

Quality Assurance in Vietnamese Higher Education

Dr. Nguyen Phuong Nga

Centre for Education Quality Assurance and Research Development

Vietnam National University, Hanoi

Dr. John J. McDonald

Saint Michael's College, Colchester, VT USA

Fulbright Scholar

For more than two millennia, from the second century BCE to the nineteenth century CE, Vietnam educated its citizens in a system derived from Chinese models, based on Confucian attitudes towards citizenship, learning, ancestral values and traditional class structures. At advanced levels the purpose of the system was to provide skilled civil servants to the Imperial Court, and its highest achievers became mandarins. With the coming of the French in the nineteenth-century, the tertiary education system for Vietnamese largely disappeared, and in its place was built a relatively small system replicating the organization of tertiary education in France. This system concentrated on the provision of skilled administrators for the colonial government and on research into scientific issues raised by the cultural and material environment of Indochina. Very few Vietnamese were admitted. The French system declined precipitously with the onset of

WWII, and then virtually disappeared within a few years of the Ho Chi Minh's declaration of Independence on 2 September 1945.

In the four decades between 1945 and 1985, wars against the French (concluded by partition in 1954), a southern regime supported by the Americans (ended 1975), Cambodia and China all drained Vietnam's resources. A huge primary education program, nevertheless, successfully raised the literacy rate to a level among the highest for developing nations (85%-95%). During this time tertiary education was rebuilt on a socialist model. The legacy of this socialist organization is still very much in evidence, although the beginnings of a new system were prepared by a government decision to move towards a modified market economy. This was the critical policy known as "Doi Moi," or "renovation," adopted by the Sixth Party Congress in December 1986.

With few resources, relatively little overt change has taken effect since 1986, so the tertiary education system remains predominantly socialist in flavor. Numerous mono-disciplinary institutions are administered by various ministries and staffed by faculty members who are, in effect, civil servants.

Recently, however, following on the lifting of American economic sanctions in 1995, the tertiary system has begun to move again, motivated this time by resources flowing from some entrepreneurial foreign universities (in the Netherlands and in Australia, for example) and, most importantly, by a World Bank funded "Higher Education Project" involving a US \$110 million loan. Preliminary World Bank sponsored studies had led to a consensus judgment that the mono-disciplinary "universities" brought with them multiple redundancies, so a major part of the loan has

been designated to support consolidation into multi-disciplinary universities which can take advantage of economies of scale.

Another significant block of World Bank loans have been dedicated to helping the universities achieve a more clearly defined legal status, so that they may become autonomous enough to be able to do much of their own planning, both strategic and tactical. To date that planning – including matters such as the number of students to be accepted by various disciplines, criteria used to admit students, the contents of curricula and even authorization to offer individual courses -- has taken place within the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET). The universities have therefore been responsible for detailed administration of decisions which MoET has taken on a macro-policy level.

Now, however, two national universities, each with a significant measure of autonomy from the government's ministry structure, have emerged. In 1995, Vietnam National University -- Hanoi and Vietnam National University -- Ho Chi Minh City were both placed directly under the authority of the Prime Minister, freeing them from many of the complications consequent upon ministry sponsorship. That decision was reconfirmed in February of 2001, in a decision which granted further autonomy to the two national universities. These two multi-disciplinary universities now have greatly enhanced opportunities to influence their own structures and to do their own planning. A major corollary of this change is the obvious one that the universities now need to learn how to plan, and a major component of the universities' planning need is their need to evaluate their planning and its achievements. Only in a legal framework such as is only now evolving -- a legal framework granting universities significant autonomy -- does it begin

to make some sense to discuss quality management, quality assurance, continuous quality, or even “quality” at all.

The move to greater institutional autonomy has been a major concern articulated by both the Higher Education Project (funded by the World Bank) and by the Ministry of Education and Training. Both of these entities have also articulated the need for Quality Assurance mechanisms alongside the move to greater autonomy. In cooperation with that effort, the Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment (MoSTE), commissioned a National Project on Quality Assurance two years ago. The project was awarded to the Centre for Education Quality Assurance and Research Development (CEQARD), which is a “think tank” established within VNU -- Hanoi. Among other accomplishments, this Centre has now taken three critical steps: (1) It has defined 43 evaluative criteria, distributed among 9 subject categories, which are applicable to virtually all tertiary education institutions in the country; (2) It has secured voluntary agreement from the country’s leading universities to be evaluated against these criteria; and (3) It has taken a leading role in establishing the “Vietnam University Network.” a voluntary organization of over 60 (out of 153) tertiary education institutions including all the leading universities in Vietnam.

The criteria developed and piloted by CEQARD will mostly be familiar to anyone who has worked in the area of accreditation or higher education research in quality assurance. The nine areas among which they are distributed are: (1) Institutional Governance; (2) Academic Staff; (3) Students; (4) Teaching and Learning; (5) Research; (6) Facilities; (7) Finance; (8) Consultancy and Technology Transfer Services; and (9) International Relations. These may in fact all be obvious categories, although perhaps

the least obvious might be (8) Technology Transfer, and (9) International Relations. The position of importance assumed by these two areas, causing them to be separated from more general possible designations, such as “research” for number 8 or University Development for number 9, are specific adaptations to Vietnam’s current circumstances. Tertiary education is seen as the primary internal technology engine to drive future economic growth. Hence the transfer of technological knowledge serves one of the highest needs of the country and must be carefully assessed. Similarly, the current lack of internal resources sufficient to develop tertiary education systems means that foreign help is a top priority. Hence the universities see productive international connections as a key to building quality for the foreseeable future.

Wherever appropriate, each “component” or area is addressed by two kinds of evaluative criteria: (1) indicators of effective quality assurance; and (2) indicators of quality itself. In area number five (“Research”) for example, there are four indicators for effective quality assurance: (1) Number of student research projects carried out per student per academic year; (2) Number of students completing graduation papers per academic year; (3) Number of academic staff research papers undertaken per year; and (4) Number of workshops held per faculty per academic year. There are three indicators of quality itself: (1) Average number of publications per academic staff member; (2) Average number of research awards per academic staff member; and (3) Number of superior student graduation papers and student research awards per year.

Vietnam’s first efforts at constructing evaluative criteria have proven to be very much in line with a regional effort now being led by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). ASEAN has formed the ASEAN University Network (AUN), which

now includes seventeen universities from ten ASEAN countries. AUN, in turn, has asked each member to appoint a “Chief Quality Assurance Officer” (CQO), and AUN has directed the conference of these officers to develop quality assurance mechanisms which will eventually lead to the mutual recognition and transferability of academic work within the network. The first meeting of the AUN -- CQO group was held on 18-20 April, in Kuala Lumpur, at the Universiti Malaya. The first author of this paper, Dr. Nguyen Phuong Nga, was the Quality Officer representing Vietnam National University -- Hanoi, and the second author, Dr. McDonald, was an observer (the only observer) at this important meeting.

AUN members represent enormously different resource and development levels in tertiary education. At the high end of the scale is Singapore, some of whose institutions are consistently mentioned high in Asia Week magazine’s rankings of Asian universities. Whatever else such rankings may (or may not) mean, they do indicate the wealth, stability and public reputation of institutions. At the other end of this scale are Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, all of which still suffer from levels of political instability and poverty which make it impossible, for the moment, to think about much more than survival. Malaysia is near Singapore, not only in higher education investment but also in perceived quality. Thailand appears to be as strong as Malaysia. Indonesia and the Philippines have basically sound systems, but are now being shaken by extended political turmoil. Brunei has all needed resources and a relatively small population to serve. Vietnam is somewhere above the three poorest states (Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia) and well below Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. Clearly the range represented by

these countries is a huge obstacle to their finding common quality assurance mechanisms and common criteria to measure acceptable quality.

Nonetheless, a major step was taken toward the adoption of common goals during the Kuala Lumpur Meeting. Tasked to do so by "The Bangkok Accord" (November, 2000), the delegates hammered out a framework which articulated fundamental goals and suggested more ambitious steps to be taken once the first goals have been reached. The Bangkok Accord mandated six substantive steps: (1) Each member university must appoint a Chief Quality Officer (CQO); (2) The CQO's must meet regularly to establish a closely collaborative relationship and to exchange information; (3) The CQO's should establish criteria for quality assurance and benchmarking procedures to measure quality using internal and external examiners; (4) Criteria and benchmarks must be acceptable to all member universities; (5) CQO's shall facilitate auditing, assessment, and review by other member universities and by external bodies; and (6) The CQO's will seek deeper engagement concerning quality assurance in higher education with ASEAN Dialogue Partners (as, for example, China, the Republic of Korea, and Japan).

During the Kuala Lumpur Meeting, a set of common policies looking similar to minimum "standards" was in fact adopted. The CQO's affirmed the consistency between their intentions and the program laid out by the AUN Board of Trustees in "The Bangkok Accord" and then went on to commit their universities (assuming ratification by the responsible agencies and offices in each home country) to the adoption and implementation of quality assurance systems appropriate to the conditions of the home country. They decided to organize quality assurance exchanges and training programs. They expressed their intention to formulate a plan by which individual quality assurance

programs would be progressively enhanced and at last commonly recognized by the AUN. They decided that all AUN quality criteria would relate to Teaching/Learning, Research, and/or Service.

Although very general and still the expression of intentions rather than binding, concrete conclusions, these policies provided a framework which led to a productive discussion of more specific criteria on the second day of the meeting. It was agreed that the discussed criteria should be refined by specific “goal levels,” which would have a harder quantitative character and would serve as a system of benchmarks. This work will continue as twice-yearly meetings, with the next one scheduled for October at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.

Although there was a serious attempt to work toward benchmark figures in Kuala Lumpur, these failed of the required consensus. Singapore and Malaysia, for example, proposed that all courses to be accredited by AUN be taught in English, since this is the only language common to all Southeast Asian universities. As written, however, the criterion seemed too difficult for the legal and/or political situation in several member countries. It seems likely that some carefully articulated versions of this proposal will in fact find consensus, perhaps as early as October. Similarly, Malaysia proposed that one criterion for measuring an accreditable “research” standard be that at least 15% of a university’s budget be devoted to research. Again, consensus failed. Widely variant organizations and budget procedures make such a straightforward criterion unworkable. In Vietnam, for example, a significant proportion of academic research (and some graduate instruction) is done in technical institutes or national laboratories, outside the university structure. Again, however, it seems possible that an objective criterion in this

area can achieve consensus, though in a longer time frame than the question of instructional language.

More progress was made on criteria such as minimum faculty/student ratios and requirements for various kinds of planning. Most importantly, the stage seems set for substantial progress in the October Thailand meeting. An experienced UNESCO official, Prof. Wang Yibing, present as a resource person, declared Kuala Lumpur to have been the finest and most substantial meeting on quality assurance he had ever attended in the Asia/Pacific Region.

For Vietnam the progress continued in Dalat, less than one month later, when the fledgling Vietnam University Network met for three days. Now with more than 60 member universities (including three "people-founded" institutions as well as the public ones), more than 200 senior university officials met to hear papers on various aspects of quality assurance and to plan the group's future. The major result of this conference was a decision to request government approval of its status as an "Association." If granted, this would give the network a firm legal standing from which to pursue the interests of the upper echelons of the tertiary education community in Vietnam.

Slowly, Vietnam's university system appears to be working its way towards a system of quality assurance which is self-regulating but adapted to Vietnamese experience and current conditions. The movement can serve to institutionalize improvement initiatives which are currently dependent on five driving forces: (1) The World Bank-funded "Higher Education Project;" (2) The movement toward higher education autonomy as signaled by the creation of two national universities which function at the ministerial level; (3) The Vietnam University Network; (4) The ASEAN

University Network; and (5) Research and activities being done by CEQARD through its National University Project. A single force is, however, behind all five of these, and that is "Doi Moi," the renovation process set in motion by the Sixth Party Congress in 1986, but only now reaching forcefully into the tertiary education system. Vietnamese universities are now being asked to serve Vietnam in the context of a socialist-driven market economy, and that means that they must make much faster and more significant adaptations to market requirements than ever before. Quality is critical to these adaptations -- quality finally measured not only by national, but by regional (ASEAN) and finally by world standards. Vietnam has as yet taken only the first steps in this direction, but they are steps which carry a significant sense of persistence for the long journey ahead. Since a concentration on or vision of "quality" is a fundamental component of that sense of persistence for the long journey, we cannot underestimate its importance for Vietnam, and for the ASEAN region, no matter what may have happened to the applied concept in the "first world."