Fostering a Culture of Quality in Vietnamese Universities through Educational Accreditation

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Abstract: *This article examines the evolving role of educational accreditation in shaping a culture of quality within Vietnamese universities. Drawing from national policy milestones and institutional experiences, the study identifies key challenges in embedding quality-focused values and practices across administrative and academic domains. It highlights the gap in awareness, leadership commitment and stakeholder engagement that hampers the realization of sustainable quality frameworks. The paper concludes with targeted measures-ranging from policy formulation and capacity-building to systemic quality assurance-that aim to integrate accreditation efforts with long-term cultural transformation.*

Keywords: quality culture, accreditation, higher education, university, Vietnam

1. Introduction

The quality of higher education is of particular importance to all countries in the world because it determines the quality of the country's human capital. Therefore, universities always focus on improving the quality of training, while building a learning and working environment based on core values of quality, innovation, responsibility and cooperation.

In Vietnam, since the Law on Higher Education was promulgated in 2012 and officially came into effect, educational accreditation has become a mandatory requirement to ensure that higher education institutions not only maintain but also continuously improve the quality of training, research and community service. The mandatory requirement for educational accreditation has contributed to the formation and development of a quality culture in each university and in the entire system, thereby enhancing the reputation, brand and competitiveness of Vietnamese universities in the region and the world.

Currently, most Vietnamese universities clearly recognize that quality culture is one of the core factors in developing and improving the quality of higher education in Vietnam, while creating an environment that promotes innovation, responsibility and commitment to continuous quality improvement of each individual and collective in the university. However, the construction of a quality culture in Vietnamese universities faces many difficulties and challenges such as: limited awareness of quality among a part of lecturers, staff and students, the commitment to quality of the board of directors and leaders of departments and faculties is not strong, resources are limited, there is a lack of coordination and participation of stakeholders, continuous quality improvement has not been implemented, especially after receiving the certificate of educational accreditation... The above situation requires Vietnamese universities to apply synchronous measures to build and promote a quality culture in universities, especially in the process of participating in educational accreditation, specifically right in the process of implementing self-assessment of educational institutions, preparing for external assessment until receiving the certificate of educational accreditation and especially continuously right after receiving the certificate of educational accreditation.

This study contributes to ongoing national efforts to improve higher education outcomes by providing a strategic framework for institutionalizing quality culture in universities, which is essential for long-term competitiveness and international integration.

This article adopts a qualitative, policy-analytical approach, drawing from national regulations, institutional reports, and secondary literature to examine the intersection between quality culture and educational accreditation in Vietnamese higher education.

2. The concept of university quality culture

According to Woods, J. A. (1998): "Culture is the shared beliefs, values, attitudes, institutions, and behavior patterns that characterize the members of a community or organization" [13].

Ahmed, S. M. argued that "A quality culture is an organizational value system that results in an environment that is conducive to the establishment and continual improvement of quality" [1].

The culture in an organization is formed by a number of constituent elements including: Interpersonal behaviors, standards achieved by work groups, dominant values accepted by the organization, rules of engagement, and context. In any business, culture can be defined as the dominant beliefs throughout the organization about how business should be conducted, how employees should behave, and how they should be treated [2].

For universities, culture is understood as a set of beliefs and

values shared by everyone in the organization. Culture brings people closer together and makes them feel that what is changing has great meaning for them [6].

According to Le Duc Ngoc (2008), the quality culture of a training institution is understood as every member (from learners to managers), every organization (from departments, divisions to mass organizations) knows the quality standards for their work and all do according to that quality requirement [11].

According to Pham Xuan Thanh, the characteristics of quality culture in universities include:
- There is awareness from lecturers and learners about the need to build a system that ensures accountability for quality and always strives to improve quality;
- Quality culture puts learners at the center;
- There is a shared ownership of quality in an education policy;
- The leadership role is more encouraging than directive and the leadership role can be assumed by any individual in the education policy, instead of being assigned only to the senior management team;
- Quality culture is based on cooperation, sharing of experiences and the spirit of teamwork [6].

Based on the above definitions, in our opinion, quality culture at university is a combination of awareness, belief, value, quality standards of the university that all members of the university share, voluntarily act at all times, everywhere to best complete their work with the highest quality. In a university with quality culture, quality is always the top priority and the basic value of the university culture. This means that managers must always fulfill their assigned responsibilities with the highest quality of work; teaching staff are always dedicated to performing their work with the highest quality; lecturers always teach with the highest quality; students always strive to achieve the highest quality in their studies with a spirit of self-awareness and sense of responsibility to contribute to ensuring and constantly improving the quality of the university. That is the foundation, the basic manifestation of quality culture at university.

3. The Concept of Accreditation of Higher Education

Grilo (2003) argued that accreditation was a system of external quality assurance which had several decades in the United States of America and had its origin in an external evaluation [4].

Sanyal and Martin (2007) argued that accreditation is the outcome of a process by which a governmental, parastatal or private body (accreditation agency) evaluates the quality of a higher education institution as a whole, or a specific higher education program/course, in order to formally recognize it as having met certain predetermined criteria or standards and award a quality label [12].

Lazăr VLĂSCEANU, Laura GRÜNBERG and Dan PÂRLEA (2007) argued that accreditation is the process by a governmental, non-governmental, or private body evaluates the quality of a higher education institution as a whole or of a specific educational program in order to formally recognize it as having met certain predetermined minimal criteria or standards. The result of this process is usually the awarding of a status (a yes/no decision), of recognition, and sometimes of a license to operate within a time limited validity. The process can imply initial and periodic self-study and evaluation by external peers. The accreditation process generally involves three specific steps: (i) a self-evaluation process conducted by the faculty, the administrators, and the staff of the institution or academic program, resulting in a report that takes as its reference the set of standards and criteria of the accrediting body; (ii) a study visit, conducted by a team of peers, selected by the accrediting organization, which reviews the evidence, visits the premises, and interviews the academic and administrative staff, resulting in an assessment report, including a recommendation to the commission of the accrediting body; (iii) an examination by the commission of the evidence and judgment and the communication of the formal decision to the institution and other constituencies, if appropriate [5].

According to the Law on Education (2005), accreditation of educational quality is the main measure to determine the level of implementation of educational goals, programs, and contents for universities and other educational institutions [8].

Educational accreditation is the activity of assessing and recognizing whether educational institutions meet the educational quality standards issued by the Minister of Education and Training [8].

The objectives of educational accreditation are clearly defined in the Law on Higher Education (2012):
a) Ensuring and improving the quality of higher education;
b) Confirming the level of higher education institutions or study programs meeting higher education goals in each specific period;
c) Serving as a basis for higher education institutions to explain to competent state management agencies and society about the current status of training quality;
d) Serving as a basis for learners to choose higher education institutions, study programs, and for employers to select human resources [9].

The principles of educational accreditation are mandatory requirements for educational accreditation activities, including:
a) Independence, objectivity, and compliance with the law;
b) Honesty, openness, and transparency;
c) Equality, mandatory, and periodicity [9].

The educational accreditation process is the specific steps that must be followed during the implementation of educational accreditation activities, including:
- The educational institution conducts a self-assessment;
- The educational institution registers for external assessment with an educational accreditation organization and requests consideration for recognition of meeting educational quality standards;
- The educational accreditation organization conducts external assessment;

- The educational accreditation organization appraises, recognizes or does not recognize the educational institution as meeting educational quality standards [7].

The educational accreditation cycle is carried out every 5 years [7].

4. The relationship between quality culture and accreditation in higher education

Quality culture and educational accreditation are closely related in quality management within universities. Quality culture is fundamental for the effective implementation of educational accreditation. With the quality culture that has been built and developed in universities, all staff, lecturers and students are clearly aware of the importance of educational accreditation. They voluntarily and actively participate in the process of self-assessment and preparation for external assessment. This ensures the progress and effectiveness of educational accreditation activities as well as during the process of self-assessment and preparation for external assessment, with the participation of all members of the university, the shortcomings will be overcome. As a result, the university's educational accreditation achieves the best possible outcomes. For example, in a university with a quality culture, all staff, lecturers and employees, in addition to the training courses on quality assurance and educational accreditation organized by the university, will study on their own to understand quality assurance and educational accreditation. Then, they will proactively and actively participate as well as give comments and monitor to ensure and promote the progress and results of the university's educational accreditation activities.

Educational accreditation helps the university recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the university's current situation compared to the set of university educational accreditation standards. On that basis, the university develops a quality improvement plan and focuses resources to implement quality improvement. This strengthens the trust of staff, lecturers and students in the quality of the university. Therefore, the university's quality culture is strongly developed. Thereby, the reputation and reputation of the university are better known nationally and internationally. In addition, during the process of participating in educational accreditation, the university issues policy documents on quality assurance and implementation guidelines. Each unit of the university has clear policies, appropriate processes on quality assurance and sets quality standards for training activities, scientific research and community service, and commits to building a quality culture. For example, through educational accreditation activities, the university reviews, evaluates, and improves its mission, vision, cultural values, and educational philosophy to suit the new development context. At the same time, through educational accreditation activities, university's stakeholders clearly understand the university's mission, vision, cultural values, and educational philosophy. This contributes to promoting the development of the university's quality culture.

When universities fully recognize and focus on applying measures to implement educational accreditation and at the same time build a quality culture, it will create favorable conditions for the process of regular and continuous quality improvement. From there, improving the quality of the university becomes a regular task with the active participation of stakeholders. Educational accreditation activities will achieve the set goals and there will no longer be mandatory, obstructive, or administrative factors to deal with. With the development of a quality culture in universities through educational accreditation activities, it will promote responsibility, transparency, and continuous improvement, contributing to enhancing the reputation, brand, and competitiveness of universities in the domestic and foreign educational markets.

5. Difficulties in building a quality culture in Vietnamese universities

In Vietnam, in 2012, the Law on Higher Education for the first time stipulated that educational accreditation was a mandatory requirement. By 2015, the University of Education - Danang University was the first higher education institution to be granted an educational accreditation certificate and educational accreditation activities began to receive attention from universities. To date, 250/271 training institutions and about 2,400 study programs has been assessed and met quality accreditation standards, of which nearly 700 programs have met international accreditation standards. In particular, many educational institutions and study programs have been accredited for the second cycle of educational accreditation (after 5 years). Most universities have voluntarily participated in educational accreditation. Through participation in educational accreditation, the university's quality culture has been formed and developed. It can be affirmed that Vietnamese higher education has about 10 years to build a culture of quality and educational accreditation has the greatest influence on the formation, construction and development of a culture of quality in Vietnamese universities. Compared to countries with a long history of implementing educational accreditation, Vietnamese higher education quality assessment has only been implemented for about 10 years, so there are still difficulties and obstacles that need to be resolved. This shows that although universities in Vietnam have paid attention to building a culture of quality through educational accreditation, it is clear that there are still many difficulties and obstacles.

First of all, there is an inadequate and inconsistent awareness of the importance of a culture of quality. Some staff, lecturers and students are still not fully aware of the role of building a culture of quality in universities. This leads to a lack of commitment, self-awareness, initiative and positivity in activities to improve the quality of training, scientific research and community service of the university. Lack of clear and full awareness of quality culture is the main cause of passive working, not focusing on improving the quality of one's own work to contribute to improving the overall quality of the university. In the process of educational accreditation, due to the lack of clear and full awareness of quality culture, cadres, lecturers, staff and students have not actively participated in the process of self-assessment and preparation for external assessment. They believe that educational accreditation is the job of the department specializing in quality assurance. This affects the results of the university's

educational accreditation.

Resistance to innovation among university staff and faculty poses a significant barrier to developing a robust quality culture. A quality culture requires a long time to form, build and develop. For the majority of cadres, lecturers and staff, they all perform their work according to established habits and do not like innovation and creativity. They feel safe in old processes but cannot quickly adapt to changes in society, the labor market or global educational trends. They are afraid of risks or lack confidence in their own, their unit's and their university's ability to innovate. Lecturers prefer to maintain traditional teaching methods, value form over content, or keep the way of organizing activities and do not want to apply modern teaching methods, so they do not contribute to improving quality. Moreover, if cadres, lecturers and staff of the university are afraid of innovation, the process of innovating training programs, improving staff capacity, applying new technology, improving teaching and learning conditions will be slowed down or not really effective.

Lack of coordination between units in the university is the reason why work quality and efficiency are not improved. As a result, a culture of quality is not formed but instead there is pushing and blaming. During the process of self-assessment and preparation for external assessment in educational quality accreditation, universities establish self-assessment councils and specialized working groups. However, there is a lack of coordination between specialized working groups in collecting and processing evidence and writing self-assessment reports. This leads to delays in the progress of self-assessment implementation. According to the guidance of the Ministry of Education and Training, the time for universities to complete self-assessment reports is within 8 months. However, in reality, universities usually take 1.5-2 years to complete self-assessment reports. Therefore, cadres, lecturers and staff feel tired due to the long self-assessment process while they are still performing their assigned main tasks. The quality assurance system in many universities only ensures the structure with the establishment of a quality assurance council, a specialized unit on quality assurance of the university and working groups on quality assurance of the units. However, individuals participating in the quality assurance system do not understand the activities of quality assurance and educational quality assessment, so they cannot participate in the implementation of the tasks.

University funding for accreditation and quality initiatives remains insufficient, constraining broader institutional development. For most universities, funding for educational accreditation and quality improvement activities accounts for a small proportion of the total funding of the universities. Although universities are well aware of the importance of building a quality culture as well as participating in educational accreditation, they are hesitant to spend money on this activity. This affects the quality of university activities not being improved or the results achieved are insignificant and have not created motivation for staff, lecturers, employees and students to make real efforts for quality.

All of the above reasons are factors affecting the building of a quality culture in universities in Vietnam. This requires universities to synchronously apply measures that universities are currently required to implement, which is educational accreditation. Attention to implementing measures to build a quality culture during the process of participating in educational accreditation has practical significance for building a university's quality culture.

6. Proposing measures to build a culture of quality in the process of participating in educational accreditation of Vietnamese universities

6.1. Develop and promulgate university quality policies

A quality policy is part of a university's general policy, reflecting the direction, purpose and basic tasks of the university in the field of quality. According to ISO 9000:2005, "Quality policy is the general intention and direction of an organization related to quality officially announced by the top management" [3].

The quality policy also demonstrates the university's concern and commitment to the quality of training as well as the quality of the conditions serving the training process. Based on the university's quality policy, students, parents, employers and society see the commitment and level of concern of the university for the quality of training. This demonstrates that the quality policy is also a tool to build strategic, long-term trust of learners and society in the quality in general and the quality of training products in particular of a university. Therefore, universities need to develop a unit-specific quality policy that outlines the direction, desired outcomes, and ways to satisfy learners' needs, while ensuring the university's commitment to training quality. It is important that the quality policy must be consistent with the practical conditions of the university and at the same time be based on the results of scientific analysis of the opportunities and challenges of the university in the coming time. Moreover, the quality policy is not only the subjective opinion of the university's leaders but also requires the participation and contribution of opinions from managers, lecturers, students, employers and educational organizations. Only then will the university's quality policy be both strategic and highly feasible while closely linked to the needs of learners and society. The quality policy must be expressed in easy-to-understand, concise, and concise language, and at the same time clearly demonstrate the orientation of building the university's quality culture. The content of the quality policy clearly shows the university's determination and investment in implementing quality assurance and educational accreditation activities, building and developing a sustainable quality culture. Based on the established quality policy, the university's top leaders officially announce and commit to creating all favorable conditions for implementing and concretizing the quality policy in the management process. All activities of the university must meet the quality standards according to the announced quality policy. In addition, universities need to periodically inspect and review to make appropriate adjustments and improvements to perfect the university's quality policy.

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6.2. Raising awareness of administrators, lecturers and students about the university's quality culture and about educational accreditation

One of the basic characteristics of quality culture in universities is the spirit of self-awareness of all members in their efforts to improve the quality of their work and always complete assigned work with the highest quality. To achieve this, universities need to foster a proper understanding among their members of the need to build a quality culture of the university as well as a full understanding of quality culture and educational accreditation.

Managers, lecturers, and students are truly interested in quality culture, educational accreditation, and self-awareness to perform work for quality when and only when they have a deep awareness and full understanding of the quality culture and quality policy of the university, especially when they have faith in the quality culture as well as the awareness that doing their job well will contribute practically to building the quality culture of the unit as well as promoting educational accreditation activities. Therefore, through political activities, academic forums, exchanges, discussions, seminars or in written form, the university needs to disseminate and propagate so that all staff, lecturers and students clearly understand the quality policy as well as the orientation for building a quality culture, participating in the university's educational accreditation. Correct awareness of the need to build a quality culture in the university is a fundamental factor for members of the university to voluntarily and actively participate in building a quality culture through specific actions, and at the same time is an important premise for universities to successfully build a quality culture in the unit as well as participate in educational accreditation to ensure progress and achieve high results. Universities need to diversify forms of promoting quality culture and educational accreditation through the unit's website, bulletin boards, slogans, billboards, posters, etc. In addition, to contribute to raising awareness of managers, lecturers, and students about the university's quality culture, universities need to launch action movements for quality; each staff member, lecturer, and student performs their work with the highest quality... to enhance the spirit of self-awareness and positivity for quality of members, while creating conditions and attracting everyone to participate in building a quality culture and promoting university's educational accreditation activities of the university.

6.3. Promoting internal quality assurance activities

Quality culture is built on the foundation of quality assurance that has been comprehensively implemented by the university because quality culture is also one of the basic characteristics of overall quality management. Therefore, the quality culture of the university cannot be formed in the condition that the university is at the level of quality control or applying the functional management model because due to the characteristics of the quality management level and the management model mentioned above, quality cannot become culture. In addition, educational accreditation belongs to the quality management method. Therefore, implementing internal quality assurance activities is to contribute to building a quality culture and promoting educational accreditation activities.

Building a quality culture in the university is only feasible in the case that the university has basically fully implemented quality assurance activities for all areas of the university's management. To do so, universities need to build and apply quality assurance processes in practice with pre-established quality standards for all work in the fields managed by the university. Quality assurance processes need to be built consistently so that they can be linked to form a system in which the output of one process is the input of the next process with the aim of not allowing errors to appear at any stage from the beginning of the work to the end. Quality standards are determined in advance in which work standards are specified into criteria and evaluation indicators that are accurate, objective, complete, and ensure reliability. In other words, universities need to build and successfully operate a quality assurance system within the university. In this way, the quality of the university will be guaranteed and will be the basis for building trust for all members and stakeholders inside and outside the university about the quality of the unit. This is one of the important foundations for building a quality culture of universities.

6.4. Implementing quality improvement to satisfy learners' needs

Satisfying learners' needs is one of the basic characteristics of quality culture in universities. In addition, in the set of standards for assessing university quality, attention is always paid to satisfying the needs of stakeholders, including learners. In order to satisfy learners' needs, universities need to improve quality in university management areas, focusing on teaching quality and teaching services. According to ISO 8402:1994, "Quality improvement is the activities carried out throughout the organization to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of activities and processes, leading to increased profits for organizations and customers" [3].

Quality improvement can be incremental or leapfrog improvement, but must ensure continuity. This requires universities to always implement quality improvement to satisfy learners' needs. Universities need to apply the PDCA (Plan - Do - Check - Act) cycle in management, focusing on the improvement stage to continuously improve the quality of the university to satisfy the needs of learners. Quality improvement is not only improving the quality of training products but also improving the quality of the quality management system. In addition, universities need to empower each individual to develop a plan to improve their own work with specific assessment criteria with the aim of making members always aware, performing work for quality with increasingly higher requirements to satisfy the needs of learners. In the context of Vietnam's higher education being strongly integrated as it is today, universities are trying to gradually approach regional and international standards, so quality improvement at universities is demonstrated through striving to achieve regional and international standards, specifically expressed by participating in educational accreditation according to regional and international standards. Therefore, universities in Vietnam need to choose and gradually move towards implementing the quality

assessment of their training programs. This creates great pressure for universities to continuously improve quality while contributing to the internationalization and regionalization of degrees of Vietnamese universities.

6.5. Building consensus for the quality of all members in the university

To build a quality culture as well as participate in the educational accreditation effectively requires the efforts for the quality of all members in the university, or in other words, requires the participation of everyone. If there is any unit/individual who performs the work in a forced manner, not for the overall quality of the university, the work of building a quality culture at the university will fail as well as the process of participating in the educational accreditation will be prolonged. Therefore, the university needs to promote the democratic mechanism at the grassroots level, everyone knows, discusses, works together, checks together, and self-checks towards consensus in the university. The university needs to ensure clear division of work with specific responsibilities and authorities for each group and individual in order to eliminate bureaucratic and administrative management and build a healthy working environment for quality. In addition, it is necessary to publicize the work contents, resources of the university, work processes, especially the recruitment process, promotion and appointment of staff so that members of the university know with the aim of making the university's activities transparent, creating trust for the staff, lecturers, students, employers and society. On the other hand, the university needs to implement a correct, reasonable and objective emulation and reward policy to motivate members of the university to always strive for quality. In addition, it is necessary to widely apply the form of teamwork to break down barriers between individuals, enhance understanding, solidarity and consensus for quality among members of the university. The consensus for the quality of university's members will be strengthened and improved when there is a smooth and close coordination between the units/departments. Therefore, the university needs to develop and promulgate regulations on the operation and coordination of the units in the university. Moreover, it is necessary to increase the smooth exchange of information between departments and members, in which the information exchanged is not simply top-down directive information but also bottom-up feedback information and information exchanged between units, functional departments, and members in the university.

6.6. Ensuring resources for university operations

University's resources are considered a necessary condition for building a quality culture at universities because it is impossible to form a quality culture in conditions where the qualifications of management staff and lecturers do not meet standards; the financial situation is difficult and lacking; and the facilities are poor and limited. This is completely consistent with the fact that the university's participation in educational accreditation is ineffective when compared with the standards and criteria for assessing university quality. To build a quality culture at the university and at the same time promote educational accreditation activities, universities need to ensure the quality of management staff and lecturers;

increase financial resources, and pay attention to investing in necessary facilities to serve the university's operations. To do so, universities need to ensure that the recruitment of staff and lecturers is fair, transparent, and meets professional standards according to regulations. In addition, strengthen training and create conditions for members of the university to participate in studying to improve their professional qualifications and skills. In addition, the university needs to do a good job of promoting and appointing managers with good qualities and ethics, ensuring professional capacity and management capacity. Regarding the financial resources of the unit, the university needs to develop a suitable and feasible financial plan, increase funding from scientific research and technology transfer sources. The university needs to pay attention to investing in facilities to serve the university's activities with the unit's budget, investment from ministries and branches at all levels, and at the same time promote international investment projects.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, integrating educational accreditation into institutional practice offers Vietnamese universities a critical pathway toward building a sustainable culture of quality. While significant challenges persist - such as limited awareness, structural inertia, and resource constraints - this paper underscores that these obstacles can be mitigated through coordinated policies, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and continuous quality assurance mechanisms. These efforts will not only enhance the credibility of Vietnamese higher education but also position its institutions more competitively on the regional and global stage.

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