

DEVELOPING QUALITY CULTURE AT VIETNAM NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF HO CHI MINH CITY THROUGH THE IQA SYSTEM¹

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Abstract: *Quality assurance (QA) system has become an issue of great concern in the Vietnamese higher education since it is considered an important tool and an integral part of quality culture. As one of the 2 National Universities of Vietnam as well as a full member of ASEAN University Network, VNU-HCM with its 6 member universities has put great efforts in developing its quality culture in the last decade. The paper first summarizes the theoretical background as well as briefly describes the national, regional and international contexts affecting the development of QA system in VNU-HCM, then analyzes the internal and external quality assurance (IQA and EQA) in the Vietnamese higher education with the case study of IQA at VNU-HCM (SWOT analysis), and finally gives some implications and recommendations for further development of quality culture at VNU-HCM and in the Vietnamese higher education through the IQA system, especially in terms of setting up a new value system for the synergy strength as well as policies, tools and procedures for PDCA-based continuous improvement.*

Key words: *quality culture; Internal quality assurance (IQA); PDCA; HEIs*

Introduction

There have been a lot of strategies and reforms built for improving the quality of HEIs in Vietnam in the past two decades. More and more management staff at different levels in higher education have shown increasingly strong commitment in improving quality of their units or institutions for accountability in face of competition challenges, which facilitates the development of quality culture in HEIs. However, due to their lack of competence and experience in establishing an effective QA system, the quality culture has not been able to attain the sustainable development. Moreover, quality culture could only be optimized with the combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches. An IQA system which embeds both approaches can help speed up the development of the quality culture further in HEIs.

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1. Theoretical background

1.1. Quality and quality assurance

1.1.1 Quality in higher education

Nowadays, many QA researchers and practitioners know about the five quality concepts according to Harvey and Green (1993): (1) Quality as exceptional or excellence, (2) Quality as perfection or consistency ('zero defects'), (3) Quality as fitness for purpose, (4) Quality as value for money and (5) Quality as transformative. Harvey and Knight (1996) see the notion of quality as transformation as incorporating the other four concepts.

"Transformative quality encourages an approach that sees quality as a dynamic and continuous; that does not simply encourage improvement but enables a process of transformation of the student, the researcher and the institution" (Harvey 2012, 30).

However, Woodhouse argues that this definition is sort of a meta-concept in the way Harvey sees it for the transformation notion. For him, fitness for purpose covers all other notions, *"because all of them imply a specific characteristic or goal (ie purpose). that should be achieved. [...] and provides an 'organising principle' for approaches to the achievement and checking of quality"* (Woodhouse 2012, 7).

As quality is a complex and multi-dimensional concept, one should have an eclectic approach in following a certain quality concept from different views of quality, which depends on the size of the institution or a specific period of time.

"We therefore suggest to adequately analyse your own context at your higher education institution, especially looking at how and which stakeholders to involve, and to seek your very own transparent quality definition by means of discussion in your institution, constantly updating it and the system as well as instruments behind it" (Niedermeier, 2015:21)

Niedermeier (2015:23) also recommends that "Quality" can be seen in five dimensions: input, process, output, outcome and impact, as well as the to incorporate external quality assurance systems by governments. In addition to the CIPO model (i.e. Context, Inputs, Process and Output) which is frequently used in evaluation studies, the Context, Input, Process and Product (CIPP) Evaluation Model of Stufflebeam (1971; 2012), is another evaluation model often used in education.

1.1.2. Quality assurance, external and internal quality assurance

A good quality definition and concept will help give common guidelines for the whole institution to follow as well as make it easy to support quality culture and measure or assess the quality at the institutional or program level. Quality assurance (QA) does not define quality, it checks the quality of processes or outcomes and can have the purpose of compliance, control, accountability or improvement/ enhancement (Harvey 2012, 6).

External quality assurance (EQA) can be anything related to quality assurance that is driven from outside the institution and which evaluates or assesses the institution as a whole or in regard to a certain topic such as internationalisation, gender equality or a programme according to standards that are either agreed upon or pre-set (Sanyal & Martin 2007, 5). EQA can be compulsory, as in regulated by law, or voluntary. Voluntary EQA activities often result in a label or certificate that, in contrast to compulsory EQA, has no control or

decision-making power on the study programmes for example. Accreditation can be the compulsory or voluntary EQA.

Internal quality assurance (IQA) summarizes all mechanisms, instruments and systems for quality assurance which are within the higher education institution (HEI) and ensure that the institution or programmes are meeting their own standards and objectives (Sanyal & Martin 2007, 5). IQA is influenced by the governing external quality assurance system of the country or region. But generally institutions are encouraged and free to implement their own processes and system as long as they comply with the external regulations and policies. IQA instruments and mechanisms can be the setting of processes, standards, internal evaluation, assessment, making use of external peers.

There is a stronger bond between EQA and IQA which complement each other for the joint quest for quality. In order to reach this goal though, there is much still to be done on both sides, starting from mutual trust to available human expertise and to new or revised models and methods (Niedermeier 2015: 40). IQA is part of the overall steering and management of the HEI, on the institutional and programme level, to ensure one's own purposes and goals are met. It defines the intentions and procedures although some might be externally prescribed. (Martin & Stella 2007, 34)

QA is not only about accreditation and means of control by ministries but can be part of the strategy and the steering processes of a HEI to address new challenges and requirements of higher education which are growing and changing at a fast pace like the impacts of globalization, massification, diversification, internationalization...

1.2. Quality culture in higher education

Among many definitions of quality culture (QC), the following definition from European University Association (EUA 2006:10) is quite complete and easy to understand: *“Quality culture refers to an organisational culture that intends to enhance quality permanently and it is characterised by two distinct elements: on the one hand, a cultural/psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality and, on the other hand, a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts.”*



(from *EUA Publications 2010: 17*)

The first element is quite intangible, but for sustainable development, quality should be a well-defined value that everyone in the same organization believes, understands, shares and makes commitment for continuous improvement to obtain its quality aims on the basis of specific procedures. QC focuses on the quality value which is one of the values of an institution. If we define the quality of an organization as the fulfillment of its aims/objectives and we want to create the quality value, clear objectives need to be specified in all activities and then activities are carried out to reach the objectives; the efficiency or degree of this attainment must be assessed as well as improvements must be made and new objectives at higher level will be set up in a new PLAN-DO-CHECK-ACT cycle (Deming cycle).

QC at a higher education institution (HEI) can be shown at several levels: *desire* for quality or *awareness/belief* (cultural/psychological element) in the importance of quality (with shared goals), *understanding* of tools/processes to measure and enhance quality and really taking *action* towards quality improvement to satisfy different stakeholders, including learners, employers and to meet the demands of the society.

At the first level, QC represents everyone's belief in the continuous improvement and adjustment to meet the minimum and higher requirements/expectations of stakeholders, their good awareness of the importance of making contributions to the shared improvement objectives, and as a result the long-term benefits for each individual and the organization.

At the level of understanding, everyone has a good understanding of their duties/obligations, the objectives and requirements of their tasks and of how to apply the tools/procedures to fulfill their tasks effectively and meet increasingly higher requirements. That means, they understand their responsibilities towards the society and the accountability to satisfy the stakeholders as well as the common objectives of their HEIs.

The level of action can be manifested in the case when everyone not only knows how to make and implement plans, but they also voluntarily and really participate in the *continuous improvement* in all daily tasks and activities (action with appropriate procedures/initiatives/skills). More specifically, they must be able to make assessment and

get feedback from the stakeholders related to their current jobs to define the real situation and measure their success in their task, to learn from the best practices to make corrections.

At the highest level, everyone will be willing to *share* the results and benefits of improvements, to *learn* from each other's best practices, make contributions or give initiatives/recommendations/suggestions to their colleagues or other units to make improvements together, as QC emphasizes the "shared values and beliefs". The institution will then become a "learning organization".

Therefore, we can find that the factors necessary for the development of QC include: (1) The specification of criteria, quality indicators/KPIs and requirements for each task, other tools/procedures to fulfill the tasks including QA policies, guidelines, data system, quality handbook; (2) Informing, giving instructions or training to enhance everyone's understanding of these criteria, requirements and tools; (3) Creation of mechanism to develop the habit of monitoring, making self-assessment, peer review, getting feedback from external evaluation; (4) Creation of mechanism and measures for rewarding, recognizing and encouraging people to make improvements and share best practices; and (5) Regular support/consultancy from experts and adequate resources.

QA stops at ensuring a certain predefined level of quality in order to maintain it. Quality management can be seen as the management of change in order to have higher education institutions adapt their doing to address current and future needs of the stakeholders, first and foremost the students. (Bucher 2012, 94)

QC is related to both IAQ and EQA and everyone must be aware of this tool for the autonomy of their HEI "... *quality culture is a tool for preparing the institutions for the consequences of this autonomy, both with respect to how they handle external demands (e.g. the ability to respond to external quality assurance schemes), and internal developments in governance (e.g. promoting stronger internal management structures). As such, it seems that quality culture, in practice, is everything for everyone*" (Harvey 2008). Harvey (2008) also based on the Cultural Theory Framework (degree of group control and intensity of external rules) to classify QC into 5 types: responsive QC, reactive QC, regenerative QC and reproductive QC. Finally, he warns that QC should be viewed as a way of life and must be constructed in the context in which it is located.

In addition, Suskie (2015) defines the Teaching Excellence in 5 cultures: a culture of focus and aspiration (to achieve outcomes), a culture of relevance (to meet stakeholders' needs), a culture of evidence, a culture of betterment (continuous improvement) and a culture of community (collaborative working) which can be applied as the tools for enhancing educational quality in higher education.

1.3. Roles of leadership in IQA

There can be different QA systems which can be centralized or decentralized or a combination of both (depending on the size, context of the HEI and other factors) with different roles and responsibilities. The role of the senior management staff is very important in developing the QC in the HEI, especially with their commitment in setting up the value system for quality development as well as the initiatives for a QA system or quality management system (QMS) to achieve what the missions and visions have set. They

are also the key persons who can make decisions in budget and resources allocation for the strategic actions, especially for the quality improvement plans (including the follow-up activities after EQA processes) with certain topics or themes in the agenda. The quality managers at different levels are supposed to fulfil their required roles in coordinating the QA plans and strategies. Therefore, the importance of the leadership role cannot be emphasised enough (Becket & Brookes 2008; Steiger, Hammou, and Galib 2014):

“Leadership is the prime factor responsible for an organisation’s development, acting upon the definition of its policy, strategy and culture, making available the resources needed for its processes, establishing culture, making available the resources needed for its processes, establishing necessary partnerships, intervening in the recruitment, and training of its different actors and contributing to its structure and internal organisation” (Maria João Rosa & Amaral 2007, 195).

The quality manager has a variety of roles from a controller to a facilitator, especially nowadays, they play a more and more important role in developing the quality culture in their institution. Sursock and Vettori (2012) have examined quality cultures in European HEIs. Their findings have underlined the need for new roles for quality managers, which emphasise the facilitating function. They should:

- ***examine quality cultures*** of the institution. How do the individuals in the institution handle quality and quality assurance? Are there repeating, similar or different types?
- ***facilitate organisational reflection***, change and dialogue in the institution. This function goes beyond a mere coordinating function and emphasises the role as a facilitator, which we have already addressed above.
- ***translate between languages***. It is not easy to bring together different actors of higher education institutions and there is often a need to translate the languages used in order to have a common ground and understanding. The translation would be for example between the language of QA and the one of the institution or the language of the academics and the one of senior management.
- ***be “cultural brokers”*** in the sense of linking, mediating and bridging ideas and help actors to take their perspectives.
- ***be “meaning agents”*** who support managers within the HEI in sense-making processes and help to generate meaningful information (Niedermeier 2015:89)

A participative approach of all the concerned stakeholders, would produce ownership and could nurture a so called quality culture in the institution, at the level of faculties, departments and lecturers (Kohler 2012, 81).

2. The context and overview of QA system in VNU-HCM

2.1. International, regional and national contexts

EQA frameworks for higher education have been established in more and more countries in the world with the development of international, regional and national evaluation/assessment or accreditation agencies (both governmental or independent for voluntary or compulsory external assessment). However, Billing (2004) in exploring

international comparisons of the extent of commonality or diversity in the main national EQA frameworks for higher education concludes that in each country, there may be specific additions of elements or omissions from the model, but usually there are modifications or extensions of elements. These variations are determined by practicalities, the size of the higher education sector, the rigidity/flexibility of the legal expression of QA (or its absence in law), and the stage of development from state control of the sector.

The summary of the surveys in Europe about the purposes of external evaluation demonstrates considerable commonality at the heart of national QA, in the shape of a spectrum from the "softer" (developmental) improvement/informational functions to the "harder" (judgemental) legal/financial/ planning functions. Self-evaluations is usually the basis for external review and development, EQA frameworks are transferable at the level of aims, principles, concepts, style and approach. Institutional-level evaluations, compared with programme-level accreditations, are expected to be more liberating and developmental, in empowering HEIs to become more self-regulating, innovative, responsible, and responsive to market needs. (Billing and Temple 2001)

There are many models of QA and QA frameworks including those in Europe (EHEA) in ASEAN (AQRf), especially many countries have developed NQFs recently. As for IQA, there are several internal management models which have been applied are TQM, EFQM, balanced scorecard, ISO 9000 series....Quality is strongly tied to change (Harvey 2012, 30) and the management of change: from external forces such as massification and the need to identify and address socio-economic trends to internal needs to enhance the institution, departments and programmes. The Deming-Cycle or **Plan-Do-Study-Act** (PDCA) is a simple tool that can be used by everyone in the institution for the implementation of processes in many countries in the world.

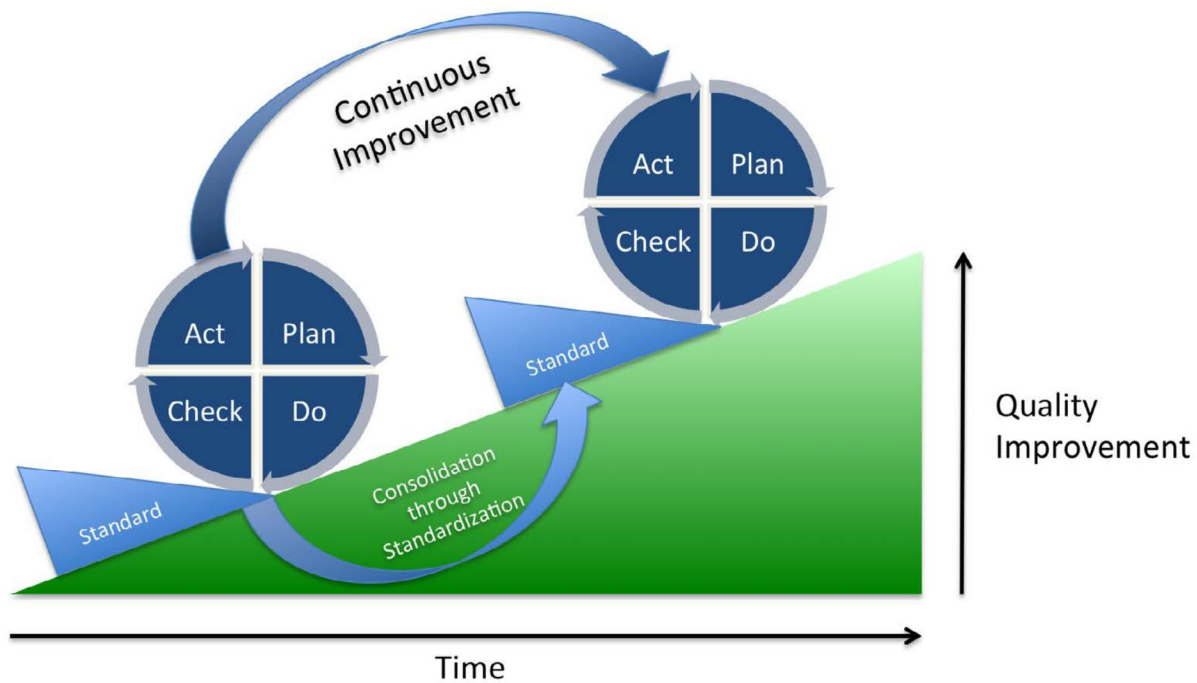


Figure 1: The PDCA cycle of continuous improvement

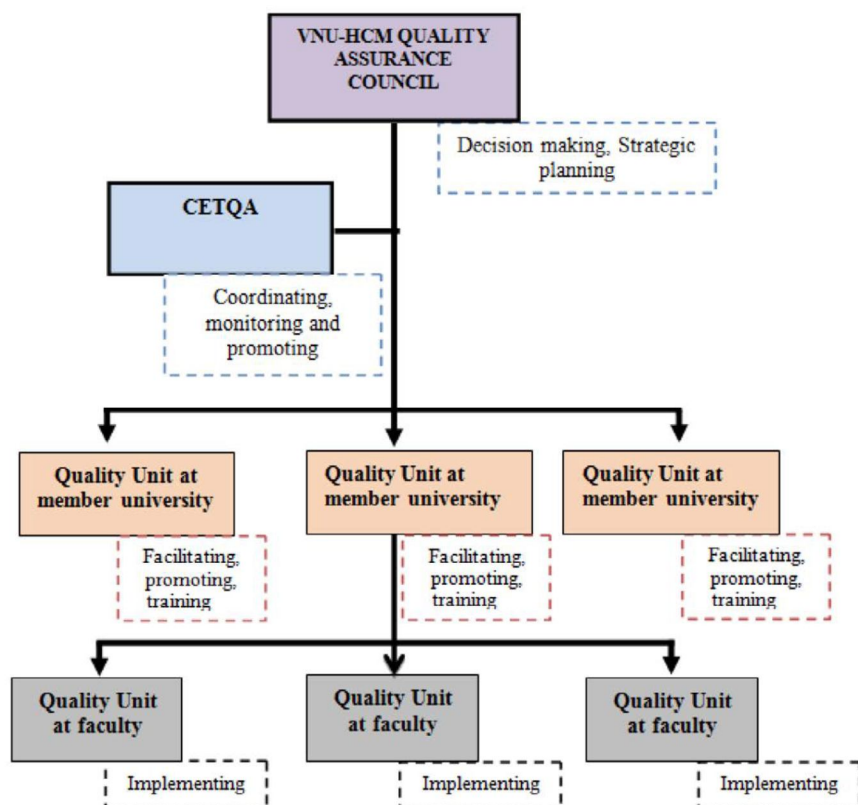
The logic of the PDCA cycle requires the action has to follow after the check, and the cycle is repeated again and again in an endless loop. This is the continuous process.

2.2. The context of QA and QC at VNU-HCMC

In the last 2 decades, VNU-HCM has developed the QA system with different levels. The QA system at VNU-HCM is based upon the importance of a good balance between centralization and decentralisation. It consists of three levels: the overarching VNU-HCM level with a QA Council and the Center for Educational Testing and Quality Assessment (CETQA), the member institution level each with its respective QA Unit, and the quality unit at faculty level within the institutions.

CETQA is a standing unit of VNUHCM's QA Council and serves as the QA unit on VNU-HCM level. It is to some extent the bridge between the QA Council and the QA Units at institutional level. CETQA is under the direct guidance of the president and vertically related to the other units of VNU-HCM's QA system. It coordinates, facilitates and monitors the QA practices of the member institutions and provides consultancy for the QA Council for example in matters of strategies. It also makes sure that the decisions made by the QA Council are implemented on the member institutions level.

The QA Council sets the direction and strategies for QA practices for the whole system. The QA Units of the member institutions develop their strategies in alignment with the VNU Council and their own context. The quality units at the faculty level are then responsible for the implementation. CETQA annually conducts internal quality assessments at programme and institutional level. On the programme level the assessment is based on the AUN-QA criteria while on the institutional level the criteria in use are issued by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). There are guidelines, regulations for QA practice in a variety of documents.



(Diagram 1: QA system in VNU-HCM, Nguyen Thi My Ngoc 2015)

The cultural element of the quality culture of VNU-HCM comes from both top-down commitment and bottom-up determination at both individual and collective level. The QA Council chair and VNU-HCM President as well as the 6 member institution presidents have shown their great concern for and commitment to QA in the last decade with their active participation in the EQA process at both institutional and program level. Prof. Dr. Phan Thanh Binh, the former VNU-HCM President has emphasized in his speech at the *Summative Conference on the assessment of educational quality by AUN-QA criteria of the period 2009-2013* that “As a large HE training center in the country with the obligation of being a pioneer in innovation and creativity, VNU-HCM is deeply aware that QA is a foundation for improving and enhancing educational quality and, at the same time, assert with the society its development and trust... Its participation in AUN since 1999 is really a good chance for VNU-HCM to raise their awareness of enlarging cooperation relationships with the big universities in the region and in quality assessment for mutual recognition... The period of 2009-2013 is planned to be the foundation period for the quality development and enhancement. Therefore, VNU-HCM has been improving its IQA and EQA continuously in the last 5 years... All the activities in quality assessment at institutional level by MOET criteria and program level by AUN-QA criteria of all the member institutions of VNU-HCM have had great impact on enhancing the educational quality of VNU-HCM and increasingly asserted the QC and the prestige of VNU-HCM” (VNU-HCM: 2013). Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nantana Gajaseni, the Executive Director of AUN also expresses her

acknowledgement at this Conference that “*I deeply appreciate that VNU-HCM puts a strong emphasis with passion and interests in QA*”.

The quality commitment as the cultural element is an important integral part of the QC in VNU-HCM, a foundation for the development of IQA and, as a result, for the development of QC further. The quality commitment has therefore a close link with the IQA. On the other hand, the IQA systems of the member institutions which have been established with the requirement and support/commitment from VNU-HCM also have their impact on the development of values and commitment of the member HEIs.

3. The study into the formal IQA for quality culture at VNU-HCM (SWOT analysis)

3.1. Strengths and weaknesses

3.1.1. Strengths

The first noticeable strength of the IQA system in VNU-HCM is that there is a flexible combination of *uniformity and diversity*. All of the member institutions have a QA administrative and coordinative unit at the institutional level in spite of different names with many similar important functions and responsibilities under the top management for the mutual goals of quality assessment and improvement. The additional functions, facilities or networking structure of each QA unit have been established in accordance with the size, the needs and advantages of each institution. The table below is the illustration of the QA units in all the 6 members in the last few years:

	UT	USSH	US	IU	UEL	UIT
Name of QA unit	QA Section	OETQA	OETQA	QMC	OETQA	DILAQA
Year of QA unit establishment	2005	2006	2005	2008	2010	2007
Staff no.in QA unit	6	7	5	6	5	5
Quality assessment of institution	x	x	x	x	x	x
Quality assessment of programs	x	x	x	x	x	x
Survey system	x	x	x	x	x	x
ISO system	x					
QA Network units in all faculties/offices	x	x	x			
QA Database system	x			x		x
QA research projects	x	x				
Seminars/workshops, conferences in QA	x	x	x	x	x	x

Table 1: QA units and their functions in the VNU-HCM members

(Note: UT: University of Technology, USSH: University of Social Sciences and Humanities, US: University of Science, IU: International University, UEL: University of Economics and Law, UIT: University of Information Technology; OETQA: Office of Educational Testing and QA, QMC: Quality Management Center, DILAQA: Department of Inspection-Legal Affairs &QA)

The second strength is that, as all of the VNU members have had some of their educational programs internally and officially assessed by AUN-QA criteria (especially UT is going to be officially assessed by AUN-QA at the institutional level in September 2017) which place strong emphasis on *PDCA-based* system and the *alignment* with strategies, missions, vision at all levels, the culture of continuous improvement has been gradually established and increasingly developed. In addition, the mechanism of mid-term monitoring/checking in the institutional assessment and in the implementation of the strategic plans by VNU-HCM in any period of 5 years has led to more effective and institution-wide PDCA-based operations/activities in all QA and related units. They are required to report the results of implementing the post-assessment improvement plans or strategic plans set several times in each period. Furthermore, the strategic plans of the new periods have to be based on the SWOT analysis of the previous period. Here are some of the responses of the QA managers and representatives in VNU-HCM member institutions to this issue of applying PDCA cycle in the interview conducted in 2016 and 2017:

- 1. The awareness of PDCA of the academic and administrative staff has been increasingly raised through the mechanism of continuous monitoring and checking by the management at VNU and the institutional level. The process has gradually moved from top-down to a combination of top-down and bottom-up. As a result, the QC has moved from responsive and reactive QC to regenerative QC. The leaders/managers at the middle level have become more responsible for the results of the implementation of their improvement plans (USSH, 2017).*
- 2. The positive assessment results of the first educational programs by AUN-QA criteria have helped the staff build up their confidence. More and more faculties and departments want to have more educational programs assessed and reassesses by AUN-QA. As a result, the PDCA cycle has become a familiar tool or working habit in most of the faculties (IU, 2017)*
- 3. The whole institution is going to be assessed by AUN-QA for the first time at the institutional level. Since 2009 with more programs assessed by AUN-QA, there have been fundamental changes in the educational philosophies, educational programs, learning outcomes, learning assessment, student advising and support... in alignment with the requirement of AUN-QA criteria and the external stakeholders (UT, 2016)*
- 4. The QA activities have been carried out more regularly and continuously at VNU-HCM level and institutional level (VNU-HCM, 2017)*
- 5. Our institution has been implementing the correction and improvement plans integrated into our strategic plans 2016-2020 in compliance with the recommendations by the assessment teams during the whole year of 2017, which is the most important phase in every PDCA cycle (UEL and US, 2017)*

Finally, the periodical meetings and workshops between the VNU-HCM and the QA units of all the members as well as peer reviews are annually held. Through those meetings, workshops and peer review visits, the tools and procedures for QA have been discussed and

best practices have been exchanged. In addition, the quarterly/semesterly meetings among the QA faculty units within an institution have also promoted the sharing of good practices. Here are some typical comments from the institution QA representatives:

1. *The aims of these internal QA meetings at our institution are: (1) Monitoring the QA activities of the QA teams (QA Network units at the faculty and administrative office level) at all the units in implementing the action plans for quality improvement in compliance with the strategic plans for the development of each unit or the whole institution; (2) Creating opportunities for all the units to give exchanges and share best practices or initiatives in the QA activities in each unit and in the whole institution; (3) Studying into the common difficulties of the QA teams to give appropriate consultancy and support for improving and enhancing the quality at all the related fields in each unit and in the whole institution (USSH, 2015-2017)*
2. *The following types of exchanges and meetings have taken place in the QA network in VNU-HCM: (1) Annual meetings with all the QA managers from all the university members of VNU-HCM are hold by CETQA, VNU-HCM;(2) Exchanges to share best practices in QA, such as making online surveys to get feedback from stakeholders, setting up quality procedures in accordance with ISO requirements, testing management, Total quality management (TQM) model,...are given among the QA units, depending on individual needs and desires of each QA unit and the possibilities if mutual help/support. Delegations from a certain member are sent to other institutions in VNU-HCM to learn from the experiences of other QA units and see how the system works; (3) Peer assessment or internal assessment among VNU-HCM have been organized for several years (VNU-HCM, 2016)*
3. *The QA Council at the institutional level together with the QA unit has given consultancy to the top management board in the QA-related issues. The Vice-president in charge of QA has been assigned with the QA leadership... (UIT, 2016)*
4. *The establishment of the QA network in all the units of our institution will gradually help develop and operate the IQA system more effectively (US, 2017)*

Those strengths have been making great contributions to the development of QA in VNU-HCM.

3.1.2. Weaknesses

There are always two sides to every issue of QA. Some weaknesses in the structure and operation of the IQA in VNU-HCM are recognized through the periodical self-assessment and internal reviews as well as from the assessment teams and experts. One of the key issues of IQA is the effectiveness of IQA structure and processes with adequate tools and human resources, not mentioning the investment on ICT and other facilities.

The first weakness in the professionalization and modernization of IQA is that the set of tools, procedures and policies, including the set of KPIs for internal assessment and decision-making, QA handbooks for the specific core areas like the curriculum development and academic advising, teaching and testing strategies, survey methodology, credit-based teaching and management... have not been fully developed regardless of which set of

assessment criteria is applied. Some remarks from the institutions have been recorded from the interviews and the annual meetings' minutes as follows:

1. *Due to the lack of knowledge and experience in the science of higher education management and QA, the IQA has not been run effectively (UEL, 2013)*
2. *We are trying to develop and revise some important tools for IQA such as the ISO-based procedures, the KPIs, the curriculum design and revision handbook, especially the online survey system...(USSH, 2015-2016)*
3. *The information system for the QA activities is very important for the whole institution but not effectively developed. We are still faced with a lot of difficulties in the collection, update and analysis of the data and information (IS, 2013-2014)*
4. *There are still some shortcomings in the QA staff development and financial budget for the QA activities (UEL, 2012 and 2016)*

The PDCA-based approach has led to some advantages in running IQA but as this approach is still quite new in most of the member institutions, not all the leaders/managers, heads are committed and qualified enough to follow it in everyday activities. This is the second main weakness is the IQA system in VNU-HCM. The aim for accountability has not always accompanied the aim for improvement in all QA plans. The monitoring and QA project management skills need to be developed for all the management staff. In addition, the strategic plans have not always been based on the QA activities. Some QA reports and interviews show the following main concerns:

1. *The training workshops for the QA officers are not effective and productive enough and not all of the QA officers are eager and qualified enough to learn (USSH, 2015-2017)*
2. *The great issue is how to integrate the QA process into the professional processes of each unit (UIT, 2013)*
3. *The implementation of the improvement action plans for overcoming the weaknesses after the internal review by VNU-HCM is not effective enough as we expected. Some units, departments are still reluctant in analyzing the weaknesses and not active enough in initiating effective correction measures (EUL, 2013)*

Finally, the teamwork and collaborative decision-making as well as the smooth coordination among different units, departments, offices have not been well developed. This can be partly due to inadequate communication, trust and leadership. It is really difficult to change the long-lasting habit of working independently in separation and intuitive experience-based decision making without basing on any source of reliable data.

1. *The collaboration and coordination among the administrative units and the faculties having the programs assessed by AUN-QA are not good enough. This requires innovation and flexibility in the management. In addition, the training should be held in both broad and deep dimensions. How to deal with the resistance and conservative thinking of some staff is still a challenge (US, 2013)*

2. *The coordination among the units within the institution to overcome the weaknesses is still loose and has not conducted in a systematic way with all the connected chains (UEL, 2013).*
3. *There has not been a good coordination and cooperation among the units in the institutions as many staff in the units are overloaded with so much work (UIT, 2012-2016)*
4. *The sharing of good practices among the member institutions has not been so well conducted (VNU-HCM, 2017)*

The weaknesses mentioned above are also the typical ones in many other Vietnamese HEIs. The VNU-HCM member institutions are developing the power of synergy and leadership as well as the mechanism for the data-based decision-making process, especially the alignment of QA activities with their development strategies and missions, visions which can be considered as the key for success in IQA system.

3.2. Opportunities and challenges

As analyzed above, quality commitment has been the good start for the development of IQA in all the member institutions. This is both the internal advantages and challenges. On the one hand, it has been greatly developed due to the external requirements, support and guidance (MOET, VNU-HCM regulations and policies) as well as the contexts (globalization and competition, ICT development). On the other hand, several HEIs are not well motivated for developing the IQA further, especially for the quality assessment at both levels due to the lack of incentive measures and awarding system. Accountability has not become “an issue of survival” for all the training/academic units. The administrative units do not have equal concern for QA as they are less directly affected by the challenges of competition. More motivation, incentive measures and campaigns from VNU-HCM will increase their commitment further.

The globalization and integration era also brings chances for cooperation beside the challenges of competition. In addition, the economic crisis in the country and in the region in the last few years have negatively affected the QA motivation and activities, including the budget for these challenging new activities. Below are some typical remarks from VNU-HCM institutions’ annual reports or interviews with the QA management staff:

1. *There has always been great concern and regular guidance from the VNU-HCM top-level management in the QA activities. The networking among ASEAN HEIs is getting better with lots of opportunities for mutual learning in QA-related issues through workshops, conferences (VNU-HCM, US, USSH, UIT 2017)*
2. *MOET has issued a lot of regulations and guidelines for accreditation and QA activities, both EQA and IQA, with the establishment of the 4 Center for Accreditations recently, both public and private. In addition, the increasingly enlarged international relations and cooperation projects with the HEIs in the advanced countries also give us opportunities for benchmarking. However, we*

are faced with a lot of challenges of competition in the last few years. How to recruit and select the best students to our university has become an issue of great concern for many faculties and departments recently (USSH 2017)

- 3. We have the advantage of being the first public university in Vietnam which offers the educational programs using English as the medium of teaching and research. However, we are also faced with competition and have to improve the quality of our training programs and student services further (IU 2017)*

VNU-HCM members are much better aware of the above opportunities and challenges and trying to design and implement the strategic plans on this basis in the period of 2016-2020 to fulfil the missions of providing high-quality education and research services/projects.

4. Recommendations

Some practical recommendations can be given to both VNU-HCM and its member institutions as follows:

1. There should be more clear and effective policies from VNU-HCM for the motivation and incentive measures to help raise the member institutions' awareness of and commitment to QA; an awarding system in IQA could be an advantage. The clear regulations on the obligations of the teaching and administrative staff should be continuously revised with the integration or modification of QA activities and PDCA cycle into these obligations.
2. More updated and detailed guidelines, regulations and frameworks of IQA, especially the development of the information system would be highly appreciated for the development of IQA in the member institutions. The activities of designing and improving these guidelines should be done in teams with the cooperation of the member HEIs. Decentralization and centralization can be applied in a flexible way. The autonomy of the faculties or the whole institution must go together with the accountability.
3. It is highly recommended that more seminars, conferences for sharing best practices in running IQA should be carried out continuously, especially in conducting improvement plans. Not only can the peer reviews for the internal quality assessment among the VNU-HCM be continuously applied but also the monitoring of the improvement plans should be strengthened with the opportunities for sharing its effectiveness among VNU-HCM members.
4. The values of collaboration and continuous improvement should be clarified and translated into the action plans of all the operations and activities in all the institutions. Change management and HE project management should be the important topics for all the training workshops, especially for the leaders and managers, deans and heads. In addition, the effective administration competence for the right decisions in the strategies will bring great success to the QA activities
5. The IQA activities must be integral parts of all strategies at all level in the HEIs. Especially, there must be a clear and systematic alignment of all the QA

strategies, missions and visions at all levels, from VNU level to institutional level and down to faculty and department levels.

Conclusion

In applying the definition of QC by EUA, the paper focuses on the IQA as a formal QA process of QC, an integral part of QC and closely related to the commitment part of QC. This is a long process which requires not only the commitment at all levels but also the qualified QA managers, the involvement of experts and stakeholders, leadership and appropriate strategic plans as well as their continuous efforts in learning and sharing good practices in quality education in all activities specified clearly in each individual's roles and functions. The effectiveness of this process as the result of collaborative work would help enhance the development of QC in VNU-HCM further. The success in QA would be the product of the whole team, the whole system of VNU-HCM.

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