

**Quality assurance in higher education in  
Vietnam:  
A case-study**

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The College of Education  
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by  
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## ABSTRACT

This research is inspired by the recent adoption of formal quality assurance in higher education in Vietnam. The main aim of the study is to explore the quality assurance systems and mechanisms in Vietnamese higher education, through a case study of a higher education institution with six member universities, each with different disciplines and characteristics. The research uses primarily qualitative research methods.

A conceptual framework, based on the extant literature on quality assurance in higher education, consisted of five components that informed the collection and analysis of data: leadership and management; quality culture; stakeholder engagement; internal processes; and cooperation and collaboration. The primary source of data was from in-depth interviews with three levels of senior management: national policy-makers; university policy-makers; and university policy-implementers. The supplementary data was from quality assurance documents at both national and institutional levels.

There were three key sets of findings relating to: the convergences and divergences in the quality assurance implementation of the case universities viewed through the lens of organisational and change management theories; the factors that impact the implementation of quality assurance initiatives at the universities; and the essential conditions for fostering and sustaining the quality assurance initiatives, as perceived by the interviewed leaders.

The study raises three issues: the importance of including collaborative learning into the quality assurance framework; the need to view quality assurance initiatives as an important organisational change; and the application of the Yin-Yang principle to address the power tension between accountability and improvement.

## DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY

I, Hang Thu Le Nguyen, declare that the PhD thesis entitled '*Quality assurance in higher education in Vietnam: A case-study*' is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature:

Date: 18 August 2016

A large black rectangular box redacting the signature of the author.

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## Table of Contents

ABSTRACT .....	ii
DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
LIST OF TABLES.....	xiii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	xiv
ABBREVIATIONS.....	xv
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	1
1.1 Quality assurance in higher education .....	1
1.1.1 An overview .....	1
1.1.2 Research on quality and quality assurance in higher education and rationale for the study.....	3
1.2 Aims of the study.....	6
1.3 Research problem and research questions .....	7
1.4 Contributions of the study.....	8
1.5 Structure of the thesis .....	9
CHAPTER 2. CONCEPTUALISING AND CONTEXTUALISING THE STUDY: QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION .....	11
Introduction.....	11
2.1 Quality and quality assurance .....	12
2.1.1 Notion of quality.....	12
2.1.2 Quality assurance in higher education .....	15
2.1.3 The power tension in quality assurance.....	18
2.1.3.1 Accountability or external quality assurance vs. improvement or internal quality assurance .....	19
2.1.3.2 The power tension between accountability and improvement.....	19
2.2 Quality assurance implementation in higher education .....	23
2.2.1 Experience from different countries in the world.....	23
2.2.1.1 Quality assurance in developing countries .....	24
2.2.2 Overview of the quality assurance implementation in higher education in developed countries.....	25
2.3 Quality assurance frameworks and models to date.....	28
2.3.1 The general model of quality assessment in higher education (GMQA) .....	30
2.3.2 The transformative model (TM) .....	31

2.3.3 The comprehensive educational quality assurance model (CEQAM) .....	31
2.3.4 The responsive university model (RUM) .....	33
2.3.5 The university of learning model (ULM) .....	34
2.3.6 The academic learning organisation framework (ALOF) .....	35
2.3.7 The instrumental model (IM) .....	36
2.3.8 The holistic model for quality management in education (HMQME) .....	37
2.3.9 A synthesis of the key elements of the models under study .....	38
2.3.10 Summary .....	41
2.4 Demystifying quality assurance terminology .....	41
Conclusion .....	42
CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY .....	43
Introduction .....	43
3.1 Organisational theories .....	43
3.1.1 Organisational frames .....	44
3.1.2 Organisational theories in higher education .....	46
3.1.2.1 The organised anarchy theory .....	46
3.1.2.2 The collegium theory .....	47
3.1.2.3 The bureaucracy theory .....	48
3.1.2.4 The cultural theory .....	49
3.1.2.5 The interconnectedness between organisational theories and quality assurance .....	50
3.2 Theoretical framework of the study .....	52
3.3 Factors driving quality assurance and quality improvement at the institutional level .....	53
3.3.1 Leadership and management .....	53
3.3.2 Quality culture .....	57
3.3.3 Stakeholder engagement .....	60
3.3.4 Cooperation and collaboration .....	66
3.3.5 Internal processes .....	71
3.3.6 Summary of the quality assurance mechanism dimensions .....	72
3.4 Managing quality assurance as organisational change .....	73
3.4.1 Three levels of espousal, enactment and experience .....	74
3.4.2 Managing and sustaining change .....	75

3.4.2.1 Change management models.....	75
3.4.2.2 Barriers to change .....	77
3.4.2.3 Supporting and sustaining change .....	78
Conclusion .....	79
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH PARADIGM, METHODOLOGY AND METHODS.....	80
Introduction .....	80
4.1 Research paradigm and methodology .....	80
4.1.1 Research paradigm .....	80
4.1.2 Methodology: case study .....	82
4.1.2.1 Research questions revisited.....	82
4.1.2.2 Case study selection .....	83
4.1.2.3 Case study design: some theoretical considerations .....	84
4.1.2.4 Rationale for the selection of the case.....	86
4.1.2.5 Limitations of case study and the issues of reliability and validity ..	87
4.2 Research methods .....	89
4.2.1 Data collection methods and procedures .....	91
4.2.1.1 Data collection methods.....	91
4.2.1.2 Interviews: some theoretical considerations .....	92
4.2.1.3 Data collection procedures .....	93
4.2.2 Data types, sources and sampling .....	95
4.2.2.1 Data types.....	95
4.2.2.2 Description of sources and sampling .....	96
4.2.3 Data analysis modes .....	98
4.2.3.1 Data analysis techniques .....	98
4.2.4 The issues of reliability and validity.....	100
4.3 Ethical considerations.....	101
Conclusion .....	102
CHAPTER 5. CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS: VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE .....	103
Introduction .....	103
5.1 The educational system in Vietnam .....	103
5.1.1 The historical evolution of the national educational system .....	103
5.1.2 Factors influencing Vietnamese education .....	109



5.1.3 Features of Vietnamese higher education .....	113
5.1.3.1 A brief history of Vietnam's higher education development.....	113
5.1.3.2 Common styles of institutional organisation .....	114
5.1.3.3 Challenges and opportunities for Vietnamese higher education ..	116
5.2 The quality assurance system in Vietnam .....	118
5.2.1 Types of quality assurance already in place .....	118
5.2.2 The adopted framework and the implementation of quality assurance .....	119
5.2.3 The legal and regulatory framework for quality assurance in higher education .....	120
5.2.4 Opportunities and challenges for Vietnamese quality assurance.....	121
Conclusion .....	123
CHAPTER 6. THE CURRENT QUALITY ASSURANCE PRACTICE AT THE CASE-STUDY INSTITUTION .....	124
Introduction.....	124
6.1 Description of the case: The national institution and its six affiliated universities.....	125
6.1.1 Overview.....	125
6.1.2 External quality assurance policy and requirements for the universities .....	129
6.1.2.1 Policy and requirements from the MoET and the institution: adopting the regional quality assurance framework .....	129
6.1.2.2 Accreditation profile of the case institution .....	133
6.1.3 The internal quality assurance system and arrangements within the institution .....	135
6.1.3.1 The institutional quality assurance system .....	135
6.1.3.2 Internal assessment activities already in place .....	137
6.2 The current quality assurance implementation at the universities .....	138
6.2.1 Key components of the universities' quality assurance frameworks....	138
6.2.1.1 Quality assurance focus: accountability or improvement?.....	138
6.2.1.2 Leadership and management: dimension(s) of leadership in place? .....	143
6.2.1.3 A culture of continuous quality improvement: what type of quality culture is in place? .....	148
6.2.1.4 Stakeholder engagement .....	155

6.2.1.5 Cooperation and collaboration .....	161
6.2.1.6 Internal processes.....	168
6.2.1.7 Summary: frameworks or models underlying the current quality assurance practices at the universities .....	171
6.2.2 Possible explanations for the discrepancies in the universities' quality assurance practices .....	174
6.2.2.1 In light of the organisational theories in higher education.....	174
6.2.2.2 Espousal, enactment and experience in quality assurance initiatives .....	179
Conclusion .....	183
CHAPTER 7. THE FACTORS THAT IMPACT QUALITY ASSURANCE PRACTICE AT THE CASE-STUDY INSTITUTION .....	185
Introduction .....	185
7.1 Factors that facilitate quality assurance practice at the universities.....	185
7.1.1 Human facilitating factors: staff awareness and commitment.....	186
7.1.2 Organisational facilitating factors .....	190
7.1.2.1 Effective human resource management .....	190
7.1.2.2 Enabling environment for continuous improvement.....	192
7.1.3 Collaborative learning .....	198
7.1.4 Exemplary leadership .....	200
7.1.5 Support from key stakeholders .....	204
7.2 Factors that hinder quality assurance practice at the universities .....	205
7.2.1 Human constraining factors .....	205
7.2.1.1 Student issues.....	205
7.2.1.2 Teacher issues.....	207
7.2.1.3 Resistance to quality assurance implementation .....	210
7.2.2 Organisational inhibiting factors .....	212
7.2.2.1 Human resource management (HRM) issues.....	212
7.2.2.2 Limited resources for quality assurance.....	213
7.2.2.3 Conflicts in organisations .....	217
7.2.3 Affecters - Context and Vietnamese culture .....	220
7.3 Further discussion.....	225
Conclusion .....	233

CHAPTER 8. LONG-TERM STRATEGIES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN VIETNAM.....	234
Introduction .....	234
8.1 How the universities enhance their internal quality assurance.....	234
8.1.1 Leadership to navigate quality assurance .....	235
8.1.1.1 Strategic planning with quality assurance integration.....	235
8.1.1.2 Policy-making leaders' mindset: governing within given autonomy, promoting university-wide synergy.....	239
8.1.2 Resources to facilitate quality assurance implementation .....	242
8.1.2.1 Human resource development: stronger capacity, better commitment .....	242
8.1.2.2 Supporting resources: time, finance and physical resources.....	247
8.1.3 Continuous improvement mechanisms to strengthen quality culture .	252
8.1.3.1 The application of job descriptions and key performance indicators .....	252
8.1.3.2 Enabling working condition: right policies, transparent processes, and professionalism.....	254
8.1.3.3 Promoting research .....	256
8.1.4 Stakeholder engagement to inform quality improvement needs .....	259
8.1.5 Requirements for quality assurance centres and quality assurance staff .....	261
8.2 Accountability and improvement in harmony .....	263
8.3 Further discussion.....	267
Conclusion .....	271
CHAPTER 9. CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY .....	273
Introduction.....	273
9.1 Research design and theoretical framework revisited.....	273
9.2 Summary of major findings .....	274
9.2.1 The current situation of quality assurance implementation at the case universities.....	274
9.2.2 Possible enablers and inhibitors impacting the quality assurance implementation at the case universities .....	277
9.2.3 The essential conditions for sustaining quality assurance initiatives ...	281
9.3 Implications .....	284

9.3.1 Methodological implications .....	284
9.3.2 Theoretical implications .....	285
9.3.3 Practical implications.....	289
9.4 Limitations and recommendations for further studies .....	293
Concluding remarks .....	295
REFERENCES.....	296
APPENDICES.....	313
APPENDIX 1: ETHICS APPROVAL .....	313
APPENDIX 2. INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS.....	314
APPENDIX 3. LIST OF PILOT INTERVIEWS .....	318
APPENDIX 4. LIST OF DOCUMENTS.....	319
APPENDIX 5: INTERVIEW CODING .....	320

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Summary of main features of quality assurance models .....	40
Table 2: Data sources - summary of individuals.....	97
Table 3: Number of educational institutions in Vietnam in 2012 .....	109
Table 4: Administrative information about the member universities .....	126
Table 5: Organisational theories underlying the member universities’ management.....	128
Table 6: Overview of the member universities’ quality assurance profiles up to the end of 2014 .....	139

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: The conceptual diagram of Boyle and Bowden's (1997) model .....	33
Figure 2: Diagram of the theoretical framework .....	53
Figure 3: The change process model as a full stream process .....	76
Figure 4: The case study method .....	86
Figure 5: Data analysis process.....	98
Figure 6: Structure of the formal education system of Vietnam .....	108
Figure 7: The case institution's organisational structure .....	127
Figure 8: A framework for higher education quality assurance principles in the Asia-Pacific region, often referred to as Chiba principles .....	130
Figure 9: Quality culture types within the case universities .....	153
Figure 10: The interaction of quality assurance enablers and inhibitors.....	226
Figure 11: The Yin-Yang symbol.....	264
Figure 12: Applying the Yin-Yang principle in quality assurance.....	266
Figure 13: How quality assurance is sustained via the strengthening of a quality culture.....	270
Figure 14: Overview of the theories application for the study .....	287

## ABBREVIATIONS

AA:	Academic affairs
ABET:	Acceditation Board for Engineering and Technology
ALOF:	The Academic Learning Organisation Framework (Dill 1999)
APQN:	Asia-Pacific Quality Network
ASEAN:	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AUN:	ASEAN University Network
BPR:	Business Process Reengineering
CEQAM:	The Comprehensive Educational Quality Assurance Model (Boyle & Bowden 1997)
CQI:	Continuous quality improvement
ENQA:	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
GDETA:	General Department of Education Testing and Accreditation
GMQA:	The General model of quality assessment in Higher Education (Van Vugh & Weisterheijden 1994)
GSO:	General Statistics Office
HE:	Higher education
HEIs:	Higher education institutions
HERA:	Higher Education Reform Agenda
HMQME:	The Holistic Model for Quality management in Education (Srikanthan & Darymple 2002, 2004, 2007)
HRM:	Human resource management
ICT:	Information and communications technology, an extended term for Information technology
IIEP:	International institute for education planning
IM:	The Instrumental Model (Lim 2001)
INFEQA:	Institute for education quality assurance

INQAAHE:	International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
ISO:	International Organization for Standardization
JD:	Job description
KPI:	Key performance indicator
MoET:	Ministry of Education and Training
MoJ:	Ministry of Justice
PD:	Professional development
P&P:	Policy and procedures
QA	Quality assurance
RUM:	The Responsive University Model (Tierney 1998)
SEAMEO:	Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization
TM:	The Transformative Model (Harvey & Knight 1996)
UEE:	University entrance examination
UNESCO:	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
ULM:	The University of Learning Model (Bowden & Marton 1998 & 2003)
VNA:	Vietnam National Assembly
VNGO:	Vietnamese Government



# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

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This chapter sets the background of the study. It begins with an overview of the central issue: how quality assurance in higher education has developed over the last decades and gained its status in the higher education development agenda in various regions and countries worldwide. The chapter then provides a brief description of the aims of the study, the research problem and specific research questions, and the contributions of the study. Finally, the organisation of the thesis is presented.

## 1.1 Quality assurance in higher education

### 1.1.1 An overview

Quality has been a concern of higher education institutions since the founding of the mediaeval universities in Europe (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). Vroeijenstijn (1995, as cited in Newton, 2006, p.3) claimed that ‘the concept of quality is not new: it has always been part of the academic tradition’. Similarly, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s International institute for education planning (IIEP-UNESCO) (2011) argued that ‘quality assurance of higher education, by state authorities, collective higher education institution bodies, or higher education institutions themselves is by no means a new practice and request’ (p. 13).

The research literature reveals that since the 1980s and 1990s, quality has become an ever-growing concern, ‘a theme with an unchallenged position in the discussion around higher education’ (Westerheijden et al., 2007), and this was associated with the major trends and changes in the context of higher education. These included:

- growth in social demand and system expansion
- diversity of program provision and student profile

- massification of education
- shrinking resources
- changes in governmental funding schemes
- privatisation of higher education
- emergence and growth of education providers other than universities
- transnational higher education and internationalisation of higher education
- higher education perceived as a commodity good, and “consumer” demand for market transparency
- tendency to adopt business-world practices in the public sector, especially the Japanese innovation regarding quality control
- deregulation and government’s demand for value for money (most critical to the operation of universities)

(See, for example, Harvey & Newton, 2004; Westerheijden, Stensaker & Rosa, 2007; Brennan & Shah, 2000b; Dill, 2007b; Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013; Westerheijden, Hulpiau & Waeytens, 2007; Ewell, 2010; Taylor, 2010; IIEP-UNESCO, 2011).

The heightened demand for accountability and the increased pressure from external monitoring bodies, associated with the above mentioned trends and changes, on the one hand, presented prominent challenges for higher education institutions (Newton, 2000). On the other hand, however, they brought a call for more formal and explicit quality assurance schemes (Brennan & Shah, 2000a; Harvey & Newton, 2004). As argued by Westerheijden, Hulpiau and Waeytens (2007), since the first national quality assurance schemes were developed and implemented in a few developed countries with world-class elite universities (in Western Europe and the United States of America [USA]) in the 1980s and 1990s, the accumulated experiences across the countries ‘have always given rise to question, discuss, and adapt those schemes’ (p. 295). Such developments then spread to Central and Eastern Europe, culminating in the *Bologna Declaration of June 1999*. This emphasised the internationalisation of a quality assurance

framework, before radiating to other world regions (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994; Dill, 2010; IIEP-UNESCO, 2011).

In the last decades, quality assurance has become a global concern regarding quality and standards. There has been an international appetite for quality assurance services, national and regional quality agencies have been established, endeavours have been invested into developing more systematic and comprehensive quality assurance approaches, and various new models and frameworks have been proposed for educational quality in higher education (IIEP-UNESCO, 2011; Boyle & Bowden, 1997; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2007). As an international tendency, various countries around the world have adopted or developed formal quality assurance systems, aiming at regulating and improving the quality of their higher education, in response to ‘competitiveness to attract students and accountability for outcomes and resources used’ (Boyle & Bowden, 1997, p. 112). More than ever, higher education institutions in many countries across the regions have been urged to guarantee and demonstrate their “value for money” (IIEP-UNESCO, 2011).

#### 1.1.2 Research on quality and quality assurance in higher education and rationale for the study

A substantial amount of research work has been conducted in the domain of quality assurance in higher education during the past three and a half decades. As outlined by Newton (2006), during the late 1980s and early 1990s, researchers focused on defining, categorising and operationalising formal meanings of the notions of ‘quality’ and associated quality terminology and vocabulary. The most prominent study was that of Harvey and Green (1993), which associated quality with excellence, value for money, perfection, fitness for purpose, and transformation of the learner (this work is discussed further in Chapter 2). In the mid and late 1990s, several impact studies (for example, Harvey, 1995; Cheng & Tam, 1997; Westerheijden, 1999) were conducted to investigate quality in a higher education context and as quality assurance practice. Practitioners’ concerns

arose from the debate in this period, such as, ‘quality associated with burden and bureaucracy rather than improvement’, ‘improved quality or improved systems’, or the ‘politics of quality’, quality as ‘ritualism’ or ‘tokenism’ (Newton, 2006, p.31).

During the next decade, the 2000s, much of the research conducted focused on the design and relevance of a common framework for regional and national quality assurance; on appraising the applicability of industrial management models to higher education; on the possibility of applying the same framework to different contexts; on the tension between improvement and accountability in both external and internal quality assurance approaches; and on the effects of quality assurance practices in the developed contexts (Harvey & William, 2010)<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, several issues for further research were highlighted, regarding the ultimate purposes of quality assurance in higher education - the engagement leading to transformation of students’ learning, and insights into academics’ responses to quality and the changing work context (see, for example, Stensaker, 2003; Coates, 2005; Newton, 2006; Anderson, 2006).

As revealed in the extant literature, much progress has been made through research and debate, and theoretical views as well as practices across the regions seem to have certain convergences. However, there is still no universal consensus on how best to manage quality within higher education, and there is still a lack of a universally agreed model for quality assurance (Brookes & Becket, 2008; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002) nor is it necessary (Lemaitre, 2002). This has called for higher education institutions’ consideration in adopting and adapting any quality assurance framework, taking into account the influence of situational factors and context (Newton et al., 1999, 2006), the institutional level of autonomy, and organisational culture (Billing, 2004).

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<sup>1</sup> Harvey and William (2010) reviewed 15 years of quality assurance research.

There has been extensive research into how quality has been assured in developed countries and how quality assurance models have been developed, implemented, documented and analysed in reports (Please refer to Chapter 2 for detailed review). However, when compared to developed countries, where the conditions that make quality possible are already in place, developing countries are in a far more difficult situation. In reality, many developing countries have adopted the quality assurance models, and adjusted the standards and procedures that have been applied elsewhere in developed countries, to meet their own national requirements. Lim (2001) argued that the usefulness and relevance of such practice is still an area of debate.

As stated by Lemaitre (2002), one cannot ignore the fact that university and ideas on how it should look or function originated from developed countries, mainly Europe. Through exchange and partnership with other national and regional/international institutions, higher education systems evolved. Likewise, quality systems in higher education in developing countries have gone through the process of adoption and adaptation. It is essential, though, in today's globalised world, that the quality standards and criteria applied in developing countries are not so different from those applied in developed countries.

A more in-depth study of the quality assurance literature shows that, despite the progress in conceptualisation and theoretical positioning of “quality in higher education” and “how to assure it”, there is still limited empirical research on the possible barriers as well as enablers for the adoption of a quality assurance framework in the context of higher education, especially in developing countries. Additionally, although quality assurance initiatives in higher education were formed, to a certain extent, under the influence of the industrial management and quality control practised in the business world (Frazer & Craft, 1992; Newton, 2002; Westerheijden, Hulpiau & Waeytens, 2007; IIEP-UNESCO, 2010), there is still a lack of comprehensive studies on how quality assurance initiatives can be managed and sustained as instrumental organisational change. There is also a lack of clarity about how improvements of the core educational processes at the

institutional level can be identified and explained through the lenses of organisational management theories. The lack of research in this area might impede an important perspective for higher education leaders and managers in their quality assurance and quality improvement endeavours.

In Vietnam, research and empirical studies have focused on the conditions needed for, and the initial implementation of, quality assurance as an important educational reform (i.e. accreditation of educational quality, and the development of a proper quality assurance system for universities) (Adams et al., 2012a, 2012b; Oliver, 2004; Nguyen et al., 2009; Lam & Vu, 2012; Pham, 2012; Westerheijden, Cremonini & Van Empel, 2010; Dao, 2014). This is because quality assurance has been a recent phenomenon (this is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5), and extensive effort and resources have been invested mainly into accreditation as an important educational reform at the national level. There is scant evidence on how comprehensively quality assurance is being implemented in universities, how universities address the tension between external requirements and internal capacity enhancement needs, how they do this under contextual and systemic constraints, or what can be factored into the desired management and sustainability of quality assurance initiatives.

This brief review of how quality assurance is positioned in the world, and in Vietnam particularly, suggests the need for a more in-depth study. An analysis of quality assurance implementation and sustainability and how this relates to the improvement of institutional operations in the context of a developing country like Vietnam will assist in filling the gap in existing research.

## **1.2 Aims of the study**

The above review of literature on quality assurance in higher education, and identification of the potential research gap provided the rationale for this study. That said, this study aimed at examining the existing quality assurance system and mechanisms in place in Vietnamese higher education institutions. It set out to

study the quality assurance framework that underlies the current quality assurance practices, to understand how Vietnamese universities develop their quality assurance systems, with accompanying processes and measures, and to identify the possible factors that influence the implementation of quality assurance initiatives. This study also sought to apply organisational theories and change management theories as instrumental lenses through which the universities' current quality assurance practices could be interpreted and possibly conceptualised into applicable lessons. These might then inform other public universities in developing contexts of relevant insights into their quality assurance initiatives, adoption and implementation.

### **1.3 Research problem and research questions**

This study focuses on a case institution - a “flagship” representative of Vietnamese public universities. The central research problem focused on how the case institution and its member universities adopt the inherent quality assurance framework imposed by their Ministry of Education and Training, and respond to the external requirements, while developing and enhancing their internal capacity. Relatedly, the study sought to explain the divergences and convergences in quality assurance implementation among the member universities, as well as the range of factors that enable or hinder their implementation. From this basis, the study can inform decision-making regarding quality assurance initiatives and their implementation.

To address the above research problem, a set of research questions were framed to guide the data collection and analysis, as well as the writing up of the thesis. These are:

*1) How are the case study universities conducting their quality assurance?*

*1.1 What are the key components of their quality assurance frameworks? and*

*1.2 What are the possible explanations for the discrepancies among the universities' quality assurance practices?*

*2) What are the possible factors that impact on the quality assurance implementation at the case universities?*

*2.1 What are the possible factors that facilitate quality assurance implementation at the case universities? and*

*2.2 What are the possible factors that hinder quality assurance implementation at the case universities?*

*3) What are the essential conditions for a sustainable quality assurance mechanism, from the perspectives of the interviewed leaders?*

In order to answer these research questions with substance, the researcher first developed a framework for investigation, based on the review of existing quality assurance models and frameworks worldwide. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and from quality assurance related documents. For data analysis, the following theoretical frameworks were employed: Manning's (2013) organisational theories in higher education; Bolman and Deal's (2008) organisational reframing theories; and organisational change management theories (see for example, Graetz et al., 2011; Palmer et al., 2009; Kotter, 2002).

#### **1.4 Contributions of the study**

Using organisational theories and change management frameworks, this research sought to derive theoretical explanations of the current quality assurance practices in the context of a public university in a developing country. The research adds both theoretical and empirical knowledge to the available literature on how the two components of a quality assurance mechanism - the external and the internal - could be developed and sustained in harmony, within a higher education context, taking into account all possible influencing factors.

Theoretically, this study partially bridges the research gap in the area of managing and sustaining quality assurance initiatives in higher education in the context of developing countries. First, the findings of the study can inform other public universities in Vietnam and elsewhere of the need to refine their adoption and



adaptation of a quality assurance framework, so that both external and internal quality assurance can be appropriately and timely addressed. Second, this study may serve as a useful reference for other future studies in the field of quality assurance in higher education in Vietnam.

Regarding its practical contribution, this study provides referential information to other public universities in Vietnam and relevant stakeholders, including the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), on the current implementation of quality assurance. It helps reinforce the vital contribution that key stakeholders make to the improvement of educational quality in higher education. Finally, the study might inform policy-makers at both national and institutional levels of the needed changes in policy and procedures, processes and measures, to facilitate and sustain quality assurance initiatives.

### **1.5 Structure of the thesis**

The thesis is organised into nine chapters. Chapter 2 provides a thorough review of the extant literature on quality assurance in higher education. It outlines common quality assurance terminology: the notion of quality, approaches to quality assurance - external focusing on accountability and internal centring on improvement. This is followed by a brief summary of quality assurance implementation across the world, including the experiences of different countries and the responsiveness of higher education institutions within these countries. The main part of this chapter is focused on the review of existing quality assurance models and frameworks, followed by a synthesis of the common elements of these frameworks.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to the conceptualisation of the study. It examines and elaborates on the key theories used for interpreting and explaining current quality assurance practice at the case institution. These theories are Manning's (2013) organisational theories in higher education; Bolman and Deal's (2008) organisational reframing theories; and organisational change management

theories (Graetz et al., 2011; Palmer et al., 2009; Kotter, 2002). A framework for investigation is proposed, based on the reviewed models outlined in Chapter 2. The chapter concludes with an elaboration of the main components of the conceptual framework.

Chapter 4 presents the research paradigm, methodology and research methods. It justifies the selection of the case study methodology, as well as the selection of the case institution. Other necessary issues, such as data collection methods and procedures, data types, sources and sampling, and the reliability and validity of the study, are sequentially presented.

Chapter 5 provides a detailed description of the context for the study. It covers two broad areas: the educational system in Vietnam and its quality assurance system. The chapter touches on relevant issues of interest, such as the factors influencing Vietnamese education and features of its higher education. The chapter also presents an up to date account of the development of quality assurance in Vietnam. Chapter 5 serves as a reality lens for the data interpretation in the succeeding chapters.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 present the empirical findings based on the analysis and interpretation of data, followed by extended discussion using the theoretical lenses presented in Chapter 3. Sequentially, Chapter 6 provides answers to the first research question, Chapter 7 provides answers to the second research question, and Chapter 8 provides answers to the third research question.

Finally, Chapter 9 concludes the thesis with a brief summary of the key findings and the implications of the study. It also discusses the study's limitations and recommendations for further research.

## CHAPTER 2. CONCEPTUALISING AND CONTEXTUALISING THE STUDY: QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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### Introduction

This chapter explores the two basic concepts - quality and quality assurance, and their application in the context of higher education. The literature stemming from these two concepts has been enriched by analysis of controversial issues: from how quality can be defined and ensured in the higher education sector, to whether and to what extent quality assurance ensures the accountability of the universities<sup>2</sup>, or to what extent quality assurance constrains universities; and even, whether it is time to replace quality assurance (addressing both accountability and improvement) with quality improvement (Harvey & Newton, 2007).

This chapter reviews the arguments and related issues in the extant literature on quality assurance in higher education. It starts, in Section 2.1, with the conceptualisation of quality and quality assurance in higher education, covering key quality terminology and the power tension between accountability and improvement. The next part of the chapter, Section 2.2, presents a critical review of the implementation of quality assurance in higher education institutions (HEIs) in different regions of the world, both developed and developing countries, and how the HEIs in developed countries implemented the quality assurance initiative. Section 2.3 explores the literature on the development and adoption of good quality assurance models and frameworks, and highlights the key elements of these models. Finally, Section 2.4 provides a brief glossary of quality assurance terminology used throughout the thesis.

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<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, the term “university” and “higher education institution” are used interchangeably.

## 2.1 Quality and quality assurance

### 2.1.1 Notion of quality

According to IIEP (IIEP-UNESCO, 2011), there are two reasons for the difficulties associated with the notion of quality in higher education. Firstly, there is no consensus on the objectives of higher education, be it the production of qualified manpower, training for a research career, or a matter of extending life chances. Second, higher education is a multi-dimensional and complex process based on the interrelationship between teachers and learners, and ‘it is difficult to grasp the interaction of inputs and throughputs [process] and what exactly determines the outputs’ (IIEP-UNESCO, 2011, p.16) *(Please refer to Section 2.1.2 for the concepts inputs, throughputs and outputs).*

Quality is an important issue in all sectors of society, including education. In higher education, specifically, quality has been a primary agenda item for institutional development in several countries. This is largely due to HEIs facing globalisation issues and increasing market competitiveness, which has typically led to greater accountability from government organisations about the use of public money (Brennan, 1995; Harvey, 1997; Dill, 1999; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002; Ewell, 2007).

This raises the question as to how quality has been defined in higher education. Yet there seems to be no single definition of quality that has received general acceptance among the actors involved. There have been a large number of attempts to define quality, with respect to such different perspectives as stakeholders, culture, value and transformation (see, for example, Crosby, 1979; Cheng & Tam, 1997; Boyle & Bowden, 1997; Tam, 2001; Woodhouse, 2006; Van Kemenade et al., 2008; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). The evidence suggests that different stakeholders use the concept of quality differently in order to legitimise their specific vision or interests.

In the area of higher education, the concept of what constitutes quality has been addressed in numerous studies, but without a consensus. Nevertheless, the set of

five major categories of definitions of quality in higher education presented by Harvey and Green (1993) and Green (1993) have been well recognised. These are a point of reference in several studies that have examined the quality domain (see, for example, Owlia, 1996; Westerheijden, 1999, 2007; Lim, 2001; Tam, 2001; Cheng 2003; Blackmur, 2004, 2007; Lomas, 2004, 2007; Van Kemenade et al., 2008; Langfeldt et al., 2009; Kahsay, 2012).

These five categories of the definition for quality can be summarised as follows:

*Quality as Exceptional:* This notion is related to academic excellence. In this view, quality is achieved if high standards are surpassed. It is more than likely that internal stakeholders and academic staff would support this view.

*Quality as Perfection or Consistency:* Quality means conforming to standards, it is perceived as consistent, with a zero defect outcome. This dimension of quality may not be appropriate for higher education context as much as to industry.

*Quality as Fitness for Purpose:* Quality is achieved if the institutional missions are achieved and customers' requirements are fulfilled. It would appear likely that external stakeholders would be interested in this dimension.

*Quality as Value for Money:* This view embodies efficiency, effectiveness and accountability, and is associated with performance indicators. Funding agencies, parents and students tend to be interested in this dimension.

*Quality as Transformation:* This view refers to academic enhancement and the empowering of students, through the learning process. This allows them to transform themselves through a higher level of knowledge and skills. Academics and the students themselves would be motivated by this dimension.

Whilst the first four categories have been generally known and widely discussed in the literature, the fifth category (i.e. Quality as Transformation) was coined by Harvey and is further developed in his later studies (for example, Harvey & Knight, 1996; Harvey & Newton, 2007).

Horsburgh (1999) supported Harvey's arguments and further elaborated on this fifth category. Transformation goes beyond enhancement (addition of knowledge and skills) or empowerment (development of critical skills); it refers to the evolution of the way students approach the acquisition of knowledge and skills and relate these to the wider context outside their campus. Transformation provides an overarching concept of quality in education. Quality needs to be understood as a transformative process that encompasses learning, teaching, assessment, institutional practices and structures, and the institutional, departmental and faculty culture and climate (Horsburgh, 1999, p.10).

How quality is defined originates from the proponent's perspective and will determine how quality is assured. Harvey and Green's (1993) definitions, which appear to be widely acknowledged by several researchers, are based on stakeholder views of quality, thus they are "stakeholder-relative". Similarly, Westerheijden (1999) claimed that quality should be viewed from a multi-actor and multi-dimensional perspective, reflecting different views of different stakeholders on different dimensions of the quality domain. Boyle and Bowden (1997) also supported this stakeholder related perspective. They suggested that as 'education is a purposeful activity based on values and goals which are shaped by the interests of a range of stakeholders' (p. 113), and as values, goals and stakeholders' interests vary across communities and higher education (HE) contexts, programs and time, quality and quality improvement need to be viewed from different perspectives.

It should be noted that the different views of quality have implications for the quality assurance system and policy adopted in a particular higher education context. The way in which quality assurance has been established in higher education as a mechanism to ensure quality, and relevant issues will be discussed in the section that follows.

### 2.1.2 Quality assurance in higher education

As already indicated, a review of relevant literature in the quality domain reveals that different terms used in the discussion and practice of quality assurance are frequently used very loosely, and there is no general consensus on the exact meaning of each term. Accordingly, as outlined in the External Quality Assurance Modules (IIEP-UNESCO, 2011), some of the terms are generic for the whole field, such as quality assurance and quality assessment, while others relate to specific approaches, such as quality audit and accreditation. Quality assurance is a generic term used for all forms of quality monitoring, evaluation or review.

In all discussions on quality assurance, different terms are applied in viewing the management of quality and specifying processes and standards. However, at the international level, there are common principles and overarching purposes. The common requirement for quality assurance is ‘being systematic and comprehensive about maximising the quality of how things are done and the outcomes that result’ (Boyle & Bowden 1997, p. 114).

This study adopts the global term, quality assurance, and focuses on the general quality assurance initiatives, with accreditation<sup>3</sup> being mentioned when necessary. The study does not cover quality assessment<sup>4</sup> or quality audit<sup>5</sup>, as these are out of scope.

Let us browse through the literature for different attempts to define quality assurance in higher education.

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Accreditation is the process by which a government or private body evaluates the quality of a higher education institution as a whole or a specific educational programme in order to formally recognize it as having met certain predetermined minimal criteria or standards’ (UNESCO-IIEP, 2011, p.19).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Quality assessment (often called also quality review or evaluation) indicates the actual process of external evaluation (reviewing, measuring, judging) of the quality of higher education institutions and programmes’ (UNESCO-IIEP, 2011, p.18).

<sup>5</sup> ‘Quality audit is the process of quality assessment by which an external body ensures that: 1) the institution or programme quality assurance procedures; or 2) that the overall (internal and external) quality assurance procedures of the system are adequate and are actually being carried out’ (UNESCO-IIEP, 2011, p.18).

Quality assurance is a 'holistic approach providing a philosophical framework for the development of higher education institutions' (Kettunen, 2008, p. 323). Quality assurance involves the development of policy, procedures and systems for the HEI to ensure and improve its educational quality. Quality assurance mechanisms have been introduced into higher education systems worldwide to address the pressure from government and external stakeholders on accountability in relation to public money/funding allocation and tuition payment, while still striving for enhanced academic-related performance in order to stay competitive (Ewell, 2007; Stensaker, Rosa & Westerheijden, 2007).

Other scholars have similar views towards the nature and function of quality assurance in the context of higher education. To Harvey and Newton (2007), quality assurance provides HEIs with a means of securing accountability, and encouraging compliance to policy requirements. To Barnett (1992), quality assurance in a HEI implies a determination to develop a quality culture so that everyone is aware of their own part in sustaining and improving the quality of the institution. Boyle and Bowden (1997) and Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002) view quality assurance as the perpetuating development and implementation of policies and procedures, aimed at maintaining and improving quality as per core values and stakeholder needs.

The assurance of quality in higher education stems from a multi-dimensional and subjective understanding of the nature of quality, as stakeholder-relative. Quality assurance in higher education involves a process in which stakeholders establish their confidence that the desired qualities are present at least to the threshold level or minimum requirement (Harvey, 2002; Stella, 2008; Blackmur, 2007). This threshold level refers to the minimum performance standards that the HEI establishes in its mission and purpose (which is explicit to the external stakeholders) and 'is usually expressed according to three different types of measures: input, process and output' (Westerheijden, 2007, p.80).



As categorised by Westerheijden (2007), *input* measures refer to such factors as staff body and credentials, student intake, staff-student ratio, funding and facilities per student, and curriculum plans. *Process* measures include such factors as: requirements for different course units/programs, students' feedback on course delivery, and alumni feedback. Finally, *output* measures include such factors as: graduation rates/drop-outs, the employment rate in relevant job sectors, and research outputs.

All the above-reviewed authors have attempted to define quality assurance and related issues, and their studies overlap in many ways. Their studies could fit with the definition of quality assurance as presented in the glossary of basic terms and definitions (Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, & Pârlea, 2007, cited in IIEP-UNESCO, 2011). The definition is as follows:

“Quality assurance relates to a continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system, institutions or programs. As a regulatory mechanism, quality assurance focuses on both accountability and improvement, providing information and judgment (not ranking) through an agreed and consistent process and well-established criteria. Many systems make a distinction between internal quality assurance (i.e. intra-institutional practices in view of monitoring and improving the quality of higher education) and external quality assurance (i.e. inter- or supra-institutional schemes of assuring the quality of higher education institutions and programs). Quality assurance activities depend on the existence of the necessary institutional mechanisms preferably sustained by a solid quality culture. The scope of quality assurance is determined by the shape and the size of the higher education system. (p. 17)

In concise terms, as updated in the modules of IIEP-UNESCO (2011), quality assurance is a process of establishing stakeholder confidence that provision (inputs, process and outcomes) fulfils expectations or measures up to minimum requirements.

The rationale for quality assurance in higher education encompasses accountability, control, compliance and improvement. Among these, accountability has been considered the most dominant rationale and the condition for improvement (Harvey & Newton, 2007). There have been various studies on the power tension between accountability that relates to external quality assurance, and improvement that relates to internal quality assurance (Brennan & Shah, 2000a, 2000b; Dill, 2007a; Kohoutek, 2009a, 2009b; Harvey & William, 2010).

These two approaches (external and internal quality assurance) and related issues will be addressed in more details in the next section.

### 2.1.3 The power tension in quality assurance

A prominent part of the quality assurance literature up to date has been focused on the different values held by, and the power tension between and among stakeholders in HEIs. Such varied ways of thinking underlie different choices of the quality assurance types by HEIs.

At the institutional level, quality assurance is defined as one part of the overall management function that determines and implements the institutional quality policy (IIEP-UNESCO, 2011). Externally, the government or funding agencies might impose procedures on institutions, for purposes of accountability and conformity. Internally, the institutional or departmental management might also establish their own procedures for monitoring their performance and improvement.

As summarised in the IIEP-UNESCO quality assurance modules (2011), the procedures for quality assurance at the institutional level may be part of a well-practised process (e.g. institutional accreditation or program review) or relate to new practices (e.g. the use of student feedback on the teaching and learning process). These procedures may be ‘geared towards research activities, courses, academic staff or support/administrative functions’ (IIEP-UNESCO, 2011, p.17).

#### *2.1.3.1 Accountability or external quality assurance vs. improvement or internal quality assurance*

As argued by Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007), a quality system can be seen as having two aspects: accountability and improvement through assurance.

External quality assurance is the process of evaluating education quality through the subjective process of peer-review by external bodies (Westerheijden, 2007; Stensaker et al., 2010), in which it is thought that this approach ensures “value for money” (Harvey & Newton, 2007) and “fitness for purpose” (Lomas, 2004). External quality assurance focuses on accountability (Barnett, 1992) and is compliance-driven. To put it in simple terms, external quality assurance refers to the actions of an external body, such as a quality assurance agency, or another body outside the institution, which assesses the operation of the institution or its programs to determine whether the agreed-on standards have been met.

Meanwhile, internal quality assurance refers to the fixed procedures and policies developed within the institution to monitor and improve their own quality (Westerheijden, 2007; Dill, 2007), and is associated with the transformation view of quality. Internal quality assurance focuses on improvement (Barnett, 1992) and is improvement-driven. Again, to put it simply, internal quality assurance refers to the institution’s policies and mechanisms for ensuring that it is fulfilling its own purposes, as well as meeting the standards that apply to higher education in general or to the profession or discipline in particular.

#### *2.1.3.2 The power tension between accountability and improvement*

As Brennan and Shah (2000b) point out, HEIs are faced with two types of need: one to change and one to comply. These two needs promote quality assurance activity in an institution, but as ‘means to ends’ (p. 121). In both cases, the power tension between accountability and improvement can be identified. For example, improvement is often sidelined in assurance processes if the focus is on demonstrating compliance (Harvey & Newton, 2007).

The proponents of the improvement-led approach view quality as a process of transformation (Harvey, 1995; Colling & Harvey, 1995) and shift the focus from external scrutiny to internal creative innovation (Bauer & Franke-Wikberg, 1993; Bernhard, 2012). However, subscribers of the accountability-driven approach believe that improvement can be a result of accountability and is secondary in the quality monitoring process (Commonwealth of Australia, 1991; Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013).

Many quality researchers (see, for example, Brennan et al. 1992; Westerheijden & Van Vught 1994) suggest that although accountability approaches to quality assurance may lead to initial improvement, they have no long-term impact on continuous improvement, especially when there is a requirement for the production of strategic plans with clear vision and objectives. In the same vein, Harvey (1995) argued that having to respond to accountability requirements may negatively affect the resources needed for innovation and improvement.

Further pro-improvement arguments continue with Harvey and Knight (1996) provided additional pro-improvement arguments, believing that if the institution puts primacy on accountability and hopes that improvement will result, the continuous quality improvement process is likely to be impeded rather than encouraged. Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) shared this viewpoint and recommended that improvement should be the priority aim of the institution, with accountability as a result.

In the actual implementation of quality assurance in many developed countries in the world, the above-mentioned power tension seems to be perpetuating. For example, while many European countries advocate for an improvement-led approach (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Westerheijden et al., 2013), Australia has shifted from improvement-led approach back to a compliance-driven approach (Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013).

For quality assurance policy-makers worldwide, the question is how HEIs can resolve the tension between accountability (i.e. the need to comply) and improvement (i.e. the need to change).

Harvey (1995, p. 138) proposed the development of a ‘collegiate approach’ as a solution to the tension between accountability and improvement. This approach advocates a quality culture of continuous improvement and transformative, empowering education. The core of this approach is a self-critical collegiate group who set their own agenda for improvement and strive to fulfil the improvement plans. The collegiate approach embraces initiative through internal procedures and demonstrates that accountability is achieved through the continuous quality improvement process. To further develop this proposal, Harvey and Newton (2004, 2007) proposed a research-informed improvement-led approach to quality evaluation, which shifts the focus from externally imposed procedures to internally generated ones.

A quality improvement approach should fit with external requirements for accountability (Harvey, 2002a) and that a successful implementation of quality assurance in HEIs requires a balanced blend of the four quality assurance types (quality assessment, quality audit, accreditation, and external/peer review) (Brennan & Shah, 2000a). The expected benefit of quality assurance in higher education should be ‘products of the external-internal dialogue’ (Harvey, 2002a, p. 9) through the interaction between external monitoring and internal quality systems.

As such, accountability and improvement do not have to be polar opposites. Hoecht (2006) observed that accountability can be geared to promote learning and innovation rather than bureaucratic control, and does not have to undermine professional autonomy. Quality assurance is no longer the game of the leaders and managers or quality assurance agencies, it is now an integral part of academic life. Academic staff who care more about professional autonomy and improvement of the teaching and learning quality should have no problem with the principles of accountability and transparency. Thus, as Hoecht (2006)

proposed, it requires a proper debate between higher education policy-makers and academics on how to achieve quality in teaching and learning while ensuring trust and professional autonomy.

Further review of the literature on this power tension reinforces Harvey and Knight's (1996) opinion that although accountability and improvement are two faces of the same quality system coin, the focus should be on improvement with accountability being a consequence. Well-cited scholars (for example, Boyle and Bowden, 1997; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2007) also believe that if improvement is properly addressed, the evidence for accountability will be automatically developed. These authors suggest that an evidence-based approach should be adopted if the institution is to attend to both accountability and improvement.

In their updated research, Harvey and Newton (2007) reaffirmed the need for HEIs to address the imbalance between external quality monitoring and internal quality assurance. Academics and quality practitioners, according to the authors, should "make" rather than just "take" the quality agenda, by renewing the focus of quality evaluation on the enhancement of teaching and learning, learner empowerment and learning experience enrichment. The institutions that adopt this enhancement-led approach to quality assurance will operate on a self-regulation basis, and have such tools as an 'institutional quality enhancement plan', a 'teaching and learning improvement strategy' and 'systems and mechanisms for identification and dissemination of good practices' (Harvey & Newton, 2007, p. 239).

The challenge for HEIs is to implement a 'hybrid model of quality assurance that focuses on compliance and improvements with increased emphasis on internal enhancements and active engagement of all staff' (Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013, p. 104).

In the subsequent section, the actual implementation of quality assurance in higher education is reviewed. The issues to be elaborated on include: whether the

tension between accountability and improvement can be lessened, and how HEIs respond to external quality assurance.

## **2.2 Quality assurance implementation in higher education**

### **2.2.1 Experience from different countries in the world**

The implementation of quality assurance in higher education across different regions and/or countries has shown both convergence and diversity. In relation to convergence, the common external quality assurance features represented in van Vught and Westerheijden's (1994) general model were extended in many European countries to include more common elements (Billing, 2004) (*Please refer to Section 2.3.1 for more details*). Furthermore, quality assurance practices in Asia-Pacific countries also experienced similarities in terms of the development of criteria, the role of self-assessment and peer review, the final decision-making process (the final decision on the accreditation result), the public disclosure of the outcome and the validity duration of the outcome (accreditation certificate) (Stella, 2008).

However, the quality assurance literature also acknowledges diversity in the quality assurance frameworks applied in different countries/regions. For example, Brennan and Shah (2000a) reported differences in the actual implementation of van Vught and Westerheijden's (1994) general model, and concluded that the model is more suitable for those countries with medium-sized and state-regulated HEIs. Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2002) also observed that efforts to substantially improve higher education performance have been impeded by the lack of a universally agreed model for quality assurance (see also Adomssent et al., 2007).

Another area of diversity in national quality assurance framework patterns stems from the differences in quality cultures. The concern is whether the same type of quality assurance frameworks can be applied in countries with different cultures and HEIs with different levels of autonomy (Billing, 2004).

Similarly, in other regions, such as in Asia-Pacific countries, variations are observed in such aspects as unit of quality assurance (institution vs. programs), nature of the quality assurance process (mandatory vs. voluntary), disclosure of quality assurance outcomes and post quality assurance follow-up/accountability (Stella, 2008).

In many developed countries, for example Australia, significant progress has been made towards developing more comprehensive and integrated approaches to quality assurance. There has been a real need for customised and multi-faceted quality assurance approaches to address the complexities of educational contexts, as many HEIs throughout the world, according to Boyle and Bowden (1997), do not have well-designed, comprehensive and integrated quality assurance principles and mechanisms.

#### *2.2.1.1 Quality assurance in developing countries*

Compared to the developed countries where the conditions that make quality possible are already in place (e.g., the needed policies and procedures), and there have been extensive literature on how quality has been assured and how quality assurance models have been developed and implemented, documented and analysed in reports, developing countries face far more difficult situations. In developing countries, HEIs not only have to assure quality, they also have to develop the conditions for quality and adjust the standards and procedures that have been applied elsewhere in developed countries, to their own national requirements (Lim, 2001; Lemaitre, 2002).

The implementation of quality assurance in developing countries and the adoption of certain quality assurance types should be seen from a broader, overarching “globalised view” of the world. As Lemaitre (2002) claims, ‘what we see is not the imposition of certain definitions of quality by developed countries on developing ones, but rather the colonisation of universities by a foreign ideology, imposed by a globalised economy on higher education systems throughout the world’ (p. 34).



So, is it viable that quality principles and standards can be taken from one (developed) country to another (developing) country with little or no modifications? It seems that this general idea has been implicit in the quality assurance literature. However, we should always ponder critical questions, bearing in mind Harvey's (1995) main underlying rationale for quality - accountability and improvement. For example, regarding accountability, who should universities be accountable to? And how is good "value for money" defined? or regarding improvement, what is to be improved? In what ways? And for whose benefit? To put all these questions, and possibly many others, in the context of developing countries with their different ideologies, quality policy-makers and practitioners would need to identify what dimensions of the quality assurance framework would work for their context. This would result in the realisation of the well-used slogan "think globally, act locally".

### 2.2.2 Overview of the quality assurance implementation in higher education in developed countries

This section provides a brief review of how HEIs, mainly in developed countries, have implemented quality assurance initiatives.

First, there are several reasons why HEIs need to address quality assurance initiatives. As Westerheijden (2007) pointed out, in applying economic theories of behaviour, the relationship between quality assurance and institutional performance is 'what gets measured gets rewarded, and what gets rewarded gets done' (p. 80). According to the author, this means that HEIs have to adapt to the external environment and address the quality conception held by external stakeholders, in order to create their internal mechanisms.

The introduction of performance related funding for universities in the 1980s and 1990s and the "new managerialism" that emphasised transparency and accountability, associated with external quality assurance, required HEIs to be responsive to the pressure from the external environment (Turner, 2011).

From the institutions' perspective, they were concerned that more quality assurance initiatives from the government would lead to 'more oversight of their operations, and greater compliance that may limit their autonomy, flexibility and responsiveness' (Chalmers, 2007 p. 11). Since accreditation became a predominant approach to quality assurance in higher education, around 2000, HEIs have had to build a 'culture of evidence' that allows for 'serious, sustained and thematic investigations of effectiveness' (Ewell, 2007, p. 132). For many small institutions, this could be a burden and require a high cost. Also, many academics raised their concern that quality initiatives involve opportunity cost as they have to spend time on compiling statistics, rather than on research and academic tasks (Harvey & Knight, 1996; Lomas, 2007). In addition, it is argued, compliance-driven quality lacks focus on enhancement as more energy is devoted to meeting external compliance requirements, rather than building internal capacity for quality assurance and ongoing improvements (Nilsson & Wahlen, 2000; Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013)

In response to the external quality assurance policy, universities may play the 'compliance game' by using their resources to comply with regulatory standards while ignoring other 'more difficult-to-measure dimensions of higher education', such as the improvement of teaching and learning (Blackmur, 2007, p. 36). In other words, they could choose accountability and satisfaction of external stakeholders as their primary goal.

Alternatively, as Ewell (2007) claimed, universities can take advantage of the external quality review by using the analysis to their advantage, seeing it as beneficial to their internal operation or development. This happens when institutional leaders regard external quality reviews as opportunities to gather useful information and at the same time enhance the reputation of the institution. Many institutions in the USA have chosen to seize this opportunity (Ewell, 2007). This 'high-stake move in the Quality Game', as Ewell named it (p.139), describes the incorporation of the planning/management assets of the institution with the "academic core" in responding to external review requirements. This could

facilitate improvement in institutional performance while achieving accountability.

Another successful way of responding to quality assurance has been through integrating the management process of the HEI with the quality assurance system. For example, the evaluative information produced from the quality assurance system can be used as feedback for the management processes for continuous improvement (Kettunen, 2008).

In order to facilitate both compliance to external quality assurance and improvement/ enhancement of internal performance, it has been argued that institutions need to balance compliance and improvement by further emphasising and encouraging innovation and self-improvement among staff members (Barnett, 1992; Hodson & Thomas, 2003). With quality enhancement, an institution's endeavour to self-improve and be innovative in its approach and ideas would drive the quality systems forward (Hodson & Thomas, 2003). However, with compliance, institutions would respond to external forces and thus, quality assurance becomes a policy in name only. It has been argued that if institutions want to achieve both ends of compliance-improvement/ enhancement, a cultural shift in the institution is required (i.e. a quality embedded culture or culture of continuous quality improvement) (Hodson & Thomas, 2003; Lim, 2001; Lomas, 2004; Barnett, 1992; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008).

Although recent models of quality assurance represent researchers' endeavours to balance the improvement-accountability dimensions of quality assurance and address the administrative-academic interface in higher education, it is still difficult to use quality assurance to empower academic actors (teaching and research staff, or students) (Stensaker, Rosa & Westerheijden, 2007). Furthermore, it appeared that the institutional consequences of quality assurance have not yet contributed much to improvement of teaching and learning, or to transformation of the student learning experience (Stensaker, Rosa & Westerheijden, 2007).

Yet, the introduction of quality assurance has actually caused cultural changes to take place in HEIs: ownership of changes and a more evidence-based approach to decision-making (Brennan & Shah, 2000b; Westerheijden et al., 2013; Harvey, 2009).

In short, a number of researchers have argued that HEIs need to respond to the pressure from governments in a more pro-active manner, to become more ‘value-for-money’, more ‘relevant to social and economic needs’, more accessible, and more capable to ‘ensure comparability of provision and procedures within and between institutions’ (Harvey & Newton, 2007, p. 229). Also, quality assurance should not be seen as a policy game among policy-makers, quality assurance agencies, and institutional managers. Instead, HEIs should create and foster a sustainable quality culture and manage organisational changes, involve all stakeholders into quality management practices, and enhance both the external and internal dimension of quality assurance (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Westerheijden, 2007; Dill, 1995, 1999; Stensaker, Rosa & Westerheijden, 2007; Srikanthan & Darymple, 2007).

The next section explores quality assurance models and frameworks that have been proposed and implemented internationally. These represent empirical and research-informed endeavours to resolve the power tension between accountability and improvement, and help HEIs to ultimately respond to quality assurance more effectively.

### **2.3 Quality assurance frameworks and models to date**

As quality assurance adoption depends on diverse perspectives on quality dimensions, there has been no universally accepted conceptual framework for quality assurance in higher education.

Quality assurance literature has seen the emergence of various models and frameworks developed for different regions at different times. At first, there were attempts to apply models used in industrial quality management to the higher

education context, such as the Total Quality Management<sup>6</sup> (TQM) model (Harvey, 1995; Houston, 2007), Business Process Reengineering model<sup>7</sup> (BPR) (Ahmad et al., 2007), or ISO 9000<sup>8</sup> (Doherty, 1995). These quality management models focus on a culture of continuous improvement in organisational processes, the role of leadership and management for change, customer satisfaction, and organisational outcomes. However, the industrial quality management models seem to be more compatible with the service/administration functions of HEIs (e.g. managing student admission, resource allocation, support services), rather than the academic functions of a university, given that the sector deals with human beings (students) (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002; Boyle & Bowden, 1997). This raised the need for scholars and practitioners in the quality domain to adapt or develop new models, integrating the assurance of quality in teaching and learning.

More recently, various new models for educational quality management have been developed and proposed (see, for example, Cheng & Tam, 1997; Penington, 1998; Dill, 1999; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002, 2004, 2007; Perellon, 2007). For the purposes of this study, eight models were selected for review. These models were identified as those that were most articulated and/or well referenced in the literature, and relevant to the Vietnamese context. Each is discussed below, in chronological order.

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<sup>6</sup> A management approach to long-term success through customer satisfaction. In TQM, all members of an organisation participate in improving processes, products, services, and the culture in which they work. See: ASQ website (<http://asq.org/learn-about-quality/total-quality-management/overview/overview.html>)

<sup>7</sup> A business management strategy, originally pioneered in the early 1990s, focusing on the analysis and design of workflows and business processes within an organisation. BPR aims to help organisations fundamentally rethink how they do their work in order to dramatically improve customer service, cut operational costs, and become world-class competitors (Wikipedia).

<sup>8</sup> ISO 9000 is a set of international standards on quality management and quality assurance developed to help companies effectively document the quality system elements to be implemented to maintain an efficient quality system. They are not specific to any one industry and can be applied to organisations of any size. It is designed and published by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), a specialised international agency for standardisation composed of the national standards bodies of more than 160 countries. See: ASQ website (<http://asq.org/learn-about-quality/iso-9000/overview/overview.html>)

### 2.3.1 The general model of quality assessment in higher education (GMQA)

In an attempt to develop a general model for quality assurance in Europe and North America, van Vught and Westerheijden (1994) observed and analysed the common elements of the quality assurance frameworks in operation within European countries (France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom [UK]), the USA and Canada.

Whilst the various systems observed had their own features, which were applied in their specific contexts, there were common elements that could be combined into a core general higher education quality assessment system. These common elements encompassed: 1) independent organisation of the procedure (e.g. quality assurance agencies); 2) self-evaluation (or self-assessment, self-study); 3) site visits (external peer-review); 4) publication of evaluation reports; and 5) funding possibilities (e.g. increased funding from the government to successful HEIs). The first four elements of Van Vught and Westerheijden's model have been widely accepted as the four-stage model, while the fifth element – ‘an indirect link with [funding] decision-making’, has not been generally agreed on, due to the fact that funding could be the result of the quality assessment in different contexts with different funding bodies (Westerheijden, 1999, p.240).

The underpinning theory of this model is that both the dimension of providing accountability of the historical French model (external authority had the power to decide what should be studied and who could be allowed to teach) and the dimension of peer-review of the traditional English model (the community of the fellows could judge the quality of their colleagues) are key elements of any quality management system in higher education, and should be incorporated. Van Vught and Westerheijden's model has been applied as a common framework of external quality assurance, assessing the “fitness for purpose” dimension of quality.

### 2.3.2 The transformative model (TM)

The transformative model was developed for European countries by Harvey and Knight (1996). It is rooted in the transformative notion that quality should focus on enhancing and empowering participants. This model highlights the development of a quality culture of continuous improvement. The authors proposed that the primary focus of the quality process should be shifted from external scrutiny to internal effective action. This continuous quality improvement process is driven from two directions: bottom-up empowerment and top-down auditing.

In Harvey and Knight's (1996) view, bottom-up empowerment leading to quality improvement requires the development of effective collegiate teams working together to identify quality targets, planning for implementation and reporting on outcomes. Bottom-up empowerment involves those participants who can affect the improvement of quality - the student, the teacher and the researcher.

Top-down auditing leading to quality improvement requires an effective external monitoring process. It takes into account a range of concerns and different stakeholder perspectives in an open, self-critical manner. Auditing operates at two levels: the internal level on a regular and comprehensive basis within the institution, and the external level, on a periodic, irregular basis, by a national or regional agency.

In a continuous quality improvement process, institutional management does not direct or manage quality but provides a context and enabling factors to facilitate quality improvement and quality culture development. The emphasis is on collegiate teamwork, the dissemination of good practice and the delegation of responsibility for quality. In the transformative model, accountability will result as a consequence of a planned and transparent quality improvement process.

### 2.3.3 The comprehensive educational quality assurance model (CEQAM)

Boyle and Bowden (1997) proposed the CEQAM based on their distillation of key ideas from previous literature on quality assurance and higher education

culture and practice. As they viewed it, the foci and requirements for comprehensive quality assurance approaches include: 1) an overarching vision, purpose and plans of the institution; 2) effective leadership and management; 3) people (including human resource management, professional development, effective communication etc.); 4) customer orientation that includes knowledge of needs and expectations, client satisfaction and management; 5) evaluation, information and continual quality improvement; and 6) structures, policies and procedures that optimise the effectiveness of processes.

According to the authors, the model needs to be interpreted in light of the enabling conditions (including the felt need for comprehensive quality assurance, leaders' commitment to quality assurance development and quality culture, adequate resources for quality assurance etc.) and basic principles and values (such as a primary focus on continual quality improvement, and accountability as an important consequence of quality assurance). The overall model encompasses a set of key elements integrated to form a quality assurance framework, as below:

- *Key output elements:* evidence-based quality improvements in student learning, and evidence for accountability requirements
- *Key enabling/process elements:* institutional vision, values, strategic goals; program quality assurance system; faculty development program; assessment of learning; and faculty evaluation system
- *Key support systems:* enabling policies, structures, resources and support groups

The model can be perceived in an integrated way. For example, the three enabling elements program quality assurance system, faculty development, and assessment of student learning - all influence and determine the critical outcome element (i.e. quality and continuous quality improvement in student learning). There is an interrelationship between program quality assurance system and faculty development, faculty development and faculty evaluation, and assessment of learning and program quality assurance.





As Tierney (1998) argued, the universities of the twenty-first century face a dilemmatic challenge: scarce resources and a requirement to set high goals. Thus, efficiency of operations is essential to achieve high performance. This requires the institution to focus on the learning needs of the students and implement a greater focus on teaching, supported by appropriate resource allocations. Academic programs need to be regularly reviewed, in line with internal and external demands and changes. This model emphasises the development of new internal and external relationships through communication and partnerships.

### 2.3.5 The university of learning model (ULM)

Bowden and Marton's (1998, 2003) model has some similarities with Harvey and Knight's (1996) TM of quality. This University of Learning model (ULM), like the TM and the RUM, emphasised the enhancement of student learning and a proactive collaboration among academic teams in education delivery.

The authors examined the organisational features of higher education from a pedagogical perspective to facilitate a dynamic learning process. As such, the model highlights the synergetic involvement of academics in course/research teams, in developing a holistic view of students' competencies, and a collective consciousness of what is common and what is complementary. This is the basis for the academic teams to enable learners to differentiate options, and focus on the most relevant solution when facing problems and challenges in different contexts.

The authors argue that teaching, research and service are considered the core of the university system, and the ultimate goal of a university is to prepare the individual and the community to face future problems and turn challenges into opportunities, based on formed knowledge. In this model, there is a shift from an input-oriented educational approach to a learning-focused approach. This in turn requires HEIs to shift their focus onto policies and activities centred on student learning.

### 2.3.6 The academic learning organisation framework (ALOF)

The concept of a learning organisation has received extensive emphasis in organisational literature (see, for example, Senge, 1990; Garvin, 1993; Goncalves, 2012; Maula, 2006; Buckle, 1998; Wick & Leon, 1995). This concept was developed based on earlier more extensive literature on organisational learning (March, 1991, Huber, 1991), which involved the study of the phenomena of learning within organisational contexts.

Garvin (1993) argued that the concept of a learning organisation is associated with the purposeful and systematic acquisition of knowledge (both new knowledge and knowledge of its operations), and the processes and structures that facilitate these activities. Garvin's learning organisation framework was developed based on the assumption that in a competitive context, an organisation must adapt its core processes through the search for, and application of, new knowledge. A number of other authors broadly agreed: for example, Buckle (1998) viewed a learning organisation as one with increased problem-solving capability and behaviour change leading to improved performance at the individual, team and organisational level. Wick and Leon (1995) defined the learning organisation as one that 'continually improves by rapidly creating and refining the capabilities needed for future successes' (p. 299). According to these authors, the learning organisation is the ideal type of organisation in which learning is maximised.

Dill (1997, 1999) adopted Garvin's framework and further developed it into the academic learning organisation framework (ALOF). In his view universities can respond to changes in the environment (for example, pressure for academic accountability and a more competitive higher education environment) by becoming "learning organisations". Dill (1999) analysed twelve university case studies drawn from the Institute for Management in Higher Education (IMHE) project on the impact of academic quality assessment on institutional management and decision-making. From this analysis, Dill suggested the following distinctive elements of the academic learning organisation:

- Culture of evidence into academic problem-solving (systematic problem-solving employing objective measures and scientific method)
- Improved coordination of teaching units (observing basic processes to understand how they work and can be improved)
- Learning from others (seeking knowledge from colleagues that can be used for academic research and improvement of basic processes of teaching and learning)
- University-wide coordination of “learning” (developing pan-university structures for providing more effective coordination and support)
- transferring these among academic units (Dill, 1999, pp. 148-150).

The implications of this framework confirm the adaptive responses of universities to the new environment. As Dill pointed out, the literature consistently showed that universities are internally restructuring themselves to improve academic quality, enhance innovative research, and improve entrepreneurial capacities. Dill’s framework puts focus on the improvement of the teaching and learning processes. This model of learning organisations emphasises the internal processes that could enhance sustainable institutional internal quality assurance, and advocates the transformation dimension of quality.

#### 2.3.7 The instrumental model (IM)

The instrumental model (IM) of quality assurance has been used widely in developed countries, albeit with marked differences in implementation (Lim, 2001). This model firstly requires the statement of purpose of the university to be in line with the national goals, to be “fitness for purpose”, then the quality management system is established to assess whether the institution can achieve this purpose.

In the IM, all quality assurance systems in higher education follow the same sequence, as below:

- Identify the mission or purpose of the university
- Identify the functions that the university needs to perform to fulfil the mission
- Identify the objectives for each function and set quantitative and qualitative performance indicators for these
- Establish a quality assurance management system (that the university uses to ensure that these objectives are achieved)
- Establish a quality audit system to evaluate the performance of the university in the conduct of these functions and identify improvement areas

This model depicts the process of developing and maintaining a quality assurance system; it does not take into account the elements of the educational environment that influence quality of climate, process and outcome.

#### 2.3.8 The holistic model for quality management in education (HMQME)

Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2002, 2004, 2007) developed the holistic model for quality management in education (HMQME) based on their synthesis of other quality models and approaches, including Duke (1992), Harvey and Knight (1996), Haworth and Conrad (1997), Bowden and Marton (1998), and Tierney (1998, 1999). The HMQME was grounded on the assumption that a model for quality management in higher education needs to be more holistic to meet the requirements of the two core functions of universities: service and education.

The core features of this model include: 1) a clear focus on “transformation” of the learner and of the institution, “enhancing” them through the process of acquiring knowledge and skills, and ultimately “empowering” them; 2) a synergistic collaboration at the learning interface, with the underpinning idea that multi-actor collegial and supportive cultures will facilitate high quality programs; and 3) a significant commitment to improve learning at all levels, supported by senior management. A causal loop can be observed as follows: increased commitment leads to increased collaboration, which, in turn, facilitates transformation leading to improved quality outcomes.

The major elements of the model include institutional transformation for learning, teaching for transformation, assessment for transformation, quality improvement, and quality monitoring for learning. The model has various implications for the transformation of the institution, such as: a transformative type of learning (student-centred and learning-oriented) should be fostered, rather than a transmissive type of learning (teacher-centred and content-oriented); shared awareness of common goals and collective consciousness will make the institution a flexible dynamic organisation to cope with the changing environment; and there should be a paradigm shift regarding: 1) teaching as a key performance indicator; 2) collegial processes; and 3) the role of leadership.

Similar to the CEQAM proposed by Boyle and Bowden (1997), in the HMQME, the focus of the quality system should be on improvement with accountability as a consequence.

#### 2.3.9 A synthesis of the key elements of the models under study

In this section, the synthesis of the key elements of the above reviewed models and frameworks is discussed. This synthesis lays the groundwork for the development of the conceptual framework for this study, which will be presented in the next chapter.

The review of models and frameworks indicates that quality assurance in higher education originated from industry quality management models with some adaptation. The elements of a continuous improvement culture, leadership and management were maintained in the educational quality models. The significant adaptation related to the integration of such elements as students' learning and collaboration in education delivery.

There are both similarities and differences in the elements covered in the reviewed quality assurance models.

Regarding commonalities, in the *Transformative model*, the *Comprehensive educational quality assurance* and the *Holistic* models, a culture of continuous

improvement is at the centre of quality assurance, with accountability as a result, and the transformation of learning is advocated. These models focus on the internal processes and the conditions that drive quality improvement at the student-staff interface. The *Transformative model*, the *Responsive university* model, the *University of learning* model, the *Academic learning organisation* framework, and the *Holistic* model all emphasise the student learning experience and the dynamic collaboration of academic teams in education delivery.

In all the reviewed models, the engagement and active participation of academic staff, students, and administrators in the quality activities is highlighted. The role of stakeholder expectations and satisfaction is also an important feature of these quality assurance models. Compared to the industrial quality management models, the stakeholders involved in these educational quality models are more diversified, and the students, while the product of education, are at the same time, considered important stakeholders.

As for the differences between the reviewed models, the *Comprehensive educational quality assurance* model and the *Holistic* model for quality appear to be more comprehensive than the others. This is because they cover more elements that constitute quality, including leadership and management, policies and procedures, cooperation and collaboration among the different units of the institution, the engagement of staff, students and administrators in the quality assurance practices, and creating a culture of continuous quality improvement with accountability as an inevitable result.

Another difference is that while most models focus on internal improvement and transformation of learning, as well as the condition and processes needed for this, the *General model of quality assessment* and the *Instrumental* model focus on accountability and the processes/procedures that the institution needs to follow to achieve its accountability goal. These two models seem to be more generic and procedural, while the others allow for multi-faceted interaction of the elements, making the quality mechanism more like a web or a network.

Building the institution into an academic learning organisation could be seen as an attempt to synthesise the essence of the quality management models for higher education and implement them through the adoption of learning community principles. This could provide a balanced approach towards educational, service and behavioural excellence in higher education (Srykanthan & Dalrymple, 2002).

In short, the ultimate aim of the quality assurance mechanism proposed in most of the reviewed models is improvement with accountability as a result.

The table below summarises the main features of the reviewed quality assurance models. The ‘✓’ mark is used to indicate the focal points of each model.

Focus	Quality Assurance models							
	<i>GMQA</i> <i>Europe</i>	<i>TM</i> <i>Europe</i>	<i>CEQAM</i> <i>Australia</i>	<i>RUM</i> <i>USA</i>	<i>ULM</i> <i>Europe</i>	<i>ALOF</i> <i>USA</i>	<i>IM</i> <i>UK</i>	<i>HMQME</i> <i>Australia</i>
Accountability	✓		✓				✓	✓
Transformational learning		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Culture of continuous improvement		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Policies/procedures	✓		✓			✓	✓	
Organisational structure			✓			✓	✓	
Leadership and management		✓	✓			✓		✓
Stakeholder expectations and satisfaction	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Engagement of staff, students and administrators		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Partnership and collaboration		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
Sequence	✓						✓	

**Table 1: Summary of main features of quality assurance models**

**Notes:** *GMQA*: The General model of quality assessment in Higher Education (van Vught & Weisterheijden, 1994); *TM*: The Transformative Model (Harvey & Knight, 1996); *CEQAM*: The Comprehensive Educational Quality Assurance Model (Boyle & Bowden, 1997); *RUM*: The Responsive University Model (Tierney, 1998); *ULM*: The University of Learning Model (Bowden & Marton, 1998, 2003); *ALOF*: The Academic Learning Organisation Framework (Dill, 1999);



*IM: The Instrumental Model (Lim, 2001); HMQME: The Holistic Model for Quality management in Education (Srikanthan & Darymple, 2002, 2004, 2007)*

### 2.3.10 Summary

To summarise, considering the key features of the above reviewed models and frameworks of quality assurance in higher education, it can be seen that an international convergence has emerged. Quality assurance models are getting more comprehensive, addressing the two core functions of universities, service and education, taking into consideration all the involving elements of the educational environment. A clear focus of these models is on the improvement dimension of quality. This requires internal changes from the institutions, in terms of organisational structure, the role of senior management and leadership, team interaction and a shared vision within the academic community, collaboration and commitment. A culture of continuous improvement is seen to be the key to institutional success.

A substantial part of the quality assurance literature deals with quality assurance models and frameworks. It should be noted, according to Lemaitre (2002), that every model is constituted with a significant cluster of elements. Some of these are essential to the key aspects of the models, some being contextual factors without which the model cannot properly function. Therefore, when any model is imported to a new higher education environment, the cluster is broken because the context is different. In this case, the model itself needs to be redefined, taking into account such factors as the current condition of the institution and its intended goals, the requirements of the student body, the features of research, the need for academic autonomy, or the demands of external stakeholders.

## 2.4 Demystifying quality assurance terminology

In this chapter, several quality assurance terms have been mentioned. In the next chapters, these terms will reappear here and there. In order to assist the consistency, below is a short glossary that the researcher used.

Process-oriented vs. product-oriented quality assurance: Process-oriented quality assurance aims at ensuring the quality of the whole educational process, whereas product-oriented quality assurance focuses on one-off jobs as program accreditation, attaining standards.

Quality assurance framework/ mechanism/ system: quality assurance framework refers to theoretical or conceptual framework developed for quality assurance; quality assurance system refers to the legal and regulatory framework, policies and procedures, measures and indicators established for the implementation of quality assurance; quality assurance mechanism refers to how quality assurance is implemented, how the system, policies and procedures are operationalised.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, the conceptualisation and contextualisation of the study have been presented through a review of relevant literature. Conceptual considerations regarding quality and quality assurance, as well as related issues, such as the tension between accountability and improvement, have been provided. Contextual considerations discussed in this chapter include the experience from different regions and countries in implementing quality assurance, and how HEIs in developed countries have implemented external quality assurance. Finally, a selection of well-referenced quality assurance models and frameworks were reviewed. This chapter provides the theoretical constructs for the conceptual framework for the current study.

The next chapter presents the conceptual framework and its components on quality assurance developed for this study. Additionally, as quality assurance initiatives have created important changes in HEIs, the relevant literature on organisational theories in higher education, organisational management and change management are reviewed. This will assist in the interpretation of the conceptual framework at the operational level, to be discussed in the later chapters.

## CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

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### Introduction

This chapter sets out the theoretical foundation of this study. Organisational theories provide valuable insights in this regard, as the focus of this study is on organisational level practices. The first part of the chapter, Section 3.1, examines two sets of organisational theories. The first is applicable to organisations in general; the second underlies the operations of higher education institutions. The main theories are presented with their key features. The next part, Section 3.2, presents the theoretical framework of the study, developed based on the existing quality assurance models and frameworks. Section 3.3 elaborates on the foundation for the theoretical framework, that is the factors that drive quality assurance and quality improvement at the institutional level. Section 3.4 provides a review of organisational change management theories, as the implementation of quality assurance should be treated as an important organisational change.

### 3.1 Organisational theories

Colleges and universities belong to the oldest<sup>9</sup> type of organisations, with enabling governance and administration that has helped them survive and sustain through changes (Sporn, 2007). These institutions are unique organisations differing in major respects from other forms of organisations, being ‘extremely ambiguous, complex and politically charged settings’ (Manning, 2013, p. 246). In order to understand the complexity of HEI functioning, their operations and how they are managed or controlled, the members of these institutions (managers, administrators, faculty, and external stakeholders) need to be viewed through organisational theory lenses. Without such understanding of how universities

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<sup>9</sup> The first university in the sense of higher learning and degree awarding institution, was established in 1088 - University of Bologna in Italy, a creation of medieval Europe. *Source: Wikipedia*

work, these internal and external higher education stakeholders have no clear clues as to why their institutions are difficult to manage, resistant to change, or fail to adapt to environmental changes. As Manning (2013, p. 3) stated, ‘Without knowledge of organisational structure, faculty are hard pressed to make policy decisions regarding curriculum and other issues; trustees struggle to determine effective institutional purposes; and administrators fight to keep up with the rapid pace of change’.

By understanding the theories underpinning the functioning of HEIs, such academic and strategic tasks as program development, curriculum shaping, decision-making, policy and planning can be effectively performed.

Although it requires the combination of different organisational theories and perspectives to comprehensively understand the ever-changing world of higher education, due to the focus of this study (how HEIs implement their quality assurance practices), the following theories are reviewed:

- Manning’s (2013) four organisational theories in higher education: organised anarchy, collegium, bureaucratic, and cultural.
- Bolman and Deal’s (2008) four-frame model: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames.

These theories provide useful theoretical lenses for the interpretation of data, to be specifically presented in Chapter 6.

### 3.1.1 Organisational frames

With reference to the vast literature on organisational studies (see, for example, Bolman & Deal, 1984; Bradford & Cohen, 1984; Heffron, 1989; Pfeffer, 1992; Pieters & Young, 2000; Donaldson, 2001; Kezar, 2001a; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995, 2005; Lawler & Worley, 2006), Bolman and Deal’s (2008) four frame model seems the most comprehensive and applicable to the case under investigation. It provides a multiple perspective approach to study an organisation. The four frames are: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic.

The structural approach focuses on the architecture of the organisation, how teams and groups, units and sub-units are organised and structured, how roles and responsibilities are specified, and how goals and policies are framed, in order to get the desired results. This approach also highlights the need for organisations to go through restructuring when facing problems or opportunities, such as environmental changes, technology changes, organisational growth, and leadership changes.

The human resource lens emphasises how organisations can be tailored to meet human needs, to improve human resource management, and build positive interpersonal and group dynamics. The essence of this frame is that the characteristics of organisations and their staff shape what they do for each other, and the relationship between an organisation and its people is mutually beneficial.

The political view looks at organisations as political arenas that host diverse individual and group interests. This frame focuses on how to deal with power and conflict, and highlights the need to understand and manage political dynamics, in cases of scarce resources, and the differences among coalitions, regarding values, beliefs, interests and perceptions.

The symbolic frame focuses on issues of meaning and faith, how humans make sense of the world they live in. It requires organisations to build a culture that unites people around shared values and beliefs. It puts rituals, ceremonies, stories and symbols at the heart of organisational life.

Bolman and Deal's (2008) four frame model fits with any organisational study, as it sees organisations as multiple realities. When all four frames are applied, the integration offers a comprehensive, multi-faceted design for understanding organisational practices and responding to needs for change and realignment.

### 3.1.2 Organisational theories in higher education

#### 3.1.2.1 *The organised anarchy theory*

Manning (2013) reviewed the organised anarchy theory that Cohen and March (1986, cited in Manning 2013) first proposed. This theory characterises HEIs as having ‘Problematic goals, Unclear technology and Fluid participation’ (Manning, 2013, p. 29-31). These characteristics make HEIs profoundly different from other forms of organisations.

First, as Manning (2013) claimed, HEIs have unclear and even ambiguous goals, and the primary goals embed a conflicting nature. For example, the three-part primary purpose of teaching-research-service entails arguments on whether teaching and research are mutually exclusive or the teaching mission should be the primary responsibility of academic staff who do research as well. The conflict about the appropriate goals for a HEI happens during the involvement of the internal and external stakeholders, as different stakeholders hold different views about what should be the primary goal for a HEI. Yet, it could be argued that many goals, even conflicting ones, exist within the same institution. Therefore, the institution can become more adaptable when they diversify their attention and efforts in many areas to achieve a number of societal purposes at the same time.

The second characteristic of the HEI, as an organised anarchy, is their use of unclear technology. In each HEI, technologies must be employed to meet the needs of different groups of participants. However, HEIs can hardly find clear technologies as students learn differently, teachers apply different methodologies, and researchers require different methodologies and approaches.

The third characteristic of organised anarchy is fluid participation. This represents the varied involvement and duration of the institutional members - students, faculty, administrative staff, leaders and managers. Fluid participation in the organised anarchy often results in multi-directional communication. This affects the expectations of what can or cannot be accomplished, and the already multi-faceted decision-making processes in the institution.

Another characteristic of organised anarchy, proposed by Baldrige et al. (1978, cited in Manning 2013) is environmental vulnerability. Accordingly, higher education is particularly affected by environmental change, due to its dependence on tuition, national and international economies, quality measures and the fluidity of the client groups. Furthermore, the emergence of new competition, internationalisation of higher education, together with other pressures from government and the market have intensified the impact of the external environment on higher education.

#### *3.1.2.2 The collegium theory*

As Manning (2013) highlighted, multiple organisational perspectives often occur simultaneously within the university, but the most common combination is collegium and bureaucracy. The complexity of organisational structures in universities, and the multiple ways of operating within the same institution stem from this combination.

Birnbaum (1988) analysed the coexistence of collegial and bureaucratic aspects of higher education. In this analysis, the collegium reflects the perspectives of the faculty/academic body and the bureaucratic reflects the administrators' perspectives. For example, the goals of the institution from the collegial perspective are teaching, research and service, while from the bureaucratic perspective, the university is to achieve broader organisational goals and to maintain standards of performance. For another element, authority, collegium authority is decentralised and comes from disciplines and faculty's expertise, while bureaucratic authority is legitimate (or entitled power), centralised and comes from the position of leadership.

Manning (2013) argued that the collegial perspective contains strengths and weaknesses that add to the complexity of HEIs. On the positive side, collegiums provide a structure that facilitates faculty autonomy, creates disciplinary communities, and promotes participatory decision-making, planning and policy making at the institutional level. On the negative side, collegiums may engender

competition among like-discipline peers, separate faculty who emphasise research from faculty who focus on institution-based affairs, and may result in faculty disengagement in institutional affairs.

Such aspects of the collegial perspective as faculty self-governance, peer review, curriculum control, and tenure represent key challenges in higher education.

### *3.1.2.3 The bureaucracy theory*

Bureaucracy theorists (Fayol, [1916] 2005; Ferguson 1985) argue that organisations should follow the natural order, and adopt a hierarchical, pyramid shaped structure. Therefore, the key features of bureaucracies can be listed as follows: Organisational structure is hierarchical. Staff are recruited and appointed based on their expertise and qualifications, and work in divisions of specialisation. The authority is concentrated at the top of the hierarchy and decisions are made top-down. Operations follow processes and procedures. The human resource is managed based on the expectation that long-term employment is possible and that stable personnel enables efficiency in the organisation.

As Manning (2013) observed, one aspect of the bureaucracy that challenges HEIs is that management could be centralised, as envisioned by the original bureaucracy theorists, or decentralised. Centralisation ensures standardisation and consistency; while decentralisation allows for multiple purposes to coexist within the institution and lower level management can make up for leadership oversight at a higher level. This centralisation-decentralisation tension in academic bureaucracies is intensified by the professional and disciplinary expertise of the deans and faculty. Decentralisation is more appropriate to current HEIs due to their size and nature.

Regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the bureaucracy perspective, Manning (2013) stated that this model provides a means to organise complex tasks while ensuring standardisation and objectivity. However, routinisation and standardisation can lead to red tape and impede the adaptability and responsiveness of the institution to external changes.



In today's higher education, the bureaucracy model can be applied to strategic management in the institution through capacity building (Toma, 2010). The knowledge of the inter-relationship between organisational units enables leaders to synchronise the organisation parts/elements as goals, structure, governance, resources, policy and procedures, and culture, in ways that build capacity and achieve the purpose undertaken. This approach can help leaders determine future goals and development areas, as they are fully aware of the capacity of the organisation as well as the capacity needed to undertake those initiatives.

#### *3.1.2.4 The cultural theory*

As Manning (2013) argued, organisational culture first became a concern for managers and researchers in the 1980s, with Japan's emergence as an economic power, business globalisation and the disillusionment with hard management. Theorists were looking for approaches that could better explain the intangible aspects of institutional life. Parker (2000) summarised the need to supplement the 'hard S's of strategy, structure and system' with the 'soft S's of style, skills and staff' (p. 21). Newton (2002) pointed out that organisational culture provides an important context for the 'management of policy initiatives' (p. 187), combining both constraints and opportunities. More specifically, a cultural lens could provide multi-faceted insights into the decision-making, planning and program development processes within HEIs.

According to Manning (2013) organisational culture theory can take two different approaches. The first, the corporate culture approach, assumes that culture can be managed and that leaders are responsible for the development of culture in the organisation. The second, the anthropological framework, proposes that all members of the organisation play a role in shaping the culture of the institution through individual and collective experiences. This model enables internal and external stakeholders to gain a deeper understanding of the intangible aspects of institutional life.

To sum up, the above reviewed perspectives on organisational theories would help all players in the higher education sector (faculty, internal administrators, external stakeholders, and students) to acquire a more complex and comprehensive understanding of the operations of the HEI.

#### *3.1.2.5 The interconnectedness between organisational theories and quality assurance*

The preceding sub-sections have provided a brief review of the four organisational theories that underlie the operations of HEIs. Although there are other ways of categorising the organisational behaviour patterns of HEIs, as apparent in the organisational theories and behaviour literature, the above reviewed classification of organisational theories in higher education is the most current. It is also based on numerous sources on the subject, and provides clear guidelines for practical implications.

These organisational theories also underpin an institution's choice to adopt and implement a certain quality assurance model or framework. Only when the people involved and in charge understand how their institution is organised, and what the contextual factors and key features of its organisation are, can they make a decision on which quality assurance model to adopt, as well as which dimension or focal element of the selected model should receive more attention and more investment (Lemaitre, 2002; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2007; Sporn, 2007).

With reference to the quality assurance models and frameworks reviewed in the last section of Chapter 2, we can identify the link between certain focal elements of these models and the above organisational theories. Examples include the TM model vs. the collegium theory; the CEQAM and ALOF models vs. the organised anarchy theory; the culture of continuous improvement (the focus of most models) vs. the cultural theory; and the leadership and management dimension (the mutual compatibility between the academic and service functions in many models) vs. the bureaucracy theory.

As Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) highlighted, the effective implementation of a quality assurance model can contribute to the match between educational and organisational theories in HEIs. On the other hand, the organisational behaviour norms typical of each organisational theory are fundamental prerequisites for implementing the quality assurance model. It is, therefore, noticeable that there is an interrelation between organisational theories and quality assurance models.

There are some related studies in the extant literature that reflect this interconnectedness between organisational theories and the implementation of quality assurance in universities. For example, Kezar (2008), in her study of the implementation of equity initiatives in universities, found that organisational contextual factors had a powerful influence on the implementation of equity initiatives. Csizmadia (2006), in a study on quality management in Hungarian higher education, found that organisational features such as organisational complexity, leadership and the decision-making process, influence the pace and the scope of quality management in universities. The detailed findings include: the more complex the institution, the slower the pace of quality management implementation; the higher the commitment of leaders, the faster the pace and the wider the scope of quality management implementation. Newton (2002) emphasised the importance of taking contextual factors into full account, as these factors influence the implementation as well as the reshaping of quality policy. In general, these studies demonstrate the relevance of organisational theories in analysing the adoption and practice of quality assurance at the institutions.

In the subsequent section, a theoretical framework for the current study is presented. The main theoretical constructs identified from the quality assurance literature and elements of the organisational theories in higher education were combined to draw the dimensions of the framework.

### 3.2 Theoretical framework of the study

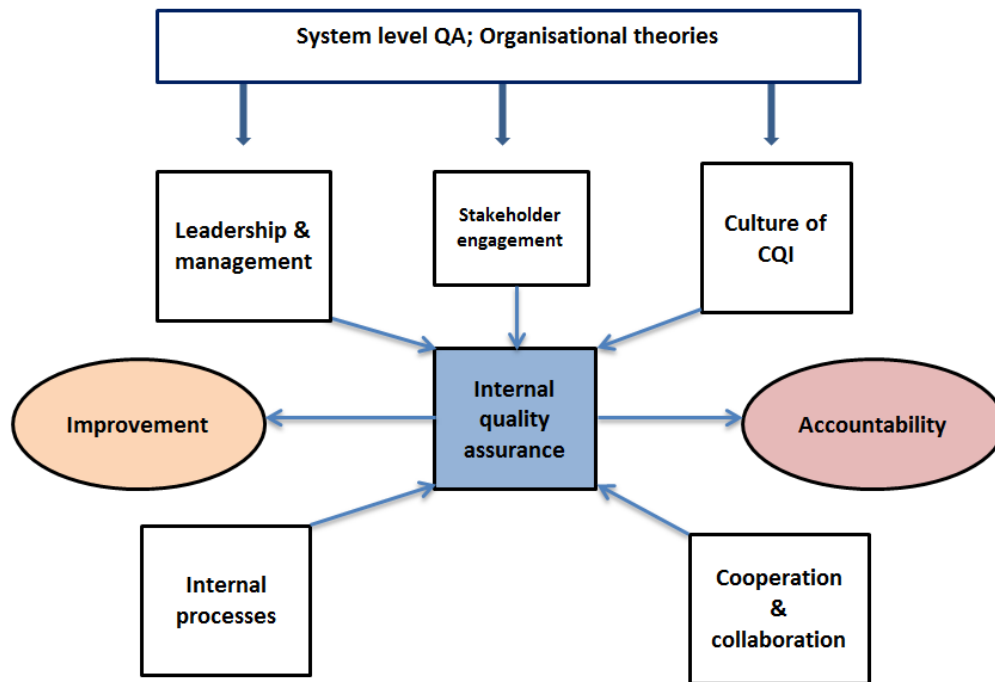
In this section, the theoretical framework of this study is presented, followed by the elaboration on the dimensions of the framework in the next section.

This framework could be interpreted as follows: in order to have a viable quality assurance mechanism, the HEI, first of all, needs to address the system level quality assurance considerations and understand the organisational theory underlying its operations. The institution needs to develop its internal quality assurance, with five dimensions contributing to its operation:

- *Leadership and management*, which includes the role of institutional vision, values and goals, and leadership;
- *Culture of continuous quality improvement*, or a quality culture;
- *Stakeholder engagement* in various aspects of the institution's operation;
- *Internal processes* whereby the institution monitors and improves its performance; and
- *Cooperation and collaboration* among the units within the organisational structure. This dimension is a special one, as it links to the broader dimension of the academic learning organisation (Dill, 1999) and collaborative learning (Kezar, 2005).

With the contribution of the five dimensions to internal quality assurance, the institution will be able to achieve accountability (responding to external quality assurance) as an inevitable result of improvement (sustaining internal quality assurance and staying competitive in the higher education environment) (Dill, 1999; Harvey & Knight, 1996).

The schematic diagram of this study's theoretical framework is presented in Figure 3.1 below. The arrow lines indicate the direction of the influence among the variables.



**Figure 2: Diagram of the theoretical framework**

In the subsequent sections, the conditions or key success factors for a viable quality assurance mechanism for HEIs will be elaborated, based on the review of the relevant literature on the five main dimensions of the above proposed framework. In other words, the literature that supports the above framework will be detailed.

### **3.3 Factors driving quality assurance and quality improvement at the institutional level**

#### **3.3.1 Leadership and management**

##### *The concept of leadership*

Leadership has been defined in a number of different ways, but there is a common understanding of it as ‘a process of social influence whereby a leader (or group of leaders) steers members of a group towards a goal’ (Bryman, 1992, p. 2). Evident in the literature are distinctions between *leadership*, often associated with vision, direction and institutional strategies, and *management*, often related to policy execution and competence in functional areas (Middlehurst & Elton, 1992;

Davies, Hides & Casey, 2001). However, in this section of the chapter, Newton's (2002) and Ramsden's (1998) pragmatic view - that leaders are also managers and that leadership is the overarching term for leaders and managers - is adopted.

### *Dimensions of leadership*

As Meade (1997) indicated, in quality assurance in higher education, one of the major barriers to quality enhancement is the lack of leadership skills. The role of leadership in the institution's quality assurance practice can be identified using Middlehurst's (1997) framework. The first dimension of leadership is a *conceptual and analytical* one. In higher education, this dimension involves a capacity to think in new ways, to generate new ideas and perspectives, and to create a vision. According to Wick and Leon (1995), leaders must have a clear vision, commit to that vision, and consistently communicate that vision to all the staff. Therefore, all members of the organisation will be enabled to anticipate what they can contribute to help achieve the organisational goals and objectives. Leaders of the institution are at their 'vantage point' and 'best positioned to see and articulate the performance gap' (Wick & Leon, 1995, p. 301) between the current achievements and the expected achievements of the institution.

The analytical perspective of leadership relates to the need to collect, analyse and interpret data. As Middlehurst (1997) pointed out, in the process of quality assurance, leaders need to make decisions to 'change, improve, sustain or withdraw activities' (p. 193) based on the interpretation of useful data from reviews, surveys or benchmarking activities.

The second dimension of leadership is a *structural and systemic* one. The leadership task at the structural level is to create structures that enable staff to improve their performance, and the organisation to improve its own performance. The systemic part of this dimension involves the capacity to attend to all the constitutive elements that have impact on the performance and operations of the institution. Fundamental changes cannot happen without this systemic leadership. In quality assurance practice in higher education, the identification of

stakeholders and their interests, the search for partnerships and collaborative opportunities, and the monitoring of performance at all levels from institutional to program to individual, are examples of how this structural and systemic perspective of Middlehurst's framework can be adopted and implemented. Similarly, Horsburgh (1999) suggested that higher education leaders should engage actively with the changes that are affecting the higher education system and learn about the approaches to quality improvement in other contexts.

The final leadership dimension in Middlehurst's (1997) framework is a *motivational and behavioural* one. The author recognised that appeals to academics to change their practices on the grounds of economy and efficiency are unlikely to inspire commitment beyond what can be achieved through compliance measures. As Harvey (1995) noted, the implementation of quality assurance practices carries with it implied scepticism about the quality of academics' work and a lack of trust. If the foundation is built on partnerships and mutual trust, rather than on control and policing, it is more likely to sustain the change agenda, and the chance to achieve quality improvements is potentially greater. The adoption of this perspective requires the leaders of an institution to engage staff at the motivational and behavioural levels, to facilitate sustainable change over time, even after the quality assurance event has passed (Middlehurst, 1997).

#### *The role of leadership in the institution's quality assurance*

Middlehurst and Elton's (1992) view on the role of leadership in HEIs is still applicable to the current context. That is, the leadership role needs to remain of prime importance in all scenarios: to direct and build internal commitment towards positive collective action in the face of both external pressures and internal crises; to develop and support the main functions of the institution at times without pressures; and, at all times, to provide vision, insight and strategies that can unify organisational forces.

Regarding the specific context of quality assurance in higher education, as noted by O'Mahony and Garavan (2012), the implementation of quality assurance

systems requires continuous leadership. Leaders can help increase staff awareness of quality improvement through a shared vision and purpose, and create an environment in which the organisation and its people can excel (Davies et al., 2001; Dorfman & House, 2004). Leadership, particularly senior leadership, commitment to, and pro-active pursuit of continuous improvement, appears to be one of the most critical factors for the success of quality [assurance] implementation in HEIs (Osseo-Asare, Longbottom & Murphy, 2005; Papadimitriou, 2011). In support of these arguments, Kouzes and Posner (2007) proposed five practices of exemplary leadership: model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart. These practices appear to match well with the change management process, in this case, management of quality assurance initiatives (this is discussed further in Section 3.4.2).

As Barnett (1992) argued, institutional leaders play an important role in understanding the institution's organisational structure, in identifying the compatible elements of quality assurance systems for their institution, in making them explicit, in establishing frameworks for quality assurance and enhancement, and in raising awareness that quality matters, thereby promoting a culture of quality improvement across the institution.

HEI leadership plays an important role in encouraging increased ownership of internal quality processes based on shared institutional visions and goals. When leadership is executed on the basis of transparency and fairness, and when leaders enact their quality actions, and communicate and disseminate good practices, the people involved in the quality system can be greatly motivated and engaged. If this leadership dimension is well performed and connected with other dimensions, the quality mechanism will be at its optimal operational condition.

For continuous quality improvement, the role of leaders is vital, specifically academic leaders at school and faculty levels. These leaders get involved in the enhancement of curriculum design and renovation, improving students' learning and experience, and monitoring course quality and staff performance.



### 3.3.2 Quality culture

A brief overview of the critical writings on quality culture in higher education shows that this is a complex concept. A variety of notions of culture and definitions of quality - with Harvey and Green' (1993) five definitions of quality as previously reviewed in Chapter 2, as the dominant set- intertwine with each other in different settings of HEI would produce vast implications.

#### *Concept of quality culture*

Although there is no universally accepted meaning of the concept, the culture of an organisation is associated with shared values, beliefs, norms, assumptions, and meanings of individuals participating in the organisation (Tierney, 1988; Barnett, 1992). Harvey and Knight (1996) characterised the governing culture in higher education as collegialism, based on shared decision-making, integrity and commitment to knowledge.

In their review of the concept of quality culture and its boundaries and limitations, and possible linkages to the fundamental processes of teaching and learning, Harvey and Stensaker (2008) referred to culture as the umbrella term for all possible intangible factors in organisational life. In their historical account, the concept of quality culture evolved differently in different languages and different disciplines in Europe, while culture became prominent in the field of management and was associated with the success of Japanese business after World War 2. Cultural factors and how they positively affect organisations and organisational behaviour/performance relate to the Japanese “kaizen” or continuous improvement. In business, industry and higher education, quality and culture are not independent entities; rather, quality stems from a broader cultural perspective.

Quality culture is the enabling environment in which the HEI implements its quality assurance practices. However, as one component of the quality assurance mechanism, quality culture itself also needs appropriate conditions for its development and sustainability.

### *Conditions for sustainable quality culture*

The European Universities Association (2006) identified that quality culture could be developed based on two key elements. The first element is a set of shared values, expectations, beliefs and commitment towards quality. The second element is structural or managerial, with transparent internal processes that enhance quality and coordinate efforts.

In a similar vein, Harvey and Stensaker (2008) claimed that although it is impossible to define quality culture as every HEI is unique - culture is something that an organisation has and also what an organisation is - quality culture could be developed by structural and managerial endeavours stimulating shared values and beliefs. Gordon (2002) emphasised that an effective quality culture involves the articulation of 'trans-institutional perspectives, values, procedures and approaches to practice' (p. 104).

Another condition that nurtures quality culture is commitment, as highlighted by such authors as Yorke (2000) and Gordon (2002). Yorke (2000) stated that a quality culture requires a widespread commitment to quality and quality improvement. This could be achieved with the commitment of leadership and management, through a sustained engagement with quality thinking and quality enactments. Gordon (2002) put that commitment at the highest level (leaders), allowing for quality practices to have a centrality in the institution's agenda, whereas commitment at the level of program and service delivery has an important impact on quality improvement.

The next condition for sustaining quality culture is individual awareness of the need to develop an internal quality culture in the institution (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). This awareness can be increased through improved institutional communication (Yorke, 2000). The final condition is teamwork, which is an important feature of all quality management efforts (Boaden & Dale, 1992).

### *Types of quality culture*

Harvey and Stensaker (2008) used a cultural theory framework, inspired by Douglas (1982), Thompson et al. (1990) and Hood (2000), to categorise quality culture into the following four ideal-types: responsive, reactive, regenerative and reproductive.

First, a responsive quality culture is led by external demands, such as governmental imperatives or an agency requirement for compliance. The responsive mode takes these demands as opportunities to review the institution's practices and explore how to make the policies and compliance requirements beneficial to internal improvement. The responsive mode will have an improvement quality agenda while addressing accountability issues.

Second, a reactive quality culture reacts to external demands, rather than engages with them. The reactive mode tends to be driven by compliance and accountability and works better when there is a reward. The quality culture is likely to be externally managed and imposed, with little or no sense of ownership. This type of quality culture appears to be less engaging than the first type.

Third, a regenerative quality culture is focused on internal improvement while being fully aware of external requirements. This dynamic mode has a coordinated plan for improvement and continuously reconceptualises its practices. The regenerative mode will presume that its continuous improvement agenda represents a form of accountability. It embraces the learning-organisation approach, stimulating collaborative learning opportunities, reflective learning and benchmarking possibilities.

Fourth, a reproductive quality culture reproduces the existing situation, aimed at minimising the impact of external factors. The reproductive mode is focused on what the institution and its units do best or what it is rewarded for. Established norms are preferred, rather than reconceptualised core values or future goals. This quality culture lacks transparency and accommodates taken-for-granted practices. A sense of "a job well done" is maintained in this culture.

As Harvey and Stensaker (2008) argued, these four types of quality culture can be found in any HEI setting and serve as a starting point for specific implications for each institution's quality assurance mechanism, with regard to the interaction between structure and culture.

In conclusion, quality culture is one of the necessary conditions for preparing HEIs to handle external demands and improve internal quality and governance. It could be a tool for reflecting on current practices, identifying possible challenges, and conceptualising future goals (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). It is a demanding task to achieve an effective quality culture as it requires trans-institutional commitment and involvement (Gordon, 2002).

### 3.3.3 Stakeholder engagement

One of the significant trends affecting higher education in many countries is the increased attention to the changing needs of society and the expectations of employers (Conway et al., 1994; Birnbaum, 2000; Vidovich, 2002). This increased awareness is reflected in the enhanced involvement of stakeholders in the decision-making and quality assurance processes in HEIs in many countries.

In the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, as highlighted by Westerheijden et al. (2013), the role of stakeholders is emphasised and clearly stated. Standard 1.1 states that the strategy, policy and procedures for quality assurance should include a role for students and other stakeholders. Standard 1.2 states that periodic review of programs and awards should involve external panel members; and the feedback from employers, labour market representatives and other relevant organisations, as well as students, should be analysed and duly considered. The involvement of stakeholders is not just one assessment criterion in the formal quality assurance processes, such as accreditation, that take place every five or more years. Rather, stakeholders should be involved in the day-to-day continuous internal quality assurance practices of HEIs. So who are the stakeholders?

### *Concept of stakeholder*

Recent quality assurance literature has included a thorough study on the roles of stakeholders in universities in seven European countries. The authors, Westerheijden and his team (2013), borrowed from the management literature the concept of stakeholders as ‘any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation’s objectives’ (Freeman 1984, cited in Westerheijden et al., 2013, p. 73). They also narrowed the scope of stakeholders in higher education to a specific category, as those that have an ability to influence the university’s direction, strategic plan, process or outcomes. These stakeholders can also influence the university’s quality mechanism and internal quality assurance processes.

The stakeholders identified in Westerheijden et al.’s study include funding bodies and the community at large, managers and scientific communities, academic and non-academic professionals, employers, social partners, business partners, and students.

According to another classification by Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2003), there are four major groups of stakeholders: providers (funding bodies and community); users of products or courseware (current and prospective students); users of outputs - graduates (employers); and the employees of the sector (academic staff and administrators). These authors relate the interpretations of quality developed by Harvey and Green (1993) to their own classification. Detailed discussion will follow in the next section.

Shanahan and Gerber (2004), in their study on quality in university student administration in Australian higher education, include other key stakeholders. These are parents and executive officers.

Although there are differences in the categories of stakeholders identified, there is agreement that stakeholders are those who have direct or indirect influence on the development of an HEI. Which key stakeholders will be invited to join the quality

debate depends on the types of education quality processes in each specific higher education context.

*Why should stakeholders be engaged in the quality mission?*

Regarding the role of stakeholders in higher education management, Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2007) stated that any model of management in any organisation could only succeed if it represents the shared values of the stakeholders.

One of the reasons for the increased popularity of stakeholders in the quality research is that different key stakeholders bring different perspectives of quality and quality systems to HEIs (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003). As such, the first group (providers) view quality as value for money (Harvey & Green, 1993); quality is represented in the effective utilisation of funding leading to satisfactory delivery of services and products. The second group (users of products) consider quality as excellence (Harvey & Green, 1993); the products should be of comparatively high standards, as revealed by quality audit reports, promising advantage in career prospects and guiding student choice. For the third group (users of outputs), quality is fitness for purpose (Harvey & Green, 1993); graduates are equipped with the required competencies to handle prospective jobs. The fourth group (employees of the sector) interprets quality as perfection or consistency (Harvey & Green, 1993), as they require a high level of job satisfaction, including remuneration, recognition and the assurance of standards, norms and core ethos.

In line with Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2003), Westerheijden and his team (2013) argued that stakeholders from different positions in the higher education system interpret quality in different ways. A long time before that, a team of recognised scholars in the quality assurance literature, including Westerheijden himself, already expressed their awareness of a possible matrix of different categories of stakeholders and their different purposes and quality dimensions (Brennan et al., 1992). Stakeholders such as students, academic and administrative staff, managers, scientific communities, government/funding bodies, and employers

could bring different perspectives, expectations and requirements to quality work in the HEIs.

Westerheijden et al. (2013) also claimed that by bringing different expectations, perspectives and requirements to bear on quality, these stakeholders may enrich the debate on quality in the institution. If they focus on a single dimension (e.g. employers merely expect immediately usable skills from the graduates), then their contribution to the HEI quality debate would be less enriching. However, one condition for stakeholders to share their perspectives and join in the quality debate is the guaranteed access to HEIs' issues.

Within an HEI, its two prominent stakeholders - managers and academics - need to interact with one another in a dialogue about the nature of knowledge and to be assertive about their needs in the joint development of mutually beneficial institutional processes (Starkey & Madan, 2001).

As each stakeholder holds a specific view on quality and the assurance of quality in higher education, the involvement of all key stakeholders into the implementation of quality assurance processes is likely to ensure a multi-faceted framework.

#### *In what areas of higher education could stakeholders be involved?*

Stakeholders have been involved in many stages of the education process and several activities that contribute to the assurance of higher education quality. For instance, Cornway et al. (1994) emphasised that stakeholders play an important role in the strategic planning processes of an institution and the terms that are consistent with these people would determine the survival of the institution. In order to prepare for the increasingly competitive environment, an institution should have successful strategies to deliver the right products and services. These strategies could be developed based on an understanding of the needs and wants of customers and the market (Conway et al., 1994). Thus, the involvement of stakeholders who have such knowledge and understanding is crucial.

In their case study of seven countries, Westerheijden and his team (2013) reported on a number of activities in which stakeholders are involved. First, the authors noted that key stakeholders are involved in decision-making bodies in HEIs, bringing in their socially-oriented views. Second, the authors commented on the pervasive professional influence of stakeholders on curriculum review and quality assurance. Good practices could be found in almost all case-study countries. For example, stakeholders from the business world have some influence on course content and thesis foci through their involvement in teaching activities, or, professionals from different expertise areas teach part-time and bring immediate relevance to the classroom learning. The influence of external stakeholders is reflected through such traditional channels as guest lectures, excursions and field trips; or through more up-to-date channels such as placements, joint projects or theses in specific fields. The informal contacts between external stakeholders and academic staff provide the latter group with ideas that they can reflect on and use to make necessary decisions and changes in terms of course content or teaching methods.

Regarding education quality work, Westerheijden et al. (2013) also observed that a good number of external professionals are involved in the evaluation of pedagogical processes and internal quality assurance processes at the institutional level. Also, the quality assurance agencies require that external stakeholders are consulted for curriculum review processes. This paves the avenue for HEIs' movement towards market influence.

As key stakeholders of the university, the voices of students as agents for change and improvement in learning and teaching should be recognised. Their perspectives should be counted in the assessment of quality at the institution (Lagrosen et al., 2004; Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013).

#### *What are the barriers to effective engagement of stakeholders?*

As shown in several studies (Brennan et al., 1992; Mitchel et al., 1997; Westerheijden et al., 2013), external stakeholders who lack knowledge relevant to



the specificities of an HEI would have no influence on the practices and decision-making process. In many cases, the HEI's expectations of change are too great, while the consultations with stakeholders can be tokenistic, possibly leading to superficial compliance (Westerheijden et al., 2013). The barrier in this case would be the academic culture of those institutions, which is inward looking and does not appreciate outsiders' viewpoints.

In general, stakeholders have been involved more and more in HEI decision-making bodies and processes. However, there are differences in individual HEI practices in terms of which categories of stakeholders should be involved, at which levels (institution, faculty or program), and in which procedures. The lack of a common framework for stakeholder involvement is a barrier for HEI implementation of education quality work in general, and stakeholder involvement in particular. Another barrier that cannot be overlooked by HEIs, is the complexity of the dual role of students in higher education, as both the product and the customer (Conway et al., 1994).

#### *What are the requirements for effective engagement of stakeholders?*

Within the scope of their case study, Westerheijden and his team (2013) reported two noteworthy requirements for the effective engagement of stakeholders. The first related to the criteria for eligible external stakeholders to get involved in academic activities in HEIs, that is 'External members should be persons of recognizable merit, external to the institutions but with knowledge and experience relevant for it' (p. 75). The second is that the proportions of stakeholders should be specified. For instance, in the Netherlands, it is specified that students and external stakeholders form the majority in program committees; or, in Portugal, the general council of public HEIs must include external stakeholder membership of at least 30%. Other positive changes in these case-study countries include students becoming a prominent group of stakeholders, and increased engagement of non-academic professionals.

One important lesson could be drawn from Westerheijden et al.'s (2013) study. That is, HEIs should engage those stakeholders for whom the enhanced quality of the institution is vital, such as fund providers, staff and students. At the same time, opinions from other stakeholders whose knowledge and experience are relevant to the HEI's specificities should be consulted. This will not only help with the delivery of the right products and services for the market, but, more importantly, it will also help higher education to achieve the mission of influencing the market.

### 3.3.4 Cooperation and collaboration

The link between the leadership dimension and this cooperation and collaboration dimension is reflected in the collaborative development and implementation of the institutional strategic plan. This should clearly define goals in the core areas of research, teaching and learning. As suggested by Shah and Jarzabkowski (2013), in the self-regulating university environment, the institutional strategic plan should be supported by a research plan and a teaching and learning plan that provide guidelines for operationalisation. This should entail plans from academic faculties/schools and administrative units to put the strategic plan into operation on a day-to-day basis. Careful strategic planning has become crucial to strengthening universities' capacity to innovate their research, teaching and learning, to align strategy with amendments to government policies and trends in the external environment, and to respond to unexpected needs.

#### *Cooperation among units*

An institution's performance depends, to a considerable extent, on its internal structure and functioning. That is to say, if the internal structure does not work well, the institution will face challenges in achieving its targeted goals and outcomes. With the responsibility for implementing the goals and strategic plans of the institution, organisational unit performance has an impact on the whole institution's performance. This, according to Yorke (2000), explains the trend of organisational units being increasingly required to demonstrate how their activities support institutional plans and policies. Nevertheless, due to the varied

nature of HEIs in terms of how loosely coupled their internal units are, or how autonomous these units are operating, the relationship between whole institutional functioning and organisational unit effectiveness is not explicit (Yorke 2000).

As Sporn (2007) pointed out in her analysis of the new direction of higher education management, if core contributions of all academic and administrative units in a university are clearly defined, in the form of contracts between the leadership and basic units, the institutional performance will be more efficient and effective. For academic units, the focus will be on teaching and research. For administrative units, the focus will be on functional areas such as information technology (IT), libraries, or marketing. Such procedures as management by objectives through contracts, goal setting and strategic planning as a basis for resource allocation and output control, are being applied in higher education.

Within the context above, as described by Sporn (2007), the cooperation between basic university units is very important, as an individual unit is not likely to implement its operations and achieve set goals if it is not connected to, or in collaboration with, other units. Between academic units, collaboration includes shared teaching and learning initiatives and joint research projects. Between academic and administrative units, cooperation includes support for the implementation of policy and procedures. Rhoades (1998) introduced the term 'professional managers' when describing the trend of professionalisation of higher education. Similarly, Sporn (2007) observed the development of professional support in many institutions. Examples include teaching centres designed to assist academic faculties to improve their course development and teaching methodologies, or multi-media officers who advise faculty staff about applying technology transfer to their teaching or translating their research into marketable products. These professional support activities represent and promote the cooperation and collaboration between university units.

As globalisation brings increased competitiveness to the higher education sector, universities are moving towards more market-oriented and entrepreneurial models. With governance being in the hands of the top leadership and

administration being professionally managed, the power balance between academic faculties and administration can only be achieved when both groups are accountable, based on mutually agreed indicators and measures (Sporn, 2007; Amey et al., 2007). This condition is an important dimension of any quality assurance mechanism in higher education institutions.

#### *Enablers for and barriers to cooperation among organisational units*

Rather than being a group of 'loosely coupled' units (Weick, 1976), or 'an assembly of multiple units' (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2004), a university can choose to become a 'network organization' (Bowden & Marton, 1998). If it chooses the latter, creating a better networked and decentralised governance structure rather than a hierarchical organisation, many links between units are created. These connections require active communication and collaboration among people who undertake the same task (Bowden & Marton, 1998).

Other elements that promote cooperation among units in a university include shared values and shared awareness of the common goals, and trust among members. These elements contribute to an enabling environment, allowing people to work together in teams, rather than individually. When there is cooperation among the units in a university, 'collective consciousness' can be created (Bowden & Marton, 1998; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2004). - it is the status quo when different people are conscious of the same phenomenon and from a variety of perspectives.

According to Kezar (2005), some of the barriers to cooperation in institutions include hierarchies and boundaries between administrative units. Another hindrance, as pointed out by Boyle and Bowden (1997), is the lack of a strong supporting foundation, comprising enabling policies, structures, resources and support groups. When institutional policies are not transparent and well translated into user-friendly templates and procedures, and when human, time and financial resources are limited, cooperation among organisational units is likely to be impeded.

When quality assurance in HEIs is written into official documents such as strategic plans, but the cooperation among institutional units (especially between academic faculties and administrative units) is not evident, the achievement of institutional goals and outcomes, including quality enhancement or assurance, might be a challenge.

### *Collaborative learning*

Cooperation among organisational units contributes to the improved performance of the whole institution. Likewise, academic collaboration across the university network enhances the quality of teaching, learning and research. Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2002) claimed that collaboration is the key requirement for improvement of educational delivery.

Another study by Kezar (2005), among a very limited number of studies on collaboration at universities, highlights that if institutions redesign their organisational contexts to accommodate collaboration, they might be more responsive to external pressures. The major elements of Kezar's model of a collaborative university are:

*Mission statements* include the concept of collaboration, which is integrated into all the institution's work. It is reinforced through communication, and in public speeches by leaders and managers referring to the mission and collaborative work.

*Networks* provide a vehicle for ideas to flow and to gain momentum and energy to sustain the collaboration. Networks overcome resistance to new structures or processes on campus and inspire more people to join in the collaborative work. Networks have to be cultivated before attempts are made to conduct collaborative work. Typical activities of network building include orientation for a new faculty, a leadership series for faculty and staff, social events and academic symposia.

*Integrating structures* help redesign the organisational context for sustained collaboration, when the idea (mission) and the people (network) are in place. The exemplary structure requires a central unit in charge of fostering collaboration, cross-campus high profile institutes and centres, and new accounting, computer and budgetary systems.

*Rewards and incentives* help promote collaboration, they help a new faculty to adopt an alternative approach to faculty work (i.e. collaborative work).

*Sense of priority from the people in senior positions.* Collaboration is a signalled priority when it is discussed by senior administrators, connected to the strategic objectives of the institution, written in strategic plans, accreditation reports and board correspondence, and is modelled by senior executives.

*External groups* such as sponsors, accrediting agencies, national coordinating boards, and stakeholders from business and industries create pressures for collaboration. The pressure from accreditors is the major source of support for a faculty that believes in collaboration; and motivates administrators, as poor accreditation affects the institution's reputation. The pressure from business and industry, as collaboration is needed in the workplace, has a powerful influence on certain disciplines, leading to transformed curricula.

*Learning* and conversations among colleagues, and informal information sharing about the benefits of collaboration, gradually confirm the message that collaboration enhances faculty work. A mechanism is needed to allow people to interact, such as a staff dining area or staff retreats.

These features, identified by Kezar in 2005, are still applicable to many HEIs, especially in developing countries. Sustained collaboration in the institution not only strengthens teaching, learning and research efforts, but will also pay off as better public recognition. Kezar's model aligns with Dill's (1999) concept of the university as a learning organisation, discussed in Chapter 2.

### 3.3.5 Internal processes

In the operationalisation of the institutional strategic plan, the achievement of strategic goals requires a strong and reliable operational system. This system is dedicated to managing risk and assuring and improving quality across all areas of the university (Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013). It supports leadership and management through a robust system of internal processes, in the form of policies and procedures, and indicators and measures that help with regular performance evaluation in key areas. These processes, according to Shah and Jarzabkowski (2013), reflect higher education threshold standards and risk indicators. When these processes are in place, the institution can set and achieve its own goals, while being compliant with those higher education threshold standards.

Whether the institution is focused on external quality assurance compliance or internal quality improvement, it needs to develop professional administration and education support structures, to create new policies and procedures, and systems for managing data and information on educational performance and quality (Stensaker 2003; Westerheijden, Hulpiau & Waetens, 2007). While compliance-led quality assurance aims at getting policies and procedures right, improvement-led quality assurance aims at ensuring these are effective and implemented with consistency.

Harvey (2002a) argued that when the institution focuses on continuous improvement and adopts process-driven quality assurance, the internal processes will generate their own performance indicators. Such indicators will be owned by the institution and will measure real improvements. However, when processes become more elaborate, place more demands on staff and become routinised, they lose their improvement potential (Harvey, 2002b). This might be due to the fact that administrative loads (e.g. the time and effort needed for form filling and evidence recording for accountability) may impinge on the time required for academic tasks or collaboration to improve teaching, learning and research quality.

Discussion of internal processes or policies and procedures (P&P) has gained popularity in the business management literature, with researchers arguing about the importance of these matters in the operationalisation of HEIs. However, there is very limited literature on such aspects as how institutions develop their internal processes; what enables or hinders the effectiveness of the internal processes; whether or not there are commonly applied internal processes; and whether or not HEIs have included internal processes in their quality assurance mechanisms.

### 3.3.6 Summary of the quality assurance mechanism dimensions

The above sections reviewed the key contributors to the effective operationalisation of HEIs. These factors (leadership and management, quality culture, stakeholder engagement, cooperation and collaboration, and internal processes) can be viewed as the key dimensions of the quality assurance mechanism required for any HEI. As such, educational quality can be assured and enhanced when:

- Leaders and managers make sure that quality assurance is written into official documents, such as the institutional mission and strategic plan; signal quality assurance as a priority in the institution's development agenda; and sustain their engagement in, and commitment to, quality improvement by showcasing their quality thinking and quality enactments.
- A culture of continuous quality improvement is created and nurtured in the institution, by the commitment of leaders; the increased awareness of all staff members of the need to practice quality assurance; and the enabling support structures and processes.
- Key stakeholders, especially those for whom the educational quality of the institution really matters (funding agencies, staff and students), and those who have relevant expertise and experience, are actively engaged in the decision-making process, including such educational and pedagogical aspects as curriculum renovation, new degree program development, partnerships and internships.



- The HEI promotes cooperation and collaboration and advocates transformative learning; and there is favourable cooperation and collaboration among organisational units, in the operationalisation of institutional functions and in the pursuit and improvement of teaching, learning and research endeavours.
- There are enabling internal processes in place, accompanied by performance indicators for measuring real improvements.

The interaction between and among these dimensions varies according to the specific context of an institution. However, in total, they constitute a comprehensive mechanism for quality assurance in HEIs.

The next section provides an analysis of the organisational change management literature, which contains a number of issues relevant to the sustaining of quality assurance initiatives. This was conducted in order to address the last research question of the study.

### **3.4 Managing quality assurance as organisational change**

As a university is a type of organisation (Sporn, 2007; Manning, 2013) and the implementation of quality assurance initiatives represents an important change to be addressed by all HEIs sooner or later, the study of quality assurance in higher education should not be isolated from the study of organisational management in general, and the study of change management in particular.

So far, the theories reviewed have focused on quality assurance in higher education and few studies have attempted to view quality assurance implementation through the lens of organisational management and change management theories. In this section, I will present a brief review of the literature on organisational management and change management, which is closely related and applicable to the management of quality assurance initiatives.

### 3.4.1 Three levels of espousal, enactment and experience

A brief review of the literature on organisational management and related issues indicated that the three levels of espousal, enactment and experience have been referred to or applied as a theoretical lens for various studies on organisational policies, curriculum assessment, students' learning assessment, and quality assurance (see, for example, Genus, 1998; Truss, 2001; Kezar, 2000, 2001b; Bath et al., 2004; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Mirvis, 1996; Bouwen, 2001; Barrie, 2005; Grieses, 2010; Rasori, 2012; Newton, 2006).

The application of these three levels originated from the theory of action, developed by Argyris and Schon (1978) and supported by Weick (1979). Accordingly, examining an organisation's theory of action involves the analysis of the gap between the 'espoused theory' and the 'theory in use' or the enacted theory. As these authors asserted, people or organisations tend to 'define situations so as to have control over their environment, to maximise their likelihood of winning ... and to make their actions all seem rational and level-headed' (Argyris & Schon, 1974, cited in Mirvis, 1996, p. 20). However, in reality, many times the espoused values that an organisation desires might not be reflected in the observed behaviour (Schein, 2010), or there is a difference between the planned outcomes of the espoused policies and those that emerge through implementation (Newton, 2006). Change agents in different educational aspects may share the purpose of achieving alignment between what is espoused, what is enacted, and what people experience and learn or change (Barrie, 2005).

Organisational changes often relate to the newly espoused policies and how these policies are enacted and experienced. Schneider and Barbera (2014) stated that espoused policies are explicit and stable, translated into formal procedures applicable across situations, and often communicated in written documents, training courses or formal meetings; while enacted practices, or enforced policies, are dynamic and situation-driven, and closely relate to people's experiences.

Commenting on the conditions necessary for successful change implementation, Campbell, Coldicott and Kinsella (1994) claimed:

In our view, complex change is surely more implemented when espousal of new ideas is followed by the enactment of new behaviours, within the leadership, in the relationship between the leadership and the rest of staff, and in the cultural context in which they all operate, so that the whole organization begins to experience itself as behaving differently and making new meaning from their interactions with each other and the external environment. (p. 55)

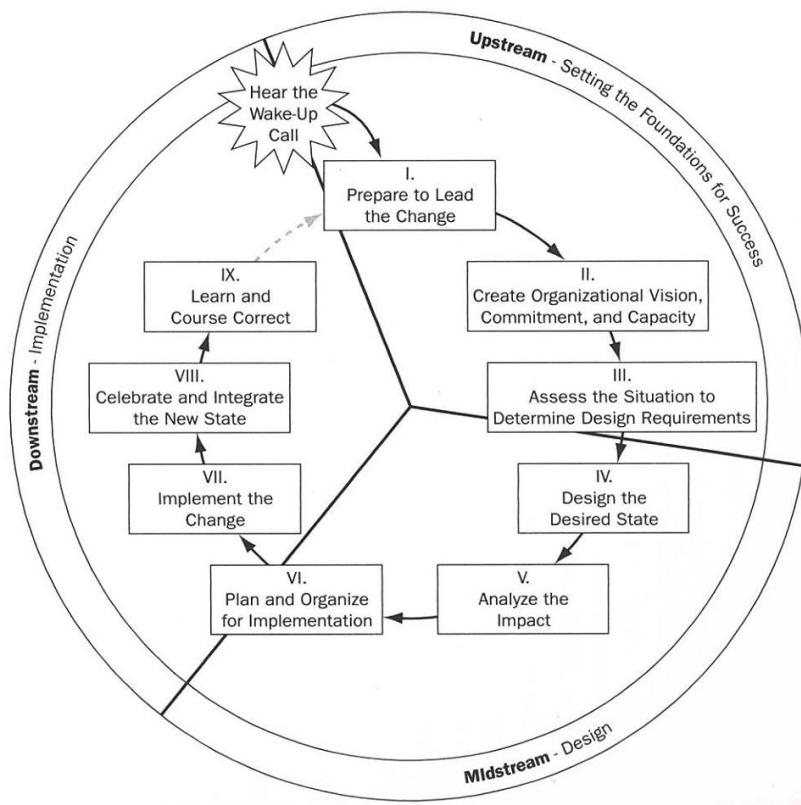
As Van de Ven and Poole (2005) argued, organisational change has been a prevailing topic in organisational studies. However, it should be noted again that there is limited empirical research into this espousal-enactment-experience frame specific to the examination of quality assurance as organisational change.

#### 3.4.2 Managing and sustaining change

As the focus of the current research is investigating how quality assurance has been adopted and implemented in a specific context, with regards to its external and internal influencing factors, a number of relevant issues were distilled from the extant literature on organisational change management. These are presented below.

##### 3.4.2.1 *Change management models*

A good variety of models for change management have been developed, and they commonly consist of several specific steps. Crosby (1984) proposed the basic formula of “Determination-Education-Implementation” for an organisation to change its profile out of problem. Two decades later, the literature had evolved, creating more complex models. Anderson and Anderson (2001), in their research on organisational development, created a change process model consisting of nine steps under three broader phases, as shown in the figure below:



**Figure 3: The change process model as a full stream process**

*Source: Anderson & Anderson, 2001, p. 172*

Kotter and Cohen (2002) studied over 100 organisations that had successfully implemented large-scale change. They synthesised important elements of these success stories into eight stages:

1. *Increase urgency*: creating a sense of urgency for people to start the change
2. *Build the guiding team*: pulling together a team with the needed skills, credibility, connection and power to drive the change effort
3. *Get the vision right*: creating a compelling vision and strategies
4. *Communicate for buy-in*: communicating the vision and direction of change
5. *Empower action*: removing barriers, or empowering people to move ahead
6. *Create short-term wins*: producing visible symbols of success through short-term victories, and building momentum
7. *Don't let up*: sticking with the process and refusing to quit when things get tough
8. *Make change stick*: shaping a new culture to support the emerging innovative way

These latter two well-recognised change process models share the essence of other models (see, for example McLennan, 1989; Nadler, 1998; Light, 2005; Leppitt, 2006) and the proposed steps can either be followed in sequence or adapted to specific settings. In the real world, the stages might overlap and be multi-dimensional, rather than linear (Palmer, Dunford & Akin, 2009). As change itself is a dynamic process, change agents may cycle back to earlier stages when needed (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

#### *3.4.2.2 Barriers to change*

Organisational change has proved to be instrumental, to varying extents, to the development of an organisation. However, as Graetz et al. (2011) claimed, ‘almost all change management attempts are met with some type of barrier or resistance’ (p. 229). These authors presented their thorough analysis of several aspects of resistance to change: causes, forms, and how to deal with such undesirable practices. Graetz and her colleagues raised worthwhile concerns. That said, change agents should hold a balanced perspective that acceptance or commitment to change and rejection of, or resistance to change are ‘polar extremes of the single issue best described as responses to change’ (p. 229), and that resistance to change can serve positive purposes as well.

In the change management process, as the available literature indicates, change agents need to address other major issues, such as conflicts between ‘winners and losers - those who benefit from the new direction and who do not’ (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 396), the need to revise and realign the existing structural patterns to support change (Palmer, Dunford & Akin, 2009; Bolman & Deal, 2008), or the impact of situational factors and context (Newton, 1999).

Change management is a complex and multi-dimensional undertaking (Graetz et al. 2011). Successful change management, therefore, requires a comprehensive understanding of an organisation’s practices and underlying organisational theories, as well as the supporting structures and driving values and forces that impact on these practices.

#### *3.4.2.3 Supporting and sustaining change*

As implementing quality assurance initiatives is a new phenomenon in Vietnam (discussed further in Chapter 5), how to support and sustain this important change is a critical concern for all change agents involved.

One common feature of the reviewed change management process models is that change implementation is not a one-off process, but a continuous process. Making change “stick” is equally important (Senge et al., 1999; Palmer, Dunford & Akin, 2009). To facilitate sustainable change, a new culture must be created, embedding change in routine organisational practices. In this respect, researchers highlight the importance of the critical role of change leadership, communication and training, realignment of roles and systems, resolution of conflicts and resistance, and short-term achievement celebrations (Graetz et al., 2011; Palmer et al., 2009; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Anderson & Anderson, 2001).

The above review of organisational change management issues adds valuable perspectives to strengthen the theoretical basis for the current research. Further discussion based on these theories and models is presented in Chapters 6, 7, and 8.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, the theoretical framework of the study has been presented. It was conceptualised based on the existing quality assurance models and frameworks, with reference to organisational theories in higher education and the organisational theories reframed for change management. The factors that drive external quality assurance and internal quality improvement at the institutional level - the dimensions of this theoretical framework - have been further analysed, providing a needed theoretical foundation for the study. The theoretical framework guided data collection and analysis. Data was interpreted based on the outlined elements, taking into account the impact of different institutional and contextual or cultural factors.

Additionally, as the implementation of quality assurance proves to be an important institutional change, a number of relevant issues from the literature on organisational change management have been also briefly reviewed in order to shed light on the interpretation of the findings.

The next chapter presents the structural design of the study - the adopted research paradigm, methodology and methods.

## CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH PARADIGM, METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

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### Introduction

This chapter presents the methodological considerations for the study. The research paradigm and the methodology are presented, as well as how they work together to form the research study. This is followed by a discussion of the methods that match the methodology and the expected research outcomes, in terms of data types, sources and sampling; data collection tools and procedures; and data analysis modes. Discussions relating to issues of validity and reliability are intertwined throughout the sections on methodology and methods. A section on ethical considerations is also provided in this chapter.

### 4.1 Research paradigm and methodology

#### 4.1.1 Research paradigm

As Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) highlighted, the choice of paradigm is the first step in the research process and the basis for subsequent choices of methodology, methods and research design (see also Lincoln & Guba, 2005; Lather, 2006). This study is designed under the overarching research paradigm of interpretivism.

The interpretivism paradigm is suitable for social science research as it facilitates the investigation and understanding of ‘the world of human experience’ (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 1994, p. 36). From the epistemological perspective, this paradigm represents the quest for subjective knowledge when the ‘knower and respondent co-create understandings’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 13), or the subjective meanings that individuals develop based on their experiences (Creswell 2007). As these meanings are varied and multiple, requiring the researcher to look for the complexity of views, the researcher tends to rely ‘as much as possible on the [research] participants’ views of the situation’ being studied (Creswell, 2007, p. 20). Researchers also recognise that their own



background and experiences shape their interpretation of what others perceive (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006; Creswell, 2007). In this regard, according to Raddon (2010), the researcher acts as a detective. Another epistemological assumption is that researchers need to get close to the research participants by conducting research in the “field” where participants live and work, thus minimising the distance and ‘objective separateness’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1988, p. 94) between themselves and the research participants.

The ontological perspective of interpretivism is that ‘reality is socially constructed’ (Mertens, 2005, p. 12) and that people are human beings (i.e., the truth is out there but complex) (Raddon 2010). As discussed in more detail by Creswell (2007), the individuals being studied embrace multiple realities, so when studying individuals, the researchers actually intend to report on these different realities. Multiple quotes based on the words of different individuals are evidence of multiple realities and reflect different perspectives from individuals. In this regard, interpretivism assumes a relativist ontology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Interpretivists do not generally start with a theory. Instead, they generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning throughout the research process. The interpretivist researcher is likely to employ qualitative data collection methods and analysis or a mixed methods design (Cohen et al., 1994; Creswell, 2003, 2007; Silverman, 2004; Raddon, 2010; Yin, 2011).

My choice of the interpretivism paradigm was made while taking into account both the advantages and disadvantages of this paradigm. Regarding advantages, as Raddon (2010) argued, this paradigm facilitates the understanding of how and why things happen, the interpretation of social processes, as well as the motivations and values of social actors, structures and patterns. It allows for complexity and contextual factors. The current research was designed to investigate how Vietnamese public universities are implementing quality assurance, whether the universities under study adopt the same or different quality

assurance mechanisms, and why there are differences in their actual implementation. Also, the roles of the contextual factors affecting quality assurance practices were analysed, and patterns were conceptualised into a framework for reference. Thus, the current research fits nicely with this paradigm.

Since the research is conducted under the overarching paradigm of interpretivism, the researcher is aware of the limitations of this paradigm. As pointed out by Raddon (2010), data collection can be time consuming and data analysis can be challenging and complex. There is a risk that clear patterns may not emerge. There are other limitations, such as: limited perspectives may be provided, or language may be misconstrued. The researcher, therefore, developed a framework for investigation that set boundaries and categories of information/data to be collected and analysed. This framework was presented in the preceding chapter. The sections that follow explain in more detail how the drawbacks of interpretivism were addressed.

#### 4.1.2 Methodology: case study

##### *4.1.2.1 Research questions revisited*

The review of quality assurance literature and the study of the Vietnamese public university context (discussed in Chapter 5) helped the researcher to identify the research gap. This gap relates to how Vietnamese public universities are implementing their quality assurance in terms of creating harmony between their internal quality assurance and external quality assurance, and how they manage/sustain quality assurance initiatives. To address this research gap, the research questions were constructed and revised several times, from the stage of candidature proposal to data collection in the field. As Creswell (2007) argued, the research questions may change in the middle of the study to reflect better the types of questions needed to understand the research problem.

The final research questions are:

- 1) How are the case study universities conducting their quality assurance?
  - 1.1 What are the key components of their quality assurance frameworks?
  - 1.2 What are the possible explanations for the discrepancies among the universities' quality assurance practices?
- 2) What are the possible factors that impact on the quality assurance implementation at the case universities?
  - 2.1 What are the possible factors that facilitate quality assurance implementation at the case universities?
  - 2.2 What are the possible factors that hinder quality assurance implementation at the case universities?
- 3) What are the essential conditions for a sustainable quality assurance mechanism, from the perspectives of the interviewed leaders?

#### *4.1.2.2 Case study selection*

The case study methodology is purposefully selected based on the following reasons. First, as claimed by Yin (2009) in his well recognised case study research book series, case studies are the preferred method when a researcher can match the following three conditions: 1) “how” and “why” questions are being posed; 2) the researcher has little or no control over actual events; and 3) the focus of the study is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context. In addition, the case study method has been used in education research, allowing the researcher to ‘retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events’, including small group behaviour, organisational and managerial processes, and institutional performance (Yin, 2009, p. 4). The current research satisfied these three conditions and, therefore, the case study method was considered the appropriate choice.

Second, the research aimed at investigating the current situation of quality assurance in higher education in Vietnam through an exemplary case - one of the flagship national university - where quality assurance has been embedded in strategic planning and evidence can be traced. The anticipated outcomes included a viable quality assurance model, the components of which were demonstrated in the quality assurance implementation at the universities under study; and the possible implications drawn from the case for other public universities in Vietnam, as well as in other developing countries. In developing countries, quality assurance in higher education is still in the initial stage, and the implementation of a quality assurance mechanism remains under the influence of similar contextual factors.

Third, this methodology is appropriate for the scope and budget of my research project. As the field work of the research was conducted in Vietnam, under strict time and budget constraints, while the research project is based in Australia, the choice of case study enabled the researcher to manage a small-scale project. It also allowed for the researcher to conceptualise valuable findings from one case, to a certain level of generalisation applicable to other public universities with similar operational contexts (see, for example, Bassey, 1999; Creswell, 2009, 2012).

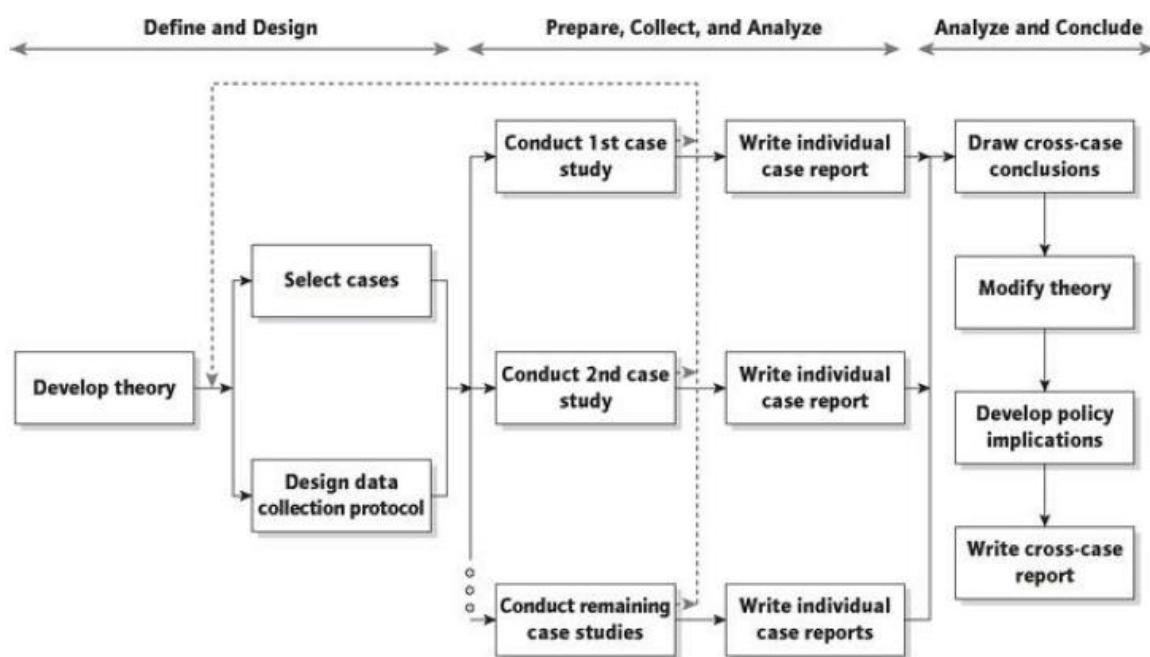
#### *4.1.2.3 Case study design: some theoretical considerations*

The selected case design uses ‘multiple-case’ as Yin (2009) terms it, or an ‘interpretative’ case as classified by Merriam (2009), or ‘collective case studies’ as identified by Stake (1994). Specifically, Yin’s (2009) multiple-case design is used when the study contains more than a single case. Merriam’s (2009) interpretative case inductively develops conceptual categories in order to examine initial assumptions. Stake’s (1994) collective case studies refer to groups of individual studies undertaken to achieve a fuller picture.

When adopting the multiple-case design, the researcher is aware of the *replication* logic. Yin (2009) claims that the replication logic underlying the use of multiple-

case studies is similar to that used in multiple experiments. That is, ‘upon uncovering a significant finding from a single experiment, an ensuing and pressing priority would be to replicate this finding by conducting a second, third, and even more experiments’ (Yin, 2009, p. 52). Yin suggests that each case should be carefully selected so that the results predicted are either similar (*literal replication*) or contrasting but for anticipatable reasons (*theoretical replication*). That said, the current research design matches the multiple-case design, since it was designed to investigate how quality assurance is being conducted at Vietnamese public universities. The predicted results could be similar across the case universities, for example, in a commonly adopted quality assurance framework, or they could be different in terms of implementation due to the varied organisational styles and contextual factors.

Yin (2009) also identified an important step in the replication procedures - the development of a robust theoretical framework. This framework specifies the conditions under which a phenomenon is likely to be found (a literal replication) as well as the conditions when it is not likely to be found (a theoretical replication). The theoretical framework later becomes the vehicle for generalising for new cases, as depicted in the diagram below.



**Figure 4: The case study method**

Source: Yin, 2009, p. 73, adopted from COSMOS Corporation

As mentioned earlier in Section 4.2.1, the researcher developed a theoretical framework for investigation that sets boundaries for the data collection and analysis. This framework represents the original theoretical propositions, and was used as a frame of reference during the replication procedure.

The selection of the multiple-case design is based on the argument that this has distinct advantages over single case designs. According to Herriott and Firestone (1983), the evidence from multiple cases is often considered more convincing and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more powerful. Similarly, Yin (2009) claimed that the analytic conclusions from multiple cases are more compelling than those coming from a single case.

#### *4.1.2.4 Rationale for the selection of the case*

A national institution in Hanoi was selected for this study. The institution is one of the two national flagship universities of Vietnam, being appointed by the MoET to be one of the three centres monitoring quality assurance practices and

accreditation of public universities in the North of Vietnam (discussed in more detail in Chapter 5). Therefore, it is assumed that this institution is also a flagship in quality assurance implementation and has experiences and lessons worth sharing.

The institution has six member universities, or to use the western term, “affiliated colleges”, which range from the prestigious, with large campuses, student intake and academic bodies, to newly established, smaller colleges. The main disciplines covered are: social sciences and humanities, natural sciences, economics and business, engineering and technology, languages and international studies, and education. The quality assurance approaches and practices adopted by these universities also differ, with some seemingly having more experience with regional and national accreditation than others. The diversity in these institutions’ approaches to quality assurance and their internal quality assurance practices was worth studying. In short, it was anticipated that a comparative analysis of the target universities, in light of the relevant literature, would help draw out valuable lessons for Vietnamese public universities.

#### *4.1.2.5 Limitations of case study and the issues of reliability and validity*

Case studies have certain advantages and strengths that make them attractive to educators and researchers. Researchers, however, need to address the limitations of this methodology, and by doing so, to address the issues of reliability and validity.

Yin (2009) pointed out two common concerns about case study research. The first is the lack of accuracy when researchers do not follow systematic procedures and allow biased views to influence the directions of the findings and the conclusions. This concern was shared by Shaughnessy et al. (2003, cited in Cohen et al., 2007) who claimed that case studies may be impressionistic and involve self-reporting by the participants, or the observer may be biased. Similarly, Nisbet and Watt

(1984) stated that case studies may be selective, biased, personal and subjective, because they are not likely to be accessible for cross-checking.

The second concern, according to Yin (2009), is that case studies are generalisable to theoretical propositions and not to broader communities. In this regard, a case study does not represent a sample, and when doing case study research, the goal is to ‘expand and generalise theories’, rather than ‘enumerate frequencies’ (Yin, 2009, p.13). Nisbet and Watt (1984) also recognised this weakness, as the results from case studies can be generalisable only to those readers or researchers who see their application. This weakness, however, can be balanced by the idea that new interpretations are explicitly possible and that others may take up the ideas to test or adapt to their own situation (Lincoln & Guba, 1990).

Stake (2011) identified an ethical issue that can be another concern for both researchers and the researched in case studies. As the case study researcher shares an intense interest in personal views and contexts, those participants whose lives and expressions are depicted in the case risk exposure, embarrassment or, even worse, loss of their position, employment or self-esteem.

To increase the likelihood of rigor and reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation or biased influences, the researcher in this study employed various systematic procedures and disciplined practices for data collection and data analysis. These procedures and practices will be discussed in more details in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

Regarding the second common concern over the generalisability of case studies, the researcher sought to improve this by investing efforts in doing a ‘good case study’ (Yin, 2009, p. 14), allowing the sharing of significant lessons and implications for similar cases. The researcher also sought to fulfil major conceptual responsibilities, as recommended by Stake (2011), including seeking



patterns of data to develop the issues, selecting alternative interpretations to pursue, and developing generalisations about the case.

As for the third concern about ethical issues, the researcher went through a strictly reviewed ethics process before conducting the research project. The researcher carefully planned the data collection, data analysis and presentation, so as to minimise the inherent risk to participants.

## **4.2 Research methods**

Under the overarching interpretivism paradigm, within the multiple-case design, the research was conducted using qualitative methods for data collection and data analysis. Qualitative methods included complementary applications of document analysis and in-depth semi-structured interviews with leaders and middle managers. These interviews were based on two sets of interview questions for two levels - ministerial and institutional. The questions were framed based on the set of research questions. Emphasis was placed on the institutional level.

The researcher followed the data collection procedures recommended by Miles and Huberman (1984, 1994), and Creswell (2009). The researcher firstly identified the purposefully selected sites and individuals for the proposed study, taking into account the four aspects of setting, actors, events and process. Then the types of data to be collected were indicated.

Throughout the study, multiple-case design was applied in the empirical investigation of: 1) the system level quality assurance in higher education in Vietnam; 2) the quality assurance mechanism in place, and internal quality assurance practices of the case universities, and how these affect their responsiveness to system level quality assurance, and the implications for harmonious external-internal quality assurance and how to sustain the quality assurance initiative.

The first empirical study investigated the current system level quality assurance in higher education in Vietnam. It involved the analysis of qualitative data gained from document analysis and interviews at the national level. Document analysis was conducted on the quality assurance framework(s) being implemented, policy documentation, proclamations, instruction manuals and published reports, rules and regulations for higher education institutions in Vietnam. This was designed to provide some background. Interviews with key quality assurance officers from MoET and the institution's centre for quality assurance covered such issues as: the rationale and process for developing/adopting the quality assurance policy and measures, and recent changes; factors that enhance or hinder the implementation of quality assurance as a national policy; feedback from universities regarding the implementation of quality assurance as a national policy; and the proposed changes to allow the institutions to better respond to external quality assurance while sustaining internal quality assurance and improve performance.

The second empirical study dealt with the six case universities within the national institution. Again, qualitative data were gathered and analysed from different sources. Documents on internal structure and processes, organisational management mechanisms, internal quality assurance systems, were analysed. Added to this, interviews with university presidents, deans, department heads and senior quality assurance staff were conducted. The interview questions investigated topics such as the operation of institutional quality assurance mechanisms; whether the culture of continuous improvement is evident; whether the current internal processes are effective; whether the collaboration and coordination among university units support the improvement of teaching, learning and research; and to what extent the key stakeholders have been involved in the quality assurance decision-making and implementation. The main issues addressed in the interviews included the requirements for the institution to sustain the quality assurance initiative and make embed quality assurance into institutional life.

Finally, the qualitative data from the interviews with quality assurance experts in the MoET and managerial staff were analysed to examine the implications of a viable quality assurance mechanism that could address both accountability and continuous improvement in public universities.

The sub-sections that follow elaborate on the selected research methods and relevant issues.

#### 4.2.1 Data collection methods and procedures

##### *4.2.1.1 Data collection methods*

Although observation, interview and document review are common methods of data collection in case study research (Stake 1995), the following methods were selected for my study: interview and document review. This selection was made based on the scope and the overall aims of the study. The researcher intended to investigate how quality assurance practices were being implemented in the case study universities. The quality assurance framework of investigation covers broad areas and it would require lengthy periods of observation to gather a comprehensive picture. This was not within the scope of this research in terms of time constraints. Therefore, the researcher opted for interviews through which to gather primary data on the actual implementation, and document reviews to gain supplementary data on the contexts.

Specifically, semi-structured in-depth interview techniques were applied. This approach is generally considered to be the most important type of interview in case study research, producing the richest single source of data if conducted well (Gillham, 2010). Similarly, Seidman (2006) also highlighted the fact that the in-depth interview is the primary or even singular method of investigation and, when conducted with skill, is the most appropriate method for some research situations.

In this regard, the researcher could approach the experience of the people in a contemporary educational organisation by examining the institutional documents and through the review of existing literature. More importantly, the researcher could understand the meaning that the people involved in this study make of their experience, through in-depth interviews. As Seidman (2006) stated, for such an investigation goal, ‘interviewing provides a necessary, if not always completely sufficient, avenue of inquiry’ (p. 11).

#### *4.2.1.2 Interviews: some theoretical considerations*

By definition, an interview is an *inter-view*, an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest (Kvale, 1996, cited in Cohen et al., 2007). Interviews enable both the interviewer and the interviewee to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, from their own perspectives (Berry, 1999). As the interviewer and interviewee construct knowledge together, the interview is neither totally subjective or objective; it is, as Laing (1967, cited in Cohen et al., 2007) claimed, inter-subjective. Unlike a naturally occurring conversation, an interview has a specific purpose, is question-based, often follows a pre-established protocol that controls the order of the interview while at the same time allowing for spontaneity, requires explicit and detailed responses, and the interviewer may express ignorance (Creswell, 2007; Cohen et al., 2007).

Regarding the limitations of this method, a researcher should be aware that interviews, like many other methods, take a great deal of time and sometimes money. Interviews are also open to interviewer bias, and the issues of inconvenience, fatigue, and exposure experienced by some respondents are difficult to avoid (Seidman, 2006; Cohen et al., 2007; Miles et al., 2014).

These possible interview method drawbacks can be addressed if the researcher has skills and abides by the “rules of the game”. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) put it, the human instrument (the interviewer) can be smart, flexible and adaptable and respond to situations with skill, tact and understanding, rather than influence

the data collection process with their bias. Although the interview can be a mutually active meaning-making venture (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004), based mainly on the participant's construction and reflection, the interviewer should be aware that the meaning could be, to some extent, a function of the participant's interaction with the interviewer (Seidman, 2006). Therefore, interviewer skills are needed in order to minimise the distortion that can occur because of their role.

According to Seidman (2006), a researcher can improve the validity of the study, responding to the question "are the comments of the participant valid?", by interviewing a number of participants. In doing so, the researcher can connect their experiences, and cross-check their comments on the same situation or issue.

In addition, in terms of validity, the interviewer should skilfully structure the interview with a set of ready-designed questions, with spontaneous probing and scaffolding questions. The interviewer should also apply specific tactics, such as keeping quiet, not interrupting, and not trying to redirect the participant's flow of thoughts. This allows the participant to make sense to themselves and to the interviewer (Creswell, 2007; Seidman, 2006). Ultimately, the goal of the study is to understand how the participants, at the time of their interview, understand and create meaning of their experience, through language.

In short, the interview is a powerful implement, used to gain insights into educational issues through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives reflect those issues (Seidman, 2006; Cohen et al., 2007).

#### *4.2.1.3 Data collection procedures*

The data collection was conducted using an approved procedure (Ethics clearance reference number HRE13-172). A case study database, as recommended by Yin (2009), was set up so that the researcher could store all the data files and related paperwork. First, archival data were collected, then interview data. The primary data was sourced via the semi-structured interviews with senior managers and quality assurance officials, while a document review helped provide the context.

The procedures that the researcher set up for the interview data collection followed the stages developed by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) for interview investigation, based on the work of Kvale (1996, cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). These stages were: thematising, designing, interviewing, transcribing, and verifying.

First, the review of relevant literature and the study of the current contexts of the case study universities helped the researcher form the key themes for investigation. Then, two sets of interview questions were developed, based on the thesis research questions, for two target groups - national policy-makers and institutional policy-makers and implementers. The semi-structured interview format enabled open-ended questioning around the themes of the research. Together with these, an interview protocol was set up, as suggested by Creswell (2009), as a guideline for the interviews. The next step was to conduct pilot interviews, with revisions subsequently made in order to refine the questions. After the interview schedule had been planned and booked, the interviews were conducted. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were then sent to the interviewees for their review and verification.

During the data collection process, the researcher allowed for flexibility. After the first two interviews, I reviewed the questions and modified them as needed. As the process progressed, I also added some scaffolding questions, particularly if any respondents raised a new aspect of quality assurance practice in their own university context. Specifically, two scaffolding questions were added to explore how collaborative research and collaborative learning were promoted at the case universities. To address the issue of missing data in the earlier interviews, I sent the extra questions to the previous interviewees via email, requesting their answers. Finally, all the audio files and transcriptions were compiled into the case study database.

During the conduct of the interviews, the researcher applied Creswell's (2007) suggested interview protocol, and Cohen, Manion and Morrison's (2007, pp.366-367) guidelines for the conduct of interviews.

#### 4.2.2 Data types, sources and sampling

##### 4.2.2.1 Data types

###### *Data from the semi-structured interviews*

As briefly mentioned in the earlier part of this chapter, different versions of semi-structured interview schedules were developed and administered to the key officials at the national and institutional levels, and senior quality assurance staff. The interviews were designed to gather insiders' perspectives, opinions, beliefs and experiences, as well as critique and reflections concerning the current system level quality assurance, the current approaches to quality assurance applied by the institutions and the recommendations for changes. As indicated previously, the semi-structured interviews provided the primary data for the study.

###### *Data from the document review*

As mentioned earlier, relevant documents were accessed and collected. The documents relating to the operationalisation of quality assurance were obtained from the MoET, including policies and procedures, measures, circulars and regulations, guidelines and instruction manuals. The documents relating to the implementation of quality assurance were obtained from the selected universities, including strategic plans, action plans, reports, and any published materials related to quality assurance in higher education. Document analysis provided background information of quality assurance practices at system and institutional levels.

Regarding the issue of data type, one important point raised by Cohen et al. (2007) was noted for the data collection and analysis. They argued that the selection of information is essential in case study research and, although it is useful to record typical and representative occurrences, the researcher should not

overlook any ‘infrequent, unrepresentative but critical’ (p. 257) incidents or events that significantly contribute to the understanding of the case. Cohen and his associates (2007) emphasised that ‘significance rather than frequency is a hallmark of case study, offering the researcher an insight into the real dynamics of situations and people’ (p. 258). In order to avoid omitting any information of this kind, careful line-by-line data analysis was conducted. Moreover, Holliday’s (2007) techniques for selecting rich data were applied: selecting the fragments of data containing ‘the elements that generate the thematic organisation’, and those containing ‘as many of the key elements as possible within a short space’ (p. 106).

#### *4.2.2.2 Description of sources and sampling*

The data sourced from the MoET and selected universities were collected from the following: 1) key officers at the managerial level (Director or Deputy Director of the Quality Assurance Department) and senior quality assurance experts working in the MoET; 2) key officers at the managerial level (Rectors, Vice-Rectors for academic affairs, Deans and Associate Deans of selected faculties) and senior quality assurance officers working at the institution; 3) documents from the MoET archive; and 4) documents from the universities’ archives.

The sampling process is described as follows. First, one faculty was selected from each of the six case study universities under the institution. The selection was based on document analysis and discussion with the management boards, which were used to identify the faculty that had been most engaged and “pro-active” in quality assurance practices. Evidence, including certificates of regionally and/or nationally accredited programs, and/or practices of continuous improvement, were used for the identification of the “most engaged” faculty. Second, from each of the six selected faculties, two schools were identified for the study. A similar evidence-based identification process was conducted for choosing the two “most engaged” schools.



The selection of the most engaged faculties and schools was based on two assumptions. First, the study of the case institution's faculties and schools that had more exposure to, and experience in, continuous improvement, and with programs accredited nationally and regionally, would provide experiential learning lessons for other public universities. This is particularly important given that quality assurance is a new policy and practice for Vietnamese higher education. Second, there would be less to learn from those faculties and schools that had no or little experience with external quality assurance.

As summarised in the table below, the following staff were invited to participate in the semi-structured interviews: two members of the MoET, as national policy-makers; six staff from the six case-study universities, as institutional policy-makers (e.g. the Rector, or the Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs, or the Director of Quality Assurance); and eighteen middle managers at the faculty management level (six Deans and 12 school heads).

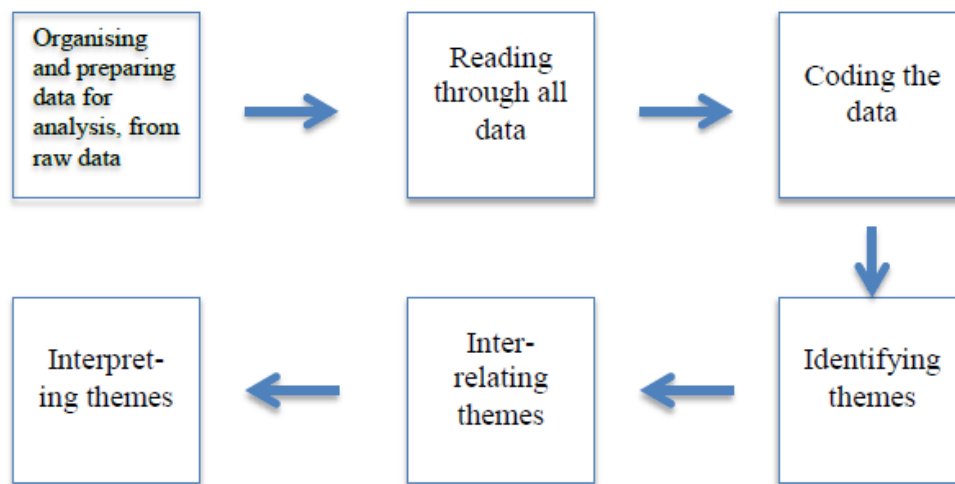
Type	Description	Method	Number
National policy-makers	MoET officers	In-depth interview	2
Institutional policy-makers	University Rectors/ Vice-Rectors for AA/ Directors of QA centers	In-depth interview	6
Middle managers	Faculty Management	In-depth interview	18

**Table 2: Data sources - summary of individuals**

In the data analysis, the university policy-makers are coded as PM and also referred to as top leaders, and the policy-implementers are coded as PI and also referred to as executive leaders or middle managers (Appendix 5).

#### 4.2.3 Data analysis modes

First and foremost, the interview transcripts were analysed line-by-line using Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) directed content analysis procedure. Additionally, during the data analysis process, the researcher followed a path of analysing the data to develop an increasingly detailed understanding of the case, in the form of themes, issues and descriptions (Stake, 1995; Creswell, 2007, 2009). The basic steps in this path are as follows:



**Figure 5: Data analysis process**  
*Adapted from Creswell (2009)*

##### 4.2.3.1 Data analysis techniques

The aim of this study is to investigate the current quality assurance implementation in Vietnamese public universities. Therefore, the unit of analysis is institutional level quality assurance systems and practices, in the context of national higher education operations and quality assurance.

Four stages of the data analysis process (Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003) were employed: data reduction, data display, data consolidation and data integration. Data reduction involves condensing the dimensionality of the data, for instance,

via thematic analysis. Regarding data display, the researcher also applied Miles and Huberman's (1994) suggested display format 'in the form of matrices with defined rows and columns ... driven by the research questions involved, and the developing concepts, often in the form of codes' (p. 93). Data consolidation requires the combination of data to create new or combined variables. Finally, in the data integration stage, qualitative data are integrated into sets.

When analysing the interview data, it should be reduced to what is of most significance and interest (Miles & Huberman, 1984) and this data reduction process should be done inductively rather than deductively. In other words, the researcher should approach the transcripts with an open mind and let the significant information emerge (Seidman, 2006; Joshi & Krag, 2010; Grbich, 2013).

During the analysis of the interview data, the researcher adopted the 'analytic progression' suggested by Rein and Schon (1977, cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 91). That is the progression from telling a 'first story about a specific situation' to 'constructing a map (locating key variables)' to 'building a theory or model (how the variables are connected, how they influence each other)' (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 91). This analytic progression can be seen in the chapters on findings and discussion (Chapters 6, 7 and 8 of this thesis). As Miles and Huberman (1994) claimed, the adoption of the analytic progression allows the researcher to move 'through a series of analysis episodes that condense more and more data into a more and more coherent understanding of what, why and how', and helps 'construct a deeper story that is both variable-oriented and process-oriented' (p. 91).

In this study, the qualitative data were transcribed, reduced, coded and analysed thematically. The themes for the data analysis were derived from the conceptual framework of the study that is grounded in the basic research questions. This practice aligns with the work of Miles and Huberman (1994), as well as

Holliday's (2007) argument that interview data can be organised according to the main research questions and emerging themes (see also Thomas, 2006), and that the researcher needs to show in the discussion how the data interconnects.

One important issue that should be mentioned is that the interviews were largely conducted in Vietnamese. This allowed the participants to express their ideas in the most precise way, as not all of them have excellent English proficiency. The transcripts were not entirely translated. Only the quoted phrases were translated by the researcher, and verified by a NAATI professional translator, as specified in the approved ethics procedure.

#### 4.2.4 The issues of reliability and validity

Reliability and validity issues were addressed in this study to ensure the quality of the collected data and the trustworthiness of the findings. Validity refers to the extent to which results generated by an instrument measure the characteristic or variable it is intended to measure (correctness or truth of inferences). Reliability refers to the stability, and consistency of the findings.

As the qualitative researcher is interested in multiple realities and a diversity of perceptions, data should be collected from various sources. This fits well with Stake's (2011) suggestion that the researcher can reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation by employing such procedures as redundancy of data gathering and triangulation using multiple perceptions to verify the repeatability of an observation or interpretation. In this study, the perceptions of participants concerning quality assurance practices in their respective universities, as well as the factors that influence existing practices, were captured. This allowed the researcher to gain a comprehensive picture of the case under study. Moreover, in order to make the empirical data more objective and less subjective, the researcher used replicative methods, following disciplined practices of analysis and triangulation (Stake, 2004), in order to separate experiential knowledge from

opinion and preference (Busher & James, 2007), or as Cohen et al. (2007) put it, knowledge versus inference. These measures helped ensure the validity of the study.

During the data collection and analysis processes, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, the researcher applied Creswell's (2009) suggestions on using interview protocols and protocol for recording information. Yin's (2009) principles were also applied, including using multiple sources of evidence, using a case study database and maintaining a chain of evidence. Also, the member checking technique was employed, involving sending interview transcripts to interviewees for verification. This is how the reliability of the study was managed.

The following additional activities were undertaken to improve the validity of the study:

- (a) Developing an understanding of the topic through an in-depth review of the literature on quality assurance in higher education, and the study of the Vietnamese context. This helped set up a framework for investigation that acted as a point of reference during the whole processes of data collection and data analysis.
- (b) Rechecking the data and interpretation of results; keeping updated about quality assurance practices and policy changes at the site universities; and frequent discussions about the issues under study with colleagues at Vietnamese public universities.

With the implementation of the above measures, the researcher is confident that the study is both reliable and valid.

### **4.3 Ethical considerations**

The research was conducted using an approved ethics procedure. Accordingly, the information obtained from this study may be communicated, in summary format, to interested parties (such as other academics, government organisations), but no individuals/school/faculty within each institution will be identified in any report.

All information gathered from individual participants during the study was disguised by use of a 'coded name'. For example, interview 06-PM1-U3 refers to the top level policy making leader- rector or vice-rector from university 3, whose random turn of interview was the 6<sup>th</sup>; interview 23-PI2-U4 refers to one of the two policy implementers or executive leaders- school heads from university 4, whose random turn of interview was the 23<sup>rd</sup>. (Pls see Appendix 5- Interview coding for more details).

The researcher has a formal relationship with one of the six universities under study and has experience in both working as an academic staff and working as a middle manager. This fact may admittedly affect the objectivity of the investigation, however, at the same time may enhance the in-depth of the data interpretation, as the researcher has the perspective of an “insider”. To address this issue, the researcher strictly followed the approved ethics procedure, and tried to be cautious, transparent and neutral throughout the investigation.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the selected paradigm, methodology and methods for the research project. The study was conducted under the overarching umbrella of interpretivism, with a multiple-case design. Qualitative methods were used for data collection and data analysis. Specifically, a document review and in-depth semi-structured interviews were employed. Additionally, the limitations of the case study methodology and the requirements for data collection and analysis were discussed. It was anticipated that the measures applied to address these challenges would improve the reliability and validity of the study.

In the subsequent chapter, the context of the study or the detailed description of the context in which the case institution operates, is presented.

## CHAPTER 5. CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS: VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

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### **Introduction**

This chapter deals with the contextual background for the study. It firstly provides an overview of the education system in Vietnam, with a brief analysis of the historical, social and psychological factors that influence Vietnamese education. This is followed by the identification of common styles of institutional organisation. The chapter continues with a summary of the development of quality assurance in Vietnam, with its opportunities and challenges. Together with Chapters 2 and 3, this chapter helps frame the research questions for data collection.

### **5.1 The educational system in Vietnam**

#### **5.1.1 The historical evolution of the national educational system**

Geographically, Vietnam is a Southeast Asian country, sharing borders with China to the north, and Laos and Cambodia to the west. The Eastern Sea borders Vietnam's eastern and southern sides. Demographically, Vietnam has 54 ethnic groups, with the Kinh group forming the majority. The official language is Vietnamese (the language of the Kinh ethnic group).

Vietnam has a long standing tradition of being an “eager to learn” nation. The whole society pays respect to teachers (London, 2011a). A common traditional saying is that during the national New Year you visit your parents on the second day and visit your teachers on the third day. These days, the whole country celebrates Teachers' Day every November 20<sup>th</sup>.

Vietnam has a young population, with the number of people of school age (under the age of 18) accounting for 31.8% of the population, with those under the age of

15 accounting for 24.1% (GSO, 2011). Vietnam has a relatively high population growth rate of nearly one million per year, reaching 90 million in 2011 (National announcement, 1 November 2011). With the total number of students enrolled in all levels of education at nearly 23 million, or about 25% of the population (GSO, 2012), Vietnam today faces great demands for education at all levels.

The development of Vietnamese education can be divided into three main periods: before 1945, from 1945 to 1986, and from 1986 up to the present (MoET, 2014).

### ***Period 1: before 1945***

During the feudalism period between the tenth and the nineteenth centuries, the purpose of education was to select and educate intellectual individuals to become lords working for the governing dynasties (MoET, 2014). During these centuries, there were wars against Chinese invaders, but the peaceful intervals between wars allowed for cultural and educational exchanges between China and Vietnam. As a result, Vietnamese Education is profoundly influenced by the Chinese philosophy: Confucianism (Welch, 2010; London, 2011a; Tran & Marginson, 2014). Written Vietnamese during these centuries is known as Nom hieroglyphs, influenced by written Chinese, and spoken Vietnamese borrowed a large amount of vocabulary from Chinese. Education reinforced the standards for social and individual behaviours. For example, it was taught at schools that for girls and women ‘When living with parents - obey your father, when getting married - obey your husband, when your husband is dead - obey your son’, or for men ‘three tasks for a man’s life: managing your family, governing your country, and conquering the world’ (Nguyen, 2011, p. 57).

During the period from the end of the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century, Vietnam and the whole of Indochina were under the colonisation of the French. Confucian education was replaced by French-Vietnamese education, which produced qualified human resources for the ruling



government (MoET, 2014). The main language taught in schools was French. The most talented students were sent to study at universities in France, then back to Vietnam to work for the ruling government. As in other colonial contexts, the education system, organisational structure, governance and leadership in Vietnamese schools resembled those of France. The curriculum was strongly influenced by colonial ideology, with the subject contents either totally borrowed from France or educating students in a love for France (MoET, 2014).

***Period 2: from 1945 to 1986***

There were four turning points in Vietnamese history in this period: the Vietnamese declaration of independence in 1945; the end of the war against French in 1954; the end of the war against the USA in 1975; and the start of the renovation period in 1986, with the opening of Vietnam's door to the world (MoET, 2014).

During the early years of this period, after gaining independence, the focus of education was on the eradication of illiteracy and the provision of compulsory elementary education for the whole population (MoET, 2014). From 1954 to 1975 there were two systems of education in Vietnam: one in the north, following the model of the socialist Soviet Union; the other in the south following the American model. After the reunification of the country in 1975, the regional education systems were merged and the national system was established. According to several studies on Vietnamese education (see for example, Lam & Vu, 2012; Dao & Hayden, 2010; Dao, 2014; London, 2011b), the influence of the Soviet model and educational philosophies can be seen through all levels of education, for example, in the centralised control of the whole education system, the test-based assessment of achievement, the organisation of unitary discipline universities, and the university entrance examination.

### ***Period 3: 1986 up to the present***

After a decade of moving towards socialism, with a huge amount of post-war reconstruction and economical challenges, Vietnam implemented an important policy in 1986, known as “doi moi” renovation. This introduced reforms intended to facilitate the transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy, encouraging the establishment of private businesses and foreign investment. This step towards a market economy, accompanied by the persistent efforts of the whole country, brought Vietnam to a new period in its history. As reviewed by Lam and Vu (2012), this period is marked by radical achievements and improvements in all realms of socioeconomic development, political stability, and international integration.

Significant milestones in Vietnam’s external relations include: the normalisation between Vietnam and the USA in 1995, with the trade embargo lifted one year before; becoming an official member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995; and joining the World Trade Organisation in early 2007. These international integration moves brought opportunities and challenges for Vietnam in general, and for its education system (Freire, 2011; Lam & Vu, 2012; Dang, 2016).

During this period, Vietnamese education experienced the most overwhelming changes in its history. The influence of western ideas in education can be seen in changes in the length of general education from 10 to 12 years and higher education from 5 to 4 years. It was also evident in changes to the state funding scheme for education at all levels, such as removing total subsidisation, providing allowances for private institutions, and involving different stakeholders in financing education.<sup>10</sup> Western influences were also seen in changes to the curriculum, to add or remove certain subjects; changes in teaching and learning

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<sup>10</sup> The Vietnamese term is socialisation of education i.e. different stakeholders, such as parents, banks, industries or employers, provide funding/loans for their children’s or prospective employees’ education.

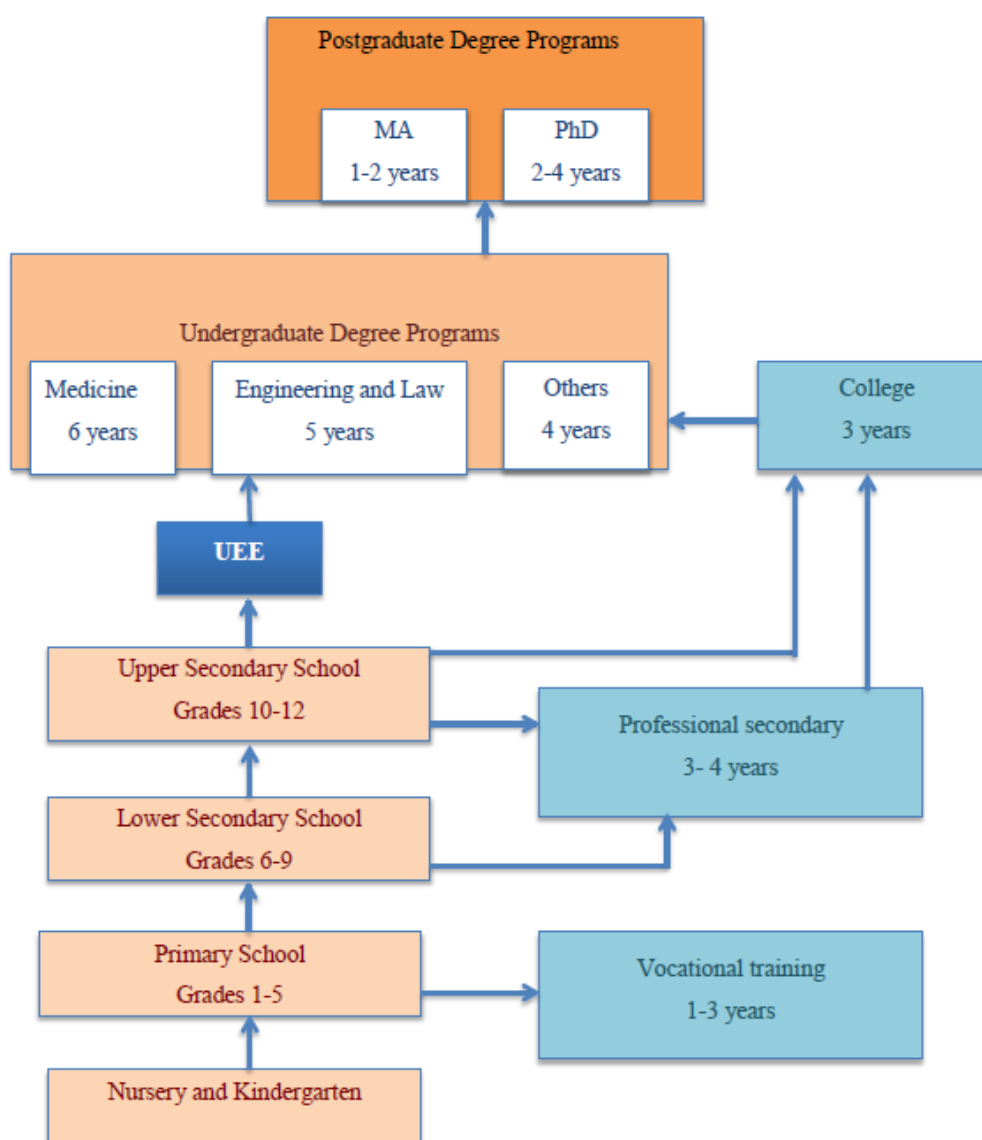
approaches towards learner-centeredness; and changes in assessment to include continuous assessment (Tran, 2014; Tran & Nguyen, 2015; Dang, 2016).

As stated in the National Report on Education for All (MoET, 2014), several educational reforms were made during this period, accompanied by changed legal and regulatory frameworks. These aimed at meeting the needs of the economy and improving the quality and relevance of education, as well as the efficiency of the educational system.

Through these reforms, the mainstream education structure became 5-4-3-4, representing the number of years for the four levels of primary, lower secondary, upper secondary and tertiary education. This was specified in Article 4 of the *Education Law* passed in 1998 and amended and supplemented in 2005 and 2009, as follows:

- (a) There are mainstream/formal education and continuing/informal education
- (b) The mainstream education consists of 4 levels: early childhood education (nursery and kindergarten), general education (primary, lower secondary and upper secondary), vocational education (professional secondary and vocational training), and higher education (undergraduate and post-graduate)

The figure below is a diagram of the current mainstream education system of Vietnam.



**Figure 6: Structure of the formal education system of Vietnam**  
 Source: Adapted from the National Report on Education for All (2014)  
 Note: UEE is university entrance examination

As noted by Pham (2012), the education system has developed extensively across the whole country, with a wide range of institutions, types of ownership (public-private), and modes of training (formal education, distant education, continuing education). A summary of these institutions in 2012 is presented in the table below.

	Level	Quantity	Non-public institutions	
			Quantity	Percentage
1	University	204	54	26.47
2	College	215	28	13.02
3	Vocational school	295	97	32.88
4	School	28,803	520	1.81
5	Kindergarten	10,584	2,556	24.15
6	Continuing education centre	712		
	Total number	40,813		

**Table 3: Number of educational institutions in Vietnam in 2012**

*Source: GSO (2012)*

### 5.1.2 Factors influencing Vietnamese education

In the preceding section, some of the factors that have influenced the educational systems of Vietnam have been briefly discussed. In the following section, more factors are identified and their impact analysed.

#### *Chinese Confucianism*

Chinese Confucianism reached Vietnam about 2000 years ago and has had a significant influence on all areas of its society. Elements of the contemporary Vietnamese higher education system reflect Chinese and Confucianism influences (Welch, 2010). These can be found in the prevailing teacher-centred teaching and learning approach in most levels of education. Teachers are “gurus” who are expected to know everything, learners are expected to obey and respect teachers; questions from students are not welcome or encouraged but rather, considered as challenges to the teachers (Tran & Nguyen, 2015). The influence is not only reflected in the relationship between teachers and learners, but also in the hidden curriculum. That said, parents, teachers and peers expect students to obey the social hierarchy and not to challenge or criticise their elders (Doan, 2005). Together with a rote-learning, close-book examination oriented education, these

influences impedes exploratory learning, creativity and critical thinking among Vietnamese young people.

### *Colonialism and neo-colonialism*

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Vietnam went through two major wars against the French, and against the USA. Several decades after the country was liberated, traces of colonial and neo-colonial influences are still omnipresent (London 2011a). Particularly, since the implementation of the open-door policy in 1986, the influence of western ideas in education has become stronger than ever, although mainly in the higher education sector (Welch, 2010). This is reflected in, for example, the adoption of the education system structure, especially that of higher education, the structure of curricula at all levels, the higher education teaching methodologies that facilitate learner autonomy and learner-centeredness, credit-based education programs, and recently, quality assurance in higher education (MoET, 2014).

### *The ex-Soviet educational philosophy*

Vietnam today still claims to be a socialist country, and the impact of the ex-Soviet educational philosophy on the educational system is still strong (Dao, 2014). While private institutions are corporate and governed by school councils, public institutions are still centrally controlled by the MoET and its departments, or line-management ministries and state instrumentalities (Tran, 2014). The top-down approach to governance, leadership and decision-making; bureaucracy and the reliance on state funding, are still common features of the majority of educational institutions (Dao & Hayden, 2010). Specifically, as observed during this research in higher education, the Soviet-styled single discipline universities, as well as the academic year based rather than credit-based education, limit the chances for students to pursue inter-disciplinary studies and university researchers to conduct inter-disciplinary research.

### *Political issues*

Vietnam has a single party government. This has resulted in politically-driven impact on the country's education. For example, as Dao (2014) noted in her case study on higher education reforms, Vietnamese universities are governed by two authority systems: academic administrative and the party system. The party system is in charge of personnel appointments, strategic plans and ideological leadership.

The direct influence of the communist party on the school curriculum can be seen at all other levels of education. For general education, the contents of the two subjects Vietnamese Literature and Vietnamese History are strictly controlled by the party system at the ministerial level. Therefore, sensitive content areas, such as literature of South Vietnam during the US war, are overlooked, or several historical events are biasedly depicted (Nguyen, 2015). In higher education, there are what curriculum renovation experts informally call "untouchable" topics, which include such mandated subjects as Marxism-Leninism, Ho Chi Minh ideology, and the history of the Vietnamese communist party (Doan, 2005). Institutional autonomy and academic freedom are still "sensitive" concepts in Vietnamese education (George, 2011).

### *Asian culture*

Like many other Asian countries sharing the "eager to learn" tradition, such as China, Korea, Japan, and Singapore, Vietnam is still strongly influenced by the ideologies of the whole continent. Competitive learning and achievement-driven teaching and learning are still popular. As getting to university is the goal of almost all families, the pressure on teachers and students starts from early childhood education, as most parents want their child/children to get a head start from the outset (Doan, 2015). When a child starts school, he/she actually begins a long-term race to university. Extra coaching, extra classes, studying ahead of the curriculum become exhausting routines and achievement-driven teaching and learning becomes the "chronic disease" of Vietnamese education (Phan, 2013).

### *Globalisation*

Globalisation and the internet appear to have both positive and negative impacts on Vietnamese education, as with many other countries. On one hand, education managers, teachers and students have access to unlimited resources and advanced tools for research and exploratory studies, as well as opportunities for exchanging research findings, sharing experiences and lessons. Information technology and the internet make viable several educational reforms, including curriculum renovation, digitalisation of syllabuses, e-learning and embedded learning (Ho, 2011). On the other hand, managers and teachers are challenged to confront high-achieving students' questions on their own right to pursue their interests, and at the same time address average and low-achieving students' overwhelming confusion caused by the mismatch between what they are taught and what they observe in real life. Regarding the governance of education, as reported by London (2010b), the globalisation of Vietnam's social and political economy has affected, though not diminished, the centrality in education governance.

As an important segment of Vietnamese education, higher education has been profoundly affected by international influences (Welch, 2010). These influences can be seen in the long history of higher learning in Vietnam from the tenth century onwards, as discussed earlier, and are apparent in the attributes of the contemporary system. Most recently, as noted by Welch (2010) in his study on the internationalisation of Vietnamese higher education, the system is influenced by the outflow of Vietnamese students to study overseas; by the growing presence of foreign universities in Vietnam; and by the increasing number of international alliances. The western-eastern interchange of philosophies and approaches, ideas and models are, therefore, likely to be unavoidable in Vietnamese higher education.

To a certain extent, all of the above factors have exerted their impact on the educational system, as well as the stakeholders involved. The next section focuses specifically on higher education.



### 5.1.3 Features of Vietnamese higher education

#### *5.1.3.1 A brief history of Vietnam's higher education development*

The modern higher education system in Vietnam does not have a long history. As reported by Lam and Vu (2012), the very first modern university was established in 1906, serving the whole Indochina. During the wars against the French and the USA, new universities and colleges were established with a mission to produce human resources for the construction and reconstruction of the country. Since the implementation of the open-door policy in 1986, the number of universities and colleges has increased extensively, mostly following the Soviet model of single discipline institutions (Tran 2014). From late 1993 to early 1994, five multi-disciplinary universities in five main regions of the country - Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh city, Hue, Danang and Thai Nguyen - were established, based on the amalgamation of several leading universities. These regional institutions formed the core of the higher education system.

In early 2000s, together with the pre-existing polytechnic universities in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh city, and a regional multi-disciplinary university in Can Tho, these regional institutions implemented the fundamental change from academic year based education to credit-based education. This allows for credit transfer and cross-disciplinary studies and research (Hayden & Lam, 2007).

Another major change in the higher education system in the twenty-first century has been the privatisation of education. Many private universities and community colleges have been established, providing a broader platform for high school graduates. According to MoET statistics for 2012-2013, Vietnam had 204 universities and 215 colleges, excluding those belonging to the police and the army. At university and college levels, about 5,000 training programs, not including distant programs, were being undertaken, with 300 programs jointly conducted with overseas institutions (Pham, 2012). The enrolment rate during the ten-year period from 2001 to 2011 increased about 35% and the MoET projects

that by 2020 the enrolment rate will be 450 students per 10,000 persons (i.e., there will be about 4.5 million students by that time) (Dao, 2014).

The MoET has developed and implemented a good number of projects, with foreign funding, to improve educational quality, the relevance of programs, efficiency, equity and expanded access at all levels. Specifically, the latest initiative, Project Foreign Language 2020 (MoET, 2011), aims at improving the quality of teaching and learning foreign languages in Vietnamese schools, and renewing foreign language teaching methodologies and assessment. This project is expected to help solve the bottleneck problem of Vietnamese education – professionals and academics lacking foreign languages, especially English, needed for integration into world education.

#### *5.1.3.2 Common styles of institutional organisation*

As claimed by Welch (2010), since its inception, the character of Vietnamese higher education has been significantly shaped by external influences. These are clearly reflected in all aspects, such as curriculum content, intellectual influences, as well as organisational and management styles.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the organisation and governance of Vietnamese universities reflected the conceptual frameworks of the Soviet-styled universities and then those of western universities. Affected particularly by the political control of the government and the communist party (Tran, 2014; Dao, 2014), and due to the fact that most still rely on state funding, many Vietnamese universities are still overlooking academic freedom and institutional autonomy. This is likely because they are denied these by the government (Hayden & Lam, 2007). Additionally, different universities have different starting points, in terms of foundation time, size and resources. Their organisational styles are, therefore, varied.

The four most popular organisational styles: organised anarchy, collegium, bureaucracy and cultural, were reviewed in Chapter 3 and they align well with the reality of most Vietnamese universities. It should be noted, however, that there is no relevant literature or empirical study on this aspect of Vietnamese universities. The following section provides a brief description of the four representative organisational styles as they relate to the Vietnamese context. This will be discussed in more detail in the analysis of data in the coming chapters.

From the researcher's observation during twenty years working in the public higher education sector, the most common organisational style of Vietnamese universities is organised anarchy, with loosely coupled units. First, the missions and goals of these universities are not clear, as they mainly adopt those dictated by the MoET. For example, until the adoption of the doi moi policy, the main mission of many public universities was the rather vague "educating the new socialist persons" (ULIS, 1990, p. 2). As a consequence, the units in these universities are not well connected due to the lack of clear institutional goals and engaging action plans. In particular, there is a lack of cooperation and collaboration between academic and administrative units. The other two features of organised anarchy, 'unclear technology and fluid participation' (Manning, 2013, p. 31) are also reflected in most Vietnamese universities. Unclear technology refers to the different technologies, methods and approaches that students, teachers and researchers apply in their learning, teaching and research, respectively. Fluid participation represents the varied involvement with the institution of various groups - students, faculty, administrative staff, leaders and managers.

In flagship universities such as the two national universities or the regional universities, their operations reflect a combination of collegium and bureaucracy. These two organisational styles are not mutually exclusive (Manning, 2013). In some of these universities, the governance and management systems are substantially collegial, allowing the academic faculty to participate in the

decision-making process, planning and policy-making at the institutional level, either directly or through their representatives. Their priorities are teaching and research; whereas the administrators take the leading role in setting and maintaining standards of performance, achieving institutional goals and their priorities are policies, procedures, and quality services. However, in some other universities in this flagship group, bureaucracy still seems to dominate over the collegium style, as governance is centralised, the organisational structure is hierarchical with more power at the top, and decision-making is top-down. Evidence for this argument can be found in Chapter 6.

While the bureaucracy style is more common in prestigious universities, the cultural style appears to be welcome in newly founded universities, especially those that can attract highly qualified academic staff and overseas post-graduates. In these institutions, a combination of collegium and cultural styles can be found. Faculties, administrators, and students together shape their institutional culture. This culture acts as a catalyst for internal and external communication and collaboration.

Further discussion is provided in subsequent chapters about how these organisational styles shape the quality assurance practices at the case universities.

#### *5.1.3.3 Challenges and opportunities for Vietnamese higher education*

As reviewed by several scholars (see, for example, Dang, 2016; Tran, 2014; London, 2010a, 2010b; George, 2011) and reported in the public media in Vietnam, Vietnamese higher education institutions are facing several challenges while still dealing with existing problems.

The first and biggest challenge for Vietnamese universities appears to be reforming governance to facilitate autonomy and decentralisation (Tran, 2014; Nguyen, 2011; London, 2010a; Dao & Hayden, 2010). At present, most universities have limited autonomy, as the MoET still controls centrally across a

number of areas: from appointing top management personnel, approving strategic plans and curriculum, and granting budgets, to determining enrolment levels and organising the national university entrance examinations (SEAMEO, 2007). An example of this MoET centralisation lies in the control of curriculum for undergraduate courses, including ‘content structure, number of subjects, duration of training, time proportion between studying and practicing’ (Hayden, 2005, p. 9). As Dao and Hayden (2010) claimed, most public universities in Vietnam ‘do not have adequate administrative systems for the purposes of being able to exercise institutional autonomy effectively’ (p. 135). As can be seen in the coming chapters on data analysis, the lack of institutional autonomy is an inhibitor to the implementation and sustaining of quality assurance initiatives.

Only a few colleges among the two national universities can enjoy their autonomy, especially financial autonomy, albeit only to a certain extent. The reason is that the two national universities are governed by the Cabinet, not the MoET. When the proportion of state budget for public higher education sector tends to remain static, if universities continue to rely on the government and not allowed to be financially autonomous, it is not likely that they can undertake transformative changes that require investment. As such, disentangling the public universities from the bureaucratic line-management control of MoET is a big challenge (Dao, 2014).

Significant legislative and regulatory frameworks have been put in place to allow Vietnamese education institutions to implement prominent reforms. The first of these is the *Education Law*, passed in 2005 and amended in 2009, with Article 14 stating that the government decides to ‘exercise decentralization on educational management, strengthen the autonomy and accountabilities of educational institutions’. The second framework is the Higher Education Reform Agenda (HERA) of 2005, which is a blueprint for system reform by 2020, giving tertiary institutions autonomy to decide on, and bear responsibility for, their training, research, organisation, personnel and finance (VNGO, 2005). The improved

autonomy of HEIs is designed to make them become ‘more responsive to market forces’ (Ho, 2011, p. 262).

Another noteworthy challenge for Vietnamese higher education is the development of a viable mechanism for quality assurance and strengthening internal efficiency in the higher education system (Pham, 2012). Several aspects are expected to improve through such mechanisms, including strategic planning and management, the quality of teaching and learning, research capacity, the quality and relevance of the training programs, and institutional infrastructure.

In order to enhance their institutional capacity for better competitiveness in the global market, Vietnamese universities need to integrate quality assurance into their strategic plan. This will be further elaborated on in the next section.

## **5.2 The quality assurance system in Vietnam**

As highlighted in the literature review in Chapter 2, quality assurance has been implemented in many developed regions of the world for more than two decades, with the USA and European countries major arenas in this field, with leading philosophies, approaches and frameworks (Harvey & Williams 2010). In neighbouring Asian countries like Hong Kong, Singapore, and Thailand, quality assurance mechanisms and systems were instituted more than a decade ago (Mok, 2000; AU, 2000). The concept of a distinct quality assurance system is, however, relatively new in higher education in Vietnam.

### **5.2.1 Types of quality assurance already in place**

The development of quality assurance in higher education in Vietnam can be summarised as follows: Prior to 1986, quality assurance was synonymous with the control of inputs, as student intake was strictly controlled by the MoET via high-stakes entrance examinations. Since the mid-1980s, when the country adopted an open-door policy, all sectors of society and economy, including higher education, have experienced dramatic changes. The increasing number of students

and institutions, in both the public and private sectors, as well as the diversity of modes of training and training programs, create challenges for Vietnamese higher education in terms of assuring the quality of large-scaled educational provision. A need emerged to establish a proper quality assurance system to address this challenge (Adams et al., 2012a; Oliver, 2004; Nguyen, et al., 2009; Lam & Vu, 2012; Pham, 2012).

Before 2000, the main type of quality management practised within the MoET system was quality control, which was implemented through inspection and examination of educational delivery by the ministry, the department, the office and institutional levels (Pham, 2012). Pham (2012) also noted that quality control was not comprehensively practised in large-sized institutions and addressed only the quantifiable matters, rather than creativity or quality in teaching and learning, or the renovation of curriculum and teaching methodologies. Many leading universities did conduct their own quality assurance activities. For example, ideas of improving the quality of training programs through review and external examination processes were practised as an internal affair in these universities. However, no empirical evidence has been found to show whether these practices were formal and institutionalised.

The first adopted quality assurance initiative was accreditation (of educational institutions and educational programs), founded and funded by the government in 2002 (Lam & Vu, 2012). Accreditation standards and processes, which were developed with the USA model as a point of reference, were approved by the MoET in 2004 (Nguyen et al., 2009).

#### 5.2.2 The adopted framework and the implementation of quality assurance

As reported by Pham, a quality assurance policy-maker at the MoET (2012), Vietnam has learnt from world experience and other quality assurance models. It has adopted the Asian-Pacific framework (Stella, 2008) and the framework of the ASEAN university network (AUN), which were developed based on a common

European model. A detailed description of the framework adopted by Vietnam HEIs is presented in Chapter 6.

As already indicated, Vietnam's quality assurance model is significantly influenced by Asian-Pacific countries with similar cultures and contexts (Pham, 2012). Nevertheless, as reported by Pham (2012), the bilateral cooperation and funded projects from international organisations, notably the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, UNESCO, international quality assurance agencies in higher education (INQAAHE), Asian-Pacific quality network (APQN), Southeast Asian ministers of education organisation (SEAMEO), and countries like the USA, Australia and the Netherlands, have had a certain impact on how Vietnam has further developed its quality assurance framework.

### 5.2.3 The legal and regulatory framework for quality assurance in higher education

Since quality assurance in higher education was put into practice, regulations relating to this issue have been gradually integrated into the legal and regulatory system at the national level: Articles 17, 58 and 99 of the *Education Law* passed in 2005 relate to educational accreditation (VNA, 2005); and Part 3a in the *Education Law* (amended and supplemented in 2009) includes three additional articles on educational accreditation (VNA, 2009). The *Higher Education Law*, passed in 2012, contains one chapter (Chapter VII) on higher education quality assurance and accreditation (VNA, 2012).

The government issued detailed regulatory documents and guidelines for implementation: Decree number 75/2006/ND-CP (VNGO 2006)) includes Chapter II, Articles 38-40 on educational accreditation; and Decree number 31/2011/ND-CP (VNGO 2011), amends and supplements Articles 38 and 39 of Decree 75/2006/ND-CP, in Article 1, items 14 and 15. Pham (2012) reported that the MoET developed a decree guiding the implementation of the *Higher Education Law*, providing detailed guidelines and instructions for the implementation of Chapter VII on higher education quality assurance and accreditation.



In another important governmental document, *The Education Strategic Development Plan 2011-2020* (MoET, 2011), there is a requirement for the development of a system of educational quality accreditation agencies. These agencies are expected to conduct external accreditation of educational institutions at all levels, and of professional training and higher education programs.

In the decision of the Prime Minister on Network planning of universities and colleges for the period 2006-2020, one solution involved ‘extensively implementing higher education accreditation and assessment’ (Pham, 2012).

From 2004 to 2012, the MoET issued eight decisions, directives and circulars regulating on higher education accreditation cycles, procedures, criteria and standards. In 2008, the General Department for Educational Testing and Accreditation (GDETA) issued four official documents regulating on self-assessment and the use of higher education accreditation criteria.

The enactment of comprehensive and functional legal and regulatory frameworks, as discussed above, provides Vietnamese higher education with a scaffold stipulating the requirements for quality assurance in universities, as well as other levels of education. The quality assurance practices adopted elsewhere in the higher education system could now be reinforced and officially endorsed by the government.

#### 5.2.4 Opportunities and challenges for Vietnamese quality assurance

A review of the context of quality assurance in higher education in Vietnam helps identify the gaps between Vietnam and the world. First, the national quality assurance agency, GDETA, is not an independent body; it remains under the direct supervision and governance of the MoET. Second, the structure of the quality assurance system was completed with the establishment of the GDETA, as well as quality assurance centres of the national and regional universities and quality assurance units within all universities. However, the current quality assurance mechanism does not facilitate the independence of the accreditation process. For example, there has been no independent quality assurance agency to

conduct external reviews for accreditation. Third, the internal quality assurance within higher education institutions still focuses on compliance rather than improvement for increased competitiveness. Finally, the only type of quality assurance conducted by the MoET has been accreditation and this has included only self-assessment and peer review, with no external evaluation (Lam & Vu, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2009).

Within the last decade, Vietnam has been provided with international training and expert assistance to establish an accreditation scheme. During 2002-2003, Vietnam joined the SEAMEO higher education quality assurance group to develop a policy framework for quality assurance in higher education in Southeast Asia. During 2005-2008, with funding from the Netherlands HBO-raad (the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences), Vietnam conducted the project, “Establishing five quality assurance centers in five regional universities of Thai Nguyen, Hue, Danang, Vinh and Can Tho, and capacity building at system level”. This project helped Vietnam develop institutional internal quality assurance systems applicable to other universities (Pham, 2012). Vietnam also participated in accreditation pilot projects funded by the World Bank and the Netherlands (Pham, 2012). Higher education policy in Vietnam strives for the combination of improvement and control through the use of accreditation (more of a control instrument) (Dao, 2014). However, more conditions are needed for this to be effective, such as “smart criteria” on sustainable internal quality assurance schemes, or a decision-making context with positive incentives (Westerheijden, Cremonini & Van Empel, 2010).

According to Pham (2012), the MoET developed the legal and regulatory frameworks for the establishment of independent quality assurance/accreditation agencies, and for the procedures and cycle of educational quality accreditation of training institutions and training programs. These legal and regulatory frameworks provide the necessary conditions for public HEIs to develop their quality assurance mechanisms.

## Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of modern higher education in Vietnam, in the context of the country's broader education. This has been shaped by the influences of western educational systems and several other ideological and cultural factors. The rapid changes in the Vietnamese economy and international integration have brought about both opportunities and challenges for Vietnamese education in general, and Vietnamese higher education in particular.

The high and still increasing demands of the labour market and the economy are creating pressure for higher education, forcing it to renew or improve the quality and relevance of training programs, and expand enrolment. More than ever, the human resources involved in higher education (the academic faculty and administrators) are vital to the assurance of educational quality and efficiency. In order to cope with external requirements and internal capacity building needs, Vietnamese higher education has to develop a viable quality assurance scheme.

In Chapters 6, 7 and 8, the connections between the findings and discussion on the current quality assurance practices at the case universities, and the education traditions and features of higher education of Vietnam will be discussed in more detail.

## CHAPTER 6. THE CURRENT QUALITY ASSURANCE PRACTICE AT THE CASE-STUDY INSTITUTION

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### Introduction

As outlined in Chapter 4, the data from the document analysis and semi-structured interviews were collected and analysed around the six-component theoretical framework, in order to answer the three research questions. Furthermore, during the analysis of the data, the interactions of the following elements provided the researcher with insightful lenses: Manning's (2013) four organisational theories; Bolman and Deal's (2008) four organisational frames; the six member universities; and the three levels of espousal, enactment and experience relating to the quality assurance initiative.

As the findings are reported in the sequence of the research questions, this chapter addresses research question 1: How are the case study universities conducting their quality assurance? This includes the two sub-questions: What are the key components of their quality assurance frameworks? and What are the possible explanations for the discrepancies among the universities' quality assurance practices?

In this chapter, first the case description is presented, setting the scene for the report. In this section, data from both sources, the documents and interviews, are reviewed. Then the emerging themes are reported, and discussion is presented. The significant findings are selected and written in the form of mini narratives, following the guiding five-component quality assurance framework developed for this study; in light of the four organisational theories adopted by the universities; and with the three levels of espoused, enacted and experienced in quality assurance implementation.

## **6.1 Description of the case: The national institution and its six affiliated universities**

### **6.1.1 Overview**

The national institution, the case under study, was established in 1993, as a result of the MoET's initiative to establish a network of five regional multi-disciplinary universities. These were to be the flagship universities of Vietnam's higher education system (MoET, 2014). Since the amalgamation of three leading and prestigious universities in the capital city of Hanoi, the oldest one established in 1906, the national institution has undergone several stages of development. This has included the separation of one member university, and the establishment of new member universities, affiliated schools, research institutes and centres. At the time of my data collection, the institution had six member universities, covering a wide range of disciplines. At present it has seven member universities, five affiliated schools, five research institutes, and four training and research centres.<sup>11</sup>

Due to the design of my study, in this chapter the institution is described as it was when the data was being collected (i.e. when there were six constituent universities). For the purposes of the research, these universities were numbered (e.g. university 1, university 2 etc.). Also, due to the focus of the study - quality assurance in public universities - any quality assurance practices at affiliated schools, research institutes and training/research centres, are not mentioned. The table below provides a brief overview of the six member universities.

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<sup>11</sup> Updated information from the institution's website

	U1	U2	U3	U4	U5	U6
Foundation year	1906	1906	1955	2004	2007	2009
Number of disciplines	22	21	12	8	6	6
Number of bachelor programs	37	27	18	11	9	6
Number of staff	723	527	769	216	251	142
Number of students (full-time programs)	5735	5890	4384	2527	1540	1380

**Table 4: Administrative information about the member universities**

*Source: Documents 4, 5 & 10 (Appendix 4)*

As can be seen from the table above, universities 1, 2 and 3 are older, and larger in size, than the other three universities. It should be noted that the undergraduate students in university 6 come from universities 1, 2, 4 and 5, as they are expected to take courses on teaching methodologies offered by university 6, on top of courses in a specialised field, and graduate as teachers of their selected field (Interview 04-U6).

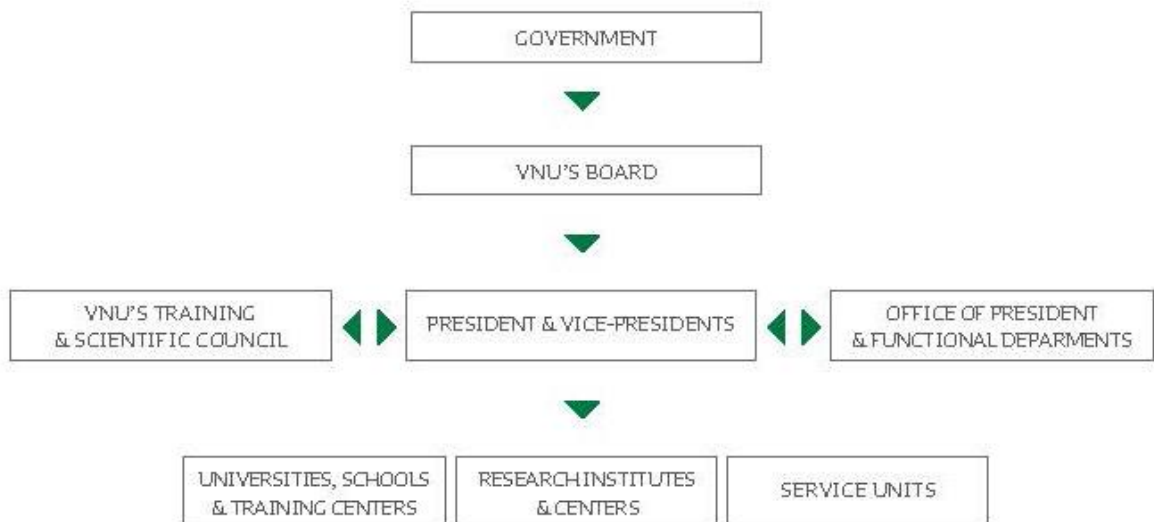
The disciplines offered at the universities are natural sciences (university 1), social sciences and humanities (university 2), languages and international studies (university 3), engineering and technology (university 4), economics and business (university 5), and education (university 6).

In order to provide clarity about how the case institution implements its quality assurance, it is necessary to view the quality assurance situation at the institution and its member universities through the lens of organisational theories.

### Organisational theories

As discussed in the literature review in Chapter 3, to some extent, the organisational theory or a combination of theories adopted by HEIs influence their choices of development policies, including quality assurance policy.

The organisation and operation of the case institution match well with the bureaucracy model (discussed in Chapter 3) as developed by Manning (2013). The organisational structure is hierarchical, with authority concentrating at the top, from the President and his Cabinet. This is shown in the figure below.



**Figure 7: The case institution's organisational structure**  
*Source: the institution's website*

Due to its size and multi-disciplinary nature, management in the institution is decentralised to the individual universities. This, to a certain extent, allows for participatory strategic planning and decision-making. In quality assurance practice, the institution has to meet the system level requirements as regulated by the MoET and, in turn, impose the quality assurance P&P on the member universities (Interview 09-M2, p. 2). It can therefore be said that at the espoused level, the quality assurance P&P are inherent and top-down.

While the case institution adopts a bureaucracy approach to ensure standardisation and objectivity, especially in complex task implementation, the member universities' organisational management styles are varied. The first reason is that before being amalgamated into the case institution, the three big universities (1, 2 and 3) had had their own development and operation histories,

as well as their own organisational cultures. Second, as the member universities are granted a certain level of autonomy (Document 9, Appendix 4), and their operations are affected by different contextual factors, they have established different management styles.

The initial analysis of the interview data with the universities' leaders and middle managers partly revealed management patterns. The table below shows the theory or combined theories that underlie each university's management system. The findings presented in the subsequent sections of this chapter highlight this categorisation. The table below shows the theory or combined theories that underlie each university's management system.

<b>Organisational theory adopted</b>	<b>U1</b>	<b>U2</b>	<b>U3</b>	<b>U4</b>	<b>U5</b>	<b>U6</b>
Organised anarchy theory		✓				
Collegium theory	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Bureaucracy theory	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Cultural theory	✓	✓	✓			

**Table 5: Organisational theories underlying the member universities' management**

As outlined in Section 3.1.5 of Chapter 3, the organisational theories underpin the espousal and enactment of the quality assurance framework that an institution opts for. In the scenario of the case institution, although the member universities are strictly tied to the direction and regulations imposed by the MoET and the umbrella institution, they are autonomous in planning for, and implementing, their quality assurance plans at their own pace. In doing so, each university takes into account their available resources and capacity, organisation cultural factors and other contextually specific factors. This is reflected in their choice of focus on certain components of the quality assurance framework more than others, while striving to develop a sustainable internal quality assurance mechanism.



It is worth mentioning that there might be other factors that influence the organisational styles of the case universities, and that specific factors might have a stronger influence than the others. However, it is beyond the scope of this study to include such matters. The focus of this research is on how the universities adopt frameworks and implement their quality assurance, and what the critical success factors are for a sustainable quality assurance mechanism.

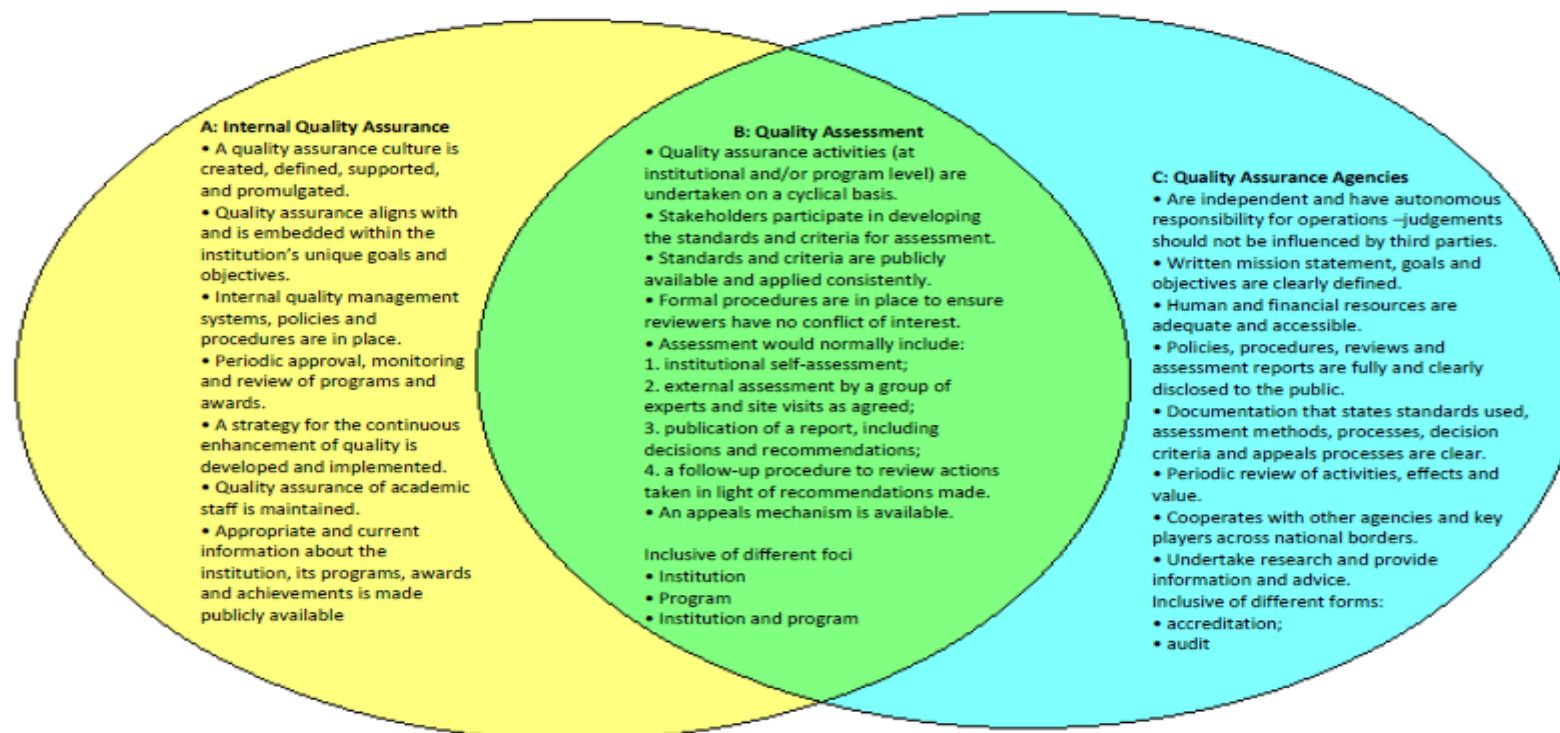
The next section explores the institution's existing external and internal quality assurance practices.

### 6.1.2 External quality assurance policy and requirements for the universities

#### *6.1.2.1 Policy and requirements from the MoET and the institution: adopting the regional quality assurance framework*

Vietnam is one of those countries in the Asia-Pacific region, where the government has responsibility for some areas of quality assurance, and in this scenario, it is the government's responsibility to ensure that its quality assurance practices are aligned with international best practices (APQN, 2008).

As mentioned in the preceding chapter on context, during the first decade of the twenty-first century, with the expertise from international and regional quality assurance agencies and networks, and funding from international aid agencies, the MoET undertook fundamental steps to establish a legal and regulatory framework for quality assurance in education. This included the creation of a quality assurance policy-making unit under the ministry (GDETA) and a system of instruments including sets of standards and criteria, as well as guidelines for implementation (Pham, 2012). These system level quality assurance considerations aligned with the Asia-Pacific region higher education quality assurance framework, with Chiba principles (Document 8, Appendix 4) providing a commonly agreed reference point for consistency in quality assurance in the region (Interview 16-M1, p. 1). This is described in more detail in the Figure below.



**Figure 8: A framework for higher education quality assurance principles in the Asia-Pacific region, often referred to as Chiba<sup>12</sup> principles**

*Source: APQN, 2008*

<sup>12</sup> Chiba, Japan, 18 February 2008, workshop under Brisbane Communiqué in conjunction with the APQN annual conference, 35 participants from 17 countries discuss the establishment of principles applicable to the particular context of quality assurance in higher education in the Asia-Pacific region.

In retrospect, quality assurance became a topic of discussion in the Vietnamese education development agenda in 2000. In the period 2001-2002, the MoET often referred to quality assurance as educational accreditation, due to the institutionalisation of accreditation in education. The requirement for public universities and colleges to be accredited was first put into a legal document in 2001, in Decision No. 47/2001/QĐ-TTg (MoJ, 2001; Document 6, Appendix 4). This was issued by the Prime Minister, approving the 'Planning on the network of universities and colleges in the 2001-2010 period'. It was reinforced in a subsequent legal document, Decision No. 121/2007/QĐ-TTg (MoJ, 2007; Document 7, Appendix 4) by the Prime Minister, approving the 'Planning on the university and college network in the 2006-2020 period'.

From its inception, GDETA functioned as a national accreditation centre, starting accreditation in 2005 with the top 10 universities. By December 2013, 160 universities nation-wide had completed the first step in the accreditation process, that is their self-assessment reports based on such criteria as program specification, teaching and learning strategy, academic staff/support staff/student quality, staff development activities, stakeholder feedback, etc. (Interview 16-M1, p. 10). In the period between these two milestones, the MoET and GDETA set up an accreditation plan for higher education. Accordingly, universities were divided into 3 groups: (1) those that were almost ready for accreditation; (2) those that needed a year to prepare for the self-assessment report; and (3) those that needed two years for the self-assessment report. The universities in groups 2 and 3 needed more time to establish required internal processes and reconstruct the required evidence for their quality assurance implementation. All the universities received regular monitoring from GDETA, an initial fund of US\$3000 and on-site expert consultation, to help them prepare their self-assessment reports (Interview 16-M1, p. 9).

It should be noted that although a large number of public universities in Vietnam have gone through the process of educational accreditation at the institutional level, only some leading universities, including the case institution, have

completed the second cycle accreditation at the institutional level and the first cycle of accreditation at the program level (Document 1, Appendix 5).

Although there had been criticism about the fact that Vietnam did not have independent accreditation agencies (Adams et al., 2012b; Lam & Vu, 2012), the MoET and GDETA actually adopted a viable approach for a developing country with no experience in quality assurance, while having a limited budget for educational assessment, and a centralised top-down education system. The MoET and GDETA began the process when there was no local independent agency capable of taking on this huge task. They underwent an experiential learning process, implementing accreditation while establishing the needed legal framework, developing required human resources, and accumulating experience. When everything was ready, they transferred responsibilities to independent agencies.

Since 2013, GDETA has discontinued its accreditation function, and shifted to its policy-making function. To prepare for the independent accreditation agencies, two centres for education and accreditation were established, attached to the case institution and the regional university in the south of Vietnam. They were in the expected transitional period of 5 years, operating on funding from the state and the accreditation fees from the universities, having support from the host institutions in terms of facilities, human resource and activities, before they can function independently (Interview 16-M1, p. 12).

As a system level policy-making unit, although GDETA asserts that the focus is on improvement, rather than accountability (Interview 16-M1, p. 8), on their part, they can only use accreditation as a dual purpose instrument. One purpose is for the top universities that are confident in being accredited. The other is for lower-ranked universities to identify their current quality status and develop improvement plans accordingly. GDETA is aware of the fact that they can provide universities with the legal framework, impose the quality assurance model, and develop relevant policies and procedures for external quality assurance (accreditation implemented as a prominent activity, as outlined above).

However, it is the responsibility of the universities to develop their internal quality assurance system, following Chiba principles (Interview 16-M1, p. 7).

In this regard, it appears that public universities, in meeting MoET and GDETA's requirements, are 'not willing [to undertake accreditation] and just do it because they have to', despite having little experience in systematic quality assurance and limited budgets for quality assurance, especially 'no quality improvement funding' (Interview 16-M1, p. 6). As noted by Nguyen, Oliver and colleagues (2009) and Lam and Vu (2012), Vietnamese universities still focus on compliance rather than internal quality improvement. That is, they are investing more resources and efforts into immediate need areas in order to meet external assessment or accreditation requirements (e.g. buy more books and facilities for the libraries, or modernise some classrooms with LCD projectors, in order to meet the criteria for facilities and structure) rather than into longer-term internal improvements (e.g. providing regular library training sessions for new students so that they can use the resources). In his interview for this study, the policy-maker from GDETA even admitted that many universities are used to accreditation but 'ignorant' of quality assurance, especially internal quality assurance (Interview 16-M1, p. 8). That said, many universities associate accreditation with quality assurance. For example, they manage to meet the required accreditation criteria (in program structure and content, student assessment, and output) but do not establish a formal quality assurance system, do not conduct regular curriculum review or enhance the quality of student support services.

#### *6.1.2.2 Accreditation profile of the case institution*

As one of the flagship regional universities in Vietnam, and one of the two universities designated by the MoET to host a centre for education and accreditation- the institute for education quality assurance (INFEQA), the case institution is expected to translate the system level quality assurance policy into institution level enactments.

In their operationalisation of quality assurance, evidently, the case institution has surpassed the expectation of the MoET, and gradually become autonomous in its quality assurance. Specifically, the institution registered for regional accreditation at the program level (bachelor or master programs) through the AUN, developed its own set of standards and criteria based on the one imposed by the MoET (hereinafter referred to as the old set) (Document 2, Appendix 4), then integrated AUN standards and criteria into this old set to issue a new set (hereinafter referred to as the new set) (Document 3, Appendix 4). Both sets are used for their internal assessment.

According to the latest statistics from INFEQA, all six member universities under the case institution have completed two cycles of external accreditation. The first cycle was implemented during 2007 and 2008, based on the old set of standards. The second cycle was conducted during 2012 and 2013, based on the new set. . At the program level, from 2009 to 2012, six programs were internally assessed, based on the old set; in 2013 two programs were internally assessed, based on the new set; in 2014, five programs were internally assessed by other member universities. Notably, from 2009 to 2014, eleven programs were regionally accredited by AUN and one program was accredited by the German Academic Exchange Service- DAAD (Document 1, Appendix 4). Given that there are a total of 108 programs in the whole institution, and that some of the above mentioned programs were both nationally and regionally accredited, the number of programs accredited is still very limited.

It seems to be a common scenario among the public universities participating in the quality initiative, that in the first stage they are required to comply with the MoET's requirements for institutional and program level accreditation. One desirable outcome would be that the universities could raise awareness of continuous improvement through this course of action, and develop their internal quality assurance mechanism to make quality assurance sustainable. The analysis of findings in the coming sections provides further detail on this.

### 6.1.3 The internal quality assurance system and arrangements within the institution

#### 6.1.3.1 *The institutional quality assurance system*

##### Structure

Since its first accreditation experience in 2005, the case institution has engaged in a substantial amount of quality related work, and accordingly developed its quality assurance system. Structurally, this system has two levels: the institutional level and the member unit level. At the institutional level, there is one quality assurance council, in charge of monitoring and guiding the quality assurance activities of the member universities and affiliated schools and centres, to ensure consistency. The members of the quality assurance council include external stakeholders from the MoET, research institutes and national education fund; leaders of the constituent universities; and leaders of INFEQA. The council meets biannually and these meetings are for policy-making, decision-making, as well as planning for quality assurance activities (Interview 09-M2, p. 1).

At the member unit level, each university has a quality assurance centre or quality assurance is integrated into a centre with inspection or assessment. For example, universities 2, 3, 4 and 6 have quality assurance centres; university 1 has a centre for quality assurance and inspection; and university 5 has a quality assurance and assessment centre (Interviews 06, 24, 04, 05, 25 and 07). The main functions of these quality assurance centres include providing consultation for the governing board; and coordinating external assessment activities, such as accreditation of programs, and internal assessment activities, such as student evaluations of teaching, curriculum and support services (Interviews 06, 24, 04, 25, 07).

Under the institution, the INFEQA is in charge of coordinating for external accreditation and assessment. Apart from that, the INFEQA helps with the promulgation of a quality culture in all the affiliated universities through periodical assessment of the quality of teaching, as well as the quality of academic staff and support services. The INFEQA is in charge of setting up

procedures, designing templates and questionnaires for these assessment, as well as providing consultation and training where needed (Interview 09-M2, p. 1).

### Current concerns

As revealed in the interviews with the university policy-makers, there have been concerns about the operations of the current quality assurance system in the case institution. On the positive side of the quality picture, the bi-annual meetings of the quality assurance council provide opportunities for ‘inter-university cooperation, sharing experiences and resolving difficulties and problems in quality assurance’(Interview 09-M2, p. 9). Another good practice is that external stakeholders from relevant departments in the MoET, research institutes, embassies and funding organisations, are engaged in developing policies and making decisions regarding the set of standards and criteria, or the system of regulatory documents (Interview 09-M2, p. 6). The third good practice is planning for quality assurance. While the institution imposes directions for what areas to maintain or improve, and targets how many programs should be accredited, the member universities can propose their own plan, based on their actual capacity and budget (Interview 09-M2, p. 9).

However, as indicated, there is a negative side to the quality picture. First, university leaders are those who have the most powerful voice in quality assurance enactment, but they do not consider quality assurance an important part of institutional operations. As one interviewee put it, for leaders ‘quality assurance is like spices to the main dish’ (Interview 09-M2, p. 6). Consequently, the investment of effort, time and budget into quality assurance practices is seen as less than desirable. Second, respondents are concerned about the adequacy of the quantity and capacity of the staff in the university quality assurance centres to cover all quality assurance aspects. Understandably, they might only focus on the administrative aspects of quality assurance (e.g. circulating information on coming accreditations or merging parts of the self-assessment reports), leaving the academic aspects (e.g. developing criteria and standards for teacher professional development programs) for faculties (Interviews 26, 27, 12, 20).



In the next section of this chapter, I investigate quality assurance implementation at the member universities and triangulate the above findings.

#### *6.1.3.2 Internal assessment activities already in place*

The interviews with both policy-makers and policy-implementers at the member universities, and the study of their websites, revealed that the following internal assessment activities were already in place:

- *Periodical review of curriculum, annual review of course syllabuses*: these academic activities are conducted across the institution, based on common criteria.
- *Staff performance evaluation*: this is conducted once a year, across the institution, based on common criteria, in three main areas - teaching/workload completion, professional development, and research outputs. A reward/punishment mechanism is in place.
- *Student evaluations of teaching, curriculum and support services/facilities*: this is conducted twice a year, across the institution, based on procedures and templates suggested at the institutional level, with the university's adaptation if needed. The results of the evaluation are compiled by the quality assurance centres and sent to relevant faculties/departments for their follow-up.
- *Staff evaluation on the performance of their university administrative departments*: this has been conducted in university 1 and university 4.
- *Staff evaluation of their management board*: This is conducted once a year, across the institution.
- *Inspection of teaching and learning*: this is conducted throughout the year, by the designated inspectors, across the institution, normally without prior notice. The results are used for staff performance evaluation.

The above internal assessment activities align closely with the Chiba principles for internal quality assurance. At the espoused level, the procedures and

instruments for assessment are inherent (i.e. they are imposed on the case universities from either the MoET or the umbrella institution).

In the next section, I examine how these activities fit into the quality assurance framework of the member universities.

## **6.2 The current quality assurance implementation at the universities**

In the preceding section, an overview of the institution under investigation, and its external and internal quality assurance has been provided. In this section, the emerging themes from the interview data are reported, revealing how the member universities are conducting their quality assurance (i.e. how the universities are enacting the imposed framework and building their internal quality assurance system, taking into account the inherent capacity and available resources). The framework for investigation, as described in the literature review in Chapter 3, is used for guiding the analysis.

### **6.2.1 Key components of the universities' quality assurance frameworks**

#### ***6.2.1.1 Quality assurance focus: accountability or improvement?***

A study of their quality assurance documents shows that the six member universities have, more or less, gained certain achievements in their external quality assurance. This is reflected in the completion of two cyclical accreditations at the institutional level, and the number of programs that have been regionally, nationally or institutionally accredited. These are shown in the table below. It should be noted that although the number of programs accredited only accounts for approximately 23% of the total number of programs on offer institution-wide, as claimed by one policy-maker from university 2, the institution is the first public institution in Vietnam to have participated in program level accreditation, by various sets of standards and criteria (Interview 07-PM1).

	U1	U2	U3	U4	U5	U6
Quality assurance commencement	2007	2005	2005	2007	2004	2006
1 <sup>st</sup> cycle of institutionally accredited university	2008	2007	2007	2008	2007	2008
2 <sup>nd</sup> cycle of institutionally accredited university	2013	2012	2012	2013	2012	2013
Number of programs regionally accredited (AUN)	3	1	2	3	2	0
Number of programs nationally accredited	0	0	1	0	0	0
Number of programs institutionally accredited	1	2	6	2	1	1
Other quality certification		MoET accredited university in 2005			ISO9001 <sup>13</sup> in 2009	

**Table 6: Overview of the member universities' quality assurance profiles up to the end of 2014**

*Source: Document 1(Appendix 4)*

### The quality assurance system in place at the universities

Since the institution participated in the quality assurance initiative generated by the ministry in 2005, its member universities have endeavoured to meet the external MoET and institution requirements. At the same time, the institution has invested effort, time and resources in developing their internal quality assurance systems. Unlike many public university leaders who are ignorant of [internal] quality assurance, as highlighted earlier in this chapter, the interviewed leaders of the universities under study appear to be aware of the importance of a strong internal quality assurance system. For example, an interviewed leader from university 3 asserted: 'we have a comprehensive quality assurance mechanism comprising of three levels: the university quality assurance council; managers of

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<sup>13</sup> ISO 9001 belongs to the **ISO 9000** family of quality management systems standards, designed to help organisations ensure that they meet the needs of customers and other stakeholders while meeting statutory and regulatory requirements related to a product.

the functional departments in charge of ensuring quality of academic, research and other aspects of operation; and the quality assurance implementers at academic faculties' (Interview 06-PM1). An interviewed leader from university 5 shared a similar view: 'we are the first university in the institution that has a quality assurance centre, and probably the first university in Vietnam that applied CDIO [Conceive-Design-Implement-Operate]<sup>14</sup> approach in curriculum development ... quality assurance has always accompanied all our operations' (Interview 15-PM1).

There is consistency in the policy-makers' positive perceptions on the establishment and operation of the quality assurance centres and systems. A policy-making leader from university 2 claimed that 'the quality assurance centre acts as a bridge, providing the governing board with consultation on which aspects need focus, while monitoring and supporting the academic faculties to achieve their quality improvement objectives' (Interview 07-PM1). Another policy-making leader from university 1 viewed the quality assurance centre in his university as a contact point operating in collaboration with other functioning units and requiring system-wide cooperation (Interview 5-PM1)

From the perspective of the executive leaders who implement policies, however, there are still concerns over the size, duties and capacity of the quality centres and their staff. For example, an executive leader from university 6 said that 'we have a small size quality assurance centre but its functions and duties have not been clearly defined' (Interview 14-PI1). An executive leader from university 3 also complained: 'the role of the quality assurance centre in the university is still blurred, not widely known by staff in the campus. They mainly act as coordinators or "class monitors" in charge of collecting evidence, saving evidence and presenting evidence. They haven't activated their role as quality assurance experts (Interview 03- PI2).

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<sup>14</sup> CDIO: Conceive-Design-Implement-Operate is an innovative educational framework for curricular planning and outcome-based assessment, collaboratively developed in 2000 by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and three Swedish universities, now applied by many universities world-wide. *Source: Wikipedia*

As briefly described in Section 6.1.3.1 above, the quantity and capacity of university quality assurance staff are still limited. Nevertheless, it is understandable that the existence of the quality assurance centre and the line personnel in charge of quality assurance in functional departments and academic faculties only form the “hardware” of the quality assurance body. The “software” required for it to operate to good effect comes from the enactment of the adopted quality assurance framework and the interaction and collaboration of all actors involved.

#### Accountability vs. improvement

As the interviewed policy-maker from the MoET highlighted, top Vietnamese public universities were led through a learning by doing process; from accreditation to awareness-raising of the need to improve educational quality, to building their own internal quality assurance. This scenario seems to be true with the case institution.

One emerging theme from the interview data with both policy-making and executive leaders was that accountability comes first as a necessary condition, and internal improvement comes next as a sufficient condition for good quality assurance practice. In this regard, one university 2 leader noted that ‘external quality assurance requirements are actually opportunities for us to identify our current strengths and weaknesses, in order to plan for improvement, such as changing direction, renovating the curriculum or changing teaching methodologies’ (Interview 07-PM1). Similarly, one university 3 executive leader recalled her experience that ‘in the process of preparing a self-assessment report for AUN accreditation, we were requested by the governing board to identify our improvement need areas, for example one weakness of our fast-track program was the lack of teachers’ research capacity, then one objective in our action plan would be strengthening research capacity’ (Interview 01-PI1).

Accountability requirements facilitate the development of the universities' internal quality assurance. This is reflected in the following views and experiences:

We take the AUN and the institution's sets of standards and criteria for program accreditation as the state-of-the-art for our quality assurance of bachelor programs. (U4 leader, interview 21-PM2)

In the past we just tried to do better than ourselves, but now we have clear and transparent criteria of quality work, as a framework of reference. (U6 leader, interview 10-PM2)

We now have our own set of standards and requirements for quality teaching/teachers in terms of qualifications, methodology innovation, publishing; and for quality programs - curriculum development and renovation. (U5 leader, interview 18-PI1)

After five years with two cycles of external quality assurance, it can be said that our university simultaneously attend to external assessment and internal quality improvement, towards the ultimate goal of improving the educational quality. (U4 leader, interview 24-PM1)

In the process of developing their internal quality assurance mechanism, some of the member universities address both the administrative and academic aspects of their operations. As stated by an executive leader from university 1:

In the beginning, I think quality assurance in my university focused on the administrative aspect, for example, the set of regulations that teachers and researchers had to follow. Recently, the focus has been shifted to development of the core part - the academic team, for example sending teachers and researchers to short-term and long-term higher education, or to collaborative research projects at overseas universities. (U1 leader, interview 11-PI2)

Another executive leader from university 6 also advised that 'our leaders care about building a professional environment in which each individual is proactive in getting updated, and improvement activities in human resource development and program renovation are regularly conducted' (Interview 14-PI1).

On one hand, it seems that the power tension between accountability and improvement (Brennan & Shah, 2000b; Harvey & Newton, 2007) is satisfactorily addressed in most of the member universities. On the other hand, one cannot overlook the issue that there is an incompatibility between reality and desirable

outcome (as reflected by some executive leaders from universities 1, 2 and 3). Specifically, accountability creates pressure for internal improvement while the available resources are perceived as not adequate for implementing the changes. The staff at the policy enactment level seem to be ‘driven into fast-speed changes and this hot development would lead to quality improvement, however, the push-to-ripe banana is not as tasty as the naturally ripe one<sup>15</sup>’ (Interview 3-PI2). Similar contextual factors affecting the implementation of quality assurance in the case universities are dealt with in more detail in the following sections.

Many interviewed leaders consistently perceived that in the long-run, accountability will become the inevitable result of internal improvement (Interviews 15-U5, 10-U6, 06-U3, 21-U4). These leaders believed that the shift in focus between accountability and improvement would depend on timing and the requirements of the MoET. In the first place, they learned to practise quality assurance by responding to external quality assurance requirements, such as program accreditation. During this experiential learning process, their quality assurance awareness was increased. Then they took the initiative to address their internal quality improvement needs. The belief of one policy-making leader from university 5 that ‘when we are strong inside, the outsiders will acknowledge our strengths’ (Interview 15-PM1), is echoed by some other leaders (Interviews 10, 06, 21).

#### *6.2.1.2 Leadership and management: dimension(s) of leadership in place?*

The university leaders at the policy-making and executive levels, shared their real-life experiences (their actions in quality assurance) and also their insights and perceptions on the roles of leaders in the universities’ quality assurance. Their actions and perceptions were analysed in light of Middlehurst’s (1997) framework. This suggests that there are three dimensions of institutional leadership that influence quality assurance practices, namely: the conceptual and analytical dimension; the structural and systematic dimension; and the

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<sup>15</sup> Colloquial Vietnamese, meaning that it requires time and necessary resources for any change to take place and to produce good outcomes.

motivational and behavioural dimension. Interviewed leaders' perceived dimensions were therefore coded to correspond to these three dimensions, plus any code emerging from the data.

### Conceptual and analytical dimension of leadership

Many policy-making leaders shared perceptions and leadership actions that fall into the conceptual and analytical dimension. For example, one leader from university 6 perceived a leader's vision as one condition for improving educational quality of the university. He noted, 'we have Vision 2030 when the enrolment will be 3000, not 300 as the present, together with strategic goals and periodical development planning. If we don't get well-prepared by enhancing internal quality, we may not realise that vision' (Interview 4-PM1). Another leader from university 4 highlighted the importance of leaders having a clear vision and consistently communicating that vision to all staff. He said:

all the heads of the units need to be well aware of this [vision] and share the [leaders'] compassion, the determination and support this. Then the people who implement the quality assurance activities - teachers, researchers, lab members, admin staff - all these people need to be communicated on the policy as well as the quality assurance plan. (Interview 21-PM2)

As a result, staff awareness of quality assurance is raised through a shared vision and goals. This was echoed by a leader from university 2 (Interview 17- PM2).

In three universities 1, 4 and 5, the policy-making leaders were able to articulate clearly their strategic visions (Interviews 05-PM1, 24-PM1, 25-PM2). Accordingly, university 1 is to become a research-based university with their strongest faculty reaching international standards; university 4 aims to have their programs accredited by international agencies; and university 5 sets their quality bar higher than the demand of the current market, in other words, approaching international quality standards. Relatedly, one university 5 leader shared his perception that 'education is a type of commodity, and quality is only in place when the demand for that commodity is set high' and that 'setting a high standard helps ensure quality in everything we do' (Interview 18-PM1).



Related to this conceptual and analytical dimension and according to some executive leaders, the policy-making leaders play a decisive role in what direction the university will take. These interviewed executive leaders perceived that their policy-making leaders' clear and well-communicated orientation had a positive impact on staff awareness raising, and of the need to improve quality towards the institutional goals (Interviews 22-PI2, 13-PI2, 14-PI1, 12-PI1).

### Structural and systematic dimension of leadership

Reflecting the structural and systematic dimension of leadership in quality assurance, many interviewed leaders claimed their direct engagement in the planning and setting of structures for institutional as well as staff performance improvement. One executive leader from university 5 said that 'we [executive leaders] are in charge of developing strategic plans from the faculty level upwards, then we will negotiate with the governing board on targets and focal missions for the academic year, they [the governing board] make sure the faculties get enough pressure' (Interview 18-PI1). Similarly, one policy-making leader from university 3 shared his experience in applying a log frame matrix in strategic planning at all levels of his university (a systematic, visual approach to designing, executing and assessing projects that considers the relationships between available resources, planned activities, and desired changes) . He said, 'log frame planning helps us monitor our process and verify our outcomes at specific timing' (Interview 06-PM1). Recalling the recent curriculum renovation project in his university, another leader from university 3 acknowledged that 'I highly appreciate the governing board leaders, they act as they speak, they set deadlines, participate in appraisal committees, provide critical feedback, and supervise follow-up improvement plans' (Interview 27-PM2).

Regarding another aspect of this leadership dimension, there is a consistency in the leaders' engagement in identifying stakeholders and searching for partnership and collaborative opportunities. For example, an executive leader from university 5 stated that 'the governing board are pioneers in searching for research partners and collaborative projects for the university and contributing to the development

of research centres' (Interview 19-PI2). One policy-making leader from university 2 shared similar experiences in his university and asserted that 'our leaders [the governing board] are also high profile researchers and therefore they create enabling conditions for research development' (Interview 07-PM1). In this vein, two leaders from university 4 reported on their engagement in identifying prospective stakeholders who could partner with their universities in several projects (Interviews 21-PM2, 23-PI2).

One policy-making leader from university 6 recalled the fundamental changes that they had conducted, that positively impacted on education quality, including:

increasing self-study and student research and providing smaller size classes for more practice, thus improving the students' teaching quality during placement at school ... [and] recruiting students with personality traits suitable for teaching jobs from year 1 through to year 3, and offering credit-based non-prerequisite courses as general psychology/ pedagogy to year 1 students, thus improving the quality of the student intakes. (Interview 4-PM1)

#### Motivational and behavioural dimension of leadership

One emerging theme from the interview data aligns with the motivational and behavioural leadership dimension. Many interviewed leaders stated that they either directly granted or acknowledged the positive impact of the leaders' efforts and investment in creating an engaging environment based on partnership and mutual trust. At the espousal level of quality assurance, they 'communicated the institutional strategic plans, including the quality assurance component, via all possible channels' (Interview 17-PM2) and 'involved multi layers of leaders/managers in planning' (Interview 21-PM2). At the enactment level of quality assurance, they 'provided necessary resources' (Interview 15-PM1) and 'created professional development opportunities for everyone' (Interview 26-PI1). Many leaders consistently perceived that leaders' direct engagement in and dissemination of good practices actually motivated staff and raised staff awareness of changing good habits or detailed quality actions into a sustainable quality culture (Interviews 6-PM1, 18-PI1, 23-PI2, 24-PM1).

Apart from the three main themes- the three leadership dimension, some themes emerged from the interview data. The positive views of university leadership relate to the leaders' own actions. Accordingly, those leaders who directly engaged themselves in quality assurance initiatives, attended to detailed quality actions, or demonstrated strong commitment to quality assurance, were perceived by their subordinates as having a positive impact on raising quality improvement awareness (Interviews 27-PM2, 08-PM2, 14-PI1, 15-PM1).

The negative views of the interviewed leaders related to conventional top-down leadership or culturally affected leadership and its negative impact on institutional quality assurance. One executive leader from university 1 noticed that the top-down leadership in her university seemed not to work well as 'the academic staff are scientists, so when they are not happy with the policies, they perform the tasks for the sake of fulfilling the requirement, instead of resisting [against those policies]' (Interview 12-PI1). This leader elaborated her point, saying, 'at the moment, we [at the faculty level] try to fulfil the quality assurance requirements as written on documents, however the direct engagement of policy-makers is not obvious' (Interview 12-PI1). A leader from university 2 also shared similar observations, saying, 'there is no clear connection between the quality assurance plan and the university's strategic 5-year plan' (Interview 20-PI1).

As to culturally-affected leadership, one leader from university 3 asserted that:

In Vietnam there is a lack of critical view towards leadership. Leaders in my university are "know-all" people as they have access to important information. As they are leaders and they know everything, people just follow, whether towards the right direction or not. Therefore, if leaders go off-track or have poor supervision, quality will be like a train running downhill without control and the quality of a whole program may be under no one's control. We had experience of having a vice dean for academic affairs, who failed to address conflicts over the contents of the renewed curriculum. That's why there are still some academic courses that we should question the quality, although the stamp "accredited" has been sealed. (Interview 27-PM2)

This view was shared by some other leaders from university 4 (Interview 26-PI1), from university 1 (Interview 12-PI1), and from university 2 (Interview 20-PI1).

### *6.2.1.3 A culture of continuous quality improvement: what type of quality culture is in place?*

The emerging themes from the interview data reflected two codes: the conditions for a sustainable quality culture (The European Universities Association, 2006; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Yorke, 2000; Gordon, 2002; Boaden & Dale, 1992); and the types of quality culture (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008) evident at the member universities.

#### *Conditions for a sustainable quality culture*

Data analysis identified that all five elements forming the condition for a sustainable quality culture were evident in the case institution. However, not all of these elements were found at all the member universities. Therefore, the differences are discussed further, as are the implications in terms of strengthening their quality culture. In the following section, significant themes are presented, illustrating these five elements.

#### *Shared values, beliefs and expectations*

First, all of the interviewed leaders at the institutional level agreed on the importance of building and sustaining a quality culture if the universities choose to improve internally. In the three universities with the longer history of development (universities 1, 2 and 3), the majority of interviewees confirmed that a quality culture had been well-established in their universities, even before the quality assurance policy had been introduced. Continuous quality improvement has been an inherent trait of their organisational culture. It is the tradition and shared value of these flagship universities that teaching/learning/research quality can be enhanced through inventing new technologies, renovating the curriculum, offering new programs, and advancing collaborative research projects with national and international institutions (Interviews 05, 08, 12, 11 from U1; Interviews 07, 20 from U2; Interviews 06, 03, 27 from U3). Examples of shared values include university 2's belief that 'everyone self-improve and self-upgrade their level' (Interview 20-PI1, p. 10); university 1's 'every teacher should be a

bright example on self-study and self-creation' (Interview 08-PM2, p. 6); or university 3's 'towards professionalism and friendliness' (Interview 06-PM1, p. 8). Shared values, beliefs and expectations and certainly evident in these universities.

#### *Awareness and commitment of all levels*

The next element to sustain quality culture is staff awareness of the need to develop a quality culture. This was evident in all the member universities, but at different levels. According to the majority of interviewed leaders, staff awareness and its positive consequence – a commitment to quality and quality improvement - manifested in the 'specific quality actions' of staff (Interview 06-PM1, p. 3); in 'the way their work is smoothly conducted, in the comfortable inter-personal interaction' (Interview 15-PM1, p. 9); and in the fact that 'improving quality in teaching and research became an intrinsic motivation, and quality actions became routinised' (Interview 8-PM2, p. 5). These leaders shared the perception that quality is not something abstract. Regular quality actions mean doing things right, sharing and learning from each other (Interviews 10-PM2, 15-PM1, 06-PM1, 12-PI1); and quality culture can be translated as professionalism and responsibility (Interviews 06-PM1, 07-PM1, 15-PM1, 04-PM1, 05-PM1). Leaders consistently believed that only when the culture of self-improvement is individually internalised and quality actions become common practice, can the quality of teaching, research and services of the whole faculty or the whole university be sustainably enhanced. These leaders' viewpoints appear to be consistent with those of Barnett (1992), Harvey and Knight (1996), and Harvey and Stensaker (2008).

It should be noted that awareness raising is difficult to measure as it relates to people's minds, and often, is easier said than done. On reflecting on awareness raising in their universities, some leaders observed certain obstacles. A policy-making leader from university 6 expressed his concern: 'It is difficult to develop quality culture when people's knowledge, attitude and democracy levels are not high enough. When the staff still complete their work just to stay on the pay-roll,

it would be very difficult to change their attitude and raise their awareness’ (Interview 04-PM1, p. 12). One leader from university 2 complained that ‘for seniors with over 30 years’ experience, awareness raising needs to be done tactfully’ (Interview 07-PM1, p. 11). A leader from university 5 also said ‘it’s dangerous when a part of the staff think that because their salaries are low, they just do their job at the satisfactory level, no need to improve’ (Interview 15-PM1, p. 7). Two leaders from universities 1 and 3 both critically admitted that not all in their universities are committed to quality culture and that the awareness and commitment at the grassroots level appear to be less than desired (Interview 06-PM1, Interview 05-PM1).

Due to the scope of this study, as outlined in Chapter 4, interviews were not conducted with teachers or administrative staff. Therefore, the researcher could not include their perspectives on leadership commitment to quality culture from the enactment level. However, the data analysis indicated that the commitment of leadership and management through quality thinking at the espoused level is evident in all the member universities.

#### *Transparent internal processes and a reward/punishment mechanism*

Apart from the above elements, the emerging data from the interviews also shows that the case universities used their internal processes to scaffold the development and reinforcement of the quality culture. Many interviewed leaders shared their perception as well as experience in this process. For example, one leader from university 6 said ‘friendly-user guidelines and evidence- based task performance help build up quality culture’ (Interview 10-PM2, p. 6). Another leader from the same university also stated that ‘quality culture needs pushing in the beginning, with an evidence-based mechanism, and accompanying regulations and internal processes’ (Interview 14-PI1, p. 4).

One policy-making leader from university 2 claimed that ‘one important measure to sustain quality culture is using a transparent reward/punishment mechanism to encourage good practices and self-responsibility towards common work’

(Interview 7-PM1, p. 11). In the same vein, one leader from university 1 highlighted that the reward/punishment mechanism in his university used to focus on administrative aspects. For example, he explained, those teachers caught by the inspectors for lateness or not following the time-table had their performance evaluation score reduced, negatively impacting their annual incentive. However, he continued, his university has recently shifted more attention to the academic aspect. For example, teachers with excellent research or supervision outcomes are rewarded and recognised (Interview 08-PM2).

Raising awareness is an ongoing process and once it is successfully done, the desired outcome would be staff willingness to change and improve. When staff awareness is not up to the expected level, a set of transparent internal processes and a fair reward/punishment scheme would help promulgate quality culture.

More detailed findings on the current internal processes in place at the member universities can be found in section 6.2.1.6 below.

#### *Teamwork based on mutual trust, sharing and openness*

As Boaden and Dale (1992) claimed, teamwork is an important feature of all quality management efforts in general and helps sustain the quality culture.

Data analysis revealed that only in university 6, the smallest university, was the role of teamwork mentioned. A leader from this university reflected:

The first representation of quality culture in my university is mutual trust and openness. We consider each other a family. The second representation is diffusion and sharing. Teachers are willing to share, for example what they learnt from a recent international conference. Older generations and younger ones are connected and learn from each other. (Interview 10-PM2, p. 6)

The finding that teamwork as one of the conditions for quality culture, is present in university 6, while absent in the other universities may be related to the small size of its faculties, with one faculty in university 6 being the same size as a division within a faculty in university 3. In the former, staff work more closely with each other as manageable teams. Another explanation might be that the role of teamwork in quality culture formation in the bigger universities, is submerged

by other more obvious elements, such as well-practiced internal processes or strong staff commitment.

#### Types of quality culture evident at the universities

Data analysis against the categories of quality culture in HEIs as informed by the literature (as discussed in Chapter 3), revealed that the two types - responsive and regenerative quality culture - prevailed in the case universities.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the case institution and its member universities began the quality assurance process externally, through accreditation. In other words, their quality cultures, either inherent before quality assurance was introduced or in the early stage of formation, were led by external demands (i.e. that of the MoET). All the member universities adopted the responsive mode, taking the demands as opportunities to review their practices and explore how to make compliance requirements and policies beneficial to their internal improvement.

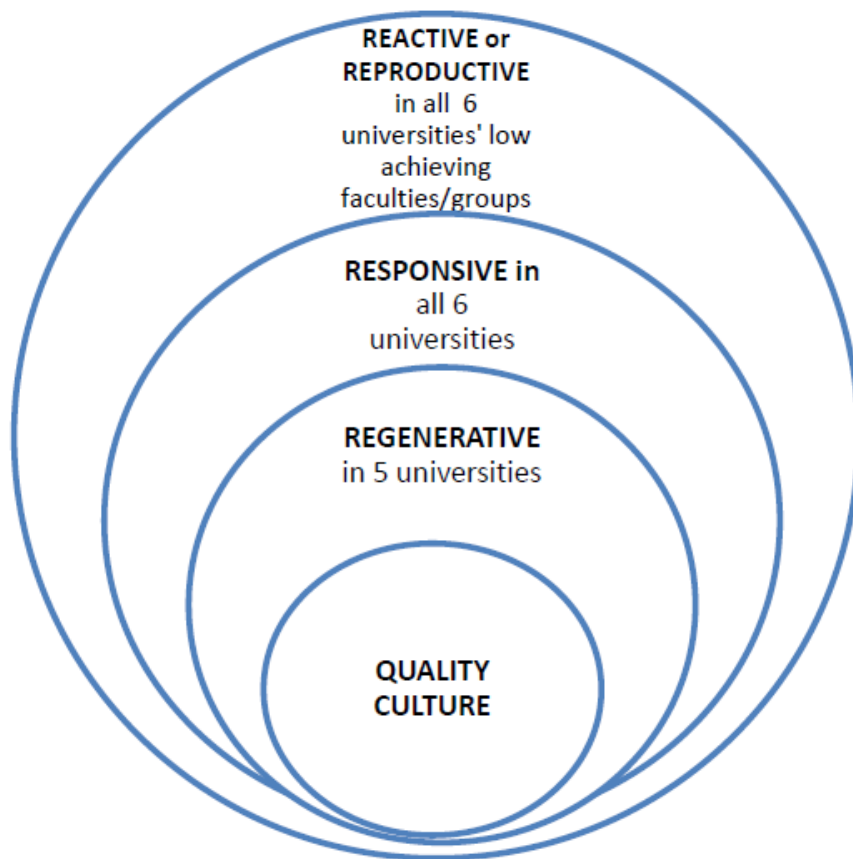
According to the interviewed leaders from universities 1 to 5, once their quality awareness and practices were improved, they shifted their focus to internal improvement while remaining fully aware of external demands. In these universities, institutional core values were reconceptualised to promote quality culture, such as the 'professionalism and friendliness' values of university 3 (Interview 06-PM1); and the 'excellence, creation, cooperation and social responsibility' of U1 (Interview 05-PM1). In addition, future goals were reframed, such as the 'research-based university' goal of universities 1, 2 and 4 (Interviews 05, 07 and 24 respectively); the 'first faculty offering international program' of university 1 (Interview 08-PM2); or the 'internationally accredited programs' of university 4 (Interview 24-PM1) and university 5 (Interview 15-PM1). The data show that these universities have adopted the regenerative mode.

Interestingly, the interviewed leaders from all member universities shared their perception that even when the university-wide quality culture becomes a dynamic regenerative mode, some faculties, units or groups still perform tasks in reactive



or reproductive modes. For example, the product-oriented or achievement-driven quality assurance practices at university 3 (Interview 27-PM2) and quality improvement as a result of the introduction of a new reward/punishment scheme at university 2 (Interview 07-PM1), both reflect the reproductive mode. The lack of commitment from all staff at university 1 (Interview 05-PM1), and from those at the grassroots level at university 5 (Interview 15-PM1), indicate little or no sense of ownership and the adoption of a reactive mode.

The figure below provides a visual summary of the actual representation of all four categories of quality culture at the case universities.



**Figure 9: Quality culture types within the case universities**

#### Other emerging themes

In the experiential learning process of implementing quality assurance, the universities that had a well-established quality culture (universities 1, 2 and 3)

had opportunities to standardise their actions, and turn their intuitive good actions into systematic practices aligned with the adopted APQN quality assurance conceptual framework (Interview 20-PI1). This reflective view was shared by a policy-making leader from university 3:

The culture for quality improvement has become more well-refined, resulting in an evidence-based culture of working and problem solving. For example, the documentation of meetings and follow-up plans, the digitalisation of feedback from students for later usage, the recording of evidence, become routinised. I think the positive effect of accreditation is the refinement of the quality culture. For example, in a recent program accreditation, there was a comment that we overlook feedback on the curriculum from teachers, students and external stakeholders. Then, in post-accreditation time, we conducted surveys with all these stakeholders, and processed their feedback, not putting them on the shelves as before. (Interview 27-PM2, p. 10)

Data analysis also identified a good number of emerging themes that are worth consideration.

The first is that ‘although quality culture is in place, is being further reinforced and becomes more popular among staff, the product-oriented<sup>16</sup> quality assurance still prevails over the process-driven one’ (Interview 27-PM2, p. 11). As discussed in Chapter 5, this product-oriented approach to quality assurance can be related to a typical feature of Vietnamese education, including higher education, which is the obsession with achievement, both of teachers and students. The policy-making leader from university 3 expressed his concern over this common practice:

in my university, quality is perceived as high achievement, that’s why people view that the more committees are established, the more “certified” seals are stamped, the more accreditation certificates are uploaded on our websites, the higher the educational quality is. (Interview 27- PM2, p. 8)

This scenario is also found in universities 1, 2 and 4 (Interviews 12, 20, 26). Sustaining the quality culture would require a process-driven approach (Harvey, 2002), accompanied by careful planning and monitoring.

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<sup>16</sup> Some interviewees (27, 25, 03) used this term to refer to the quality assurance practice that only targets one-off accreditation and neglects post-accreditation improvement plans or continuous improvement needs.

Another interesting finding is that professionalism, one feature of quality culture, in most of the case universities, can be affected by a problem called ‘the sensitiveness in inter-personal relationships’ (Interview 21-PM2, p. 4). A leader from university 4 gave examples:

We know about the quality of teaching of some teachers, as revealed in feedback from students - not following the course syllabus, but we do not address this. It is not easy to assure teaching quality when students respect teachers, hence avoid low rating for their teaching, or when teachers neglect their students, hence giving higher marks. Therefore, the feedback does not reflect the true situation of teaching and learning. (Interview 21-PM2, p. 4)

This excerpt suggests that because of the tendency to maintain harmony rather than engage in conflict among managers and teachers/staff, and students respecting their teachers - two desirable traits of a Confucian culture (see Chapter 4) - people choose to avoid speaking the truth, in order to keep harmonious inter-personal relationships.

#### *6.2.1.4 Stakeholder engagement*

Data analysis identified three main themes under stakeholder engagement: the groups of stakeholders engaged; the engagement activities; and the barriers to effective stakeholder engagement.

From the perspectives and experiences of the interviewed leaders, the six member universities can be divided into two groups: one group adopted an active approach to engaging stakeholders in their education programs and activities (universities 1, 4 and 5); and the other group adopted a responsive approach to engaging stakeholders (universities 2, 3 and 6).

#### *Groups of stakeholders engaged and the engagement activities*

As for the groups of stakeholders, all four main groups suggested by Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2003) and Westerheijden et al. (2013) are reported to be involved in the operations of the universities, but not at the same level and frequency at each. For convenience in presenting the findings, the two groups, providers of funding and users of outputs (employers), are referred to as external stakeholders.

The two groups, users of products (students) and employees of the sector (academic and administrative staff), are referred to as internal stakeholders.

As the case institution is a public one, operating on funding from the government under the direct supervision of the Cabinet, the providers of funding stakeholder category obviously means government. Specifically, as discussed in Chapter 5, certain academic aspects, such as the inclusion of compulsory common ideological subjects, or funding allocation based on the approved enrolment quota, as well as the personnel requirements for academic and administrative positions, are under the control of the MoET. In addition, financial disbursement has to follow national regulations as controlled by the Ministry of Finance (Document 9, Appendix 5). The engagement of the government as the biggest funding agency, in all operations of the institution, is inherent and taken for granted.

In the section that follows, the groups of stakeholders are identified, in connection with the activities in which they are engaged.

#### [The most typical stakeholder-engagement activity](#)

There is one educational activity in which the engagement of all groups of stakeholders, other than funders, can be seen across the institution. As required by the institution, its member universities implemented periodical curriculum reviews, adopting the CDIO curriculum planning framework developed by MIT and other universities (2000). During this process, all the member universities were required to seek feedback on the current curriculum in use from current employers of graduates, curriculum developing experts, current teachers and students using the curriculum, and alumni (all interviews except for Interview 16 [Ministry level]).

With reference to this common task, a policy-making leader from university 4 emphasised that:

We make sure that the learning outcomes of our programs match the expectations and requirements of prospective employers and social demands,

by reviewing the curriculum and course syllabus in a cycle of 4 years for BA, 2 years for MA and 3 years for PhD. We surveyed external stakeholders and asked for their evaluation of our programs and graduates. (Interview 21-PM2, p. 7)

An executive leader from the same university confirmed that for the major revision of the curriculum, after four or five years of implementation, many surveys would be conducted and processed, together with recommendations from teachers, the division, and the scientific council (Interview 26-PI1).

An interviewed leader from university 5 stated that

the external stakeholders as scientists, experts in the field of specialisation, prospective employers were invited to provide detailed feedback on the curriculum and courses. For some programs, we even held 20 review seminars. It is important that the project [curriculum/course review] leader can make decisions on what to change and what to keep (Interview 18-PI1, p. 10).

Another executive leader from this university confirmed that the curriculum review was conducted following several stages and involved all related external and internal stakeholders (Interview 19-PI2).

One interesting finding should be noted. Two executive leaders from university 2 asserted that curriculum review in their university was based on students' needs and the accommodating capacity of the academic body. As they put it: 'it's not easy at all to add a new course to the program, we have to wait for prime time for both supply [teachers' capacity] and demand [students' need]' (Interview 20-PI1, p. 6); and 'students' needs and the developmental trend of society have an impact on our curriculum' (Interview 22-PI2, p. 3).

#### Other stakeholder-engagement activities

In university 4, where stakeholder engagement appears to be the most successful compared to other member universities, a policy-making leader proudly reported:

We have done good stakeholder engagement, for example, we have received funding for lab equipment from external source, about 300 to 500 million

VND<sup>17</sup> per year, they also provided joint research projects, scholarships for students with excellent contribution to those research projects. We organised research teams and invited enterprises to join, after they assessed our proposals and approved, they funded for the research and for labs. The enterprises cared about practical stuff, they are willing to fund for joint projects that would bring mutual benefits. They fund for seminars and short-term training, take our students for internship, provide scholarships and job offers for our students. (Interview 21-PM2, p. 18)

Other leaders from university 4 asserted that they collaborate with industries and international organisations in both training and research projects (Interview 24-PM1); that enterprises provided lab equipment and practice kits for students to work in labs (Interview 26-PI1); and that some big telecom companies were invited to give guest talks on transmission software for students (Interview 23-PI2).

University 5, which was involved in many government consultancy and research projects, established a network with many big corporations, joint-ventures and import-export enterprises. Therefore, they could send their students to do internships in these corporations and enterprises, to acquire practical experience and learn to problem-solve (Interview 25-PM2). Additionally, the university invited guest-speakers, such as economic experts, to give guest lectures, seminar presentations, or deliver course components. This practice ‘helps enhance practical knowledge for students and thus, the quality of graduates’ (Interview 18-PI1, p. 9). The engagement of international organisations also brought about more and more opportunities for students to attend overseas training and conferences. These chances ‘motivate the students to study and conduct research’ (Interview 19-PI2, p. 5).

The link between university 1 and relevant enterprises is well established and, as a result, ‘many scholarships and job offers were provided [by these stakeholders] to the students’ (Interview 8-PM2, p. 20). An executive leader from university 1 stated that in seeking feedback from current employers of their graduates, they received positive responses, as ‘many organisations approached us to recruit only the graduates from our faculty. I think it’s an encouraging signal for the assurance

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<sup>17</sup> Equivalent to US\$14,000-US\$24,000 at the time of data collection.

of outputs that our faculty aims at' (Interview 12-PI1, p. 6). This executive leader added that their study of the specific needs of enterprises informed necessary changes to their courses, such as the integration into course content of projects and assignments with highly practical and applicable models (Interview 12-PI1).

Similarly, a policy-making leader from university 4 confirmed that feedback and external stakeholder requirements have a constructive impact on the curriculum or syllabus choice. This leader critically admitted that 'many areas are pink in our eyes, but when assessed by stakeholders, these can be grey, or even black<sup>18</sup>. We have to accept that and find ways to improve our program' (Interview 21-PM2, p. 4). Another executive leader from the same university noted that many teachers in his faculty participated in part-time projects for big corporations or big research institutes, and could, therefore, better understand what graduates need in the world of work. This knowledge, together with feedback from employers, informed changes to the programs, such as 'the recent integration of soft-skills to the curriculum' (Interview 26-PI1, p. 8), or 'include an internship module to the program, not practising in university labs, but in real systems at site' (Interview 26-PI1 p. 9).

Unlike the universities in the active group that are pro-active at stakeholder engagement, the universities in the passive group (universities 2, 3 and 6) seemed to have limited access to, and engagement with, external stakeholders. One possible explanation is that these universities offer programs on social sciences and humanity, which are not directly related to business-oriented and resource industries and enterprises.

University 6's partners in provincial departments of education and training, and representatives from schools were invited to graduation thesis defence, so they could select suitable candidates for their schools (Interview 04-PM1). This university has a network of satellite schools and experienced teachers within them. These teachers are regularly invited to teach sample lessons for university 6

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<sup>18</sup> Vietnamese colloquialism, meaning 'the areas that we think are very good may be assessed as bad or "need improving" by the stakeholders'

students, to prepare them for their placements at schools (Interview 14-PI1). Also, the university organised fieldtrips to all the host schools during and at the end of the placements. The feedback from these schools was processed in a timely manner to address any issues during placements (Interview 10-PM2) and informed necessary changes to the educational programs (Interview 13-PI2). There was consistency in the interviewed university 6 leaders' positive perceptions about the engagement of school leaders in assuring placement quality.

Data analysis of the interviews with leaders from universities 2 and 3 does not indicate any significant engagement activities, with the exception of involving external stakeholders in curriculum/course reviews.

All of the interviewed leaders admitted that the role of alumni had been overlooked, and that they had not engaged with this resourceful stakeholder group.

To some extent (greater in active than passive universities), the engagement of external stakeholders in several academic operations, while addressing the need and capacity of internal stakeholders, contributed to the monitoring and improvement of educational quality. It also helped enhance educational practicality and students' transformative learning.

Regarding the involvement of internal stakeholders in quality assurance practices, there was consistency in all interviewed leaders' positive perceptions about the engagement of students in evaluating the teaching-learning process, and in recommending improvement needs in the curriculum and courses.

In universities 3 and 5, all interviewed leaders confirmed that their teachers were invited to provide feedback or recommend changes concerning the content, methodologies and assessment during course or curriculum reviews. There were no significant findings in the other universities in this regard.

In universities 1 and 4, teachers were surveyed on the performance of supporting and administrative units (Interviews 05, 24).



In all six universities, teachers, staff and students were engaged in the formulation of internal P&P. However, as some interviewed leaders commented: a) students were involved only in the formulation of procedures related to their study (Interviews 11, 14, 21, 17); and b) many staff and teachers did not take the opportunity to provide serious feedback and often only realised that there were remaining concerns *after* the policy or procedures had been approved and come into effect (Interviews 03, 26, 10, 12, 20).

Due to the scope of this study, the researcher did not interview teachers or students for their perceptions on how much these engaging activities contributed to the enhancement of teaching, learning, research and administrative quality, or to what extent they invested their time and efforts in performing these tasks.

#### *6.2.1.5 Cooperation and collaboration*

As discussed in Chapter 3, necessary components of the quality assurance mechanism in a HEI are cooperation and collaboration among its units of academic faculties and administrative departments. Individual units are required to implement its educational provision, to support the implementation of the institutional plans and policies, in connection and collaboration with other units (Yorke, 2000; Rhoades, 1998; Sporn, 2007; Bowden & Marton, 1998). Furthermore, inter-unit collaborative learning enhances the university's capacity as a learning organisation (Dill, 1999), which might lessen the competitive challenges brought about by globalisation and the rapid advancement of technology. The findings from the interview data show that cooperation and collaboration among units are in place at the case universities.

#### *Cooperation and coordination between academic faculties and administrative departments*

As Sporn (2007) claimed, cooperation between academic and administrative units includes support on P&P implementation. Commenting on the current support granted by academic units to administrative units, and vice versa, the majority of

the interviewed leaders shared their positive perceptions and experiences. This is evident in the following examples:

good cooperation complying with ground rules and evidence-based processes (U3 Interview 06-PM1, p. 11);

cooperation is efficient because we have trust in our working culture (U6 Interview 10-PM2, p. 9);

systematic cooperation between our faculty and the administrative departments, following established procedures (U6 Interview 14-PI1, p. 3);

we have ISO [international standardisation organisation] management procedures and clear job descriptions (JD) for each position, so cooperation has been good (U1 Interview 08-PM2, p. 9);

we have clear procedures and JDs for each department, the academic faculties have personnel in charge of each aspect as training, student affairs, research, who liaise with corresponding admin departments (U4 Interview 24-PM1, p. 5); and

the functional [administrative] departments support [academic units] well (U5 interview 18-PI1, p. 6).

Regarding the problems in inter-unit cooperation, some interviewed leaders mentioned the incompatibility between academic task implementation and administrative procedures (Interview 10-PM2); the lack of procedures for cooperation (Interview 21-PM2); the cumbersome administrative system (Interview 12-PI1); and the die-hard administrative habits of organising too many meetings and communicating through official memos (Interview 05-PM1). All these issues result in delays and slow down the cooperation process.

Some interviewed leaders also raised their concerns about the coordination and cooperation between the quality assurance centres and other units, in terms of implementing such quality assurance activities as preparing self-assessment reports for accreditation, or inspecting the teaching-learning process, or conducting student evaluations of teaching and learning quality. Some possible reasons for their concern include the lack of ownership or careful planning on the side of the quality assurance centres, and the power tension between the quality

assurance centres and other units, resulting in passing the “responsibility” ball (Interviews 27-PM2, 10-PM2, 07-PM1, 26-PI1, 12-PI1).

### Collaboration among academic units, and collaborative learning

Between academic units, collaboration includes teaching and learning initiative sharing, and joint research projects (Sporn, 2007). In this case study, data analysis identified a broader scheme of collaboration across academic units, as well as beyond the faculty boundaries.

Interviewed leaders were consistent in their positive perceptions of the collaborative activities undertaken in their universities. For example, one university 6 leader listed various types of collaboration in their teacher education program: ‘integrated teaching that involves teacher-teacher collaboration and teacher-student collaboration, collaboration between our university and other member universities, their teachers in charge of contents, our teachers in charge of teaching methodology’ (Interview 04-PM1, p. 6). All university 3 leaders shared their collaborative experience in curriculum renovation, demystifying the CDIO approach on curriculum planning and developing learning outcomes, sharing expertise and experience in human resource management, developing internal terms of reference for newly recruited teachers, and professional development through a mentoring program for young and new teachers (Interviews 06, 01, 03, 27).

All university 4 and 5 leaders highlighted their collaborative experiences in interdisciplinary teaching, inter-faculty joint organisation of national/international conferences, and inter-university double-major and double-degree programs with universities 1, 2, 3 and 6 (Interviews 21, 23, 24, 26, 15, 18, 19, 25). One university 4 leader believed that ‘the double-degree and double-major programs enable students to better meet the social demands, hence having more chances to get employed’ (Interview 21-PM2, p. 10).

The majority of leaders from all six universities positively viewed collaboration involving generations of teachers and students. These collaborative activities include: on the job training of junior teachers by senior teachers, with the juniors observing the seniors' lessons and assisting them in paper marking or becoming substitutes in case of emergency (U6 Interview 04); engaging postgraduate students in assisting teachers with paper marking, lab supervision, so that teachers can spare time for research (U1 Interview 12); and training programs for succeeding resource teachers, including acting as learning advisors to students, doing tutorials and lab sessions (U4 Interview 26). In universities 2, 3 and 5, research groups are included as compulsory professional development (PD) for young teachers. By participating in these groups, young teachers learn from their senior colleagues 'how to properly conduct big scale research' (Interviews 27, 20, 19). One university 2 leader noted the three main advantages of research groups: 'extra income and research training and practice for young teachers, teamwork and networking for all participating members, and contributions to teaching - changes, modification, updates on contents' (Interview 20-PI1, p. 13).

Another prominent finding under the theme of collaboration and collaborative learning is that universities could be divided into two groups. The first group (universities 1, 2, 4 and 5) appeared to be proactive and strong at inter-division, inter-faculty, inter-disciplinary and inter-institution collaborative research. The interviewed leaders highlighted a number of such research projects that were conducted at their universities. Two leaders from university 4 mentioned their experiences in research and teaching exchanges with three overseas universities: the Tokyo Institute of Technology, Delft University of Technology and the University of Paris-Sud (Paris 11). As these leaders perceived, their university was very strong at exchange programs with international universities and, as a result, the teaching and research capacity of the academic team was substantially enhanced (Interviews 24 and 26). According to their leaders, universities 2 and 4 were also pro-active in collaborating with internal partners (other member universities) and external partners (national flagship universities, national

research institutes, relevant ministries, and international research institutes). One example of collaborative research from university 2 was a research project on the history of the capital city of Hanoi, which was jointly conducted by a university 2 research team and invited members from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, and the University of Architecture (Interview 20-PI1). A university 5 leader asserted that collaborative research projects not only enhanced the capacity of their teachers, but also had a positive impact on education of students, as teachers could bring the latest research outcomes into their lessons and continuously improve their courses (Interview 18-PI2).

The second group (universities 3 and 6), in contrast, seemed to have limited inter-faculty, inter-disciplinary and inter-institution collaborative projects. A leader from university 3 even complained that ‘the inter-division and inter-faculty collaboration was not as desired, due to the lack of communication and sharing, leading to overloading here and overlapping there’ (Interview 03-PI2, p. 5). Although no inter-disciplinary or inter-institution collaborative research was mentioned in the interviews with university 3 and 6 leaders, there was evidence that university 3 conducted joint BA programs with universities 4 and 5, MA programs with the University of New Hampshire, USA, and exchange programs with several universities in Japan, Korea, China, France, and Germany (document 10, Appendix 4).

The final finding under the collaboration theme relates to the involvement of students in joint research projects with their teachers in the two member universities 4 and 5 (Interviews 23, 19, 26). A leader from university 5 noted that the teachers often selected research topics relevant to their courses and encouraged students to assist them in collecting and processing data, or students were assigned to do a small part of the research (Interview 19-PI2). A leader from university 4 proudly said that his students sometimes selected new topics, even new to the teachers, and that promoted their exploratory learning (Interview 23-PM1).

All of this collaborative learning and joint endeavours, to a large extent, contribute to the enhancement of teaching and research quality and, more importantly, can bring about a desired outcome of educational quality assurance: transformative learning for students (Dill, 1999; Harvey & Knight, 2008).

#### The power tension between institutional units

An emerging theme from the interview data was the power tension between academic and administrative units. This power tension, as perceived by many interviewed leaders, was triggered by the difference in perspectives on quality (evident in the administration area of universities 1, 2, 3 and 4) and affected the quality culture as well as inter-unit cooperation and collaboration. One executive leader from university 3 critically commented:

the administrative units mistake their supporting role with controlling role, and academic staff are deprived of their power, for example a teacher could be shouted at by a security guard [as staff of an administrative department], or when teachers go to administrative units it seems that they have to beg for something. I think the working culture at the administrative departments has been improved, yet at a slow pace compared to the academic units. (Interview 03-PI2, p. 20)

Similarly, one executive leader from university 2 also complained about the ‘administrative power’ of the administrative departments in her university, which impacted on the desired cooperation between the academic and administrative units (Interview 20-PI1). Another executive leader from university 4 claimed that there had been little effort among the top leaders to unify the different perspectives to quality, and redefine the power limits for both sectors. He said that ‘not just between different generations of teachers, different generations of administrative staff also hold different quality concepts, and this affects cooperation’ (Interview 26-PI1, p. 7). One good remedial measure, as perceived by these leaders, could be the institutionalisation of regulations, documents, and processes, towards a reinforced quality culture.

Sporn (2007) claimed that the power balance between academic faculties and administration can only be achieved when both groups are accountable, based on mutually agreed indicators and measures. Most interviewed leaders' perceptions and experiences were aligned with this. Examples of this include the improvement of internal communication through the increased use of ICT (Interviews 06, 10, 21) and reduced meetings (Interviews 20, 12, 05); or the refinement of procedures for inter-unit cooperation (Interviews 26, 03, 14).

The power tension was also evident among the academic faculties, as revealed by a policy-making leader from university 3. He complained:

Recently our university has been assigned with many important projects for the ministry. The top leaders wanted to promote cooperation among academic faculties so they provided equal division of project and resource shares. However, our faculty, being the strongest one, with influential capacity in the field [assessment and teacher education] should be in the lead. The equal division of project and resource shares, in this case, leads to conflicts of interests among the faculties involved. We are the biggest faculty in size, but not in funding allocation. (Interview 27-PM2, p. 23)

This type of delegation, influenced by a trait of Vietnamese culture - equality for harmony - might create a sense of favouritism for one faculty over others, and affect common quality performance in the long-term.

### Network organisation

Another emerging theme from the interview data is the role of networking in inter-unit cooperation. From the network organisation theory perspective (Bowden & Marton, 1998), a new form of cooperation among units in many universities (universities 3, 4, 5 and 6) appears to be in formation. This involves networked cooperation or cooperation being conducted horizontally (e.g. between faculties or between administrative departments) and vertically (e.g. between faculties and the university governing bodies) at the same time, rather than just vertically as in hierarchical governance structures. There are many links between the units. One interviewed leader from university 6 shared their experience:

In our university, middle managers and even staff can have certain autonomy and flexibility in approaching and cooperating with other departments vertically or horizontally. For example, during the scheduling for the new

semester, if we encounter any problem relating to classrooms, we can meet directly the person in charge, or their boss - director of facilities and security. Of course, it depends on specific cases to decide whether to approach horizontally or vertically. (Interview 10-PM2, p. 15)

It is still common practice in Vietnamese public universities to have to propose to the upper (vertical) level in order to get approval before approaching those on your own level (horizontally). In universities 1 and 2, the units have their own databases and, in many cases, they only share their resources when directed by the upper authority (Interviews 12 and 20).

#### *6.2.1.6 Internal processes*

As discussed in the literature review, the achievement of a HEI's strategic goals requires a robust system of internal policy and procedures (P&P), as well as indicators and measures for regular performance evaluation in key areas (Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013). The emerging findings under the theme 'Internal processes' revealed that a system of internal processes is in place at the case universities, yet at different levels of operation.

The findings in general indicate that all the member universities adopted the core educational P&P, as imposed by the MoET and the institution, with necessary adaptation. Furthermore, as depicted in the overview of the case in Section 6.1, during the first phase of compliance-led quality assurance, all the universities aimed at getting their P&P right. In the next phase, when the universities shifted their focus to continuous improvement, their improvement-led quality assurance aimed at ensuring the P&P were effective and consistently implemented. In this phase, the member universities, except for university 2, further developed or refined their internal P&P, and generated their own performance indicators and accompanying reward/punishment scheme for reinforcement. This process was conducted bottom-up, engaging with staff and students, with functional departments and academic faculties developing specific P&P to propose to the governing board before disseminating them university-wide. The documented evidence of the P&P confirms the claims of interviewed leaders. The universities' approach was consistent with previous research on the internal processes



dimension of the quality assurance mechanism (Stensaker, 2003; Westerheijden et al. 2007; Harvey 2002a).

Specifically, regarding the development of internal P&P, university 1 was a pioneer in conducting evaluation processes. For example, their conduct of student evaluations of teaching-learning started in 2007, even before this process was institutionalised (Interview 08). University 3 had ‘a comprehensive set of P&P in all key areas such as academic affairs, personnel and recruitment, student affairs, research affairs’ (Interview 06 p. 4). University 4 also had their internal set of P&P (Interview 21); and university 5 even had an ISO9001certified system (Interview 15). At the time of data collection, university 6 was still in the process of finalising their internal code of conduct. Finally, university 2, as mentioned above, only adopted the P&P imposed by the MoET and the institution, with contextualised adaptation. It should be noted here that universities 1, 3, 4 and 5 had regionally or internationally accredited programs.

Another key finding is that in the universities that implemented improvement-led quality assurance initiatives, as perceived by leaders from universities 1, 3, 4 and 5, there was continuous improvement in internal processes. For instance, P&P relating to staff bonus income were reviewed every year (U5 Interviews 15 & 18); new P&P on staff rotation were introduced when the under-performing staff had no improvement after a certain period (U1 Interview 05); new P&P allowed academic staff to evaluate performance of the administrative departments (U1 Interviews 05 & 08, U4 Interview 24); and internal P&P were revised and amended every year so that they could better support monitoring and management (U3 Interview 03). One policy-making leader confirmed these necessary changes, saying that ‘once we got into trouble during the operationalisation process, we either fixed the current P&P or developed new ones, also we shared initiatives and evidence-based procedures among leaders of the member universities, to avoid reinventing the wheel’ (Interview 06-PM1, p. 14). Actually, these practices help enhance the universities’ capacity as learning organisations, and the

enactment of these P&P is likely to bring about meaningful changes in improving the quality of educational provision.

One of the major findings is that there were existing problems in the current P&P implementation at the universities. These include:

the reward/punishment is not fair when the rewards are often given to leaders and managers. (U2 Interview 07),

the staff performance evaluation is not based on quantifiable indicators such as KPIs [Key Performance Indicators], rather it is quota-based [each unit is given a specific quota for outstanding performance individuals], so not fair. (U4 Interview 21),

the punishment is not strict enough to trigger changes. (U1 Interview 05),

some processes, for example the students' evaluation of teaching-learning, are conducted superficially as compliance-led quality assurance, because the results are not treated radically towards improvement. (U1 Interview 12, U3 Interview 03)

the institution imposed many policies and regulations, then we have internal P&P at university and even faculty levels. This causes overlapping and thus administrative pressure for staff (U2 Interview 20, U3 Interview 03, U6 Interview 10), wastes time (U1 Interview 12), and staff become unresponsive. (U4 Interview 26)

Interestingly, some interviewed leaders shared the perception that there are two types of internal processes: type 1 is a formality and during implementation may be distorted due to incompatibility with working conditions or be viewed as superficial compliance, with staff just filling out forms as required; type 2 is change-triggering, which might push staff forward, but radical changes take time and require awareness raising (U2 Interview 20, U4 Interview 26 and U3 Interview 03).

#### Internal processes for academic affairs

An emerging sub-theme from data analysis relates to the internal processes for academic affairs. In this key area, there is consistency in the unified procedures for such activities as curriculum review, course review, program development, in addition to the inherent procedures relating to educational provisions emanating from the MoET and the institution. The implementation of these academic

procedures, as experienced by the interviewed leaders, was systematic. The curriculum and course syllabus represent the legal basis for all teachers, and there are standard procedures, monitoring and performance evaluation measures. The universities had documented evidence to support the leaders' claims. They had documented institution-wide systems, policies and strategies on how, when and by whom study programs/curriculum would be designed, reviewed, improved and approved.

However, as many leaders perceived, the lack of uniformity among the member universities, in such processes as professional development (PD) or human resource management (HRM), was perceived as a problem. Although there were inherent MoET and institutional processes, the actual working environment at the faculty level requires more direct-impact procedures, and it seems that the academic faculties were given unofficial autonomy to develop such extra procedures (Interviews 01, 26, 14, 12, 20, 19). In the faculties of universities 1, 3, 4, and 5, which are proactive in quality assurance and have had regionally or internationally accredited programs, the internal PD and HRM processes were perceived to have been systematically developed and well-implemented. This resulted in continuous improvement of the academic team's teaching and research capacity.

To sum up, as evident in the leader interviews, internal processes help construct and reinforce the culture of continuous improvement, need accompanying reward/punishment schemes, and match well with long-frame planning.

#### *6.2.1.7 Summary: frameworks or models underlying the current quality assurance practices at the universities*

In the preceding sections, I have presented the significant findings and initial discussion on the current implementation of quality assurance at the case institution. The findings in general indicate that the development and implementation of formal quality assurance is a relatively recent practice in the Vietnamese higher education system. In response to the MoET's quality assurance requirements for public universities, the case institution and its member

universities have shown their commitment and realisation of this undertaking. During the last decade, the case institution has demonstrated its capacity to respond to external quality assurance requirements while endeavouring to establish a viable internal quality assurance system.

The formal external quality assurance system is analogous with the APQN quality assessment. Institutional self-assessment, followed by external assessment and follow-up review of improvement actions taken in light of recommendations made, is a key feature of the external quality assurance system. In this regard, there were convergent practices across the member universities. In the first place, the two determining factors - the centralisation of the educational system and the leadership of the communist party - as explained in Chapter 4, seemed to leave the universities under study no other choice but to accept the ministerially-initiated quality assurance policy. Later on, according to the interviewed leaders, their universities opportunistically took the challenge to gradually strengthen their capacity.

However, the member universities did not have the same starting point, in terms of historical experience, staff profile and capacity, deep-rooted beliefs and academic values, inherent organisational culture, structures and procedures. Therefore, they appeared to differ in the levels of investment in effort, time and resources needed to build their internal quality assurance system. It should be restated here that they were expected to adopt Chiba principles for internal quality assurance.

An investigation into the development of internal quality assurance systems in the case universities, mapped against the existing quality assurance frameworks in the literature, reveals that the current internal quality assurance practices at the universities align with the essence of the models TM, CEQAM and HMQME. This is because a culture of continuous improvement is the driving force of quality assurance, with accountability as a result; transformation of learning is advocated; and internal processes provide the conditions for quality improvement. Moreover, the universities' endeavours in improving the student learning

experience and promoting the dynamic collaboration in education and research, to a certain extent, reflect the models TM, RUM, ULM and ALOF.

An in-depth review of how the member universities were actually developing and performing their internal quality assurance practices indicates that, although their internal quality assurance mechanisms cover all the components of the theoretical quality assurance framework developed for this study, there were remarkable differences regarding whether certain components were emphasised more, and therefore better performed by certain universities. This can be summarised as follows:

- *Leadership and management*: universities 1, 2 and 3, due to their large size and relatively cumbersome administrative structures, exercised more top-down management. It seems that the quality assurance initiatives were not always well communicated down to the grassroots level. By contrast, universities 4, 5 and 6, have more manageable sizes and structures, thus allowing for bottom-up management and multi-directional communication.
- *Stakeholder engagement*: universities 1, 4 and 5 performed better than universities 2, 3 and 6 in engaging external stakeholders in the educational operations and improving the student learning experience. One possible explanation for this difference is that the latter group focussed on teacher education (universities 3 and 6) and social sciences (university 2), and it is more difficult to engage resource businesses and industries in these fields.
- *Collaboration and collaborative learning*: universities 1, 2, 4 and 5 were stronger at initiating and conducting inter-faculty, inter-disciplinary and inter-institution collaborative research. Universities 1 and 2 are research universities and have developed long-lasting networks of research partners. Universities 4 and 5 have a high-profile staff, including young graduates from overseas universities; they strongly advocate high quality in both teaching and research. However, universities 3 and 6 have major

disciplines that are more practical than theoretical or research-based. Their research partner networks are, therefore, limited.

- *Internal processes*: universities 1, 3, 4 and 5 had more systematised internal P&P, especially those relating to quality assurance of academic staff, including PD and HRM. This, as mentioned earlier, may be attributed to their successful experiences in complying to regional and international accreditation.
- *Culture of continuous quality improvement*: universities 1, 2 and 3 had the advantage of inherent cultures with quality improvement traditions; the other universities (universities 4, 5 and 6) had smaller faculties with young and quality advocates teachers. Because of such variables as differences in quality culture type, differences in staff quality perceptions, or differences in the level of staff commitment and awareness across the universities, there is insufficient information to determine which university(ies) had a stronger quality culture.

In the subsequent section, I present other discrepancies among the case universities, providing possible explanations for these in relation to organisational theories and the three levels of espoused, enacted and experienced.

### 6.2.2 Possible explanations for the discrepancies in the universities' quality assurance practices

#### 6.2.2.1 In light of the organisational theories in higher education

As analysed in the preceding sections, there were differences in intensity in the universities' care and investment into certain aspects of internal quality assurance mechanisms. Let us now view these differences through the lens of the organisational theories that underlie each university's management, as briefly outlined in the overview section of this chapter. Additionally, discussion links to Bolman and Deal's (2008) four frame model for examining organisations, allowing for more spectral arrays within the big picture of the case institution.

## Bureaucracy - Structural theories

Manning's (2013) higher education organisational theory of bureaucracy shares the common essence of Bolman and Deal's (2008) structural approach. This structural frame views organisation as a factory, and 'emphasises on the architecture of organisation - the design of units and subunits, rules and roles, goals and policies' to get results (Bolman & Deal 2008, p. 21).

Among the universities that adopted a bureaucracy approach (universities 1 to 5), the three bigger universities (universities 1, 2 and 3) have the advantage of longer development histories, long-established cultures of healthy competition among units and sub-units. They also have the disadvantage of cumbersome administrative systems and more complex coordination across a multitude of faculties, units and centres. However, commonalities among these five universities are apparent. First, they all have long-term strategic goals and plans with quality assurance as one important component. The top leaders demonstrate their commitment through direct involvement in, and support, for quality actions. Second, these universities have well-organised systems of academic and administration units and sub-units, plus supporting units and centres, such as ICT centres, learning resource centres, and teacher training and assessment centres, among others. One difference between the bigger university group and the smaller one is that the latter has smaller size administrative units, with directors performing dual roles - administrative director and academic staff. As an interviewed leader from university 5 stated, 'the directors and deputy directors of administrative departments were teachers-cum-managers, therefore they were empathetic with those teachers who had to contact administrative departments and therefore facilitated the administrative procedures' (Interview 18-PI1). Finally, these universities have systematised internal processes and P&P. This is particularly the case for those with successful experiences with regional and international accreditation (universities 1, 3, 4 and 5), having developed their internal processes and procedures for PD and capacity building at sub-unit level.

It should be noted here that among these five universities, university 2 adopted the bureaucracy theory to the least extent. The sections that follow shed light on this point.

#### Collegium - Human resource theories

Manning's (2013) higher education organisational theory of collegium converges with Bolman and Deal's (2008) human resource perspective, which views an organisation as an extended family, and focuses on understanding people and their individual perspectives. Improving human resource management and building positive interpersonal and team dynamics are features of this human resource frame (Bolman & Deal, 2008). In the quality assurance literature, as mentioned in Chapter 1, the academic collegialism approach initiated by Harvey and Knight (1996), and further developed by Harvey and Newton (2004, 2007) fits in with this category.

The universities that adopted the collegium theory are universities 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6. These universities promote cooperation and collaboration, they themselves are either highly unified or growing universities. As Bolman and Deal (2008) argued, the 'human resource logic fits best' (p. 318) in such institutions. In light of this collegium theory, the universities do well in two aspects of the quality assurance mechanism: stakeholder engagement; and cooperation and collaboration.

One interesting point is that universities 1, 3, 4 and 5 adopted both the bureaucracy and collegium theories, therefore their human resource approach to improvement, such as teacher training programs, PD programs and participation encouragement, tends to work to good effect. According to Bolman and Deal (2008), the reason for this is that the approach 'usually needs support from the top to be successful' (p. 319).

Again, collaborative research, a strength of university 2 due to the research-based nature of their programs and their long-established network of research partners, reflects minimal adoption of the collegium theory in their operationalisation. Therefore, university 2 is not grouped in this category.



## Cultural - Symbolic theories

Manning's (2013) higher education cultural organisational theory has significant similarities to Bolman and Deal's (2008) symbolic frame. The symbolic lens sees an organisation as a temple or a theatre. It focuses on how to shape a culture that gives purpose and meaning to work. Culture and rituals, beliefs and team spirit lie at the heart of organisational life (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

In the three bigger and older universities (universities 1, 2 and 3), the adoption of this theory is perceived as having a positive impact on their quality assurance implementation. Before their amalgamation into the national institution, these big universities strived to achieve and maintain their flagship status in Vietnamese higher education. Aligned with the essence of the cultural theory are several factors, including: their traditionally high entrance bar for both staff recruitment and student intake; the loyalty of generations of graduates who stay and work for the university; the promotion of a tradition of high quality of teaching and learning; the honouring of heroes and heroines with excellent performance; and the promulgation of shared vision and values.

In the two universities that adopted both collegium and cultural theories (universities 1 and 3), the interaction between the two theories results in a meaningful consensus of staff in implementing quality assurance initiatives. Collegium theory adoption helps establish unifying teams, while cultural theory adoption gives them a purpose to work towards. In the case of the old universities, they have greater historical experience, better staff capacity and norms upon which reform initiatives and policies are perceived and valued. Therefore, it requires collegial teams who share not only deep-rooted beliefs and values but also vision for a prospective future, so that these universities can accept and implement the reform initiatives and new quality assurance policies with high staff consensus. As Bolman and Deal (2008) put it, a strong and unifying culture tends to reduce conflicts and increase homogeneity.

One interesting finding from the study regarding the underlying theories of cultural and collegium is that the university culture, staff unity and staff family-like attachment to the university were well recognised by leaders across the member universities. This was perceived as one element that could explain staff commitment, despite low salaries or sub-standard working conditions. However, more cultural investigation is needed to provide a clearer explanation for the different levels of commitment between generations (the old and the young), as indicated in the earlier sections of this chapter.

### Organised anarchy - Political theories

Manning's (2013) higher education organisational theory of organised anarchy echoed, to a certain extent, Bolman and Deal's (2008) political frame. The political view sees 'organisations as competitive arenas of scarce resources, competing interests and struggles for power and advantage' (Bolman & Deal 2008, p. 21).

Organised anarchy theory only fits with university 2. This university is particularly affected by environmental change due to its dependence on tuition and the national economy. Since the introduction of the "doi moi" [innovation] policy into all aspects of life in Vietnam, requiring universities to change to survive (as described in Chapter 5), Vietnamese public universities have faced challenging financial issues. In the case of university 2, their challenge is even harsher, as many of the disciplines they offer are no longer in high demand. As revealed by one policy-making leader from university 2, they do not have "hot" programs to attract students like those offering economic and business [university 5], information technology and engineering [university 4], environmental and biological technologies [university 1], or foreign languages [university 3]. Consequently, limited income from tuition and the quality of the student intake are of major concern (Interview 07-PM1).

As Bolman and Deal (2008) claimed, 'when conflict is high and resource is scarce, dynamics of conflict, power and self-interest often come to the fore' (p.

318). While recognising their vulnerability in keeping low-demand programs, university 2 also faces pressure from the government to maintain these disciplines in order to support the long-term goal of educating a research and training elite. In other words, university 2 seems to be in a dilemma. Consequently they use a top-down management approach reflecting bureaucracy theory adoption, and their long established culture (cultural theory adoption) to push their quality assurance activities. Moreover, the political power of the communist party comes into play. As argued by Pfeffer (1992), power is the ‘potential ability to influence behaviour, to change the course of events, to overcome resistance, and to get people to do things they would not otherwise do’ (p. 30). In this case, the political power of the communist party, as already discussed in Chapter 5, puts pressure on university 2 staff to comply with quality assurance requirements.

It is worth mentioning here that the intervening role of the communist party in the leadership and management of the university is evident in all the case universities. It is an unwritten rule that one needs to be a member of the communist party in order to be appointed or promoted to managerial positions. When there is environmental vulnerability that triggers conflict, power plays and self-interest, as is the case with university 2, this political power becomes more of a controlling power.

#### *6.2.2.2 Espousal, enactment and experience in quality assurance initiatives*

The premise in my mind when writing this part of the chapter is consistent with Bolman and Deal’s (2008) observation that organisations can be viewed as multiple realities, and ‘when someone’s action seems to make no sense, it is worth asking if you and they are seeing contrasting realities ... their mind-set, not yours, determines how they act’ (p. 317). Therefore, differences in the universities’ quality assurance practices could be a natural by-product of their collective endeavours. In the subsequent section, I present major differences, either between the universities, or within each university, based on the three levels of policy espousal, enactment, and experience.

Regarding the differences among the universities, there is no significant difference at the espoused level. There are a number of reasons for this. As discussed in Chapter 5, public universities in Vietnam have to comply with policies and requirements from the government and the MoET; this compliance is reinforced by the political power of the communist party. Second, being one of the two flagship national universities trying to achieve regional standards, the top leaders at the institution level and the universities share a commitment to quality enhancement.

In fact, the universities appear to have homogeneous espousal of quality assurance policies. However, at the enactment level, the group of universities that adopted bureaucracy, collegium and cultural theories (universities 1, 3, 4 and 5) tend to be more active in their quality assurance activities, as testified by their leaders.

Generally speaking, the policy-making leaders sit at a vantage point and are supposed to possess ‘fluid expertise’ (Bolman & Deal 2008, p. 12) that allows them to make decisions quickly in terms of when to shift the focus between external compliance and internal improvement. Their decisions are based on the available resources and staff capacity, and reflect the organisational theories that their universities have adopted.

The next section presents a number of mismatches between the espoused level, enacted level, and the experienced level in some universities, as identified through data analysis.

### University 1

The executive leaders from university 1 shared similar concerns that some quality assurance P&P in their university reflected superficial compliance, and there were still too many meetings. When internal processes increase administrative loads, make more demands and become routinised, they lose the improvement potential. Executive leaders raised another critical issue that seemed to conflict with the essence of a continuous improvement approach to quality assurance. This was the

lenient assessment approach that provided inflated results. One of the executive leaders from university 1 complained that the pressure for high achievement from the espoused level made the teachers adopt this assessment approach, giving higher marks to students than their actual performance deserved. She said ‘this false association of high quality with graduates’ “attractive academic records” actually has a negative impact on the university’s prestige and the real value of graduates, from the employers’ perspectives’ (Interview 12-PI1, p. 10).

## University 2

University 2 interview data analysis reveals two critical conflicts between the enactment and experience levels, from the perspective of the executive leaders. First, these leaders found that many quality assurance regulations were symbolic of compliance, rather than facilitating real improvement. For example, the inadequate infrastructure, facilities and resources for teachers and students are not compatible with credit-based education and teaching methodology innovation, as they do not facilitate research and self-study (the essence of credit-based and learner-autonomy learning). Second, the executive leaders raised their concern that quality assurance policy seems to focus on improvement of teaching and requires many changes from teachers, while neglecting students. These leaders believed that transformative learning demands the active engagement of students.

## University 3

An executive leader from university 3 expressed her concern that at the enactment level, the executive leaders and staff are driven to implement the quality assurance activities. They bear the direct pressure triggered by the tension between external quality assurance requirements and internal improvement demands. She recalled their recent engagement in an important national project, saying, ‘we had to try by all means for these achievements, and used up the resources while having little time and budget for capacity building’ (Interview 03-PI2, p. 5). Some other interviewed leaders from universities 1, 2 and 4 shared this

concern, believing that “hot”<sup>19</sup> development would negatively affect the sustainable commitment of staff (Interview 26-PI1, Interview 12-PI1, Interview 20-PI1).

In this scenario, the problem seems to originate from the scarce resources and with top leaders using their political power to drive change. Leaders made policies as they believed these are necessary for improving the quality of teaching and research. However, the teachers-implementers themselves found these policies unrealistic and burdensome. For the purpose of sustainability, university 3 should not rely on their political power or the culture that holds their staff together.

#### University 4

The executive leaders from university 4 criticised the top level leaders who did not properly address the cultural conflict - the different perspectives relating to educational quality held by different groups and units. This ‘cultural conflict’ (Bolman & Deal 2008, p. 207) was also reflected in the contradictory assessment approaches between senior teachers, who tend to assess leniently for the sake of the students, and young and high-profiled teachers, who tend to assess strictly for the sake of the university’s quality reputation.

One executive leader from university 4 further elaborated:

The young generation teachers graduated from overseas universities and are familiar with quality assurance in prestigious universities, they perceive quality as the university’s brand name and therefore want to keep the exit bar high; whereas the older teachers have affection for students and complain that the young teachers are harsh on students. (Interview 26-PI1, p. 6)

This excerpt demonstrates the problem of different perspectives relating to quality, which is also evident in university 1 and university 3 (Interviews 12-PI1 and 03-PI2). One possible remedy might be the refinement of the internal P&P for academic affairs.

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<sup>19</sup> Colloquial Vietnamese, meaning development without caring for the environment, and the human resource.

## University 5

University 5 interview data analysis did not indicate any significant conflict between the enacted and experienced level of quality assurance P&P

## University 6

Similarly, there were no emerging findings on the mismatch between the enacted and experienced levels of quality assurance policy in university 6. One explaining variable would be that this university joined the quality assurance arena later than the other universities. At the time of the data collection, university 6 was preparing the first self-assessment report for program accreditation. As common sense goes, when you do not take many actions, you can avoid the error-making risk.

## Conclusion

This chapter has presented a review of current quality assurance adoption and implementation at the case institution and within its member universities.

First of all, the key findings from the data analysis revealed that the APQN quality assurance framework is commonly adopted by the member universities. This APQN framework and its related Chiba principles provide the member universities with guiding policy and procedures (P&P) for, firstly responding to external quality assurance requirements from the MoET, then accumulating experience and expertise to develop their own internal quality assurance systems and mechanisms.

The main part of this chapter presented the major findings from the analysis of interviews with policy-making and executive leaders across the universities. The current implementation of quality assurance practices at the universities was uncovered from the perspectives of these leaders, who are involved in the quality assurance initiative, mainly at two levels: espousal and enactment.

The third part of the chapter was focused on the interpretation of the divergence across the member universities, regarding which component(s) of the quality assurance framework received more, or less, investment in resources and effort. This interpretation was made through the lenses of organisational theories and the change management levels of espousal, enactment and experience.

In the next chapter, current quality assurance implementation at the case universities is examined at a deeper level. The possible factors that might enable or hinder quality assurance implementation in general, and the development of the internal quality assurance mechanism in particular, are discussed in more detail.



## CHAPTER 7. THE FACTORS THAT IMPACT QUALITY ASSURANCE PRACTICE AT THE CASE-STUDY INSTITUTION

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### Introduction

In the preceding chapter, the differences in quality assurance implementation among the case universities were analysed through the lenses of Manning's (2013) higher education organisational theories and Bolman and Deal's (2008) four frame model for examining organisations.

This chapter addresses research question 2 - What are the possible factors that impact on the quality assurance implementation at the case universities? This includes the two sub-questions: What are the possible factors that facilitate quality assurance implementation at the case universities? and What are the possible factors that hinder quality assurance implementation at the case universities?

In the first part of this chapter, the key findings on quality assurance enablers are presented. Next, emergent themes on quality assurance inhibitors are elaborated, to add contrasting colours to the picture of quality assurance implementation at the institution under study. The third part of the chapter provides a discussion on these affecting factors, in connection with previous studies in the literature.

### 7.1 Factors that facilitate quality assurance practice at the universities

The major argument of this study is that sustainable quality assurance at the case institution has two essential conditions. The first condition is the legal framework for system quality assurance, including the requirements from the MoET, and the adoption of the APQN framework with accompanying Chiba principles. The second condition is that the internal quality assurance system within each member university is established and covers the dimensions of leadership and management, stakeholder engagement, internal processes, cooperation and

collaboration, and quality culture. It is sufficient to work on internal quality assurance, given that there is in place the external legal framework to drive the internal quality assurance process.

In the succeeding sections, major findings and related discussion are presented, first identifying the factors that enable or impede quality assurance, as perceived by the interviewed leaders, then exploring how these factors interactively support the dimensions of the internal quality assurance framework.

#### 7.1.1 Human facilitating factors: staff awareness and commitment

As discussed in Chapter 5, quality assurance in education is a key initiative in higher educational reform, first imposed by the MoET, and gradually institutionalised by top public universities. Bolman and Deal (2008), in their organisational studies, viewed change as a process that benefits some groups and individuals, and therefore get their support, while neglecting or harming other groups and individuals, who either oppose it, or become unresponsive. In this section, I present the findings relating to the former group. The latter group are discussed later in the section on inhibiting factors.

Data analysis indicates that the majority of the interviewed leaders emphasised the importance of the human resource in implementing quality assurance practices or implementing change. A policy-making leader from university 3 strongly affirmed that ‘we really need people who are passionate for improvement, people who have the needed capacity to implement changes’ (Interview 06-PM1, p. 4).

In the case universities, the change agent from inside the organisations, the staff, help the universities to transform, by implementing quality improvement activities. Interestingly, as perceived by the interviewed leaders, through this process, the staff transform themselves and become more adaptable to the new environment. The major findings from data analysis identified several reasons why the staff in the case universities increased their awareness of the need to change, as well as the effects of their transformed behaviour.

First, the staff were alerted to social changes, such as employers asking for higher quality graduates, or students becoming more knowledgeable with the aid of advanced technologies and more demanding in their learning. Staff understand that if they do not change to meet these higher demands, the best students will turn to other institutions and they would suffer from both a shrinking business<sup>20</sup> and low quality entrance intake (Interview 22-PI2, interview 27-PM2, interview 12-PI1).

Second, the staff were well informed of the new direction and long-term strategies of the umbrella institution, and of their own universities. Many interviewed leaders stated that in realising the strategic mission of becoming recognised research universities and improving regional ranking, the academic staff in their universities were encouraged and supported, as well as required to continuously update their professional knowledge and methodologies, and jointly conduct research with their undergraduates (Interviews 11, 12, 24, 26, 19, 25). One leader from university 1 perceived that ‘this strategic mission acted as a push for the teachers to improve themselves in order to at least survive, then strive’ (Interview 11-PI2, p. 7). Among the members, universities 1, 2, 4 and 5 had larger numbers of research projects conducted at national and international levels (Document 11, Appendix 5), and their staff, understandably, appeared to have greater awareness of the need to actively engage in research, involve students in research, share the research outcomes among the academic community and integrate these updated research results into course content. All these endeavours advocate the transformation of student learning, an important outcome of quality assurance (Harvey & Knight, 1996; Harvey & Newton, 2004).

Third, the staff were inspired by their universities’ prestige and long-lasting improvement culture. One executive leader from university 1 shared her perception that the teachers in her faculty, especially the younger ones, were ‘proud to be a member of the university and would feel ashamed when they do

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<sup>20</sup> As discussed in Chapter 5, there has been a significant increase in the number of universities and colleges, rising to more than 400. This means that there are approximately seven institutions per city/province, thus creating enrolment pressure for many public universities.

not catch up with the senior teachers in teaching and research' (Interview 12-PI1, p. 6). Similarly, one executive leader from university 2 positively viewed the intrinsic motivation of the teachers in her faculty, including young females who had to arrange child care in order to pursue further education and join in professional events (Interview 22-PM2). In such universities with long-standing traditions and prestige (universities 1, 2 and 3), as perceived by the interviewed leaders, a symbolic culture of faith and pride could help shape staff behaviour through inspiration. In light of this symbolic frame (Bolman & Deal, 2008), the interviewed leaders from university 6 attributed their staff's intrinsic motivation to their passion for the teaching profession and the family-like team spirit (Interviews 10, 13, 14).

Fourth, the staff were affected by some quality assurance activities, and became aware of the need to change their attitude and performance. For example, the results of the student evaluations of teaching raised the teachers' awareness to reflect on their performance and make necessary changes (Interviews 07, 03, 24, 25, 11, 17). The opportunities for overseas training or teacher exchange programs were also based on capacity and credibility criteria, therefore teachers were aware that if they did not improve their knowledge and teaching methodologies, they would be 'out of the game' (Interviews 06, 15 and 25). In addition, peer mentoring reports or annual staff performance evaluation had a direct impact on the teachers' annual bonus income, so they had a reason to change (Interview 05, 07).

Last, the younger generation, the junior teachers with less than five years' experience, learnt from their exposure to high educational quality and quality assurance practices at prestigious universities abroad. They appeared to advocate quality assurance and were aware of the need to preserve their university's brand (Interview 21, 26 and 27).

Once the staff had participated in quality assurance activities and increased their awareness, their transformed behaviour and willing participation could, in return, facilitate cooperation and collaboration, supporting leadership and management to

accomplish agreed-upon missions. Most importantly, staff awareness and the possible consequent staff commitment are essential ingredients for a sustainable quality culture. The role of staff awareness and staff commitment in promoting quality culture has been emphasised in several quality assurance frameworks, such as the ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher education), the APQN, and the Australian higher education quality assurance framework (Shah, Lewis & Fitzgerald, 2011; Stella, 2008; Houston, 2008; Cullen et al., 2003).

One interesting finding on staff awareness and commitment to quality assurance in the case universities is that the initiative was better supported by young staff, most evidently in universities 1, 4, and 5. This group of staff mostly graduated from overseas universities and advocated high educational quality. According to one young executive leader from university 1, the young teachers in her faculty, including herself, appreciated the pressure to get to a higher level in both teaching and researching. She said:

First, you only move forward when there is a mission [the strategic education program: BSc jointly conducted with an American university] - a big pressure for you. Second, when teaching in this program, you have a chance to work with American professors and use their curriculum, then you have to try your best. Of course, it is exhausting, but in the end the quality of the academic team is greatly improved. (Interview 12-PI1, p. 12)

This opinion was consistent with the experiences and perceptions of many young leaders from universities 1, 4 and 5 (Interviews 08, 11, 21, 23, 24, and 25). It can be assumed that the high-calibre and young staff commit to quality because they themselves benefited from high quality education overseas and now want to cascade the best practices through their teaching.

### 7.1.2 Organisational facilitating factors

#### 7.1.2.1 *Effective human resource management*

It can be inferred from data analysis on the facilitating factors for quality assurance that those universities that appear to have more ‘people with needed capacity to implement change’ (Interview 06), had more advantages in both quality assurance compliance and quality improvement. In other words, in universities 1, 3, 4 and 5, the universities that had successful experiences with regional accreditation at the program level, and robust systems of internal P&P supporting quality culture, the role of unifying and high profile teams was emphasised by the interviewed leaders.

There seems to be a common formula for strategic development of strong academic teams in universities 1, 4 and 5. These universities focus on the recruitment of highly qualified academic staff. One policy-making leader from university 1 stated that ‘from this year [2013] we only recruit PhD holders to be lecturers. We have a network of about 200 alumni who hold a PhD and working in Europe, America and Japan. Many of them expressed their interest of going back and work for the university’ (Interview 08-PM2, p. 16). Another policy-making leader from university 5 shared that her university applied favourable recruitment policies to attract PhD holders from overseas, as this would bring more high quality intellectual resources for the teaching and research of the university, as well as enhance their capacity to provide economic policy consultancy for the government (Interview 25-PM2). Although it might be argued that a PhD does not mean quality, this recruitment policy in universities 1, 4 and 5 appears to be a necessary short-term measure to enhance the capacity of the academic team.

Document analysis on human resource statistics of the universities under study also confirmed that universities 1, 2, 4 and 5 had a higher percentage of teaching staff who are PhD holders, Associate Professors and Professors, compared to universities 3 and 6 (Document 12, Appendix 5). Specifically, university 4, which is among the group of younger and smaller size universities, had a significant rate

of PhD qualified teachers, accounting for more than 70%, and teachers with professorships accounting for 25% (Interview 23-PM1). Another special case is the university 1 faculty under study. In this faculty, all of their teaching staff hold PhD qualifications and 39 of 70 of them are under 45 years old (Interview 08-PM2). This is exceptional for any public university in Vietnam.

Having high profile teams is one necessary condition for quality assurance. However, several other conditions are required to ensure sustainability. Kruger and Dunning (1999) found that incompetent people often overestimate their performance because they do not know what good performance looks like. Additionally, it is arguable that even competent people, such as the high profile teams in my study, need clear terms of reference regarding roles, responsibilities and expected outcomes for their performance. Many of them, despite having graduated from overseas universities and apparently familiar with quality assurance practices, may not perform to the expected standard in their current work, due to the interfering impact of many contextual factors. More elaboration on these contextual factors is provided in the succeeding sections.

Again, one major finding from the interview data reveals that the quality assurance high achieving group of universities 1, 3, 4 and 5 had more refined and robust systems of internal P&P, including those related to human resource management. As discussed in Chapter 6, the member universities adopted personnel policies developed by the umbrella institution. However, during implementation, each university had certain autonomy in refining the policies to adapt to their conditions. The differences in the way these were implemented was discussed in Chapter 6.

The common practices that the above universities applied in their human resource management included developing well-informed annual targets for teaching hours, research quotas for staff, and clear step-by-step procedures for staff performance evaluation (Interviews 08, 21, 27, 10, 07, 19). For example, university 5's annual research quota for principal lecturers requires publication in

two peer-reviewed journals and one conference paper, equivalent to 450 teaching hours (Interview 18 and 19).

Many policy-making leaders mentioned the new initiative of the umbrella institution - the development of job description (JD) for each position in the university personnel system. This initiative was welcomed by the top leaders from all the universities (Interviews 04, 07, 06, 05, 15 and 21) and was perceived to facilitate the operation of the human resource management system. As asserted by Pfeffer (1992), human resource management is likely to be effective when people share a common perspective on what to do and how to accomplish it, as well as a common language to facilitate cooperation.

Another important aspect of human resource management - staff training and professional development - is dealt with in the coming section on collaborative learning.

#### *7.1.2.2 Enabling environment for continuous improvement*

Analyses of interview data indicates that the leaders across the member universities were in agreement that an enabling environment or mechanism for continuous improvement has a central role in promoting a quality culture and improving the quality of core educational operations.

First, the findings suggest that the enabling mechanism consists of two components: (1) the existing systems of internal processes and reward/punishment, with a controlling function, such as controlling the curriculum review procedures or the personnel recruitment procedures; and (2) the accompanying mechanisms of support, monitoring and evaluation, with a supporting function. While the first component seems to be more critical to compliance-led quality assurance, as discussed in Chapter 3, the second component was seen by the interviewed leaders as crucial for improving staff commitment as well as their performance; in other words, supporting improvement-led quality assurance.



Regarding the supporting mechanism, the leaders across the universities witnessed a good variety of supporting policies in favour of research and capacity building. In universities 4 and 5, the governing board and all administrative departments provided administrative support for the faculty in gaining and disbursing funding for their research projects, ranging from 40 million Vietnam dong at the university level to 5 billion at the state level<sup>21</sup> (Interviews 18, 19, 21, 24). In university 4, teachers were granted initial funding when they successfully presented their research proposals, as the top leaders believed that ‘research projects will bring more funding for the university, chances for improving both research and education, research outcomes as peer-reviewed journals will contribute to university ranking’ (Interview 24-PM1, p. 9). Other types of financial support for research were seen in all universities, such as allowances for teachers who present at international/regional conferences, and grants for research publications (Interviews 03, 24, 14, 08, 18, 07).

Other measures were applied at universities 1, 4 and 5 to support young teachers in order to gain their commitment. These measures include providing young teachers with research funding, ‘for example 10 to 20 million dong<sup>22</sup> per year so that they can continue to pursue their research initiatives’ (Interview 12-PI1, p. 10); and opportunities to be members of thesis councils, research appraisal committees, and collaborative research projects, so that they could earn extra income (Interviews 08, 24, 18). As one young leader from university 4 asserted ‘the young researchers can take the initiative, what they need from the university leaders is trust and an open mechanism that supports new initiatives’ (Interview 23-PI2, p. 12).

Relating to the university’s support for capacity building, one executive leader from university 3 said:

The supporting mechanism is in place now, in the past, we were requested to do this and that [professional development activities] but there was no

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<sup>21</sup> Approximately equivalent to US\$1,900 and US\$238,000.

<sup>22</sup> Approximately equivalent to US\$450 to US\$500.

support so teachers were not motivated. During the recent years, I have witnessed the administrative and financial support being granted for such activities as mentoring programs for new teachers, it's like you have to open both the entrance and the exit doors so that teachers can go through. (Interview 03-PI2, p. 11)

The excerpt suggests that the supporting mechanism motivates staff and acts like a catalyst moving them forward; when they start moving, and overcome their inertia, they gradually form the habit of moving, or making changes to improve their performance. Another type of support for capacity building is evident across the universities. Young teachers are encouraged to pursue further studies, if they study part-time inside Vietnam they get a reduced workload; if they study full-time overseas they still receive 40% of their salary and their jobs are secured (Interviews 06, 04, 07, 05, 15, 21).

A policy-making leader from university 6 positively perceived the supporting mechanism in his university. This allowed for each academic faculty to have autonomy in disbursing their allocated stationery budget. In the past, this budget was managed by the department of finance and each teacher was provided with certain stationery at the beginning of the year. With the new policy, each faculty could buy stationery to share among staff, and therefore they could diversify the types of stationery they acquired, as well as save some of their budget for tea break expenses (Interview10-PM2). As this leader said, such a small change in policy made teachers in university 6 happier.

As many among the interviewed leaders were teachers with managerial responsibilities, they could share their perspectives and experiences regarding the supporting mechanisms in place from both viewpoints. Analyses of their interviews revealed that there were gaps between the amount of support in terms of funding, opportunities, autonomy and flexibility that the leaders believed should be granted, and the expectations and concerns of the teachers over working conditions. This issue is discussed in more detail later in the section on constraining factors.

As discussed previously, when a system of internal processes is already in place, a supporting mechanism must accompany it, as well as a monitoring and evaluation mechanism. This monitoring and evaluation mechanism will help ...

detect any problems that arise during the enactment of these processes and differentiate between poor-performance errors [e.g. the lecture theatre was not timely opened because the janitor in charge forgot to check the updated schedule] or system-fault errors [e.g. teachers cannot access the booking system to change booking for lecture theatre] and propose suitable solutions.

(Interview 06-PM1, p. 10)

To assist this decision-making, an evidence-based approach was applied across the universities, but most evidently in universities 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6. Commenting on this prevailing practice at the universities, one leader from university 6 said ‘in our daily work, recording the evidence and understanding the purpose of this, actually facilitate the evaluation of our performance’ (Interview 14-PI1, p. 9). What is more, the monitoring and evaluation mechanism helps reinforce the internal processes. For example, as one executive leader from university 2 reflected, teachers may start to doing regular course reviews and learning outcomes revision simply as a formality, however, as the process progresses, with feedback and critical review from their colleagues or managers, they gradually become aware of the real benefits of this revision process (Interview 20-PI1, p. 6). It is true in this case that actions drive thinking. Also, improved internal communication and feedback channels proved important in supporting the monitoring and evaluation of task performance (Interviews 01, 03, 08, 13).

### Collegial factors that positively affect individual performance and cooperation

The findings suggest another set of contributing factors towards the enabling environment for continuous improvement: collegial factors. These intangible factors appear to positively affect both team cooperation and individual performance.

Many interviewed leaders from universities 2, 3, 4 and 6 believed that the ‘mutual trust’, ‘openness’, ‘sharing and caring’ between leaders and staff, as well as among staff, created a friendly and enabling working environment (Interviews 20, 06, 24 and 10). Their views are consistent with Kouzes and Posner’s (2007) claim that teamwork, trust and empowerment were important in fostering staff commitment, and require leaders’ efforts.

Moreover, in the case of faculties that had successful regional accreditation experiences (universities 3 and 4), the teachers were used to working in task-force teams outside of their normal divisions. Through these interactive practices, the inter-personal relationships among staff members were strengthened. Therefore, they not only shared with, and cared for, each other in work but also in their personal life (Interview 06-PM1). One interviewed leader from university 2 appreciated the informal forums on new research trends, initiated by those staff who had attended or presented at international conferences (Interview 20-PI1). Another leader from university 5 stated that:

our community favours sharing and learning, and collaboration. It helps reduce teachers’ anxiety when participating in such quality assurance activities as peer observation, peer mentoring. In the long-run teachers are willing to conduct these PD activities to improve their teaching capacity. (Interview 19-PI2, p. 6)

It is worth noting that the “professional distance” (Crehan, 2002, p. 2) prevalent in western contexts, was adapted to local conditions in these cases due to the influence of one long-lasting trait of Vietnamese culture - caring for one another. That said, the teachers still met the requirements of their academic activities while maintaining an engaging and supportive learning environment.

When staff across the universities were given the chance to work in teams with mutual trust, sharing, caring, and empowerment, they gradually moved from passive involvement in quality assurance activities to developing ownership in the process, leading to substantial improvements. Collegiality and change ownership were thought to have enhanced cooperation and change implementation in the

cases of universities 3, 4 and 6 (Interviews 06, 24, 10). This fits well with Kouzes and Posner's (2007) argument that 'everyone performs better when they take charge of change' (p. 169).

### Regenerative quality culture

The regenerative culture type, discussed in Chapter 6, which focuses on internal improvement while fully acknowledging external requirements (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008), appeared to be in place in all the case universities, except university 6. This regenerative culture encourages change and reframing in order to regain balance, to generate new options and identify strategies for improvement (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

The interviewed leaders in the five universities with a regenerative culture believed that there were several possible factors that enhanced the sustainability of a quality culture. These factors included: 'increased staff awareness of the need to start from small quality actions before planning for big quality initiative' (Interview 06-PM1, p. 7); 'increased staff awareness of the need to not just complete their tasks, but rather, fulfil their tasks with full responsibility and motivation' (Interview 20-PI1, p. 12); 'a system of transparent P&P together with a monitoring and evaluation mechanism to help people firstly become accustomed to quality assurance activities, then transform the quality habits to the need to perform quality actions' (Interview 21-PM2, p. 14); and 'a process-oriented approach to quality assurance' (Interview 27-PM2, p. 10). Similar views were evident in many other interviews with leaders (Interviews 03, 23, 10, 12, 25, 07, 14, 11, 18).

As previously outlined in Chapter 6, to some degree, all the member universities reconceptualised their core values and reframed their future goals in order to regenerate their quality culture, to reenergise the workforce, and to embrace new challenges. This era of global challenges requires any HEI to make changes and improve their educational core operations, in order to enhance their competitiveness. A sustainable quality culture will significantly add to the

overarching organisational culture's 'superglue that bonds an organisation, unites people and helps them accomplish desired ends' (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 253).

### 7.1.3 Collaborative learning

As reviewed in Chapter 3, if the university can extract the essence of quality management models for higher education with key principles of learning communities, it can become a learning organisation (Whipple, 1987; Garvin, 1993; Buckle, 1998; Dill, 1999; Yorke, 2000; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002; Senge et al., 2012). This learning organisation welcomes and facilitates collaboration and collaborative learning across its units and between individuals and teams. A university as an academic learning organisation is likely to be best placed to cope with changes, and improve the quality of its core educational operations through change management. One main reason is that through collaborative learning and change university staff can enhance their capacity to handle more challenging tasks.

Connected to this, several emerging themes from the analysis of the interview data indicated the positive impact of collaborative learning on the improvement of educational quality across the member universities.

According to 75% of the interviewed leaders from universities 1 and 3, the professional development programs conducted in their universities added to staff capacity enhancement and supported the quality assurance practices. One policy-making leader from university 3 shared his experience:

I can direct staff towards a common framework of quality in our professional work, by establishing a feedback system, allowing the staff access to feedback from students, their attendance and performance at faculty PD events, their participation in collaborative research. After the introduction of this feedback system, I can observe that some "lazy teachers" started participating in PD activities and adjusting their teaching. They actually raised their awareness of the agreed-upon framework of quality. They have their own framework, the faculty and the university as well, if the three

frameworks don't overlap, how can we assure quality? (Interview 27-PM2, p. 13)

A policy-making leader from university 1 also stressed that their PD programs helped enhance faculty capacity and, as a result, contributed to maintaining the quality reputation of the university, as 'great teachers will produce good quality educational products' (Interview 05-PM1, p. 8).

The second type of collaborative learning activities is evident in universities 4 and 5, which is inter-faculty professional rotation. As the interviewed leaders from these two universities similarly noted, in such a multi-discipline institution as their umbrella institution, this practice could serve two purposes: developing more versatile academic teams for member universities, while optimising the human resource of the whole institution (Interviews 18, 19, 21, 24). Although this practice could promote collaborative learning among the faculties, it requires tight coordination and timely feedback processing for good effect.

The third type of collaborative learning, collaborative research, was observed in the universities with a stronger research focus (universities 1, 2, 4 and 5). As revealed by the interviewed leaders from these universities, collaborative research was promoted from the division level. One leader from university 1 asserted that 'there are seminars at division level, on current research trends and possible international collaboration, from this basis, new research topics and inter-disciplinary research projects can be formed' (Interview 11-PI2, p. 5). Another leader from university 4 added that the publication of research outcomes in institutional journals, as well as the promotion of staff research outcomes, could promulgate the achievements of individuals and teams, and therefore promote self-improvement needs (Interview 26-PI1). Moreover, one prevailing practice in these universities is the engagement of junior teachers in research teams. This appears to be necessary immersion training for the next generations of researchers and teachers.

Finally, evident across the universities was the involvement of students in research projects with their teachers, as well as the promotion of student research. In universities 1 and 4 the students could even join their teachers in large-scale funded research projects, the outcomes of which were internationally published (U1 interviews 08 and 12, U4 interviews 21 and 26). According to the ranking criteria for top research universities in the USA, the availability of opportunities for undergraduate students to participate directly in research accounts for 35% of the total points. This practice of engaging students in research at the member universities could facilitate transformative learning for students and, in the long-run, add points to the ranked status of the umbrella institution as a top research university in the region.

#### 7.1.4 Exemplary leadership

The previous chapter presented the experiences and perceptions of the interviewed leaders regarding the dimensions of leadership for quality assurance implementation in their universities. There were convergences and divergences in the application of leadership dimensions across the universities. As the core element of all three dimensions is the leaders themselves and their leadership, what makes great leaders and leadership will be attributed to the suitable dimension for quality assurance in their own contexts.

Kouzes and Posner (2007) identified five practices of exemplary leadership: (1) model the way; (2) inspire a shared vision; (3) challenge the process; (4) enable others to act; and (5) encourage the heart. The interviewed leaders' perspectives of good leadership matched well with these five exemplary practices. Each is discussed in more detail below.

##### (1) Model the way

All the interviewed leaders from university 3 consistently stressed the role of a strong leadership commitment to quality and quality assurance. The Rector of this university pointed out that 'if there is lack of commitment from us, the staff will have difficulty in implementation [of quality assurance practices]' (Interview 06-



PM1, p. 4). Another university 3 policy-making leader shared his experience, through which he proved himself a role model who leads by example:

I do as I preach and practice quality assurance in every task that I'm in charge of. I direct my staff to the adopted framework of quality. For example, we recently organised a national conference and I was in charge of, from providing concept of a high quality conference, to selecting and editing papers, providing regular and timely feedback and critical comments. After a while, my staff became more self-disciplined and paid more attention and efforts to their projects. They felt bad when their team repeated a mistake or received negative feedback, while other teams did well. (Interview 27-PM2, p. 15)

One policy-making leader from university 6 also highlighted the need for leaders to lead by example, to encourage and motivate staff through holding themselves accountable for agreed-upon goals and behaviour (Interview 10-PM2).

## (2) Inspire a shared vision

The findings on shared vision have already been presented in Section 7.1.1, in terms of its role in improving staff commitment. Here the focus is on the linkage between shared vision, leadership, and improved performance and quality. The interviewed leaders across the universities held similar views about the ability to envisage the “big picture”, communicate the shared vision and mobilise staff to achieve that vision, as vital to their leadership. Moreover, they were aware of the need to translate the shared vision into the language of individual staff, cascading it into their daily activities. The experiences of leaders from universities 1 and 4 exemplify this, as follows:

The long-term strategy of becoming the first university in Vietnam that offers international standard bachelor education in chemistry has been well communicated to our faculty members. It is a big challenge that requires us to make changes, to improve our core operations. Quality assurance at faculty level is therefore given more focal investment from the university. (U1 interview 08-PM2, p. 6)

The strategies of our university have changed through time, but still towards the envisaged vision of becoming a regionally high ranking research university. The teachers/researchers in our leading faculties of electronics and telecommunication are focusing on research that could at least meet the regional demand. We are now among the leading group in ASEAN in the field of micro-electro-mechanical. (U4 interview 23-PI2, p. 9)

These experiences and perceptions fit well with Bolman and Deal's (2008) suggestion that '[in order to communicate the shared vision] leaders can construct a persuasive story by painting a picture of the current challenge or crisis, and emphasizing why failure to act would be catastrophic' (p. 396).

### (3) Challenge the process

This practice of exemplary leadership can be seen more vigorously in universities 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6. The interviewed leaders from these universities elaborated on how they searched for 'opportunities to innovate, grow and improve' (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 19). Examples include:

- the introduction of 'both product and process' criterion for management of teachers' annual research (teachers are required to meet their research quota of two research papers and one presentation at a division/faculty/university seminar, as well as to work in research teams for long-term research initiatives) (U3 interview 03);
- the awareness and consequent practice that accreditation is one-off. What is more important is the development and implementation of post-accreditation improvement plans (U4 interview 21);
- the adoption of international course books and experimental online exams and English-based tests (U4 interview 23);
- the setting of high-end objectives that will influence the market and the mobilisation of resources around those objectives (U5 interview 15); and
- the development of a system of satellite schools to be partners for their placement quality improvement initiative (U6 interview 04).

#### (4) Enable others to act

The majority of the interviewed leaders held positive views on the role of staff involvement in quality assurance in their universities. They were aware that sustainable quality assurance requires ‘team efforts, group collaboration and individual accountability’ (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 21). For instance, one university 3 leader stated that their staff were involved in developing the annual plan from division to faculty and up to university level. This planning specified the procedure and expected outcomes of their work. It helped improved their overall performance (Interview 01-PM1, p. 7). Another leader from university 6 also stated that when their staff were involved in planning, their cooperation and task implementation improved (Interview 13-PI1). The engagement of staff in planning and throughout the implementation of routine operations, as well as quality assurance initiatives, is crucial in making staff become part of the process and own the process - a practice of staff empowerment (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). This not only prevents staff from “sitting-on-the-fence” or staff being isolated from the larger team but, more importantly, has the potential to unleash improved staff performance and productivity.

In short, leaders who can build trust, empower their staff through engagement and capacity enhancement, and foster collaboration, are able to enable others to act (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

#### (5) Encourage the heart

This fifth practice of exemplary leadership can be seen more evidently in universities 2, 3 and 6. As presented in the preceding section on collegial factors, “caring and sharing” is a typical feature of these universities’ organisational culture. Two executive leaders from university 2 shared their successful experiences in motivating their staff by caring about their personal problems (U2 interviews 20 and 22). One policy-making leader from university 3 stressed the need to maintain face-to-face interaction between leaders and staff, especially in this era of virtual communication via emails and social networking (Interview 06-PM1). Another policy-making leader from university 3 stated that:

When my staff could assure the quality of their work - which is a demanding job, they deserve compliments, because in our Vietnamese culture, “the offering is more important than the feast itself”, so I consider giving timely and due compliments as my recognition of their assured quality. (Interview 27-PM2, p. 15)

In all member universities, as shared by all the interviewed leaders, such events as the Vietnamese teachers’ day, the Vietnamese women’s day, the Vietnamese army’s day, and other ceremonies, provided opportunities for celebrating their universities’ values and achievements and for paying tribute to generations of staff. As Kouzes and Posner (2007) claimed, encouraging the heart of the constituents is one of the ways that leaders can make people stretch themselves.

#### 7.1.5 Support from key stakeholders

The previous chapter provided the findings and discussion on how stakeholder engagement, as an important component of the quality assurance framework, was conducted at the site universities. Main groups of stakeholders and major activities, were discussed.

In this section, I highlight the support that the universities gain from their key stakeholders, as this source of support proved to be an enabling factor for quality assurance.

First, all the interviewed leaders from the active group of universities (universities 1, 4 and 5) recognised an array of both tangible and intangible resources provided by their external stakeholders from international and national industries and businesses. These included financial support in the form of scholarships for outstanding students, funding for research, funding for lab establishment and maintenance; technical support in the form of feedback on curriculum and course improvement needs, seminars or workshops on current market needs and trends; and internship and job opportunities for students. For example, two university 1 leaders said:

They [Japanese and Korean companies] invited us to their opening ceremonies for new factories or industrial compound. They provided useful feedback on our program, such as the need to increase practice and experiments, especially on real equipment. (Interview 8-PM2, p. 20)

We conducted bilateral exchange events and actively listened to their needs and feedback, in order to match the internal capacity and the external demand. Recently we have invited experts from Castrol and Shell to give guest talks to both staff and students, on current market trends. (Interview 11-PI2, p. 11)

Second, although the engagement of alumni is generally limited across the case universities, some leaders from universities 1 and 4 reflected on their partial achievement. One executive leader from university 1 mentioned the valuable support from their alumni in the form of funding, loan or hire for extremely expensive equipment or chemicals for lab experiments (Interview 12-PI1). One executive leader from university 4 stated that their students got internships or job opportunities granted by their successful alumni (Interview 23-PI2). This type of alumni support was seen as contributing to the improvement of student learning, making it more practical.

## **7.2 Factors that hinder quality assurance practice at the universities**

In the second half of this chapter, the findings on the inhibitors to quality assurance in the case universities from the perspectives of the interviewed leaders are presented. Also discussed is how these factors impact or relate to the key components of the quality assurance framework adopted by the universities.

### **7.2.1 Human constraining factors**

#### **7.2.1.1 Student issues**

As briefly described in Chapter 5, Vietnamese students have several common characteristics: they are passive learners who follow patterns and learn well with clear instructions; they lack exploratory learning, self-study and critical thinking;

and they dare not challenge the learning process or the taught knowledge. But these characteristics are not inherent. Instead, students are products of an educational system imprinted with these features.

When quality assurance was introduced and adopted by the case universities, the quality of teaching and learning was one of the three major areas of focus, together with research and administrative services. It is evident in the findings that while improvement in teaching and teacher quality received due attention and investment, improvement in student learning seemed to be overlooked. This is because it was believed that improved learning would be an inevitable consequence of improved teaching (Interviews 12, 22, 20, 25).

Although students' transformative learning was promoted in all the faculties under investigation, especially in the accelerated or fast track programs (programs specially designed for selected high-achiever students, with more credits and more advanced courses) that were regionally accredited, it might not be the same degree of promotion in the other faculties (Interviews 25, 27, 12). As revealed by the executive leaders who were more involved in teaching than the policy-making leaders, there were several negative issues regarding student learning in the case universities. These appear to be related to the above-mentioned characteristics of Vietnamese students. One executive from university 1 raised her concern that:

Because of the high-stake entrance examination to university, it is assumed that students are homogeneous, if we think that the quality of Vietnamese higher education then depends on the robust infrastructure and abundant resources, and excellent and passionate academic teams; or that quality is reflected in high marks and awards, these don't reflect the real quality. The reasons are: 1) Our students are lazy, 2) they don't have clear objectives for their learning and 3) they don't have the ability to self-study or explore. (Interview 12-PI1, p. 6)

Another leader from university 2 shared similar concerns that if a learner-centred approach and open-book exams are widely applied to the teaching of

mainstream<sup>23</sup> students, the results could show the students' poor knowledge, as they are so used to exam-driven learning, or learning what they are taught in class and being tested accordingly (Interview 20-PI1).

Data analysis of the interviews also indicated another critical student issue. The interviewers believed that students lack important skills needed for their future life and work in a rapidly changing world. These include life skills and professional soft skills, such as inter-personal communication, critical thinking, problem solving and decision making, work planning and time management, independent learning as well as teamwork, and other soft skills (Interviews 12, 27, 14, 18, 26, 20). Due to the shortage of these skills, a large number of graduates whose academic records are excellent might only marginally meet the immediate expectations of employers (Interviews 12 and 26).

All these student issues were perceived by the interviewed leaders as impeding transformative learning and the enhancement of student learning quality. Nevertheless, as Bolman and Deal (2008) pointed out, 'targeting individuals while ignoring larger system failures oversimplifies the problem and does little to prevent the recurrence' (p. 27). The adoption of a learner-centered approach to teaching and learning, and the renovation of the curriculum allowing for the integration of study skills and professional soft skills, as practiced in the accelerated or fast-track programs of universities 1, 3, 4 and 5, proved to be successful in helping students develop their full potential (Interviews 12, 27, 01, 25, 26, 18).

#### *7.2.1.2 Teacher issues*

Data analysis identified several issues related to teachers and the impact of their practices on quality assurance. First, one executive leader from university 1 acknowledged that 'our approaches to teaching and assessment actually degrade the quality of higher education' (Interview 12-PI1, p. 4). She elaborated, saying that the current university assessment did not reflect the true quality of graduates.

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<sup>23</sup> Students in normal full-time programs, not the selected ones in accelerated or fast-track programs

Many universities produce graduates with marks of nine and ten (the current marking scale in Vietnam is from zero to ten [ten being the highest]), and believe that their quality is high. In reality, however, many of these graduates do not meet the immediate requirements and expectations of employers (Interview 12-PI1). Other leaders from universities 2, 4 and 6 similarly asserted that the inconsistent assessment criteria<sup>24</sup> across the universities result in employers becoming confused and even doubtful about the quality of graduates, as well as the quality of training institutions (Interviews 20, 21, 26 and 27). In the long-run, the reduced rate of graduate employment would adversely affect the ranking of the institutions, thus affecting enrolment and creating a vicious circle.

As previously indicated in Chapter 6, inflated assessment practices were observed by many interviewed leaders. They critically admitted that one of the factors that negatively impede quality improvement came from the teachers themselves. One university 1 leader shared incidents when some thesis defence panels dared not give marks five or six, or fail unsatisfactory theses (Interview 12-PI1). By doing this, as many other leaders believed, they released poor quality products into society (i.e. concealing the poor quality, cheating themselves and cheating society) (Interviews 03, 27, 26, 14, 20). There are possible reasons behind the teachers' lenient assessment, or reluctance to fail students. The first reason might be the pressure from the governing board to maintain good quality programs and a high percentage of good or excellent graduation theses. Another reason might be the influence of the cultural factor of achievement-driven education, as discussed in Chapter 5.

This inflated assessment practice appeared to not be common across the faculties of the case universities. The two university 4 faculties under study, for example, adhered to strict assessment and failed those students who were not qualified to pass courses or graduation exams. The percentage of students failing was reported to be higher than that of other universities (Interviews 23 and 26).

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<sup>24</sup> For example, percentages for attendance and continuous assessment during the semester vary across the faculties and universities.



Other negative teacher issues, as identified by the data analysis, include:

- Teachers' lack of competence necessary for quality improvement initiatives, due to the absence of designated PD events and/or quality assurance training (Interviews 03 and 27).
- Teachers who put their 'too big egos' above quality requirements. As one university 3 leader observed, 'many teachers think that when the classroom door is closed, they have their own world and can do whatever they want, for example, one teacher was reported to use the TOEFL-based materials prepared for her moonlighting classes, rather than teaching critical reading skills as specified in the syllabus' (Interview 27-PM2, p. 12).
- Teachers who care only about their individual needs or their group interests, instead of 'being responsible for the common tasks, as required by the university of the faculty' (Interview 07-PM1, p. 17). These teachers had low self-responsibility, preferred management by time rather than by results, and were not whole-hearted or fully committed to quality practices.

Commenting on the possible inhibiting factors to quality assurance that relate to, or originate from, the teachers, one executive leader from university 2 and one policy-making leader from university 3 respectively provided their insightful experiences and observations:

I think at the compulsory level everybody was aware that performing quality practices is their obligation or responsibility. Yet from that awareness to most optimal and effective implementation as possible, it really depends on individuals. (Interview 20-PI1, p. 11)

Young teachers quickly get updated with quality assurance requirements but they lack knowledge and experience, whereas older teachers had inertia to change although they had rich knowledge and experience. Therefore, in those divisions where the connection between teacher generations is loose,

quality assurance awareness and improvement might take longer. (Interview 06-PM1, p. 9)

#### *7.2.1.3 Resistance to quality assurance implementation*

Data analysis identified another constraining human factor: the resistance to quality assurance practices. Emerging data suggest that resistance came from different groups with different reactions. First, all of the interviewed leaders from university 3 (Interviews 06, 01, 03, 27), and half of the leaders from university 1 (Interviews 05 and 12) and university 2 (Interviews 07 and 20) observed that it was hard to involve senior staff, especially those approaching retirement, in quality assurance activities such as PD programs and research initiatives. A top leader of university 3 also asserted that staff performance P&P may not work with this group (Interview 06-PM1) as senior staff knew that their salaries and jobs were secured. Furthermore, the group of seniors included those who were conservative and sceptical, they resisted change ‘out of fear, because it is impractical and difficult, or it challenges the way things have always been done in the past’ (Graetz et al., 2011, p. 13) (U1 Interview 12).

The second group contained staff who refused to participate in quality assurance activities due to either their inertia or innate resistance to any change, or their pragmatism (i.e. they only did what was of benefit for them, or the new P&P affected their group interests) (U6 Interviews 10 and 14, U4 Interviews 21 and 26). In another scenario, as half of the leaders in universities 1 and 3 noticed, many of their staff lost interest in quality assurance activities because they got involved in accreditation tasks and then realised that these accreditations were one-off and no long-term management was addressed (Interviews 12, 11, 01, 27)

Young staff who worked under short-term contracts and therefore had low commitment to the university, or those in the age group of child bearing and raising, formed the last group resisting change (U3 Interviews 01 and 03, U2 Interviews 20 and 22).

The reactions from these resistance groups included: an avoidance approach (first and second groups); completing tasks to a minimal level (second and third group); spreading criticism via social networks (second group); strongly protesting in staff meetings against new changes (first group); or quitting their job (third group).

As can be inferred from the perspectives of the interviewed leaders, the low levels of professionalism and awareness among certain groups of staff can be attributed to their resistance to change. Some notable solutions suggested by the interviewed leaders included: improving professionalism and awareness through communication and training; applying KPIs for staff performance evaluation; and issuing the right policies that take into account all feasibility elements (Interviews 06, 21, 05).

The above findings could be interpreted, in line with previous studies in business and organisational change management, that it is unlikely to have a 100% consensus and synergy for any big change, especially in large-scale organisations, i.e., disapproval or negative attitudes are unavoidable. Moreover, awareness-raising is a difficult task and sustaining the required level of awareness seems to be no less challenging. Therefore, the vision should be shared by leaders and communicated effectively down to the grassroots level and, more importantly, reinforced through “short-term victories” (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Kotter, 2002; Graetz et al., 2011).

Coping with these resistance actions and behaviours requires leaders to bring into full play their leadership skills. It is worth referring to well-recognised claims about effective leadership, as evident in organisational management, change management, and leadership literature. This includes: ‘leaders do the right thing’ (Bennis & Nanus, 1985, cited in Bolman & Deal 2008, p. 343); and ‘leaders think in the long-term, emphasize vision and renewal, and have the political skills to cope with the demands of multiple constituencies (Gardner, 1989, cited in Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 343).

## 7.2.2 Organisational inhibiting factors

### 7.2.2.1 Human resource management (HRM) issues

The first barrier to effective quality assurance identified relates to human resource management challenges.

Emerging data indicated that the biggest HRM challenge facing the case universities was associated with heavy workloads and tight budgets. The interviewed leaders across the universities shared similar concerns that the ratio between management and teaching loads for middle-managers like the faculty management board, and that between research and teaching loads for academic staff, were not appropriate and led to overloading at both levels (Interviews 01, 03, 21, 26, 14, 12, 18, 22). Two leaders from universities 4 and 5 further elaborated on this point, saying that due to the small size of their universities and faculties, many academic staff were holding senior management positions while having to fulfil the required teaching loads (Interviews 21 and 18). One executive leader from university 3 reported that many teachers in her faculty had to do double or even two and a half times the required teaching load (Interview 03-PM2). When the academic staff were stretched, while their remuneration was inadequate for a liveable standard<sup>25</sup>, compliance to quality assurance requirements is hard enough, let alone a commitment to continuous improvement.

Many interviewed leaders perceived that staff shortages would remain a long-term issue, as the universities either had tight budgets (universities 1, 2 and 6) or had difficulty in financial disbursement<sup>26</sup> (universities 3, 4 and 5). As a consequence, extra problems arose. For example, the lack of human resources for new elective subjects (due to staff shortages and tight budgets for outsourcing) led to the renovated curriculum having many elective subjects “only for show” (Interviews 20, 21, 27); or the stretching of academic staff over a two-year or

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<sup>25</sup> The basic monthly salary of a newly recruited teacher, at the time of the data collection, was approximately US\$100; that of a senior teacher with twenty years' experience, was around US\$300.

<sup>26</sup> As discussed in Chapter 5, the case institution and its member universities had to follow the rules and regulations for income generating and disbursement, as specified by the Ministry of Finance.

even longer period led to staff burn-out (Interviews 03, 14, 21). These problems apparently undermine the implementation of quality assurance or its sustainability in the long-term.

Another HRM issue that impedes staff motivation, and hence hinders quality improvement, relates to the staff performance evaluation and accompanying reward mechanisms in place at the case universities. More than half of the interviewed leaders across the universities expressed their concern over the current staff performance evaluation schemes. As briefly mentioned in Chapter 6, leaders found these schemes to be unfair. For example, many staff with excellent performance records were not rewarded at the institutional level due to restricted quotas (Interviews 21, 07, 08, 27); or the criteria for performance evaluation were not KPI-based, and still focused more on administrative compliance matters than academic improvement aspects in the performance evaluation of academic staff (Interviews 11, 27, 03, 20, 12). This HRM issue would undermine high-performing staff motivation, as it goes against recipes for successful quality assurance as Westerheijden's (2007) "what gets rewarded gets done" (p80) or Graetz et al.'s (2011) "what gets rewarded gets repeated" (p. 154).

One specific HRM issue directly connected to quality assurance was that the human resource in charge of quality assurance at the unit level was limited (Interview 24-PM1), and that the quality assurance related administrative tasks had become a burden to a small number of faculty staff (Interview 14-PI1). These perceptions were echoed by many other executive leaders (Interviews 22, 03, 01, 13, 12, 11).

The above findings suggest that the position of quality assurance in the internal governance structure of the universities is not strong enough to effect meaningful change in quality assurance practices.

#### *7.2.2.2 Limited resources for quality assurance*

The development and implementation of quality assurance initiatives in the case universities requires human, physical and financial resources, as well as time.

There was agreement among the interviewed leaders across the universities that a financial mechanism that supported quality assurance proposals and the availability of critical resources were crucial for ensuring educational quality. However, the reality of resource availability and utilisation across the universities, as perceived and experienced by the interviewees, indicated that the limited resources and improper physical and financial usage, appeared to hinder the implementation of quality assurance initiatives.

The biggest challenge to ensuring and improving educational quality, as perceived and experienced by many executive leader interviewees, related to the mismatch between the available physical resources for research, teaching and learning, versus the requirements for increased research and teaching quality, as well as the adoption and implementation of credit-based education. Many executive leaders from universities 1 and 2 shared their concern over the lack of resources as follows:

The working conditions for teachers are still sub-standard. Many seniors working nearly their whole life at the university and have not yet been provided with a work station with a computer. In the room next door [to where the interview was being conducted] there are 7 work stations for 7 divisions, so at a time, only one division member can use that space. (Interview 20-PII, p. 13)

At faculty level, we only have very restricted budget granted by the university, for such activities as student lab practice, purchase of chemicals and utensils for experiments, for those big equipment purchases or maintenance we don't have funding. Sometimes we have to use our pocket money, extract some from our own project funds, or call for alumnus support, to buy chemicals for students' lab practice. There is still a shortage of facilities and equipment to meet the demands of both teachers and students. (Interview 12-PII, p. 12 and p. 19)

The adoption of a credit-based education and learner-centred approach require students to self-study. However, the majority of our faculty students come from suburban or rural areas and so have to stay in poorly conditioned

hostels. When they come to university, there are not enough study spaces in libraries, not enough books and reference materials, and limited access to computers. (Interview 22-PI2, p. 14)

In small size and new universities (universities 4, 5 and 6), there was a shortage of classrooms and lecture halls. They had to rent outside the institution or share access to some spaces with university 3 (Interviews 10 and 26). It is evident across the universities that the available facilities and infrastructure could not meet the demand of the increased student intake. During the field trip, I observed that in the faculties under investigation in universities 1, 4, 5 and 6, each of their divisions was provided with at least one simple work station, whereas in universities 2 and 3 this was not the case: all their divisions shared one common multi-function room. These circumstances evidently influence the implementation of quality assurance practices.

Two policy-making leaders from university 5 claimed that they lacked time, money and investment in such quality assurance initiatives as “test bank development”<sup>27</sup> (Interviews 15 and 25). One said, ‘we need money for the ICT system, the digitisation of tests, and a mechanism to pay for test designers’ (Interview 15-PM1, p. 10). Similarly, one executive leader from university 1 critically compared the test-designing experiences of her American visiting professor, who spent two intensive weeks on a test and had never issued a single overlapping test in his 25 years of teaching, and her experience of designing a test within a few days. For this, she received a small payment of VND 50,000 (about US\$2) per test, on top of her poor monthly salary (Interview 12-PI1).

Many other interviewees further commented that the problem is not just a shortage of facilities and equipment, in some cases, it is the lack of proper utilisation of the available resources and planned usage of the government budget. For example, one leader from university 1 admitted that although they had

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<sup>27</sup> The test bank contains standard tests that are developed by teachers for all courses, to be used officially for progress and achievement assessment. The leaders from university 5 believed that this initiative would, in the long-run, help save time and money for test design, as well as ensure the quality of tests.

modern equipment, they lacked funding for maintenance and spare parts, resulting in wasted resources (Interview 12-PI1). A leader from university 3 questioned the practice of regularly changing computers and photocopier machines for all the administrative departments while the whole faculty of more than 130 staff had to share one or two photocopier machines and two laptops (Interview 03- PI2).

Another concern shared by many interviewed leaders, as raised briefly earlier, was that accreditation seems to be a one-off job, as it was difficult to get funding for implementing post-accreditation improvement plans (U2 Interview 07-PM1, U3 Interview 27-PM2, U1 Interview 05-PM1, U4 Interview 21-PM2). One top leader from university 3 noted ‘as far as I know, all rectors of public universities can think of how to get extra financial resources, however, how to do it while abiding by the law is a hard math problem’ (Interview 06-PM1, p. 16). Another policy-making leader from university 1 shared his concern, saying, ‘being among the top research universities receiving a government subsidy, we actually have a low level of autonomy in deciding our education programs, as well as in finance, we want to have more autonomy so that we can issue more favourable policies for quality assurance practices’ (Interview 05-PM1, p. 15). Restricted financial autonomy in Vietnamese public universities remains a problem. So, in many cases, while the intention is there to ensure quality, in real terms the policy is not well enacted because of the outlined constraints.

It can be inferred from the data analysis that in many circumstances across the case universities, even in the leading faculties in terms of quality assurance implementation, there was a level of superficial compliance. For example, as shared by two university 3 leaders, their learning resource centre was upgraded for program accreditation, with new books and software, yet the number of students who accessed and used the resources did not increase (Interviews 03 and 27). An interviewee from university 2 commented that when classrooms are crowded and access to computers, facilities, and learning resources is limited, it is challenging to ensure the standards and indicators set by the new quality assurance office (Interview 20). As mentioned in the preceding section on



resistance to quality assurance, one of the reasons why many university 1 senior staff protested against the new strategy of developing the faculty to an international level, was the fear that they did not have the required human and physical resources (Interview 12-PI1). Often, it requires both teachers and students to rely on their own resources, to improve the quality of teaching, and to ensure quality of continuous assessment, tutorials or project-based learning. However, these types of private investment or such belief-driven behaviours as teachers' goodwill and loyal devotion to the institution, or students' love for the university and "sacrifice for a better future"<sup>28</sup> (Interviews 12, 20, 22) should not be the only ingredients for sustainable quality assurance.

The findings discussed above illustrate that both the inadequacy and misuse of resources create challenges for the operation of the quality assurance mechanisms in the universities. A more serious hindrance to quality improvement, as foreseen by a university 5 top leader, is that people may compromise quality on the premise that high quality equals high cost, and low quality equals low cost (Interview 15-PM1).

#### *7.2.2.3 Conflicts in organisations*

According to Bolman and Deal's (2008) classification, conflicts in organisations can be identified as vertical conflicts occurring between levels, horizontal conflicts occurring between departments or units, and cultural conflicts caused by different values, beliefs and lifestyles between groups. In this research, emerging data indicated that horizontal conflicts happened mainly between academic faculties and administrative departments, and cultural conflicts between generations of teachers. There were few findings related to vertical conflicts, although it can be inferred that resistance to change could be a type of hidden vertical conflict.

As perceived by all the executive leaders from universities 1, 2 and 3 (the group of bigger and older universities with cumbersome administrative structures), the

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<sup>28</sup> A common motto generated by the student unions in many public universities.

horizontal conflicts between academic faculties and administrative departments, although having been softened due to the systemic P&P for improved work quality, still smouldered beneath the surface. These executive leaders noted that the unequal division of labour and power between the two sections, as well as their contradictory perspectives towards the function of the administrative departments, either hindered or reduced the effectiveness of cooperation in implementing quality assurance practices (Interviews 01, 03, 11, 12, 20, 22).

One university 1 executive leader observed that the limited sharing among the administrative departments themselves created more pressure and workload for academic staff. For example, the department of academic affairs had all the scheduling and staffing information, but did not share that with the personnel department for remuneration-related calculations. Instead, requests were circulated to academic staff to calculate their teaching hours and submit them to the personnel department (Interview 11-PI2). In the same vein, one university 3 executive leader witnessed many instances when the in-service training department and the academic affairs department summoned the same teachers for two different events, often at short notice. As a consequence, these teachers had to do extra tasks: sending reports or feedback, justifying why they attended one event and not the other (Interview 03-PI2). As these leaders perceived, it seemed easy for the administrative departments to send out requests that put unnecessary pressure on academic staff.

There was agreement among these executive interviewees that the administrative departments appeared to manipulate their power to get things done, believing their function was managing, rather than supporting. Evidently, operations that require inter-dependent cooperation between the two sections are often stifled by the red-tape.

In the above section on teacher issues, teachers' inflated or inconsistent assessment of students' learning was considered a factor negatively impacting on the assurance of educational quality. Here, it is worth noting that the conflict that occurred at the interface between generations of teachers was likely to be

attributed to this inflated assessment. As the executive leaders of universities 1 and 4 experienced, the younger generation tended to hold on to the view that improving quality would promote the positive reputation of the university so there should be no compromise. The older generation, however, appeared to compromise quality standards (Interviews 12, 26, 25) ‘simply because this batch of students should get concession as they worked much harder than their peers in other universities’ (Interview 26-PI1, p. 10) or ‘because they feared that the high requirements for educational quality and too strict assessment could lead to decreased enrolment, due to the current trend of the labour market in favour of employees with degree’ (Interview 25-PI2). Although it requires further study to explain why the younger teachers do not have these concerns in the same way as their seniors, there might be one possible reason: the younger teachers are not yet at managerial positions that require them to make decisions or be responsible for the university’s intake.

This cultural conflict, or to be more precise and appropriate in this case, quality-cultural conflict, occurred between the older and younger generations in universities 1 and 4, an interesting pair of universities - one old and one young, but both strong in research at the international level. This type of conflict created by the change (the implementation of quality assurance initiatives), turned into what Bolman and Deal (2008) called ‘a tug-of-war between innovators and traditionalists’ (p. 385).

Regarding vertical conflicts between levels, again, the emerging findings generally came from the executive leaders who were involved in both levels of enactment and experience. Their comments were therefore multi-perspective. Many interviewees from universities 1, 2 and 3 asserted that conflicts existed between the policy-making leaders’ vision and “ambition” against the staff-implementers’ perception and capacity. As these interviewees saw it, the leaders were playing on many fields at the same time, rushing to implement many initiatives while the institutional resources were not yet compatible, i.e., the staff capacity and physical resources were not ready. This might result in staff

stretching or compromising quality here and there (Interviews 03, 27, 20, 12). It can be inferred that, like the horizontal conflicts, vertical clashes often go underground. The succeeding sections on contextual and Vietnamese culturally specific factors might offer some further explanation for this.

The above findings indicate that the three types of conflicts: horizontal, cultural and vertical, exist in universities 1, 2, 3 and 4 and, to varying extents, hinder quality assurance implementation. Variants of these types of conflicts might also be found in universities 5 and 6, since change invariably creates conflicts and conflicts are part of organisational life (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Graetz et al., 2011).

### 7.2.3 Affecters - Context and Vietnamese culture

In analysing the factors that influence the management of organisational change, Graetz and colleagues (2011) termed context and culture “affecters”, as something that ‘illustrates the role of key variables in influencing all constituents of the change process’ (p. 10). This final part of the chapter presents the findings related to context (the environment and system in which the universities operates), and culture (the set of Vietnamese values and beliefs commonly held by the staff)

As for the context, the case universities operate under several social, systemic and legal constraints.

#### Social pressures

First, as perceived by many interviewed leaders, their umbrella institution was facing a challenge: aiming at the high end of the labour market by educating the elite and producing highly-qualified graduates, while having to meet the social demands for mass education. If they focussed on mass education, they might have to lower their standards, but how far could the standards be lowered without compromising quality? For example, in university 4, only 30% (18/60 students) of the 2008 student intake graduated as scheduled in 2012, but the governing

board could not compromise quality for a higher graduation rate (Interview 26-PI1).

Another social factor that makes quality assurance more difficult for some universities relates to the social demand for employees with degrees. In addition, the available job opportunities did not match with the state policy of prioritising basic science and elite education<sup>29</sup> (Interviews 05, 07, 26). All interviewed leaders from university 2 consistently expressed their concern over this issue, that ‘history [the faculty of history] is losing its status, students don’t select this, or they enrol just for the sake of having a place to study, they have no job prospects’ (Interview 17-PM2, p. 12), or ‘there are seven fields of study in our faculty, but only one field - history of the communist party - is favoured by the students because of the higher rate of employment, whereas other interesting but difficult fields as archaeology or history of ancient Vietnam are not selected’ (Interview 20-PI1, p. 4). The reduced enrolment and consequently reduced state funding appear to affect the improvement of educational quality in these universities.

Commenting on the need to have external social forces to accelerate internal quality improvement, one university 2 interviewee asserted that there was a lack of synchronisation between the state policy, the operation of education institutions and research institutes, and the job orientation for both students and their parents from the high school level (Interview 17-PM2). A policy-making leader from university 5, as indicated in Chapter 6, claimed that the low demand from customers (prospective employers) might lessen the power of the internal improvement gear (Interview 15-PM1).

### The government and MoET context

Many interviewed leaders across the universities mentioned the legal constraints that, to varying extents, impact on the implementation of quality assurance. For

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<sup>29</sup> Elite education refers to the type of education funded by the government for resources, equipment and facilities, to educate selected students into highly qualified professionals and researchers.

example, one university 5 policy-making leader complained about the “flexibility” in assessing quality standards among public universities, saying that:

we set higher quality bars for our educational operations but received similar credit as other institutions that produce lower quality products. Even worse, we might risk violating the law, because in order to have funding for some specific quality assurance initiatives, we need to implement some activities that are not compatible with the current regulations<sup>30</sup>. (Interview 15-PM1, p. 11)

Similarly, two leaders from universities 1 and 6 mentioned their lack of financial autonomy at the faculty level and the lack of legal identity or legal mechanism to allow them to provide outreach activities and generate income for the faculty (Interviews 12 and 10). Beside this concern over finance, many leaders consistently argued that the MoET’s regulation on the required number of teaching hours per year conflicted with the institution’s requirement for increased research outputs. This policy mismatch appeared to affect the realisation of the institutional mission of becoming a leading research institution in the region (Interviews 21, 26, 27, 12, 20).

One contextual factor that appears to impede the sustainability of quality assurance is remuneration which is not up to a liveable standard. As revealed by the interviewed leaders, many young teachers at university 1 would ‘commit because they are passionate and responsible, [but] they have to find supplementary income sources from participating in research projects’ (Interview 12-PI1, p. 9). This practice was common for many young teachers from universities 2, 4 and 5 (Interviews 20, 22, 23 and 19). Meanwhile, many of their peers from universities 3 and 6 “moonlight” or take on extra teaching to earn their living (Interview 01-PI1, interview 13-PI2). This latter group consequently had little remaining time for doing research. In both scenarios, it is a challenge to sustain quality assurance when staff commitment is either “good now but hard to

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<sup>30</sup> For example, offering visiting faculty staff who are well recognised in their field a higher rate of honorarium than that required by the Ministry of Finance.

prolong”, or marginal because, sooner or later, they have to respond to their family’s immediate needs. Commenting on this challenge, one experienced executive leader from university 2 empathetically said:

when their kids asked for money to pay for extra classes or buy yoghurt as their peers did, parents have to find ways to earn more ... we ourselves are senior teachers or researchers, we can earn more from big collaborative research projects, but for many teachers who can’t find research projects and so have to do other part-time jobs, how can they focus on improving teaching and research, when their personal life is not ensured? (Interview 20-PI1, p. 14)

### Pressure from the umbrella institution

As indicated in the section on HRM issues, such quality improvement initiatives as the “strategic mission programs”<sup>31</sup> generated increased pressure and heavier workloads for all administrative departments and related faculties. While this pressure was perceived by the interviewees as necessary to push forward toward its achievement goals, it inevitably created such problems as: an overloaded curriculum, which left limited time for student self-study; large classes, which impeded the quality of continuous assessment; overloaded leaders due to extra supervision; and some quality assurance initiatives that could not be sustained because self-supervision is not a common practice in Vietnamese workplaces (Interviews 26, 12, 27, 07, 04, 21).

It can be seen from the above findings, that many of the discussed contextual affecters have been mentioned in the preceding sections. There are, however, multi-directional interactions between the affecters and other constraining factors, which makes it difficult to finely separate them and discuss each one discretely or independently.

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<sup>31</sup> The programs in which all courses are taught through the medium of English, applied in selected faculties at universities 1, 2, 4 and 5.

Regarding the second key affecter of culture, data analysis identified several Vietnamese culturally-specific factors that influence the implementation of quality assurance practices. The most significant findings are as follows:

- *The influence of the long-lasting rice farming culture*: farmers usually plan their daily activities around the weather, often they plan at the beginning of the day. For example, if it is going to be a sunny day, they will dry out the newly cut rice. This culture has affected the working culture of many staff, as about 80% of the Vietnamese population work in farming and agriculture. Consequently, they have to learn to plan for their work in a different way. For example, they must plan for the whole academic year or semester, in connection with the annual plan of the institution or faculty, rather than just planning for their next week or tomorrow's lessons. (Interview 06-PM1)
- *Hierarchical interpersonal relationships, or the absence of professional distance*: it is still common that staff do not separate work and personal relations. For example, teachers feel empathy for students and students respect teachers, leading to inflated assessment or generous evaluation of teaching, respectively. In addition, senior staff can manipulate juniors, or junior staff have to respect seniors, because "seniority means superiority" in Vietnamese culture. Because of the values of "respect your teachers" and "respect the senior", staff rarely challenge their leaders. Instead they let their disagreement subside. This provides a possible explanation for the finding that both vertical and horizontal conflicts often smoulder or go underground (i.e. they are not talked about). (Interviews 26, 07, 05)
- *Peace in harmony*: this trait of Vietnamese culture could be an advantage in conflict management, and provides an additional explanation for hidden conflicts. However, in quality assurance activities, such as staff performance evaluation or project peer review, it appears to be an inadequate quality sustainer. (Interviews 27, 04, 07)
- *Achievement-obsession*: this has been termed a "disease" by Vietnamese public media, as it has severely affected the quality and operation of the



whole educational system. In terms of quality assurance, it has led to symbolic compliance and inflated assessment (Interviews 12, 26, 10, 03), or even ‘evidence fabrication’ for self-assessment reports (Interview 27-PM2).

In summary, many of the above findings reflect the influence of certain traits of Vietnamese culture on the implementation of quality assurance, as outlined in Chapter 5. Apparently, the case universities have to adapt to these contextual and cultural affecters in order to sustain and then thrive (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

### **7.3 Further discussion**

The findings from the interview data analysis provided insightful material to help answer research question 2 – ‘What are the possible factors that impact on the quality assurance implementation at the case universities?’

The figure below provides a visualisation of the identified enablers and inhibitors in quality assurance implementation, reflecting the multi-directional interaction between these factors and the main components of the internal quality assurance mechanisms established at the case universities. The enablers are coloured in green and the inhibitors are coloured in brown.

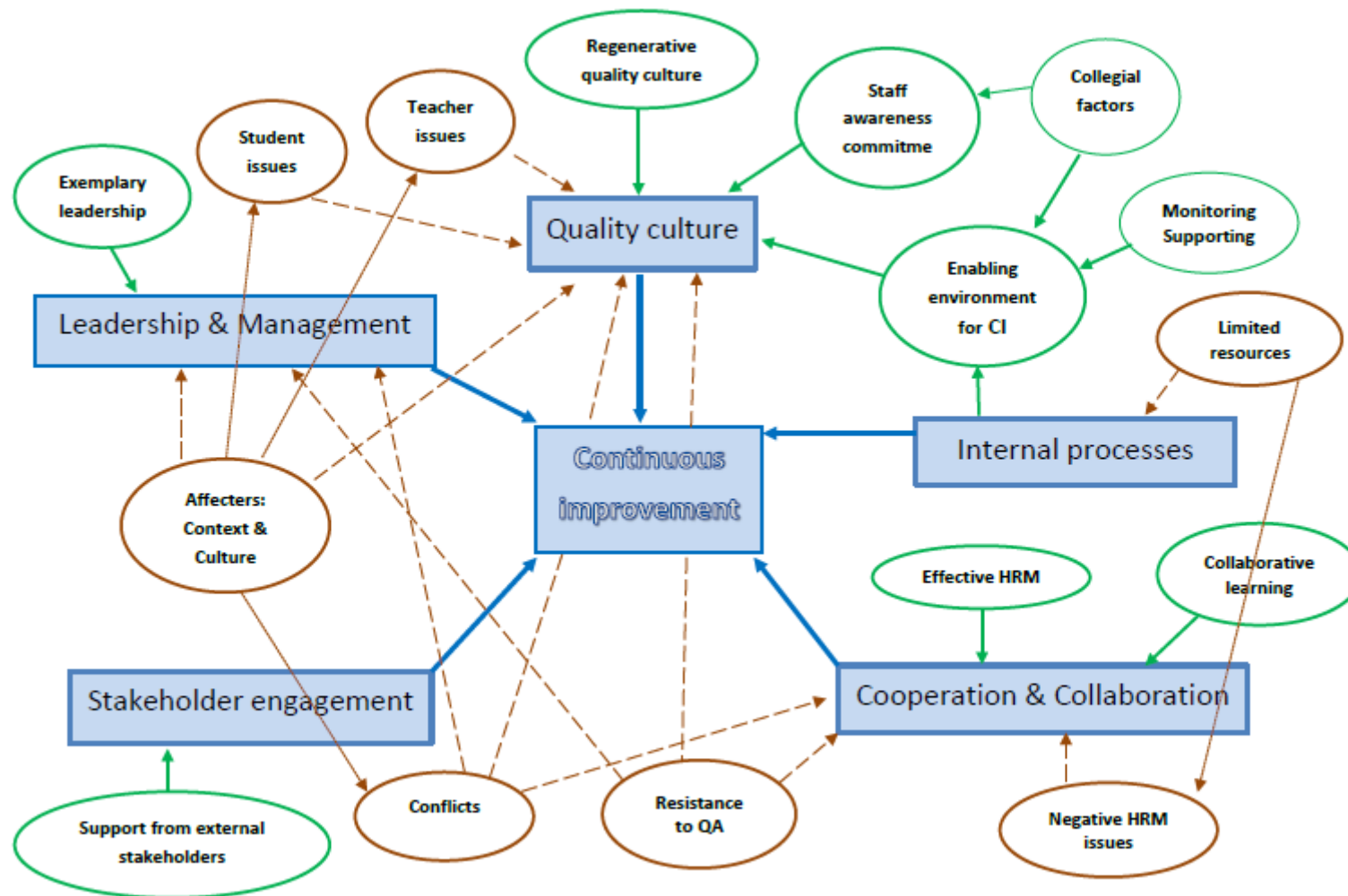


Figure 10: The interaction of quality assurance enablers and inhibitors

As can be seen in the diagram, there are three types of interaction: supporting (represented by the single arrow); challenging (represented by the dashed arrow); and having relationships (represented by the dotted arrow). Regarding colour coding, the main quality assurance framework components are blue, the enablers are green, and the inhibitors are brown.

According to the findings of this study, all the identified enabling factors directly support relevant quality assurance components. Accordingly, the **quality culture component** is supported by 1) increased staff awareness and commitment; 2) the enabling environment for continuous improvement, which is created by the supporting system of internal processes, monitoring and evaluation, and collegial factors; and 3) the regenerative quality culture in practice. The **cooperation and collaboration component** is strengthened by 1) effective HRM; and 2) collaborative learning. The **leadership and management component** is reinforced by exemplary leadership exercised by the universities' leaders. The **stakeholder engagement component** receives support from external stakeholders.

The challenges from the constraining factors can be seen as follows: limited resources challenge the operation of **internal processes**, while negative HRM issues hinder **cooperation and collaboration**. Both conflicts and the resistance to quality assurance pose challenges for **leadership and management**, **quality culture**, and **cooperation and collaboration**. The affecters (context and culture) impede the operation of **leadership and management** and the sustainability of **quality culture**. These contextual and Vietnamese cultural factors also have an effect on conflicts, student issues, and teacher issues.

An examination of the diagram, while reflecting back on the findings relating to quality assurance enablers and inhibitors, offers complementary insights into the current quality assurance implementation at the case universities.

Being a strategy-driven change, the quality assurance initiative adopted by the case institution and its member universities reflects a “reframing” (Bolman & Deal, 2008) of the organisation, ‘taking a different perspective ... to generate new ways of thinking about and responding to the need for change’ (Graetz et al. 2011, p. 21). This reframing involved the formation of the quality assurance frameworks established at the universities, as analysed in Chapter 6. These frameworks were comprised of the human element (leaders, staff, stakeholders); the system/structure element (P&P, quality culture); and the internal-external collaboration element (stakeholder engagement, cooperation and collaboration). As the diagram above depicts, this structure currently receives powerful pushing forces from such factors as staff awareness and commitment, enabling environment for continuous improvement, exemplary leadership, effective HRM and support from external stakeholders.

Inevitably, there are pulling forces that undermine the operationalisation of the quality assurance mechanism. As can be seen from the findings, most of the inhibitors were identified by the executive leaders. This might be because this group of middle management leaders were involved in both policy enactment and experience, so they were able to offer dual perspectives. For example, part of their responsibilities was to cascade the desirable quality assurance practices down to the grassroots level and, in this process, they could feel any potential top-down pressure as well as the bottom-up resistance. The policy-making leaders, on the other hand, had to focus on the agreed-upon mission and mobilise people to do what needed to be done, and even stretch staff if needed.

Regarding the constraining factors perceived by the executive leaders, two key inferences can be made from the findings. First, the three factors of conflict, resistance to quality assurance, and affectors (context and culture), appear to have direct impact on several components of the quality assurance mechanism. Therefore, these factors deserve to be examined in greater detail. Second, some pulling forces stem from two factors that the universities have limited control over: affectors and

limited resources. The awareness of these factors might inform institutional policy makers of how to address the status quo.

Bolman and Deal (2008) argue that when things are out of control in an organisation, one of the following explanations apply: the ‘targeting a guilty individual’ option or the ‘blaming the bureaucracy’ option (p. 27). In this case study, if the blame is on individuals, then attention rests on teacher issues, student issues, the closed mind-set, and resistance to change. All of these might block the sight of the larger system failures, as warned by Bolman and Deal (2008). On the other hand, problems should not be solely attributed to bureaucracy, or to the lack of clear goals and roles, or rules and procedures, as the administrative structure supporting quality assurance is already in place. More importantly, some major hindrances come from the overarching system or external environment. My argument here is that we should examine both the individual and the systemic inhibitors, as well as their possible interaction.

### Conflicts and resistance to quality assurance

Many organisational theorists (see, for example, Sporn, 2007; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Heffron, 1989; Graetz et al., 2011) view conflicts as an inevitable by-product of organisational life, and that conflict is not necessarily a problem. Heffron (1989) claimed that conflict has both benefits and costs, as an organisation operating harmoniously might offer little space for creativity, flexibility and responsiveness to change. Bolman and Deal (2008) suggested that leaders should examine conflicts from the political frame, placing more emphasis on strategy and tactics than on conflict resolution. In light of these theoretical arguments, it seems necessary for the case universities to co-exist with conflicts, such as the power tension between academic and administrative units, as this tension might actually help maintain the inter-dependence between academic and administrative units. For the short-term, addressing these conflicts requires the application of a situational approach to

leadership. For the longer-term, conflicts might be prevented or lessened by the institutionalisation of systemic procedures. As commonly found in the organisational management literature, conflicts should be viewed as challenges leading to changes, rather than hindrances to development.

Before making the decision to soften or crush staff resistance to quality assurance initiatives, the leaders should listen to, and understand, their perspectives. As claimed by Pfeffer (1992), staff resistance may arise from a different perspective on what leaders' information means, rather than a lack of information. Therefore, leaders should 'diagnose the point of view of the different interest groups and the basis for their positions' (Pfeffer 1992, p. 341). This would then lead to two possibilities: 1) their perspective can be realigned through enhanced communication, training or support; or 2) their perspective offers critical and original perceptions of the issues. The former can be fixed by immediate actions, while the latter requires leaders to reconsider the strategy or recheck the system and make necessary realignments. This is when Graetz et al.'s (2011) "adaptive leadership" or Hersey's (1984, cited in Bolman & Deal, 2008) "situational leadership" come into play. These types of leadership skills allow leaders to develop multiple perspectives about any issue, and make appropriate decisions based on individual needs, skills and performance, as well as the task and the situation in hand (Kotter, 1995, 1996; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Graetz et al., 2011; Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

Organisational conflicts and staff resistance to change, if addressed early and well managed, can trigger new ideas and approaches to problems, as well as stimulate innovation and create more energy for organisational change. This can be compared to Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh's remedy for embracing personal anger and turning it into internal power (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2001). In this case study, the possible energy transformed from the managed conflicts and resistance could hone leadership skills for more effective leadership and management, enhance cooperation and collaboration, as well as quality culture.

### Affecters (context and culture)

As shown in the diagram, the affecters tend to negatively impact two elements of the quality assurance mechanism: leadership and management, and quality culture. At the same time, they have links to three constraining factors: conflicts, student issues and teacher issues. Moreover, as indicated above, they belong to the group of factors over which the case universities have restricted control. It can be said that these affecters have both power and influence over the implementation of the quality assurance initiative (Kezar, 2008).

Due to the multi-directional interaction between affecters and other factors, it is not appropriate to blame the group of staff with low quality assurance awareness or commitment, before seeking to understand the system. As presented in the above findings, the systemic constraints include low salaries that lead to staff having to spend time doing part-time jobs for extra income, resulting in less time for research, participating in PD or capacity improvement activities. Additionally, in many Vietnamese public universities, professionalism is not up to the expected level of work ethics. All of these issues could lead to either symbolic compliance or the unwanted practice of “low quality for low cost”.

Contextual factors originating from the broader system in which the case universities operate appear to persist and are not likely to change overnight. The requirement for quality assurance, however, is a matter of some urgency and environmental challenges keep pushing universities to address this critical issue. To a certain extent, the systemic inhibitors affect the sustaining of quality assurance awareness or the translation of awareness into action. In the case universities, as indicated in the findings, staff awareness and commitment were maintained, partly based on such well-established elements as traditions or personal relationships (teacher-student). If there is no positive change to the current context and system, then either the high

staff turn-over or the reliance on staff loyalty are undesirable options for sustainability.

With regard to the identified lack of synchronised efforts between the government, institutions and schools, one argument should be presented. As discussed in Chapter 5, universities in Vietnam, as well as those in other Asian countries, are facing rapid social changes due to the advancement of information and communication technology and the associated broadening of knowledge creation and transfer boundaries. These changes challenge the long-standing role of universities as leaders in knowledge creation through research and elite education. The gap between university offerings and social demands seems to have widened, especially in the case of those universities with slow or limited improvement. Therefore, it should be each university's mission to become more adaptive and take the initiative in shaping the social needs, rather than expecting a centralised synchronisation between the state, universities and society.

Another important factor is limited resources. This, in combination with the lack of financial autonomy (one of the systemic constraints), seems to undermine the implementation of such strategy-driven changes as quality assurance. As shown in the diagram, this factor directly affects the operation of the internal processes, and has linkages with HRM challenges. Bolman and Deal (2008) warned that when 'organisational resources are in short supply, there is rarely enough to give everyone everything they want' (p. 206). In this case, continuous improvement needs might have to be in stand-by mode, as resources need to be prioritised for responses to accountability, or some other urgent projects.

A holistic view of the diagram representing the possible enablers and inhibitors in the implementation of the quality assurance initiative and its ultimate outcome of sustainable continuous improvement, offers various angles for understanding the situation at the site universities. While enablers provide more power to the



established quality assurance mechanisms, inhibitors should not be overlooked or underestimated. A variety of tools and techniques are at the university leaders' disposal to help address these constraints, including 'participation, education, facilitation, negotiation, manipulation and coercion' (Graetz et al., 2011, p. 13). Coping with hindrances in organisational change is categorised by Kotter (2002) into two out of the eight stages of successful change management: removing obstacles; and sticking with the process and refusing to quit when things get tough.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the prominent findings of the study on the possible factors that enable or hinder the implementation of quality assurance at the case universities, from the perspectives of the interviewed leaders. From these findings, a diagram was created to reflect the multi-directional interactions between these factors and the key components of the quality assurance framework, as well as the linkages between certain factors. These interactions were then discussed, in connection with previous studies in organisational change management, given that quality assurance initiatives represent important organisational change. The discussion focused on the possible interaction between the factors, taking into special consideration the influence of contextual and cultural factors constraining the improvement of Vietnamese higher education in general, and quality assurance implementation in particular.

One interesting question that arises from this discussion is how the case universities can sustain their quality assurance systems when the identified affecters appear to remain unchanged for an extended period. It can be argued that when the context does not change, then strategies must change, and these changed strategies need to accommodate both stability and dynamism. This is examined in more detail in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 8. LONG-TERM STRATEGIES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN VIETNAM

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### Introduction

This chapter presents the findings gathered to address research question 3 - What are the essential conditions for a sustainable quality assurance mechanism, from the perspectives of the interviewed leaders?

The first section of the chapter addresses the key issue of how the universities enhance their internal quality assurance in order to sustain crucial competitiveness and change responsiveness. In this regard, the interviewed leaders' perspectives and extended discussion are presented. The second section distils the essence of the findings and discusses the implications for Vietnamese public universities in relation to viable quality assurance mechanisms.

### 8.1 How the universities enhance their internal quality assurance

As indicated in Chapter 7, one challenge facing the case universities is how to sustain their internal quality assurance mechanism and be agile within an external context that tends to remain rigid. Implementing quality assurance represented the first big organisational change that the case institution, like many other leading public universities in Vietnam, had to address. However, quality assurance initiatives would not add much value to the development of the institution if treated as one-off activities. It is process-oriented quality assurance that counts. In this respect, regular internal quality assurance practices appear to create greater organisational change, requiring the universities under study to 'challenge conventional wisdom and design new paradigms' and 'find the difficult balance between stability and dynamism'

(Graetz et al., 2011, p. 235). This section of the chapter examines the interviewed leaders' perspectives on this matter.

### 8.1.1 Leadership to navigate quality assurance

As reflected in the quality assurance framework adopted by the case universities, leadership is an essential component. It is, at the same time, one of the core parts of the organisational structure that has impact on any change initiative.

Chapter 6 presented an examination of the existing leadership and management in relation to quality assurance at the case universities, in light of Middlehurst's (1997) framework. Chapter 7 identified exemplary leadership practise among the leaders in line with Kouzes and Posner's (2007) model, as one facilitating factor for internal quality assurance.

This section investigates how the interviewed leaders perceived their role in navigating the implementation of quality assurance, in order to make this important organisational change sustainable.

Interestingly, most of the major findings came from the interviews with policy-making leaders (university Rectors or Directors of quality assurance centres). One possible explanation for this might be that the policy-making leaders are positioned at a more vantage point to have a broader view of their university's situation, in relation to the general context of Vietnamese public universities.

#### 8.1.1.1 Strategic planning with quality assurance integration

Almost all the policy-making leaders from the six universities, especially the top leaders<sup>32</sup>, were well aware of the demands of their job in leading the organisation with a vision, and 'communicating their vision with clarity and power' (Bolman &

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<sup>32</sup> As mentioned earlier in Chapter 6, the term 'top leader' is used interchangeably with the term 'policy-making leader'. They all refer to the interviewed rectors/directors of quality assurance centres.

Deal, 2008, p. 436). These leaders said that they knew what they wanted for their university and how they would get there. The question was how they could make their university staff think along the same lines and act accordingly.

Commenting on the role of leaders in strategising the operations of the institution, one top leader from university 3 stated that:

There are three elements - human, environment and resource - that affect our operation. These three elements take turns to become dominating. For example, one university has favourable conditions but lacks qualified staff, then the priority should be head-hunting. In another university where high-calibre staff cannot utilise their potential, the reason might be the working environment has too many constraints, or that they do not have access to adequate resources. I think the overarching element is leadership, the leader should have the capacity to decide when to do what. (Interview 06-PM1, p. 19)

The above opinion was consistent with ideas from other policy-making leaders. These leaders highlighted the need to develop context-informed policies based on the thorough analysis of the three elements (human, environment and resource), as well the external context. They believed that it is the responsibility of leaders, especially those from the highest level of governance, to issue feasible and engaging plans and policies for internal development (Interviews 06, 07, 15, 04, 24).

In this respect, one policy-making leader from university 4 shared one measure that his university adopted to harmonise external and internal quality assurance. While implementing the agreed-upon plan as required by the umbrella institution, taking into account their own capacity for the required tasks, university 4 also improved their internal quality relating to international standards, having their programs accredited by ABET<sup>33</sup> (Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology)

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<sup>33</sup> ABET is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation recognised by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). ABET accredits college and university programs in the disciplines of applied science, computing, engineering, and engineering technology, at the associate, bachelor,

(Interview 24-PM1). The other policy-making leader from university 4 supported this viewpoint and emphasised that in approaching ABET standards, they needed to plan for many things, not just improving the education programs, but more synchronistically planning for human and physical resources, as well as the research direction. Apparently, the implementation of the quality assurance plan for ABET accreditation requires the engagement of pan-university activities (involving all faculties and administrative departments) (Interview 21-PM2). As these leaders put it, ‘by doing this, we will be able to implement the plan as required by the institution, and at the same time develop potential for our own university’ (Interview 24-PM1, p. 10).

Regarding the issue of focusing on internal improvement or external accountability, the other policy-making leaders from universities 5 and 6 believed that quality assurance should be an integral part of the university’s operational plan, and that focus should be on internal improvement. This was because enhanced internal quality could lead to ensured external accountability. The Rector of university 6 asserted that, ‘if we want to go to big seas and face the strong wind, first we need to be internally strong’ (Interview 04-PM1, p. 30). Similarly, the Rector of university 5 emphasised that in order to improve their internal capacity, rather than responding to the market needs, they would need to set their own goals and targets, even higher than the standards currently accepted by the market. This leader strongly believed that ‘our development should be our self-governed endeavour, the most important thing is that we have a goal for self-development, which is good for the institution and good for all staff, then we should go ahead with that’ (Interview 15-PM1, p. 12). The quotes from these leaders imply that they were focused on exceeding threshold requirements.

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and master degree levels.

As discussed in Chapter 6, some middle management leaders perceived their top leaders' strategic plans to bring educational quality to regional/international standards to be too ambitious. They were also concerned about resource shortages or overburdening staff.

However, as argued by the top leaders, particularly those in universities 3, 4, 5 and 6, their plans were long-term, with assessment criteria for specific work areas being periodically revised to more challenging performance levels, approaching international standards. These leaders believed that if they planned based on existing capacity and set appropriate priorities stage by stage, they would achieve their objectives (Interviews 06, 24, 15, 04 respectively). Therefore, the following distinct approaches to quality were addressed at these universities: long-term planning, regular review, staged development, and setting goals to reach international standards.

Bolman and Deal (2008) described good leaders as having the ability to 'sustain a tension-filled poise between extremes' and 'combine core values with elastic strategies' (p. 436). In the previous chapters we have seen several types of tension, including: accountability vs. improvement; administrative departments vs. academic faculties; and quality improvement requirements vs. existing capacity and resources. Although these tensions were not always extreme, they represented challenges for leaders (Middlehurst 1997). In this case study, the top leaders' comments suggested that they were attempting to balance these tensions in order to maintain both stability and dynamism. This "elastic strategy" enabled them to stay on track with the main direction of the university and at the same time see new possibilities, create new opportunities, and seek alternatives when coping with constraining factors.

It can be inferred from the top leaders' perception of their universities' strategic plan and direction, that quality assurance initiatives supported their core missions, which were: reaching international/regional standards (universities 1, 4, and 5); giving

priority to basic sciences education and elite education (university 2); aiming at the high end of the labour market (universities 5 and 6); and pushing their limits beyond what society was demanding of them (university 5). If these strategic plans and development directions could be termed the “core” or “hardware” of the leadership component of the quality assurance framework, then the “supplement” or the “software” might refer to all the activities that require alternatives to measures and connections between leadership and other quality assurance components. These are discussed in the following section.

#### *8.1.1.2 Policy-making leaders' mindset: governing within given autonomy, promoting university-wide synergy*

##### *Perspectives of the policy-making leaders (or top leaders)*

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, the top leaders of the case universities, like those of other public universities in Vietnam, are given limited autonomy for policy. When applying the adopted quality assurance policies, they needed to ‘optimise the given autonomy while respecting its limits’ (U1 interview 05-PM1, p. 18). There was consistency in the statements of the other top leaders from universities 3, 5 and 6 with regard to this “autonomy within boundaries” (Interviews 06, 15, 04- all PM1). It can be inferred from the viewpoints of these interviewed leaders that in order to sustain their educational quality, they needed an open mindset. With that mindset, they could opportunistically utilise any possible autonomy, without separating their policy espousal from the broader context of public university operations.

Data analysis of the interviews with policy-making leaders also identified that, while these leaders experienced limited autonomy, they nonetheless encouraged staff autonomy. The top leaders from universities 3, 5 and 6 strongly viewed their leadership as governing (macro-managing), rather than controlling or managing (micro-managing). The top leader of university 6 described his favoured leadership

style as ‘making them [the staff] work for themselves’ (Interview 04-PM1, p. 11). These leaders advocated a well-established organisational structure with clear roles and responsibilities. They perceived that empowerment and staff autonomy would work to effect provided that adequate support systems were put in place (Interviews 04, 06, 15). It should be noted here that except for the top leader of university 4, who could not make time in his tight schedule for an interview and therefore assigned it to the director of the quality assurance centre, all the top leaders of universities 3, 5 and 6 expressed their support for staff autonomy. This reflected the organisational theory of collegium adopted by their universities, as discussed in Chapter 6.

As indicated in the literature on organisational management and leadership, governance allows for empowerment and staff autonomy, yet it requires clear goals and roles, clear rules and procedures, and tight JDs (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Pfeffer, 1992). This viewpoint fits well with the case universities, as the leaders would not have enough time and energy for micro-management, let alone the fact that micro-management demotivates high-performing subordinates (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Therefore, leaders’ macro-management, or governance may facilitate staff engagement (Middlehurst, 1993; Mai & Dang, 2012) in quality assurance activities, for the platform (goals and roles, rules and procedures) is already in place.

### Perspectives of the executive leaders

One approach to enhancing the institutional responsiveness to quality assurance initiatives was highlighted by many executive leaders. This was to promote university-wide synergy, an idea developed through their involvement in both aspects of academic affairs and human resource management at the quality assurance enactment level. One executive leader from university 2 asserted that ‘in many cases, if staff capacity development is well conducted in single faculty or single division, but the top-management leaders lack vision and fail to connect the great ideas into significant endeavours, quality enhancement would be undermined’ (Interview 20-



PI1, p. 9). Another executive leader from university 6 proposed that the top leaders should hold on to the development strategy and direct the capacity development for more harmonious cooperation and less overlapping between the university units (i.e. doing the same task, or repeating others' projects) (Interview 14-PI1). Data analysis of the interviews with many other executive leaders also revealed the expectation that top leaders should have plans and roadmaps for human resource development to encourage inter-discipline professional development. These leaders emphasised that individual staff should take the initiative in identifying the most suitable development area for themselves, aligned with their institutional development plan. They believed that this mindset constitutes optimal human resource allocation (Interviews 03, 01, 23, 26, 10, 12, 19, 22).

As indicated in the organisational management literature, human resource management and development can be best implemented when there are both top-down approval and support, and bottom-up initiative and empowerment (see for example, Graetz et al., 2011; Sporn 2007; Bolman & Deal, 2008). When individual staff in the organisation are well aware of their existing capacity and the required level that they need to approach, and they can take the initiative in proceeding ahead, human resource managers can save time on training needs analysis and personnel roadmap building. After all, if an organisation wants to be agile, it needs leaders with an open mindset, and versatile staff.

Kouzes and Posner (2007) affirmed that 'leaders must pay attention to the capacity of their constituents to take control of challenging situations and become fully committed to change, you can't exhort people to take risks if they don't also feel safe [from losing their job]' (p. 19). Promoting staff autonomy and empowerment, connecting initiatives, and pushing self-development seem to be viable solutions to increase people's commitment to quality assurance and improvement. All in all, as suggested by Palmer et al. (2009), one of the ways to support and sustain organisational change is to 'put in place a new mindset' (p. 13).

As raised in the concluding part of the previous chapter, when the contextual affecters tend to remain unchanged or are unlikely to change overnight, the universities' leaders need to reframe their organisation and readjust their strategies, to allow for dynamism. The next sections elaborate on reframing and adjusted strategies.

### 8.1.2 Resources to facilitate quality assurance implementation

In Chapter 7, one factor identified as having an impact on internal processes and relating to negative issues in human resource management, is limited resources for quality assurance implementation. It can be inferred from the interviewed leaders' perceptions and experiences that quality assurance is not always treated with priority, and was many times a one-off activity. One possible reason, as previously indicated, is that the universities have restricted control over their resources. Other reasons are discussed in the sections that follow.

#### 8.1.2.1 *Human resource development: stronger capacity, better commitment*

In Chapter 7, some major concerns regarding human resource management at the case universities were indicated, including: a perception that few people had the competence and capacity needed for change; heavy staff workloads; overlapping task allocation; or unequal allocation of responsibilities.

Commenting on what should be done to sustain internal quality assurance, or to harmonise external and internal quality assurance, many interviewed leaders across the universities consistently asserted that 'one important element for successful change management and quality assurance is high quality human resource' (Interviews 06, 21, 04, 25, 14, 27, 23). They believed that the sustainability of quality improvement depends on the improvement of the human resource. Only by such improvement can the university: 1) enhance institutional capacity; and 2) optimise

human resource management, in order to tackle the remaining human resource problems discussed above (Interviews 06, 21, 04, 25, 14, 27, 23).

Fittingly enough, the development of staff with the expertise and experience required for change implementation, can be done amidst the process of change implementation. The top leaders from universities 3, 4 and 6 supported this on-the-job training approach. As their universities underwent “staff rejuvenation” or the recruitment of more young employees and/or the designation of junior staff to management positions, they believed that time and opportunity were critical. Time and opportunity are needed for young staff to participate in change implementation, utilise their potential, enhance their overall capacity and strengthen their commitment to the universities (Interviews 06, 21, 04).

As the top leader from university 3 said:

In order to be able to contribute ideas and efforts to quality improvement, staff need to acquire a certain level of experience and expertise. Meanwhile the young staff have to care for many things - further study, more qualifications, teaching and other academic tasks, earning extra income for their personal life. Time is an important issue here. (Interview 06-PM1, p. 13)

Regarding opportunities for young staff, universities 3 and 4 leaders similarly shared their workable solutions. For example, one policy-making leader from university 4 noted that:

Staff contribution depends on how they are treated. So remuneration policy is worth our concern. If our staff can live their life with their remuneration, without having to run around moonlighting or doing other part-time jobs, they will feel secure and will be wholeheartedly committed to the university. (Interview 21-PM2, p. 20)

However, due to systemic constraint, as discussed in Chapter 7, the basic salary scheme is governmentally controlled. Therefore, the strategies that these universities adopted in order to generate extra income for their staff is worth considering. As discussed in Chapter 6, the teachers in university 4 were involved in collaborative research projects with industries, and their colleagues in university 3 were given chances to teach in, and research for, MoET projects (Interviews 21, 23, 27).

Another remedial measure to optimise the existing human resource, as experienced by the leaders from universities 1, 3 and 5, is staff rotation between academic faculties and administration, or across universities units within the university. Universities also shared expertise, for example, lecturers with relevant expertise from university 1 are invited to teach some courses at university 4 (Interviews 05, 06, 19). According to the top leader of university 1, due to the restricted autonomy of the rectors, they cannot dismiss underperforming staff<sup>34</sup>; therefore, staff rotation could be a compromise (Interview 05-PM1). The top leaders of universities 3 and 5 also shared their experience of using staff rotation combined with staff retraining to address either shortages or underperformance (Interviews 06 and 15). Likewise, the sharing of expertise across universities or disciplines could help with such circumstances as staff shortages in one university, while another has a staff surplus.

As part of the long-term capacity building plan, university 4 had a human resource development plan for young teachers, which meant that ‘they do not have to teach full-load, meanwhile they are provided with opportunities to join research projects, to go on exchange research programs with the university’s overseas partners, the university takes risks and invests in these bench-strength initiatives [capacity building for the next management generation]’ (Interview 23-PI1, p. 11). Similarly, in university 3, young teachers were involved in research or PD initiatives to help

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<sup>34</sup> According to the labour code, staff who are on a permanent labour contract can only be dismissed under specific circumstances.

them develop their expertise, hone their skills, and upgrade their professional profiles. These were intangible assets that benefit both staff and the institution (Interview 27-PM1).

As mentioned above, in the section on leaders' promotion of a university-wide synergy, there were requirements and supporting policies for teachers to pursue further study on another discipline, or join inter-discipline research teams. This long-term human resource development solution was expected to increase the versatility of academic staff and therefore enhance university capacity, as perceived by the interviewed leaders.

Regarding measures to strengthen staff commitment to the university, the interviewed leaders across the universities shared numerous techniques that they adopted, in addition to the core values that they embraced and passionately exemplified. For instance, more than half of the interviewed leaders from universities 1, 2, 3 emphasised the need to communicate the personnel policies to all newly recruited staff. This related to the required code of conduct and professionalism, as well as the supporting system for their capacity development through PD programs (Interviews 20, 17, 08, 12, 01, 03, 27). Via communication and awareness raising exercises, as reflected by both levels of leaders, important messages were conveyed to their staff. These included: 'make your day at the university a meaningful working day' (Interview 20-PI1, p. 15); 'we need generations who can sacrifice, have determination and passion for their profession' (Interview 21-PM2, p. 21); and 'when you enter the "game" you need to play fair, or if you cannot carry the heavy load, let go of it [quit the job and change job]' (Interview 06-PM1, p. 14). One policy-making leader from university 3 critically claimed, from his experience, that 'when staff can observe that the leaders are working for common benefits, and that if they do good they will be duly recognised, then staff will be persuaded and willing to contribute' (Interview 27-PM2, p. 32).

Moreover, this leader from university 3 highlighted that ‘due recognition or credit for staff performance, either periodically, or just for single projects, could promote staff engagement in those activities that ensure or improve the quality of their teaching or research’ (Interview 27-PM2, p. 29). This practice echoed the earlier suggestion by Graetz et al. (2011) that ‘the power of symbolic and substantive actions as catalysts for changing behaviours and attitudes’ should not be undervalued, and that ‘the traditional reluctance to recognise and reward individual excellence adversely affect employee commitment and potential performance’ (p. 154).

One interesting finding from the data analysis relates to affective ways to increase staff commitment. As experienced by the interviewed leaders (for example, Interviews 27, 21, 06, 20, 01), the first one is to take advantage of one feature of Vietnamese culture, that staff loyalty is highly valued, and that staff often stay committed to an organisation even for their whole life and care for its “ups and downs”. It also appeared to be easier to engage staff in a quality assurance activity if there were good personal relationships between the leader and their subordinates. Therefore, it was considered advisable to create and nurture inter-personal relationships and the emotional attachment between staff and the institution.

The above described long-term and short-term measures to enhance human resource capacity and strengthen staff commitment match well with Bolman and Deal’s (2008) argument that ‘Innovation [organisational change] ... affects individuals’ ability to feel effective, valued and in control. Without support, training and a chance to participate in the process, people become powerful anchors, embedded in the past, that block forward motion’ (p. 396). The university measures also reflect the essence of a much earlier statement in organisational change management literature: ‘Long term solutions to the problem of maintaining adaptiveness to change cannot ... depend on manipulative techniques [over the staff]. On the contrary, they must depend on helping the individual to develop greater maturity in controlling the boundary between his own inner world and the realities of his external environment’

(Miller & Rice, 1967, quoted in McLennan, 1988, p. 549). In the context of the current study, Miller and Rice's long-term solutions refer to human resource capacity enhancement.

It should also be noted that the provision of new training programs as professional development opportunities for academic staff aligns with one of Palmer, Dunford and Akin's (2009) recommended ways to support and sustain organisational change at the human resource level.

#### *8.1.2.2 Supporting resources: time, finance and physical resources*

Besides human resources, time and finances were mentioned by many interviewed leaders as necessary for implementing and sustaining quality assurance initiatives. The following comments from the Rector of university 3 were echoed by many other leaders from universities 2, 4 and 5, as follows:

At this period, all the member universities, including ours are involved in many big projects such as project FL2020 of MoET, development project of the national institution, curriculum renovation project, and many other challenging tasks. We need time and funding. (Interview 06-PM1, p. 13)

We need resources to realise our improvement plans, for example, we can't say that we have improved our educational quality without upgrading the classrooms and facilities, advancing our curriculum or having grants for research. (Interview 06-PM1, p. 19)

If we want to reduce the teaching load for teachers so that they can spend more time on doing research, we need financial resource for outsourcing lecturers. We also need financial resource for upgrading the existing conditions. When staff are aware of the need to change and improve quality of their work, they require support in terms of resources, in order to change, for example replacing well-used equipment and facilities with new ones, or upgrading the classrooms or

lecture theatres, all require money. If we don't have resources, we can't enlarge our scope of operation. (Interview 06-PM1, p. 20)

One policy-making leader from university 2, who was the director of the quality assurance centre, raised the issue that regular funding for quality assurance activities was required at both national and institutional levels so that these activities could become a routinised part of university operations (Interview 07-PM1).

While time and funding for quality assurance initiatives represented challenges for the case universities, as was common in other public universities in Vietnam, as already indicated in Chapters 5 and 7, a couple of measures were recommended by the interviewed leaders.

In relation to time, one policy-making leader from university 3 claimed that it is vital to plan ahead and integrate quality assurance into the teachers' daily work, to make quality assurance process-oriented, so as to avoid tasks that are assigned with short notice (Interview 27-PM2). Another policy-making leader from university 1 similarly suggested that quality actions should be accumulated through day-to-day work. This would pre-empt the conflicts between academic faculties and administrative departments during times of crisis, with too many tasks due at the same time, or extra loads for one-off accreditations (Interview 08-PM2). Both leaders argued that these practices could save staff a considerable amount of time when the next accreditation cycle starts .

At the executive level, several leaders from universities 2, 3, 4 and 6 suggested that priorities for quality assurance initiatives should be set and planned for step by step implementation. As such, there are elements that directly contribute to quality improvement, yet require time for transformation. For example, it is not feasible to accelerate the time needed for senior teachers to renovate their teaching methodologies or for junior teachers to produce high quality research. The



sustainability of quality assurance depends on the optimisation of the available time through such step by step implementation. (Interviews 01, 03, 20, 23, 14).

Regarding viable solutions for the finance issue, one policy-making leader from university 4 shared their success story in raising funds. This was achieved through collaboration with external stakeholders, rather than as passive fund receivers. It was and recommended that:

1) each university should integrate the proposed budget for quality assurance activities in the annual university plan, and 2) each university should operationalise the umbrella institution's policy of "one strategic partner for each member university"<sup>35</sup> for fund-raising based on bilateral collaboration with these strategic partners. (Interview 21-PM2, p. 24)

As noted in Chapter 7, one interviewed leader from university 3 complained that in many cases, while the budget was available, it was manipulated or improperly used. This leader argued that the project funding from external sources should be strictly managed, to prevent the unequal division, or even worse, the manipulation of the financial resource. Regarding project disbursement in the case universities, management fees are added on top of the honorarium paid to people who directly implement the project. There was a perception that there was improper management of financial resources in university 3 (Interview 27).

Physical resources, including ICT, libraries, facilities and equipment were also considered by the interviewed leaders as instrumental in the translation of quality assurance policies into practice. All the top leaders from universities 1, 3 and 4 consistently expressed their expectations with regard to the upgrading of the ICT system and website. This included the enlarged scope of ICT applications in such quality assurance initiatives as staff performance evaluation, student evaluation of

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<sup>35</sup> The umbrella institution helped establish a network of strategic partners, relevant to its member universities in terms of expertise.

teaching and learning, digitisation of learning resources, online student support services, and intranet for internal communication. Leaders believed that these ICT applications could enhance transparency, as well as save time and resources (Interviews 05, 06, 21). Specifically, the university 1 top leader said:

We currently invest in upgrading ICT system and the university website<sup>36</sup>. I think the website is a useful tool for management and public relations. If we make it information-rich we can attract both teachers and students, including prospective ones. The website also acts as an education gate to assist the interaction between teachers and students. (Interview 05-PM1, p. 22)

As shown in the above excerpt, it was believed that the upgrading of the ICT system and university website would facilitate internal communication on quality assurance activities and requirements, as well as improve the student learning experience.

A policy-maker from university 4 also proposed an ICT-based innovation to improve performance efficiency and evidence-tracking:

There hasn't been an online or computer-based procedure that helps with staff performance. If a teacher submits a test late or starts the lesson 15 minutes late, he will be in trouble. Then how about an admin staff who is supposed to provide feedback to an issue within 3-5 days but actually doesn't do this timely? I think there should be computer-based applications that allow for both academic and admin staff to perform their tasks online. Evidence will be easily traced. (Interview 21-PM2, p. 12)

It can be inferred from the above excerpt, as well as the preceding perspectives advocated by these top leaders, that the maintenance of the university website and the enhanced ICT application could partly address the shortage of time and resources for quality assurance implementation, especially internally. Although implementing ICT

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<sup>36</sup> My brief study of all the member universities' websites during data collection revealed that the website of university 1 appeared to be the best-designed and most current. It was the only website that had a two-way link to the umbrella institution's website.

will cost money, the initial investment into ICT establishment could be cost-effective in the long-term, as time and human resource can be saved.

As for physical resources, such as libraries or learning resource centres, offices or classrooms, facilities and equipment, major findings were generally identified in the data analysis of interviews with executive leaders. Leaders from universities 1, 2, 4 and 6 asserted that improvements in physical resources would help sustain the condition for quality assurance implementation in general, and improve student learning quality in particular (Interviews 11, 12, 23, 13, 14). The executive leaders from university 1 both stressed the need to upgrade the university library and incorporate online library services, as well as access to digitalised courses and materials (Interviews 11 and 12).

It should be noted, as partly revealed in Chapter 5, that the case universities had different resource levels and would therefore have different priorities and possibly different strategies to tackle their problems. The findings presented in this section provide a point of reference for other public universities in Vietnam, in this regard. However, there will be financial implications for these. If the financial aspect is not properly addressed, for example, the public universities keep being granted limited financial autonomy, these measures would just be “wish lists” and would not be helpful in real terms.

As discussed in Chapter 3 in relation to organisational change management, time, finance and physical resources were not considered to be influencing factors in change implementation (See, for example, Palmer, Dunford & Akin, 2009; Anderson & Anderson, 2001; Graetz et al., 2011). In various studies, although decisions about the allocation of financial and expertise resources were noted, this resource factor seems to be submerged by other influencing factors, such as leadership, culture, resistance, or communication. It is likely that change managers and implementers only face issues of limited resources in developing contexts, as in the case

universities. This explains why the interviewed leaders mentioned physical resources as a requirement for the implementation and sustaining of quality assurance initiatives.

### 8.1.3 Continuous improvement mechanisms to strengthen quality culture

Returning to the quality assurance framework for higher education, as described in Chapter 3, and the diagram depicting the internal quality assurance mechanism in place at the case institution, explained in Chapter 7, it can be seen that quality culture is a vital component. Quality culture has gained prominence in the quality assurance literature (see, for example, Barnett, 1992; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Yorke, 2000; Gordon, 2002; The European Universities Association, 2006). It is also evident in the empirical experience at the case institution. Being an intangible component, the existence and development of the quality culture requires support and reinforcement from various elements. Many of these elements have been discussed in Chapters 6 and 7. In this section, the most prominent element, the continuous improvement mechanism, is revisited from the perspectives of the interviewed leaders, with suggestions for strengthening the desirable quality culture.

#### *8.1.3.1 The application of job descriptions and key performance indicators*

The first condition for a continuous improvement mechanism proposed by the policy-making leaders from universities 2, 3, 4 and 6 was the application of JDs and KPIs in human resource management. It was argued that there should be clear JDs for each position in the organisational structure and these should be compatible with specific internal processes (Interviews 14, 07 and 27). These leaders believed that the JDs would act as a necessary condition for a job well-performed, whereas the KPIs based on performance evaluation would function as the sufficient condition for effective

human resource management. Regarding this, one university 2 policy-maker believed that:

The best solution for the time being is having clear roles and responsibilities, accompanied by a strict award/punishment scheme. It is necessary to encourage and compliment on jobs well-done, but punishment can be more effective in pre-empting bad deeds. (Interview 07-PM1, p. 16)

Or, as a university 3 policy-maker viewed it:

I think a system of punishment or incentive would do, for example advanced salary increase, property provision, certificates of recognition, awards ... recently we have applied a new incentive-punishment scheme based on KPIs, that is every task a teacher does will be quantified to score, based on their fulfillments of the teaching load, the research quota, and the PD requirement; as well as other related academic and community activities. (Interview 27-PM2, p. 32)

Similarly, one policy-making leader from university 4 shared his expectation that KPI-based evaluation of staff performance should be put into practice. There should be quantifiable and measurable indicators for evaluation, covering academic and development activities, and linked to the annual incentive/ bonus income calculation (Interview 21-PM2). In line with this, the top leader of university 5 stressed that if staff can see the connection between the assurance of quality and their own benefits, they would embrace change (Interview 15-PM1).

As indicated in previous chapters, extra income means a lot to the staff in the case universities. While rewards can be in money form, one type of punishment can be no or deducted extra income. In this regard, the suggested KPI-based evaluation could bring about not just symbolic but also directly tangible effects, in persuading staff of the benefits of the change relating to quality assurance measures. This reflects

Kotter's (1996) observation that 'culture changes only ... after the people see the connection between the new actions and the performance improvement' (p. 156).

Another insightful argument is that the recommended application of JDs and KPIs in human resource management overlaps with one of Palmer, Dunford and Akin's (2009) suggested ways to sustain organisational change: 'Redesigning roles and redesigning reward system' (p. 360). It also reflects Bolman and Deal's (2008) suggestion that 'structural patterns [patterns of roles and relationships in the organisation] need to be revised and realigned to support the new direction' (p. 396).

The application of JDs and KPI-based performance evaluation, as perceived by many interviewed leaders across the universities, is likely to improve staff professionalism and encourage the commitment needed for quality assurance enactment. That is, JDs and KPIs act as terms of reference with measureable indicators that people can refer to during task implementation and evaluation (O'Neil & Palmer, 2004). These could therefore lessen the influence of such aspects of Vietnamese culture as respecting hierarchical inter-personal relationships, or ignoring misconduct for peace in harmony. Moreover, this redesigned roles and reward mechanism might gradually and indirectly resolve the human resource management problems of heavy workloads and overburdened staff for certain staff or groups.

#### *8.1.3.2 Enabling working condition: right policies, transparent processes, and professionalism*

Another condition for the continuous improvement mechanism to operate to good effect, as perceived by the interviewed leaders across the universities, is an enabling working condition. This umbrella term covers the 'enabling systems and structures that will sustain the momentum for change - reinforce the change message and institutionalise the new behaviours' (Graetz et al., 2011, p. 152). In this study, an enabling working condition means providing the right policies and transparent processes.

The top leader of university 3 raised his concern that:

We need to be critical about the working condition at our university. Why the same person who works with high efficiency and professionalism in an international organisation, would lose both professionalism and motivation when working with us? It is the right mechanism [supporting working condition] that we lack. There should be an enabling working condition with the right policies, transparency and professionalism, an environment that allows for dynamism and creativity. (Interview 06-PM1, p. 16)

This leader strongly believed that:

If we have an enabling working environment, it is like “birds come to good land”<sup>37</sup>. So I believe that we should make changes regarding the environment, because after all, people make policies and people operate the mechanism. (Interview 06-PM1, p. 19)

In the same vein, the top leader of university 5 urged for a change in mindset for both change managers and implementers. As he argued, professionalism was the added value of quality assurance initiatives, it required improvement in the attitude of teachers towards students, the attitude of supporting staff towards students, and the services for students (Interview 15-PM1).

Commenting on the need to provide an enabling working condition for quality assurance practices, one policy-making leader from university 6 stated that this enabling working environment should operate on the basis of:

- enough funding for specific activities
- transparent cash flow: is the fund allocated appropriately?
- a team of managers who can sacrifice their benefits and model the advocated behaviours

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<sup>37</sup> Vietnamese proverb

- real democracy: staff are respected, their voices are heard, their feedback is processed. (Interview 10-PM2, p. 13)

From another perspective, one policy-making leader from university 1 shared his viewpoint that people were the most valuable resource; if the working environment was not supportive enough, this resource could be wasted. This was particularly the case for teams of intellectuals who would require a supportive working condition . This leader proposed that:

For the researchers in my faculty, the supporting and professional working environment in which they could realise all their research plans would outweigh the remuneration. So that's what we should do, creating and maintaining an enabling and empowering environment [providing well-equipped labs, granting research funds, assisting with administrative paperwork], of course not exceeding the legal boundary, in order to attract those researchers who are currently paid several thousand dollars per month overseas, to come back and work for us. (Interview 8-PM2, p. 18)

The top leader from university 3 shared a well-known anecdote among Vietnamese managers and leaders, noting that whenever they encountered problems due to bureaucracy and red-tape, “the guy named mechanism” is blamed, implying that the system itself is the problem. Yet increasingly, there appears to be more general acknowledgement of the positive influence that a facilitating environment can have in change management.

#### *8.1.3.3 Promoting research*

Data analysis of the interviews with leaders across the universities, regarding how to sustain internal quality assurance, revealed another powerful change sustainer. This was the promotion of collaborative research to strengthen the internal capacity of the



institution, in terms of institutional and individual research capacity, and transformative education.

As analysed in the above sub-sections and indicated in the organisational change management literature, one of the ways to support and sustain change is through human resources (see, for example, Ramsden, 1998; Graetz et al., 2011; Palmer et al., 2009; Anderson & Anderson, 2001). In the case institution, as perceived by all of the interviewed leaders, the strengthening of the teaching and research capacity of academic staff is instrumental in internal quality improvement.

First, most of the policy-making leaders, especially those from the universities with strong research capacity (universities 1, 2, 4 and 5), stressed the need for enhancing research collaboration between the universities and relevant research institutes. This collaboration was believed to be mutually beneficial, as the universities could take advantage of the physical resources of the research institutes and the research institutes could send staff to the universities for teaching.<sup>38</sup>

Second, these leaders were advocates for the institution's strategic decision regarding the establishment and sustaining of labs and research units within each university, as well as the promotion of research activities among teachers. According to one policy-making leader from university 1, labs and research units should function as independent entities with professional expertise, and there should be a clear "roadmap" as well as feasible investment plans for these units (Interview 08-PM2, p. 19). One executive leader from university 4 claimed that promoting the conduct of research in line with international standards, including international publications, should be a priority in the institutional development plan (Interview 26-PI1, p. 20). Another executive leader from university 5 emphasised that the universities should provide teachers with more opportunities to do research and improve expert knowledge, primarily for the purpose of improving the quality of their teaching. They

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<sup>38</sup> In order to be eligible for a professorship, researchers at research institutes are required to do a certain amount of teaching, and supervise PhD students.

should be given more opportunities to learn about advanced research and training methodologies (Interview 19-PI2). The university leaders are consistent in their belief that research is a pre-requisite for quality improvement, and the inter-complimentary effects between research and teaching largely contribute to transformative education (Interviews 21, 26, 12, 11).

One of the recurring themes identified in this study is the inter-connection between the strategic vision of the case institution to become a regional level research university, the strategy-driven change (implementing quality assurance initiatives), and the promotion of research at the enactment level of this strategy. To view the issue from a broader perspective, the national institution can utilise their research outcomes for improving teaching quality to meet the requirements of prospective employers and social demands. As such, they can partly cope with contemporary criticisms on universities for being, more than ever, ivory towers, isolating themselves from the needs of the society<sup>39</sup>.

It should be noted, however, that although research enhancement had been one of the strategic missions of the case institution, research was not a strength in universities 3 and 6. As described in Chapter 6, the focus of these universities is teacher education. Although there was no emerging finding on research-related suggestions from the leaders of these universities, the importance of classroom action research activities was highlighted by these leaders (Interviews 06, 27, 10, 14).

In short, as can be seen across the institution, especially in the universities with research strength (universities 1, 2, 4, 5), diversified approaches were applied to promote research. The applied measures included: integrating research quota in staff performance evaluation; creating policies that facilitate inter-disciplinary research projects; investing in the development of young research teams; providing financial

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<sup>39</sup> This concern was shared in the Sixth Conference on international standard university, held in Shanghai in November 2015, reported by Ly Pham in the International Education Bulletin, No 25-2015 (CHEER, 2015).

support for staff conducting research or disseminating research outcomes at international conferences (Interviews 08, 20, 12, 21, 23, 06, 27, 15, 19, 10, 14).

#### 8.1.4 Stakeholder engagement to inform quality improvement needs

Aside from leadership to navigate quality assurance, resources to support implementation and continuous improvement mechanisms to strengthen the quality culture, the analysed data also indicated another reinforcing factor: stakeholder engagement to inform quality improvement needs. The most prominent arguments, not surprisingly, came from universities 1 and 4, which are the two universities with strong linkages to external stakeholders.

As discussed in Chapter 6, the engagement of external stakeholders brought numerous advantages to universities 1 and 4, as well as other member universities. Among them, as perceived by the policy-making leaders across the universities, the two most beneficial advantages were: 1) adding resources to the internal capacity; and 2) informing improvement needs.

When reflecting on their successful experience with external partners, the interviewed leaders from universities 1 and 4 shared advice about the optimisation of external resources. According to one policy-making leader from university 4:

if the universities under the national institution could take full advantage of the external resources, and transform these into their internal energy, the institution, its member universities, their academic faculty and academic staff will be on a stronger springboard for the next level. (Interview 21-PM2, p. 18)

All the executive leaders from universities 1 and 4 supported this opinion, as funding from external stakeholders could be used to support academic work and research in the faculty. (Interviews 26, 12, 11, 23).

Additionally, the bilateral cooperation between the universities and their external partners resulted in more opportunities for their students to get exposed to practical

hands-on learning experiences. This contributed to the transformative education of students. More importantly, as claimed by the majority of the interviewees, the feedback they received from external partners, through collaborative projects and regular quality assurance related surveys, provided insightful information for such quality improvement activities as curriculum and course reviews, or internship coordination (U6 interviews 10, 14; U1 interviews 12, 08; U3 interview 03, 27; U4 interviews 23, 21, 24; U5 interviews 18, 25; U2 interviews 20, 22).

Suggestions for more effective stakeholder engagement included:

There should be a person at each level (national institution/university/faculty) in charge of this stakeholder engagement, someone who has good networking skills and can prove potential by gaining funding/projects for the faculty and the university. There should be a detailed annual or monthly action plan specifying activities to connect with enterprises, partners or alumni. (Interview 21-PM2, p. 19 & 22)

We have a common policy of “one strategic partner [industry or enterprise] for each member university”, this should be reinforced by having one common database of external stakeholders for all member universities, as well as common strategies to attract more partners and widen the network. We should synergise our efforts in this task. (Interviews 05, 21, 06, 15)

We should also engage the internal stakeholders [e.g. teachers, students]. (Interview 05-PM1, p. 20)

We should activate the role of students as one important stakeholder, by teaching them well, taking good care of prospective and current students, making them love the university so in the future they will become committed alumni who want to pay back to the institution. (Interview 26-PII, p. 22)

For the time being, when the mechanism is changing and the teachers are changing, but the students seem to remain passive learners who are driven by

many external factors as tuition fees, job opportunities, I think what we need to do is to help them shape their learning purpose. (Interviews 22 and 24)

It can be inferred from the above findings, as well as from the broader context of Vietnamese higher education, that engaging external stakeholders serves a multitude of purposes. First, it fits well with the government's policy of "socialisation of education"<sup>40</sup>. Second, it allows universities to collaborate with industries and businesses in mutually beneficial projects, thus narrowing the gap between the "ivory towers" and "real" society. Third, and most important for this study, it helps enhance institutional capacity in several aspects, and therefore becomes a crucial sustaining factor for internal quality improvement.

#### 8.1.5 Requirements for quality assurance centres and quality assurance staff

According to the interviewed leaders across the universities, the final way to reinforce quality assurance practices and make them an integral part of institutional life, is through the empowerment of the quality assurance centres and the appointment of specifically selected staff in charge of quality assurance.

As indicated in Chapter 6, representatives from all the case universities expressed their concern over the operation and function of the quality assurance centres. Four policy-making leaders from universities 1, 4, 5 and 6, two of whom were directors of the quality assurance centres, noted that the espousal of quality policies and measures, and the establishment of quality assurance centres were indicators of the university leadership's commitment to quality assurance initiatives. However, this important step is not sufficient by itself to effect change in educational quality. In order to properly assist the translation of the espoused policies into actions, the quality assurance centre should be granted more power and capacity (Interviews 07, 21, 25, 10).

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<sup>40</sup> Involving all possible socio-economic sectors to contribute to the national education

Specifically, one policy-maker from university 6 argued that:

Empowering the quality assurance centre also means that the personnel for this centre should be selected to make sure that they have professionalism and expertise to a certain level. These people get exposed to all aspects of the university's operations and they should be sensible and critical enough to identify or prevent problems if any. (Interview 10-PM2, p. 17)

The above excerpt aligns with Schein's (1992, 2010) claim that the selection of staff constitutes 'one of the most subtle yet potent ways through which cultural assumptions get embedded and perpetuated' (p. 243). Palmer et al. (2009) also suggested that staff selection decisions should be linked to change objectives in order to reinforce organisational change. Although these authors may refer to selection at a broader level of human resource recruitment, their suggestions fit in the context of quality assurance personnel.

The director of the quality assurance centre from university 5 shared a similar opinion regarding the required quality assurance staff-in-charge. She asserted that:

The performance in all three areas of operation [teaching, research and administrative service] will affect the quality culture, so there should be staff-in-charge [of quality assurance specifically] for each area, and at unit level there should be an internal quality assurance system, with contact points, for example, at faculty level or division level. (Interview 25-PM2, p. 19)

Many other interviewed leaders believed that when the quality assurance centre is empowered and its expert capacity is enhanced, the centre can properly undertake its major tasks, such as: 1) being instrumental in policy enactment by bridging the gap between leadership strategy and implementation; 2) providing consultation to academic faculties regarding program accreditation; and 3) producing quality handbooks with guidelines and instructions for quality policy enactment (Interviews 21, 25, 27, 15, 06), to name a few.

It can be inferred that when the quality assurance centre functions well and addresses external quality assurance requirements, and the internal quality assurance systems at unit level also operate to make sure continuous improvement takes place, external-internal quality assurance synchronisation would result in quality assurance practices embedded in university life.

## **8.2 Accountability and improvement in harmony**

As briefly indicated in Chapter 6, the policy-making leaders across the universities, with the strongest voices coming from universities 3, 5 and 6, believed that accountability could be a consequence of continuous improvement. This belief was, therefore, translated into internal organisational improvement embedded in quality assurance practices.

Data analysis revealed another prominent finding that appears to confirm the transformative shift of quality assurance priorities from compliance-based and product-oriented quality assurance to improvement-led and process-oriented quality assurance. Both levels of leaders representing the case universities agreed on one crucial point. This was that in order to achieve the long-term strategic goal of their national university (to become a regional then international standard university), they needed to enhance their internal capacity, and this needed to be done via internal quality improvement of the core educational operations (Interviews 06, 03, 08, 12, 07, 15-, 21, 26, 10, 04). A policy-making leader from university 5 viewed quality assurance as a self-development or evolution process for her university, from addressing the externally imposed requirements for national accountability, to developing their own need to raise their educational quality to regional and international standards (Interview 25-PM2, p. 14). This need can be equated to “self-actualisation”,<sup>41</sup> if Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is applied to organisations, and fits

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<sup>41</sup> The motivation to maximise one’s own potential and possibilities.

with Torbert's (1991) strategy to balance self-transformation and society transformation.

Intriguingly, many among these interviewed leaders held a balanced view regarding the priority for accountability or improvement. For example, as the top leader from university 3 critically observed, that the above-mentioned priority shift (from compliance-led to improvement-led quality assurance) was not a single linear process. Instead it involved a significant change comprising a series of manageable change portions, requiring the shift of efforts and resources to attend to specific quality assurance initiatives at specific times. This leader gave an interesting analogue:

The combination of accountability and improvement should look like the Korean flag, displaying the Yin and the Yang [as in the figure below]. At a specific point, the university may focus more on accountability, as required for a program accreditation for example, and less on improvement activities. At another point, the scenario is opposite. (Interview 06-PM1, p. 17)



**Figure 11: The Yin-Yang symbol**

Likewise, one policy-making leader from university 6 acknowledged that 'keeping what we have [internal capacity] and what they need [social and market demands] in

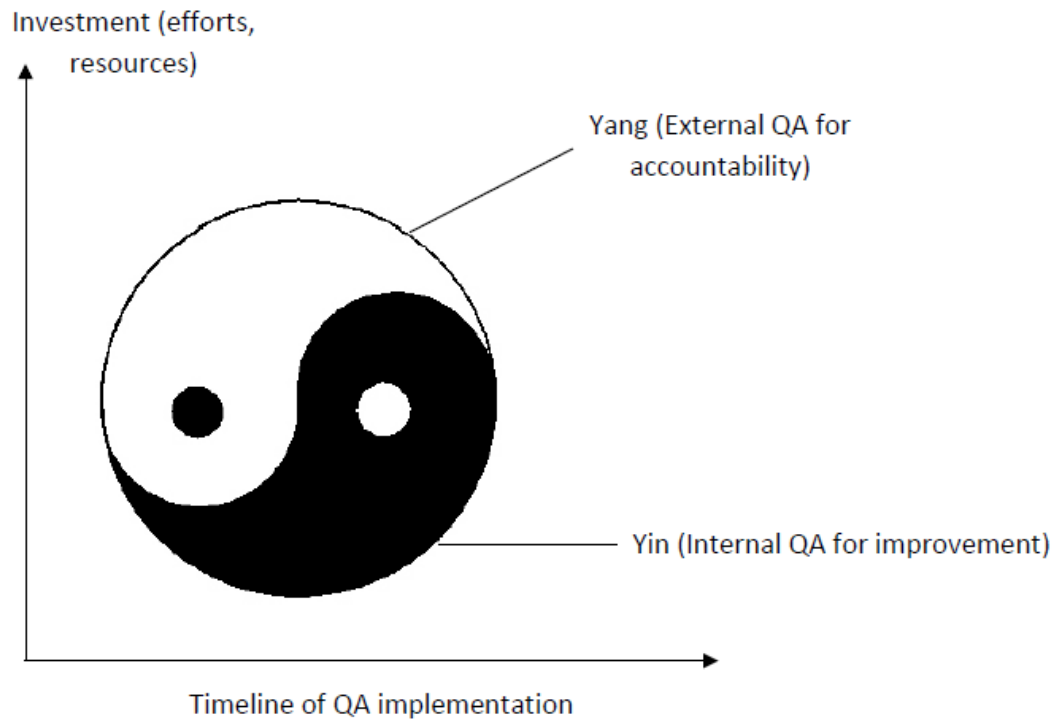


harmony is a big task. In specific situations, at specific times, one end of this continuum would outweigh the other end' (Interview 10-PM2, p. 12). This leader believed that quality assurance had a regulatory role between external requirements and internal capacity, helped identify the improvement needs for the university and stimulated internal quality enhancement.

The above-quoted policy-making leader from university 3 also asserted that they needed both accountability and improvement, although ultimately improvement would outweigh accountability. He said:

We exist so as to serve the society, that is why we need to be accountable for the society, for stakeholders, and for our students. In the first place, we need accountability in order to understand better where we are, where we want to get to, and how we can get there. After that we need improvement to bring us there. (Interview 06-PM1, p. 17)

This excerpt can be linked to the above-mentioned concept of Yin-Yang by adding a horizontal axis, displaying the progression of time for quality assurance implementation. As can be seen in the figure below, at the beginning of the quality assurance implementation timeline, greater priority is given to external quality assurance. The Yang is more dominant, with more effort and resources invested into such compliance activities as program level accreditation and institutional level accreditation, and budget is allocated to the instalment of quality assurance centres, quality assurance policies and procedures. As the university's work in quality assurance progresses, the cumulative effect of the expertise and experience gathered, and the system and structures established, as well as the improvement needs identified through the change process, contribute to the reinforcement and sustainability of change. This is when the focus and priority shift to internal quality assurance and the Yin is more dominant.



**Figure 12: Applying the Yin-Yang principle in quality assurance**

Further implications can be drawn from this Yin-Yang model. First, the principle of Yin and Yang in harmony, one of the core values of Asian cultures, has become more popular in recent studies in organisational change, organisational performance and organisational culture (see, for example, Fang, 2012; Jing & Van de Ven, 2014; Law & Kesti, 2014). Therefore, it fits nicely with this study. Second, the curving visual display of the Yin and Yang allows for the representation of flexibility and dynamism in the allocation of efforts and resources in both external and the internal quality assurance. The circle boundary represents the complete system in which the external quality assurance and the internal improvement operate in harmony. Harmony in this case should be interpreted as maintaining a complementary status, rather than an equal 50:50 division between each component, as the totality depicted.

In some usages of Yin and Yang, Yin represents feminine or the inside, while Yang represents masculine or the outside. In this study, Yang is selected to represent external quality assurance and Yin is selected to represent internal quality assurance.

All in all, as noted by one policy-making leader from university 6, ‘improvement is important, but accountability should not be overlooked’ (Interview 04-PM1, p. 20). Accountability can be an inevitable consequence when internal improvement is vigorous. Yet, when internal capacity is strong, accountability is needed so that the university can reaffirm its quality and status in a competitive market. Both employers and prospective students now demand such quality.

### **8.3 Further discussion**

As evident in the literature and discussed in Chapter 2, quality assurance in higher education has become an inevitable institutional change that universities need to implement in order to survive and thrive in a globally competitive environment. Nevertheless, as argued by some scholars in the field, the externally driven quality assurance initiatives may encourage a culture of compliance or even concealment, and universities may exhibit resistance when the initiatives are not aligned with their deep-rooted values, beliefs and traditions (see, for example, Brennan, 1995; Newton, 2002).

In the case universities, compliance, concealment and resistance were not common responses and the factors inhibiting quality assurance implementation were identified and managed accordingly. To a large extent, the universities in this study succeeded in finding ways to sustain this institutional change. In coping with the constraining factors, especially when the affecters (context and culture) tended to persist, they reframed their policies and structures and applied elastic strategies of pushing here, stretching there or co-existing with the status quo.

Commenting on the need for organisations to sustain change, Palmer, Dunford and Akin (2009) claimed that ‘sustaining change is necessary to ensure that sometime after they are implemented, things do not quietly drift back to how they used to be. Sustaining change is about how to make it stick, how to make it a core feature of how work will occur’ (p. 13). The major findings presented in this chapter reflect how the case universities realigned their quality assurance policies and practices, mobilised all possible resources, and optimised their systems, aiming ultimately at strengthening their internal quality assurance. As all the interviewed leaders perceived, having a sustainable and robust internal quality assurance mechanism represents a positive step towards enhanced institutional capacity and competitiveness. Quality assurance, whether externally imposed or internally driven, would then function as a means to an end.

To summarise the process adopted to manage the change represented by quality assurance initiatives, the top leader from university 3 said:

Any organisation has to face resistance and inertia when firstly introducing a new change. The important thing is that we have to issue right policies, share and communicate the change to people, clarify their concerns so that people start to change their actions. When the implementation is smooth with good results, the change will become normal practice, and then become embedded in the organisational culture. (Interview 06-PM1, p. 16)

This excerpt aligns with Pfeffer’s (1992) “recipe” for organisational change management, which is: ‘developing a strongly shared vision or organisational culture’ so that people ‘share a common set of goals, a common perspective on what to do and how to accomplish it, and a common vocabulary that allows them to coordinate their behaviour’ (p. 25).

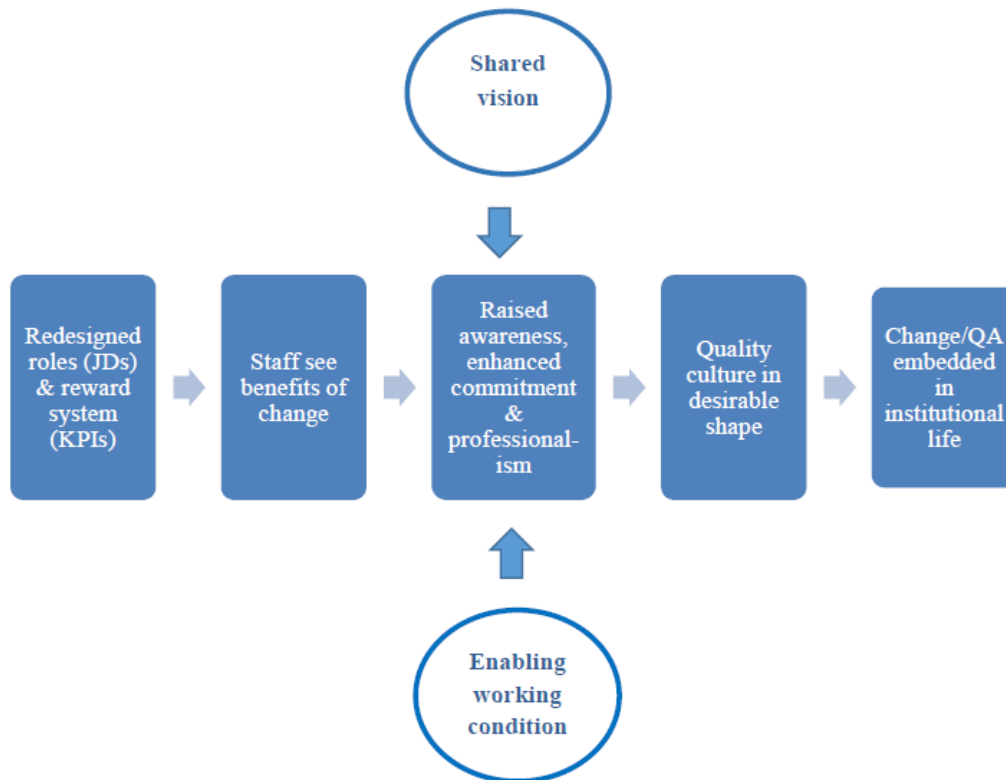
Among the main components of the quality assurance framework adopted by the case universities - leadership and management; internal processes; cooperation and

collaboration; quality culture; stakeholder engagement - most components appear to have an impact on the overall daily operation of the university, not just quality assurance. These components are long-standing and often receive priority. The components/sub-components that have direct impact on quality assurance implementation are quality culture, stakeholder engagement and collaborative learning. Whether or not the universities can embrace the approach of “improvement with accountability as a result”, and develop into an academic learning organisation to sustain the change, would depend on these core components of quality culture, stakeholder engagement and collaborative learning.

However, in times of political crisis or shortage of resources, these components would be put aside so priority can be given to other urgent issues. This would be a predictable scenario for Vietnamese public universities where resources are limited, the administrative system is cumbersome, and the leaders either lack vision or care more about maintaining their positions. When limited resources and unfavourable mechanisms are used as excuses for not trying to do things, not trying to improve a situation, the choice of ‘[making] fewer enemies and [being] less likely to embarrass ourselves ... is a prescription for both organisational and individual failure’ (Pfeffer, 1992, p. 345). In these cases, internal improvement would be submerged by symbolic compliance.

As discussed above, some components, although less long-standing than such components as leadership and management, or internal processes, have direct impact on the sustainability of the quality assurance initiative. Among these, quality culture, a vital ingredient for successful organisational management and change management, proves to be the most instrumental sustainer and has a central role in supporting, reinforcing and sustaining the quality assurance initiative. The diagram below visualises the effect of sustained quality assurance via the strengthening of the quality culture, as exercised at the case universities. As also evident in the literature (see, for example, Graetz et al., 2011; Palmer et al., 2009; Anderson & Anderson, 2001;

Salleh & Huang, 2011), these advocated actions and behaviours appear to create the right prescription for making change “stick”.



**Figure 13: How quality assurance is sustained via the strengthening of a quality culture**

The findings presented in this chapter highlight the measures and strategies applied by the case universities to reinforce and sustain quality assurance initiatives. Substantially, the nature of the quality assurance initiative was transformed from an externally-imposed change to an internal, strategy-driven change. In other words, the universities took ownership of the change, reinforced it and sustained it, making it no longer a “change” but allowing it to ‘seep into the bloodstream’ of the institutional life and become normal practice (Palmer et al. 2009, p. 358).

It should be noted here that the approaches discussed in this chapter may not represent the perfect recipe or prescription for all public universities in Vietnam or in similar developing country contexts. Quality assurance is not purely a nice uniform, i.e., a nice one-size-fits-all approach to have. Individual universities need to self-assess and work out the most viable way to make it fit, i.e., making quality assurance work in their context. As implicit in the findings presented in this chapter, not all approaches in the case universities were the same; there is no perfect framework for all. This is because several structural and cultural elements may have been long-established and could not be easily manipulated or removed, even in the name of “approved policy”. The successful adoption of a quality assurance framework depends largely on the existing capacity of individual universities, a capacity that requires time and effort to be enhanced.

The ultimate purpose of the quality assurance initiative is to help universities better themselves. Therefore, it should be viewed as an internally-driven change. Symbolic compliance or concealment should not be desirable practices, no matter how much they appear to improve the external image. In the end, it is true quality that counts.

## **Conclusion**

In Chapters 6 and 7, current practices in quality assurance implementation at the case universities were presented. The divergence in terms of focus on certain components of the externally imposed quality assurance framework was interpreted in light of organisational theories and frameworks. The possible factors that enable or obstruct the implementation of this institutional change were analysed, taking into account the possible interaction among certain factors. In this chapter, the substantial findings of the study were presented on how the universities reinforced and sustained the change by reframing their policies, realigning roles and systems, and optimising internal and external resources, while addressing identified hindrances.

It can be inferred from the findings presented in this chapter, as well as in Chapters 6 and 7, that quality assurance is an instrumental institutional change that helps systemise all the components needed for the improvement of educational quality in public higher education. It requires the synchronisation of all internal units and the connection of a multitude of driving forces to sustain this change so that it becomes embedded in the institutional culture. It can be concluded that quality assurance has been one of the most comprehensive strategy-driven changes in Vietnamese higher education to date, affecting all the core educational operations of the university.



## CHAPTER 9. CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

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### Introduction

This chapter provides a summary of the major findings and conclusions of the study. The first section provides a brief review of the research design and theoretical framework of the study, followed by a summary of the key empirical findings, corresponding to the research questions posed in Chapter 1. The following section presents the theoretical, methodological and practical implications drawn from the study. Finally, limitations of this study and recommendations for further research are discussed.

### 9.1 Research design and theoretical framework revisited

The literature review revealed the widespread application of quality assurance in higher education and the range of studies conducted on this issue. However, there are still few studies on how public universities in developing countries adopt quality assurance initiatives and implement their practices, in contexts that differ from those of developed countries where quality assurance was initiated. This study has investigated a Vietnamese national institution and its six member universities, with the aim of filling part of this literature gap.

The initial research problem that guided the study was how public universities in Vietnam develop their external and internal quality assurance systems, in order to address the system level requirements while enhancing their internal capacity. To facilitate data collection and analysis, the research problem was broken into specific research questions, as re-introduced in the succeeding section.

The conceptual framework for the study was developed based on the literature on quality assurance, combined with other organisational and change management theories. This combination was based on the argument that quality assurance should be viewed as an important institutional change.

Within an overarching interpretivist paradigm, a case study methodology was adopted for this study. In-depth interviews with three levels of senior management in the chosen Vietnamese universities were employed to gather qualitative data for the study, as well as a review of relevant documents. The major empirical findings of the study are summarised in the section that follows.

## **9.2 Summary of major findings**

This section presents the empirical findings identified by data analysis and interpretation as presented in the preceding chapters. These findings provide insightful views on the issues embedded in the research questions.

### **9.2.1 The current situation of quality assurance implementation at the case universities**

*Research question 1: How are the case study universities conducting their quality assurance?*

*1.1 What are the key components of their quality assurance frameworks?*

*1.2 What are the possible explanations for the discrepancies among the universities' quality assurance practices?*

The first key finding related to the process that the case institution and its member universities adopted in order to establish their quality assurance systems and operating mechanisms. Initially, the case institution and its member universities adopted quality assurance that was driven by the external environment, in the form of legislation. Their ministry, the MoET, paved the way for all public universities by

establishing a legal and regulatory framework for formal and explicit quality assurance at both the national and institutional levels. This included the establishment of a policy-making unit within the ministry, GDETA, and a system of instruments, including sets of standards and criteria, and guidelines for implementation. These system level quality assurance considerations aligned with the Asia-Pacific region higher education quality assurance framework (APQN), with Chiba principles providing an agreed reference point for consistency in quality assurance in the region. As such, the quality assurance system was meant to comprise both internal and external components, with the former considered the foundation of continuous improvement and the latter aimed at compliance and accountability.

The second key finding related to the quality assurance framework(s) that the case universities adopted. Regarding their formal external quality assurance, there was convergence across the member universities. They all followed the accreditation plan initially imposed by the ministry, and implemented the quality assurance initiative at the external level.

Later on, with their enhanced awareness, the case universities took the challenge to gradually strengthen their capacity through internal quality assurance practices. The espoused policy at the institutional level was to establish viable internal quality assurance systems based on Chiba principles. However, due to their divergent starting points (their existing conditions and varied quality assurance experience) and the organisational theories they adopted, the universities appeared to vary in the level of effort, time and resources they invested in building their internal quality assurance system. As a result, their internal quality assurance systems, on one hand, seemed to be consistent with existing quality assurance frameworks globally, and covered such recommended components as leadership and management, quality culture, stakeholder engagement, internal processes, and cooperation and collaboration; on the other hand, however, they differed in terms of the level of intensity and efficiency when these component were operationalised.

By combining Manning's (2013) organisational theories in higher education, and Bolman and Deal's (2008) organisational reframing approaches, it became possible to explain the discrepancies in the case universities' quality assurance implementation. First, those universities adopting a bureaucracy theory or structural approach (universities 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5) commonly had long-term strategic goals and plans with quality assurance as one important component. They had well-organised systems of academic and administration units and sub-units, plus supporting units and centres, as well as systematised internal processes, policies and procedures.

Second, the universities that adopted collegium theory or a human resource approach (universities 1, 3, 4, 5 and 6) promoted cooperation and collaboration, and were either highly unified or growing universities. They could, therefore, do well in two aspects of quality assurance: stakeholder engagement, and cooperation and collaboration. However, as these universities had differences in the nature of their offered programs, and in their connections with business and industry, universities 1, 4 and 5 proved to be stronger at stakeholder engagement. Additionally, universities 1, 3, 4 and 5 adopted both bureaucracy and collegium theories, therefore their human resource approach to improvement was evident in such areas as teacher training programs, PD programs and participation encouragement.

Third, the universities that applied the cultural theory or a symbolic frame (universities 1, 2 and 3) were bigger and older universities, with well-established organisational cultures. Their deep-rooted values and beliefs, their long-lasting norms and rituals relating to quality across all core educational operations were perceived to have a positive impact on the formation and reinforcement of the required quality culture.

Last, only one university (university 2) aligned with the organised anarchy theory or the political prism. This university was particularly affected by environmental change; many of their programs became downsized so income from tuition and the

quality of student entrants were of major concern. To address this environmental vulnerability, university 2 combined their top-down management (bureaucracy theory adoption), and their long-established culture (cultural theory adoption): top-down management to impose quality assurance P&P and long-established culture to involve staff in quality assurance activities and strengthen their commitment.

The major findings of the study also suggest that there was no significant difference at the policy espousal level; instead, differences emerged at the operational level. There were a number of reasons for this. First, public universities in Vietnam had to comply with policies and requirements from the government and the MoET, and this compliance was reinforced by the political power of the communist party. Second, being one of the two flagship national universities aiming at regional standards, the top leaders at the institution level and the universities shared their assigned commitment to quality enhancement. At the enactment level, the group of universities that adopted bureaucracy, collegium and cultural theories (universities 1, 3, 4 and 5) tended to perform better. Within each individual university, there were some mismatches between the espoused policy and the enactment/experience levels in universities 1, 2, 3 and 4.

#### 9.2.2 Possible enablers and inhibitors impacting the quality assurance implementation at the case universities

*Research question 2: What are the possible factors that impact on the quality assurance implementation at the case universities?*

*2.1 What are the possible factors that facilitate quality assurance implementation at the case universities?*

*2.2 What are the possible factors that hinder quality assurance implementation at the case universities?*

The first facilitating factor was the human one. Transformed staff behaviour and enhanced awareness, as result of quality assurance immersion, could facilitate

cooperation and collaboration, and support leadership and management to accomplish agreed-upon missions.

The factors that facilitate the implementation of the quality assurance initiatives include the following:

- Effective HRM: It appeared that universities with comprehensive HRM measures (universities 1, 3, 4 and 5), had more advantages in both quality compliance and quality improvement.
- Enabling environment for continuous improvement: First, the findings suggest that the enabling mechanism consisted of two components: (1) existing systems of internal processes and reward/punishment; and (2) the accompanying mechanisms of monitoring and evaluation, with supporting functions. Second, such intangible collegial factors as ‘mutual trust’, ‘openness’, and ‘sharing and caring’ appear to positively affect both team cooperation and individual performance. Third, it was noticeable that all the member universities, to different degrees, reconceptualised their core values and reframed their future goals, in order to regenerate their quality culture, re-energise the workforce, and embrace new challenges.
- Collaborative learning: Several types of collaborative learning were conducted across the case universities, adding to staff capacity enhancement and supporting quality assurance practices. These included professional development programs (universities 1 and 3); inter-faculty professional rotation (universities 4 and 5); collaborative research and involvement of junior teachers in research projects (universities 1, 2, 4, and 5); as well as the promotion of student research (all universities).
- Exemplary leadership: The findings of the study indicated that Kouzes and Posner’s (2007) five exemplary leadership practices - model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart - were in place at the case universities, and were perceived as driving

forces for the realisation of Middlehurst's (1997) leadership dimensions for quality assurance.

- Support from key stakeholders: The tangible and intangible resources provided by external stakeholders from international and national industries and businesses, the support from alumni, and current students, were perceived as important assets for quality assurance implementation.

The findings of the study revealed two main categories of inhibitors to quality assurance: human factors and organisational factors.

The human constraining factors included student issues, teacher issues, and resistance to quality assurance implementation. The main student issues included the lack of: learner autonomy; clear learning objectives; study skills; and professional soft skills. These impeded the transformation of student learning. The main teacher issues included the different perspectives towards quality, resulting in lenient assessment approach, and the lack of competence needed for quality improvement initiatives. The resistance to quality assurance came from three main groups: (1) seniors, (2) those teachers who refused to participate due to their inertia or pragmatism, and (3) young staff under short-term contract. The reaction from these groups included avoidance approach, completing tasks to a minimal level, or spreading criticisms via social networks. These human factors were perceived to restrain the operation of such quality assurance components as cooperation and collaboration, and quality culture.

The organisational constraining factors included the following:

- HRM issues: The biggest HRM challenges facing the universities were associated with heavy workloads and tight budgets. The consequences of staff shortages or overwork undermined the implementation of quality improvement initiatives. The current staff performance evaluation and

accompanying reward mechanisms were also perceived as focusing more on administrative compliance matters than on academic improvement. This demotivated high-performing staff, affecting the sustainability of change.

- Limited resources for quality assurance implementation: The biggest challenge to ensure and improve educational quality related to the incompatibility between the available physical resources for research, teaching and learning, versus the requirements for increased research and credit-based education quality.
- Conflicts in organisation: All the three types of conflicts (vertical, horizontal and cultural), as categorised by Bolman and Deal (2008), evidently existed in universities 1, 2, 3 and 4. These conflicts, to varying extents, hindered quality assurance implementation.
- Affecters (context and Vietnamese culture): The key findings of the study showed the remarkable influence of the contextual affecters on the implementation of quality assurance initiatives. At the society level, the mismatch between the social demand for mass education and employees with degrees, and the state policy of prioritising basic sciences and elite education made quality assurance a challenge for the universities. At the government and ministry levels, the legal constraints relating to benchmarking across public universities, the financial autonomy of the universities, and remuneration policies, appeared to impede quality assurance sustainability. At the institution level, the quality assurance initiatives themselves generated more pressure and increased workloads for all administrative departments and related faculties. As for the influence of Vietnamese culture on quality assurance implementation and sustainability, the findings indicated such features as the farming culture, hierarchical interpersonal relationships, peace in harmony, and achievement-obsession.



Based on the above key findings, some further arguments could be made regarding the quality assurance frameworks in place at the universities. These frameworks comprised the human element (leaders, staff, stakeholders), the system or structure element (internal processes, quality culture), and the internal-external collaboration element (stakeholder engagement, cooperation and collaboration). As identified, this structure element was impacted by powerful driving forces, such as staff awareness and commitment, the enabling environment for continuous improvement, exemplary leadership, effective HRM and support from external stakeholders.

Inevitably, there were pulling forces that undermined the operationalisation of the quality assurance mechanism. Most of these inhibitors were identified by the executive leaders, who offered perspectives from both policy enactment and experience. For example, it was their responsibility to cascade the desirable quality assurance practices down to the grassroots level and, in this process, they could feel the top-down pressure as well as the bottom-up resistance.

Regarding the constraining factors perceived by the executive leaders, two key inferences can be made from the major findings. First, the three factors - conflicts, resistance to quality assurance, and affecters (context and culture) - appeared to have a direct impact on several components of the quality assurance mechanism. Second, some pulling forces stemmed from the two factors over which the universities had limited control - affecters and limited resources.

In short, while the enablers provided power to the quality assurance mechanisms, the inhibitors should not be overlooked or underestimated.

### 9.2.3 The essential conditions for sustaining quality assurance initiatives

*Research question 3: What are the essential conditions for a sustainable quality assurance mechanism, from the perspectives of the interviewed leaders?*

The third group of empirical findings provided answers to the last research question

on the essential conditions for sustaining the quality assurance initiatives.

The key findings of the study indicated that the case universities could sustain quality assurance initiatives by enhancing their internal quality assurance mechanism. In this process, the possible factors that facilitated or impeded quality assurance implementation were addressed while the operations of the key components of the internal quality assurance mechanism were refined.

First, the role of leadership continued to be vital in navigating quality assurance implementation in the case universities towards the strategic goals of the national institution. At the same time, strategic planning embedded with quality assurance enabled the universities' leaders to see new possibilities, create new opportunities, and seek alternatives when coping with constraining factors.

Second, the findings showed that in order to sustain their quality assurance activities, the universities needed to build the capacity of their workforce and strengthen their commitment. This was done through formal training, collaborative research opportunities, and on-the-job training, especially for young staff, amidst the process of change implementation. The universities also optimised existing resources by such measures as staff rotation, and developed long-term plans for capacity enhancement, with reinforcing policies.

In addition to human resources, time and finance were perceived as necessary for implementing and sustaining quality assurance initiatives. As indicated from the findings discussed in Chapter 8, the challenges of having adequate time and money for quality assurance activities were partly addressed by the case universities. For example, quality actions were planned and embedded in daily operations, to pre-empt conflicts during times of crisis (e.g. gathering a large amount of evidence for accreditation within a short time); and quality assurance initiatives were planned and prioritised for step by step implementation, in order to optimise the available time.

Third, the key findings of the study highlighted another set of measures adopted by the case universities in order to foster and sustain the quality assurance initiatives by ensuring a continuous improvement mechanism to support quality culture. Detailed measures are as follows:

- The application of JDs and KPIs: It was believed that the JDs would act as a primary condition, whereas the KPI-based performance evaluation would function as a supporting condition for effective HRM.
- Process-oriented quality assurance: It was suggested that the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of core educational activities, as well as the constant follow-up of improvement plans, contributed to the enhancement of institutional capacity as well as individual capacity.
- Enabling environment: Quality assurance implementation and sustainability required engaging policies and transparent internal processes.
- Collaborative learning: The promotion of collaborative learning and research strengthened institutional and individual research capacity, and transformative education.

Fourth, the major findings of the study showed another reinforcing measure that the case universities implemented: engaging stakeholders to inform quality improvement needs. Besides such advantages as added resources for enhanced internal capacity or practical experience for students' transformative education, the feedback from external partners through collaborative projects and regular surveys, provided insightful information for such quality improvement activities as curriculum and course reviews, or internship coordination.

Last, the findings of the study suggested that within each case university, the quality assurance centre should be empowered and its expert capacity enhanced. This would allow the centre to undertake its major tasks more effectively, particularly making policy, providing consultation, and navigating quality assurance activities.

By enhancing their internal quality assurance, the case universities could foster and sustain quality assurance initiatives. At the same time, they could satisfactorily address the external quality assurance requirements from the national level. A viable solution for quality assurance implementation might be the adoption of a situational approach, as reflected in the Yin-Yang concept. That is, the university should focus on accountability or improvement depending on the availability of resources and the timing of the quality assurance activities.

The major findings also suggest that among the key components of the quality assurance framework, quality culture, stakeholder engagement and collaborative learning appeared to be the dependent variables that had a direct impact on quality assurance implementation. However, these would be put aside in times of political crisis or resource shortages. Leaders in this study believed that quality culture, stakeholder engagement and collaborative learning components, determined whether the universities could embrace the approach of “improvement with accountability as a result”, or develop into academic learning organisations by sustaining quality assurance initiatives.

## **9.3 Implications**

### **9.3.1 Methodological implications**

There are a few methodological implications that this study can offer. First, the technique applied in the data collection proved to work well. That is, the interview questions were modified after the first round of interviews (covering all six universities) and scaffolding questions were added to explore further how collaborative research and learning were promoted in the universities. This was because in the first round of interviews, the leaders from universities 1, 2, 4 and 5 touched on the issue of collaborative research as it was extensively practised in their universities.

Second, having a literature-informed framework for investigation seemed to be a time saving, content focused technique. In addition, having a number of theoretical lenses through which data can be interpreted was important. As long as the researcher can utilise the inter-complementary aspects of the different theories, the depth of the discussion can be enhanced.

One valuable lesson that I have learnt through the conduct of the study is that doing research is truly an interactive learning by doing process. It requires the researcher to go back and forth during the process, identify the recurring themes, manipulating the tools at hand, making changes as needed and, above all, developing a consistent thread throughout the thesis.

### 9.3.2 Theoretical implications

The case study was a national institution in the north of Vietnam. It was a multiple case as the institution comprised six member universities. Three levels of leaders were interviewed: the national policy-making level, the university policy-making level and the university executive one. Throughout the study, the five component quality assurance framework - leadership and management, internal processes, cooperation and collaboration, stakeholder engagement, and quality culture - was used for investigation as well as organising content in the findings and discussion presented in Chapters 6, 7 and 8.

As indicated in the earlier chapters of the thesis, there is still a concern in the literature whether a universal quality assurance framework is needed and suits all contexts. In this study, the findings suggest that the inclusion of collaborative learning, the essence of Dill's (1999) academic learning organisation, into the quality assurance framework, is needed for internal improvement and sustaining quality assurance initiatives.

In the design phase and data collection of the study, the researcher employed the organisational theories for higher education, developed by Manning (2013) and the above-mentioned five component quality assurance framework. However, as the data analysis unfolded, the literature review was updated, taking into special account organisational and change management theories. This was because it was recognised that quality assurance initiatives should be treated as important organisational change. As a result, data analysis was conducted under the additional lenses of Bolman and Lee's (2008) organisational reframing theories, the three levels of change management (espousal, enactment and experience), and the change management process (adoption, implementation, and sustainability) (see, for example, Graetz et al., 2011; Palmer et al., 2009; Kotter, 2002). The figure below provides an overview of the theories applied in this study.

The employment of both quality assurance and organisational and change management theories provided the researcher with a multitude of lenses through which thought-provoking findings could be uncovered. Specifically, these lenses allowed for the examination of the current situation of quality assurance implementation at the case universities; the differences and nuances as per the three levels of espousal, enactment and (somewhat) experience among the case universities; the possible influencing factors on quality assurance implementation; and the possible measures to make quality assurance initiatives sustainable.

Interestingly, the major findings of the study appear to be largely consistent with various key studies on organisational management (for example, Manning, 2013; Sporn, 2007; Bolman & Deal, 2008), organisational change management (for example, Kezar, 2000; Kotter, 2002; Graetz et al., 2011), and quality assurance frameworks (for example, Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2007; Dill, 1999; Harvey & Knight, 1996).

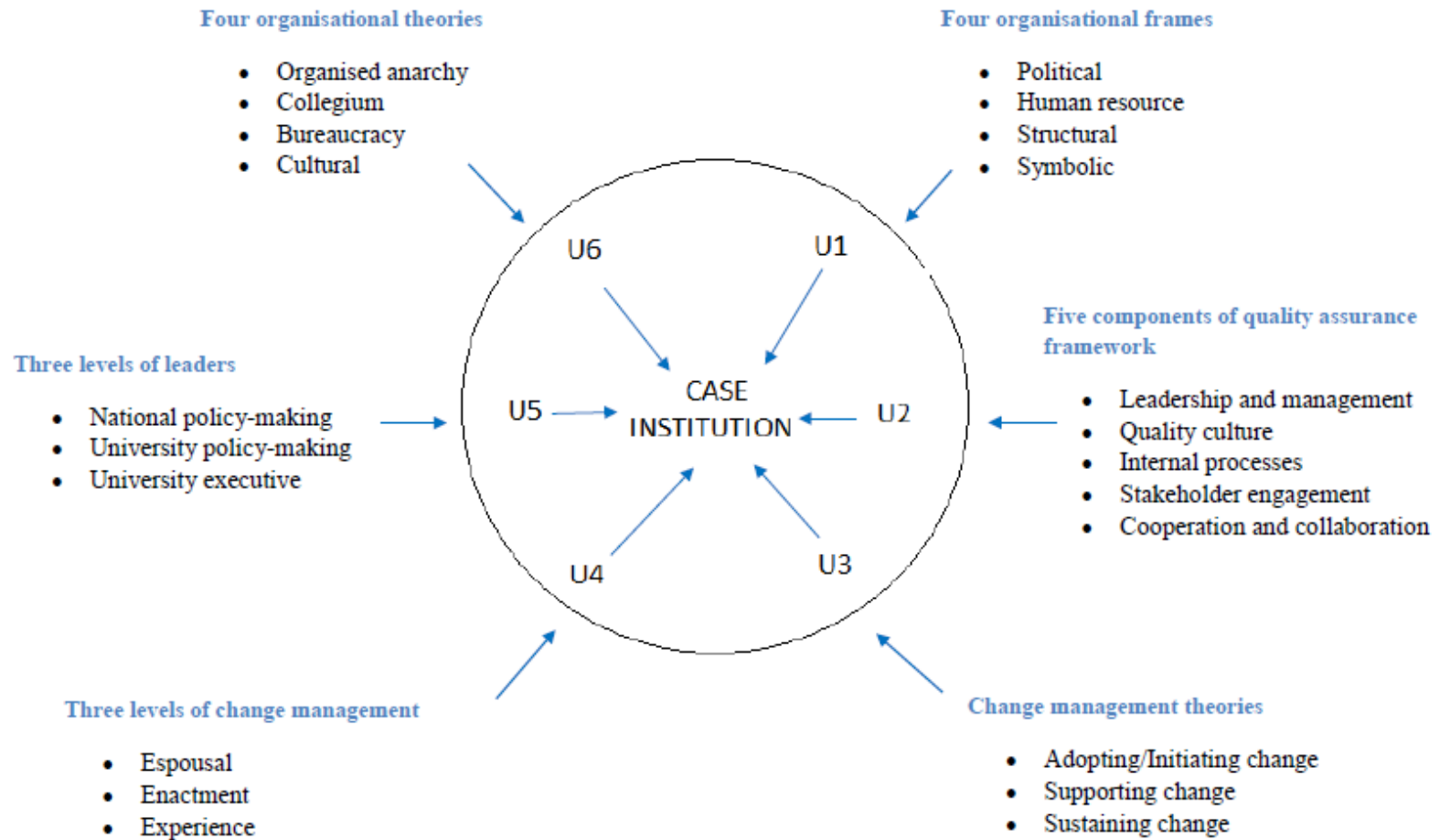


Figure 14: Overview of the theories application for the study

As previously discussed, the extant quality assurance literature mainly provided frameworks and models for quality assurance in developed country contexts. There was a lack of empirical studies about developing countries, especially on such areas as possible enablers and inhibitors for quality assurance implementation, or how to sustain the quality assurance initiative as a vital institutional change. Therefore, my contribution to the literature includes building knowledge about existing quality assurance frameworks for higher education internationally, by identifying influencing factors, including those factors that mainly exist in developing country contexts, such as limited resources or context and culturally specific factors. The extended quality assurance framework provided in this thesis includes the main influencing factors as well as an understanding of the interaction among these factors, as discussed in Chapter 7. By addressing the issues that are specifically faced by public universities in a developing country, in this case Vietnam, the extended framework provides a useful reference for quality assurance policy-makers and implementers in similar contexts.

Moreover, as there are no studies that examine quality assurance in higher education through the prism of organisational management theories, including change management theories, this study adds another contribution to literature. Unlike other studies, this research illustrates that quality assurance initiatives should be treated as instrumental institutional change and examines the possible implications for sustaining this change, especially in developing contexts.

Another theoretical contribution of the study is that it challenges the existing concern about the power tension between accountability and improvement (see, for example, Brennan & Shah, 2000b; Harvey, 1995; Harvey & Newton, 2007; Shah & Jarzabkowski, 2013; Westerheijden, 1999). The findings of the study indicate that maintaining this power tension was necessary in order to prevent the investment of all resources into compliance while neglecting internal improvement, or vice versa. The power tension between accountability and



improvement, similar to organisational conflicts and resistance to change, does not need to be crushed or removed.

### 9.3.3 Practical implications

This study offers several findings with practical implications for quality assurance in higher education. These are specifically applicable for the adoption, implementation and sustainability of quality assurance initiatives, as an influential institutional change, in the setting of public universities in a developing country context.

From the findings presented in Chapters 6 and 7, implications for other public universities in Vietnam can be drawn. In order to comply with the MoET's quality assurance requirements while having little experience and limited budget, Vietnamese public universities could adopt the approach applied by the case institution. That is, starting with external quality assurance, accumulating experience and expertise through the accreditation process, establishing needed systems and structures, training people and mobilising resources, using the assessment criteria and standards, as well as accreditation reports, as a frame of reference to self-assess where they are, then map where they expect to get to, and identify their improvement needs. These specified improvement needs could then inform the focal areas for internal improvement.

As revealed in this study, interactional factors led to differences in the quality assurance implementation and their internal quality assurance mechanisms in the case universities. These factors included the current contexts of the universities, their available resources, the supporting mechanism of internal processes and procedures, and their adopted organisational management theories. By implication, despite the fact the all public universities would adopt the same external quality assurance framework as imposed by the MoET, the establishment and development of their internal quality assurance systems and mechanisms would depend largely on their existing organisational management style; their deep-rooted values, beliefs, norms and culture; their available resources; and their

current quality status, including the above-mentioned quality improvement needs. As such, the decision on which components of the internal quality assurance mechanism to receive more priority and more investment than others, becomes well-informed.

One of the possible implications of the findings is the understanding of the conditions needed for the quality assurance initiative to be a successful institutional change. The first condition is the ministerial provision of legal and regulatory frameworks, in this case the APQN framework and Chiba principles. The second condition is the establishment of the internal quality assurance system and mechanism, comprising all five components of the quality assurance framework.

As a common saying in organisational management goes, it is the people who create and operate any system, so different people may operate the same system differently. By implication, when any quality assurance framework or system is adopted and implemented by people in an institution, fundamental changes can only be embedded to good effect if the change is owned by the people. In other words, the institutional change should start from changes in people's awareness, mind-set and attitude (House et al., 2004). To be framework-wise, a quality culture should be a central element, interacting closely with the other human-affecting elements of leadership, cooperation and collaboration.

Another implication that the study offers is the understanding of how constraining factors emerged during the process of quality assurance implementation, and (some) were resolved. For those constraints that are inevitable in any change implementation process, such as conflicts and resistance, finding the appropriate way to handle them is what counts. Possible conflicts and resistance could be pre-empted by several measures. At the beginning of the change implementation process, these measures may be communicating the shared vision, raising awareness among all staff, forming task-force teams of capable and committed people, and providing a supporting environment (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Graetz et

al., 2011; Palmer et al., 2009). During the process, such measures as producing symbols of progress through ‘short-term wins’, (Kotter, 2002, p. 126) or ‘celebrating the future’ might ‘help people let go of old attachments and embrace new ways of doing things’ (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 396).

When conflicts and resistance are identified, they should not be crushed or removed; instead, the perspectives of the groups concerned should be understood. From this reframed angle, strategies should be modified if needed, or internal communication enhanced and supporting policies issued, thus creating an enabling environment to which staff will willingly contribute. As advocated by organisational change management theorists, conflicts and resistance to change should be taken as challenges rather than hindrances (Graetz et al., 2011; Anderson & Anderson, 2001; Palmer et al., 2009).

The findings of the study also offer one more implication regarding how to sustain quality assurance initiatives. Among several measures to reinforce the change and make it stick, the optimal solution seems to be maintaining a ‘tension-filled poise’ (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 436) between accountability and improvement or, as inspired by the Yin-Yang principle in life, keeping accountability and improvement in an inter-complementary relationship. As such, the preparation for accountability can be done amidst continuous improvement, or the result of continuous improvement can be enhanced capacity for accountability.

This maintained power tension could prevent the resources from being manipulated for short-term external quality assurance missions, and stop the sacrifice of real improvement needs for symbolic compliance. The application of the Yin-Yang principle could fit nicely in this tension management process. As discussed in Chapter 8, this principle allows for dynamism and flexibility in fuelling quality assurance initiatives, while keeping the change initiators alert to the co-existence of two parts of quality assurance - external and internal.

One related implication for public universities in developing contexts is that if the university develops strategic plans and invests in capacity development projects, its internal quality assurance can become normally required practice, and get embedded into institutional life. Then there is chance for the change to stick.

The findings of the study also provide developmental implications for Vietnamese higher education. At the national and ministerial levels, a more flexible mechanism is needed for public universities to have financial autonomy. As suggested by Professor Ngo Bao Chau in the educational forum on teacher policies (CHEER, 2016), public universities should have their autonomy to decide on the special income for teacher-researcher, from either the state allocated budget, or the “out-of-state-budget” financial resource. In the future, public universities should have a higher level of financial autonomy for investment in other internal capacity building initiatives.

At the institutional level, the following implications are offered:

- Human resources are key to the sustainability of quality assurance initiatives, therefore, attention should be paid to immersion training (capacity building for the next staff generation). This could be done through teaming up senior lecturers-researchers with junior staff, thus resolving the problem of unbalanced teaching/researching loads, as well as providing junior teachers with research opportunities to enhance their capacity. Another issue is avoiding the in-breed employment (universities employing their own fresh graduates).
- More investment is needed to enhance the quality of research and the academic body, as these are seen as measures of educational quality, and necessary for transformative education.
- Stakeholder engagement has been shown to be important and beneficial, however, this is still overlooked or neglected by many universities. Connecting with external stakeholders could facilitate the narrowing of gaps between universities’ teaching and research, and the development

demands of society. The partnership of universities as knowledge creators, and enterprises or industries could bring about benefits, primarily for universities themselves. Such partnerships justify the existence of universities, improve their prestige in society and give them an irreplaceable position in a national innovative and creative mechanism.

- The role of the communist party should not be underestimated. The findings of the study show that in the initial stage of quality assurance implementation, this political power helped ‘overcome resistance’ (Pfeffer, 1992, p. 30). Later in the process, when people realised the benefits of the change, they improved their awareness and moved from a responsive to an active mode.

In short, the quality assurance initiative has become an inevitable change in higher education globally, including in Vietnam and other developing countries, helping to enhance capacity, competitiveness and status in an ever-demanding world. However, it requires individual universities to self-analyse their existing capacity and conditions, and opt for a viable quality assurance framework. The recipe for success includes owning the change, managing the change, and sustaining the change.

#### **9.4 Limitations and recommendations for further studies**

This study has investigated the current adoption of a common quality assurance framework for Vietnamese higher education at a case study institution. Although the researcher tried to be cautious, transparent and ethical in all aspects of the investigation, there were still some unavoidable limitations to the study.

First, due to the proposed scope of research, the study did not involve key stakeholders such as employers, staff, teachers and students. Although this study is not an impact assessment, and it did not measure differences before and after quality assurance initiatives were introduced and implemented, a comprehensive picture of the quality assurance implementation at the case institution from a

diversity of perspectives could be more convincing. Future large-scale studies in the field should therefore include the views from all stakeholders concerned. Also, since no survey or interviews were conducted with participant groups of staff, teachers and students - the people who are directly involved in the change implementation - there was no available empirical data for this experience level. This could be done in future studies, creating more comprehensive empirical data.

Second, due to the selection of case study as the research methodology, not all the key findings of the study can be generalised as implications for other public universities in Vietnam, or others in developing country contexts. Moreover, one limitation of the qualitative data collection method is that the data reflects how the participants perceive reality, resulting in discrepancies among different participants and multiple realities. These limitations were indicated in Chapter 4 of this study. Future studies, therefore, should consider investigating different scenarios of quality assurance implementation at different Vietnamese universities or, even better, involve a transnational comparative analysis, in order to draw more applicable conclusions for adopting, implementing and sustaining quality assurance initiatives.

Another limitation is that although data interpretation was done with caution, the researcher could not avoid the rare case when one or more participants had no authority to reflect on the reality of enactment/experience, and seemingly provided their perception of the espoused policy. Future studies require the employment of other sources of data, such as a survey of teachers and students, or interview with teachers, allowing for more effective triangulation.

Last but not least, due to the complexity of the multiple case approach and the framework for investigation and analysis, the study could only provide findings and implications on broad issues. There is still a need for an in-depth understanding of some specific issues, such as: the power tension between the administrative and academic functions; how the member universities have ensured their inputs, process and outputs; or to what extent each member

university has ensured their educational quality in terms of transformative education. All of these issues could be topics for future studies.

### **Concluding remarks**

Quality assurance in higher education is a recent phenomenon in Vietnamese public universities. The case institution in this study has been one of the pioneers in taking this quality assurance initiative into their development agenda. As the findings of the study revealed, all the six member universities have demonstrated their commitment to, and investment in, efforts and resources to ensure the implementation of this instrumental change. One of the most significant achievements of the case universities is that they have gradually shifted from external quality assurance compliance to internal quality improvement. In other words, quality assurance in their case started as an externally-driven change and became internally-driven.

The findings of the study confirm that quality assurance in higher education is context bound. The socio-cultural, systemic and organisational contexts in which Vietnamese public universities operate influence their adoption and implementation of quality assurance initiatives. Likewise, different contextual factors would affect the theoretical assumptions concerning effective quality assurance practice in another university elsewhere. That is, the theoretical assumptions are not universal across countries, and the assumptions working in one context may not work equally in another. This suggests the importance of understanding the context before universities opt for any quality assurance framework.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1: ETHICS APPROVAL

<i>Type</i>	Human Ethics
<i>Application ID</i>	HRE13-172
<i>Application title</i>	Quality assurance in higher education in Vietnam: A case-study
<i>Status</i>	Finalised - Approved
<i>Primary investigator</i>	ASPR Shelley Gillis
<i>Process Stage</i>	Review completion: Application approved
<i>Template name</i>	v.12-10 Human Research Ethics Application
<i>Date created</i>	24/6/2013

## APPENDIX 2. INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

### *2.1 Interview with national policy-makers from the MoET*

*Date:*

*Place:*

*Interviewer: Hang Nguyen, PhD student, College of Education, Victoria University, Australia*

*Interviewee:*

#### **Questions:**

1. Can you, first of all, say a little about your involvement in the development and implementation of the national quality assurance policy and procedures?
2. What is the rationale for the national quality assurance policy? What type(s) of quality assurance has(have) been implemented at the national level? Are legal frameworks and regulations available for quality assurance implementation in higher education? Can you elaborate on this?
3. What are the factors that facilitate the implementation of quality assurance as a national policy?
4. How are these factors facilitating the implementation of the national quality assurance policy?
5. What are the factors that hinder the implementation of quality assurance as a national policy?
6. Are these factors permanent or temporary (can be removed or improved)? Can you elaborate on this?
7. What is the feedback from universities regarding the implementation of quality assurance as a national policy? How has this feedback been taken into consideration?
8. What are the essential conditions for universities to sustain the quality assurance initiative?

9. Do national policy-makers pay attention to internal quality assurance within the institutions? Or just on accountability to make sure that they meet national standards?
10. There has not been an independent quality assurance agency to conduct external reviews for accreditation, as the national QA agency - the General Department for Educational Testing and Accreditation (GDETA) - is not an independent body but is still under the direct supervision and governance of the Ministry of Education and Training. What are the pros and cons of this status quo?

**Final notes:**

Who should I visit with to help my research?

Thank you very much for your time and expertise.

## *2.2 Interview with institutional policy-makers from VNUH*

*Date:*

*Place:*

*Interviewer: Hang Nguyen, PhD student, College of Education, Victoria University, Australia*

*Interviewee:*

### **Questions:**

1. Can you, first of all, say a little about your involvement in the development and implementation of the quality assurance practices at your university/faculty?
2. What is the underpinning philosophy of the quality assurance mechanism that is being implemented at your university? Did your university adopt or develop your quality assurance framework? Can you elaborate on this?
3. What are the key components of the quality assurance mechanism that is being implemented at your university? How is each component operating and relating to quality assurance practices?
  - Elements to consider: leadership and management, cooperation and collaboration, stakeholder engagement, internal processes, quality culture
4. How is your university responding to system level quality assurance? Do you focus on accountability (satisfying stakeholders and meeting national standards) or improvement (sustaining and continuously improving the capacity and competitiveness of the university)?
  - Do quality assurance practices in your university address administrative functions or academic functions?
5. How do such organisational factors as organisational size, culture, management and internal quality assurance mechanisms foster or impede your university's responsiveness to system level quality assurance?
6. How do you balance between compliance (addressing external quality assurance) and improvement (addressing internal quality assurance)?

- Factors to consider: innovative teaching, professional development, transformation of student learning
7. Is there a culture of continuous improvement at your university? If so, how is this culture nurtured?
  8. What are the current internal processes that facilitate internal quality assurance or continuous improvement?
    - To what extent are academic staff and students engaged in these processes? How about administrators?
  9. How is the collaboration and coordination among units of your university created and maintained?
    - Is collaborative research/learning promoted in your university? Can you elaborate on this?
  10. What do you think are the possible factors that facilitate the implementation of quality assurance in your university?
  11. What do you think are the possible factors that hinder the implementation of quality assurance in your university?
  12. What do you think are the essential conditions for fostering and sustaining the quality assurance initiative in your university in particular, and in Vietnamese higher education in general?

**Final notes:**

Who should I visit with to help my research?

Thank you very much for your time and expertise.

### APPENDIX 3. LIST OF PILOT INTERVIEWS

1. First interview conducted on 20 April 2013, in Melbourne, with a former Dean from University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University, Hanoi.
2. Second interview conducted 25 April 2013, via skype, with a Dean from University of Engineering and Technology, Vietnam National University, Hanoi.

#### APPENDIX 4. LIST OF DOCUMENTS

No.	Document	Source
1	Statistics on accreditation of the National Institution up to the end of 2014	INFEQA archive
2	The old version of the accreditation criteria and standards	INFEQA archive
3	The new version of the accreditation criteria and standards	INFEQA archive
4	Number of students attending full-time programs	The Academic Affairs department of the National Institution
5	Number of tenured staff (as of 25 November 2015)	The Personnel department of the National Institution
6	Decision No. 47/2001/QD-TTg by the Prime Minister of the Government: Approving the planning on the network of universities and colleges in the 2001-2010 period.	MoET archive
7	Decision No. 121/2007/QD-TTg by the Prime Minister of the Government: Approving the planning on the university and college network in the 2006-2020 period	MoET archive
8	Chiba principles	MoET archive
9	Regulations on the autonomy of the member universities	The Personnel department of the National Institution
10	List of the full-time education programs	The Academic Affairs department of the National Institution
11	List of scientific research projects conducted by the member universities	The Science and Technology department of the National Institution
12	List of faculty members with titles	The Personnel department of the National Institution

## APPENDIX 5: INTERVIEW CODING

No.	Interviewee	University	Coding
1	Rector	U1	05 PM1 (policy maker)
2	Dean	U1	08 PM2
3	School head 1	U1	12 PI1 (policy implementer)
4	School head 2	U1	11 PI2
5	Director of QA center	U2	07 PM1
6	Dean	U2	17 PM2
7	School head 1	U2	20 PI1
8	School head 2	U2	22 PI2
9	Rector	U3	06 PM1
10	Vice-Dean	U3	27 PM2
11	School head 1	U3	01 PI1
12	School head 2	U3	03 PI2
13	Director of QA center	U4	24 PM1
14	Dean	U4	21 PM2
15	School head 1	U4	26 PI1
16	School head 2	U4	23 PI2
17	Rector	U5	15 PM1
18	Dean	U5	18 PM2
19	School head 1	U5	19 PI1
20	School head 2	U5	25 PI2
21	Rector	U6	04 PM1
22	Dean	U6	10 PM2
23	School head 1	U6	14 PI1
24	School head 2	U6	13 PI2
25	Deputy Director	MoET	16 M1 (Ministerial level)
26	Deputy Director	INFEQA	09 M2

*Note: The interview coded 02 was not used for the analysis, and was therefore not included in this table.*