching English as a foreign language; upper-secondary school)

The suggestions were relatively reasonable and radical. According to Crane and Griffith (2021), pre-course orientation is essential because it gives fresh learners sufficient information about the course. Without the orientation, communication between the learners and the course would be weak, and the learners would be confused about the course's expected outcomes.

Also, the participants suggested ways for the staff to change and support the learners better. One participant said,

I think the university should organize short learning sessions during orientation events. In these sections, learners can improve their information-searching skills or learn how to find course materials for their learning and conduct research. Besides, inviting former program learners is not a bad idea, I guess." (E; Female; 26; 3 years of teaching English; Teaching English as a foreign language; upper-secondary school)

It can be seen that pre-course orientation was supposedly essential in providing the learners with sufficient skills and materials for further research. Besides, they would highly appreciate it if the staff could invite former program learners to give a talk since their experiences were unquestionably valuable. Likewise, De Jong (2004) highlights the importance of former learners after graduation. Specifically, their performances would be evidence of how effective the programs were. Therefore, their comebacks would help the fresh learners increase their trust in the program's quality.

Furthermore, the participants expected to gain insightful information about the specific objectives of the course and how the academic staff teaches to help them reach those objectives. One participant remarked,

From my perspective, participating in the pre-course orientation events is essential because it is a good opportunity for newbies like us to understand the program better, especially teaching activities, ELOs, or what we should do to complete the program..." (F; Male; 42; 21 years of teaching English; TEFL; upper-secondary school)

Besides, these events were perceived as a good chance for the participants to get along well with others, share their teaching experiences, and express their learning expectations after deciding to be involved in this program. One participant shared,

I was so excited to participate in an orientation event because I wanted to meet my classmates who would stand by my side for the next two years..." (B; Female; 30; 8 years of teaching English; TEFL; upper-secondary school)

As stated by Ansong et al (2017), pre-course orientations gave the learners an excellent chance to get along well with their classmates, who would play crucial roles in their future learning. Classmate support significantly affects learners' emotional and behavioral engagement.

Second, it is claimed that the program's objectives are to develop learners' knowledge of principles and methods in TEFL. Accordingly, some courses are designed to help the learners achieve those outcomes. However, two courses did not show their contribution to the program's success since the learners felt unsatisfied with what they had obtained after the courses. The interviewees stated,

When I looked at the names of some subjects, I was very excited and curious about them. Also, I thought they would be beneficial for my teaching. However, when I learned these courses, I felt slightly disappointed

because they were not at the level of my expectations or did not match their titles. (*E; Female; 26; 3 years of teaching English; TEFL; upper-secondary school*)

The lecturers should re-evaluate the ELOs of the learners related to the names or the titles of the subjects to design their syllabi to help both meet each other. (*A; Male; 26; 4 years of teaching English; TEFL; Language Center*)

According to the responses, the course implementation had a noticeable problem related to constructive alignment. Remarkably, the objectives of the aforementioned courses were not comprehensively communicated to the learners, who expected something different from what they learned in the program.

Third, the course delivery sequence should be taken into consideration. Noticeably, the time for learning two courses: academic writing and research methods, was advised to be changed. According to the course descriptions, the academic writing course aimed to develop learners' academic writing skills to help them with their writing assignments, and the research methods course aimed to provide the learners with sufficient research knowledge. However, the course sequence seemed inappropriate from the learners' perspectives. Notably, one learner stated,

The academic writing and research methods subjects should be rearranged to be taught earlier in the course because it would help learners know what academic writing is, how to write an academic paper, and how to use suitable research designs for their master's thesis. Instead of placing them in the third semester, the academic writing course should be taught in the first semester, and we would learn the research methods in the following semester. (*A; Male; 26; 4 years of teaching English; TEFL; Language Center*)

In the same vein, Hines and Henderson (2017) highlight the role of course sequence in student success. A logical course sequence allows learners to have a learning path that remarkably affects their ELOs. A sequence of different subjects would be effective if the previous subjects complemented the following ones. Nonetheless, the research program's current course sequence at some points did not seem logical and needed reform.

Fourth, the program should include some field trips to help the learners widen their knowledge, not only pedagogical but also cultural knowledge. One learner shared,

I learned a lot about the program before I applied to study here. In the past, some field trips to Thailand, Singapore, or other countries in ASEAN were organized to help the program's learners have a chance to acquire knowledge from a different country. However, we do not have these events anymore. I feel disappointed about that. (*D; Female; 33; 10 years of teaching English; TEFL; upper-secondary school*)

The response advocates the suggestions of Shurair and Pokharel (2019) that offering market-based training, certifications, and graduate programs can build the institution's reputation and image. This idea is also supported by Kara et al. (2016), who point out the importance of students' welfare services in enhancing learners' satisfaction with a program. Besides, it aligns with Shurair and Pokharel's (2019) study, which proposes more effective academic support to reach out to the students.

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1. Summary of the main findings

Related to the AUN-QA Seven-point Rating Scale (Figure 4), the Master's program is highly recommended to those who want to improve their knowledge of principles and methods in TEFL. This conclusion comes from the learners' level of satisfaction. Based on the questionnaire results, areas of high satisfaction are the program's provision of facilities and infrastructure. However, learners tend to expect more from the support staff and the program candidates.

In terms of suggestions for improving the program, quite a few ideas have been discussed. First, some of the subjects in the programs should be re-sequenced. Specifically, academic writing and research methods should be scheduled in the first and second semesters. Then, the ELOs have to align with the objectives of the subjects. Besides, instead of having merely theory-based courses, practice-based learning such as seminars, field trips should be incorporated to enable learners' teaching practices. The curriculum designers and administrators should also consider eliminating less practical subjects to enhance the program's quality.

Regarding the CA approach, the assessment practices, grading criteria, and marking schemes should be communicated before starting a course, preferably in pre-course orientation. Additionally, constructive feedback

should be delivered individually to avoid hurting the learners' feelings. Formative feedback should be promoted because it can reflect the learners' learning progress. Also, some participants reported that their overwhelming workload prevented them from effective learning, so counseling for stress reduction is needed. Regarding the program's reputation and the university's public image, some cooperation with overseas institutions is recommended. Finally, some policies for specific cases of learners should be discussed to help improve the satisfaction of these specific learners.

Regarding the bigger CA at the program level (Figure 3), the current study also found some reasons why the learners needed this type of higher education program. First, they wanted to improve their pedagogical competencies and knowledge. Second, they did not want to be left behind in a community of practitioners that is quite competitive. As a result, they desired to possess a higher degree. Third, they were willing to learn further because of their self-esteem as a teacher, a parent, and a representative of the senior generation. Lastly, the program's reputation has been established, and this quality recognition has helped attract many bachelor's degree holders.

5.2. Implications, limitations, and recommendations

The evaluation of the current study reveals manifold strengths of the program. Adopting the constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996) combined with the AUN-QA framework (ASEAN University Network, 2020) is appropriate for cyclical and regular academic program evaluation. The results from the research conducted in a key AUN member university in Vietnam can be an encouragement for higher education institutions in the Mekong Delta, in particular, and Vietnam in general, to follow this quality approach to enhance the quality of their programs. Taking into consideration the factor that the learning income of students may affect their satisfaction with the learning outcomes they achieve in the program, resulting in some low level of satisfaction among program stakeholders, the program administrators should strictly follow admission requirements for the program candidates. This idea seems ideal, but it may not be true in practice, considering that providing better learning opportunities to everyone, especially underprivileged teachers, to enhance the quality of their teaching and the educational system, is the primary purpose of education.

This study also suggests helpful implications for curriculum developers and administrators of higher education programs. It highlights a need to assess and adjust some elements of their programs, especially in the domains of learning assessment, program's sequential structure, practice-based teaching, staff and staff workload, and non-academic support and services. Besides, there is a close correlation between the image of the institution and the satisfaction of current students who are the ambassadors of the institutions (Shurair & Pokharel, 2019). Therefore, the program administrators should use every effort within their responsibility and authority to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and thus the current students' satisfaction.

Educational authorities and administrators in Vietnam should recognize the barriers to education quality, which may prevent learners from pursuing their learning desires and further education. Besides, school administrators and managers should encourage their teachers to participate in continuous professional development to improve their schools' teaching quality.

It can be argued that too much attention is paid to degrees and certificates when discussing the educational system in Vietnam. However, the current study indicated that organizational learning (what evidence from the study, which is something more abstract in the findings section) strongly affected the learners' motivation to continue learning to compete fairly with others in their institutions, not only for a position but also for wider recognition. In this competition, certificates and degrees play a role, but professionalism is the key weapon for the learners to succeed. It is expected that in the journey of sharpening their skills via the graduate program, they can acquire new knowledge to help their teaching in practice. Establishing a constructive ecosystem in support of teacher professional development is much needed.

This study was conducted with a small sample size, so the findings had limited generalizability. Therefore, further studies should be conducted with a larger sample and in other places outside the Mekong Delta. Furthermore, learners' satisfaction alone cannot sufficiently show the impact of programs on their teaching in practice. As a result, observations at practitioners' sites should be incorporated to increase the richness of data. Lastly, it is a good idea to compare the perspectives of learners from different program cohorts to provide a clearer view of the program's progress.

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Appendix A: The Questionnaire

A self-rating practice as recommended in Appendix A (page 63-67 in the link below):
https://qat.ctu.edu.vn/images/upload/TaiLieuThamKhao/2a_Guide_to_AUN-QA_Assessment_at_Programme_Level_Version_40.pdf

Appendix B: Interview Questions

- To what extent are you satisfied with the program?
- In what way does the program satisfy your needs and expectations?
- What aspects of the program do you value the most?
- What knowledge and skills have you learnt and developed from participating in the program?
- How do these aspects benefit you and your teaching?
- What areas of the program do you think need improvement?
- What recommendations would you like to make for better program quality?