How Structure and Culture Shape Quality Culture In Vietnamese Universities

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ABSTRACT
Higher education in Vietnam has received widespread criticism of its poor quality, and the government has promulgated a national set of standards for quality assurance and accreditation in an attempt to improve the quality. This research is designed to examine quality culture in higher education in the Vietnamese context. The methodological approach taken in this research is a multiple case study, underpinned by a quality culture conceptual framework suggested by the European University Association (2006). A qualitative approach was used to explore how academic leaders, academics, and quality assurance members interpreted and responded to quality assurance mechanisms, and how they committed to quality. Thirty five participants from three universities volunteered to take part in this research. Higher education quality was found to be assured traditionally under a centralist mechanism in Vietnam. This centralism has resulted in limited autonomy and compliant accountability for higher education institutions and allowed limited bottom-up engagement in decision-making processes. The study also identifies how structure and culture shape quality assurance in the selected institutions, notably reactive quality culture in Vietnam. This culture is characterised by top-down policies, absence of academic ownership, and a widespread culture of compliance.

KEYWORDS: Higher education, quality management, quality assurance, quality culture, leadership, academic commitment, Vietnamese context.


I. INTRODUCTION

Global growth in quality assurance systems in higher education has been significant during the last two decades. With eight members when establishing in 1991, the total membership of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education in 2020 is approximately 300 (INQAAHE, 2020). This fast development could have possibly resulted from higher education massification, decrease in public funding and in micro-management of higher education institutions (HEIs) by governments, and globalisation. Widespread concerns about the quality of education provided by HEIs have been discussed over the last two decades (Dunrong, 2007; Shin, 2015; Thompson-Whiteside, 2013). This has necessitated the development of a new system to assure quality, aiming at assessing higher education responses to changes, evaluating expenditure decisions, determining the quality of graduates, and facilitating international student mobility (Kristoffersen & Woodhouse, 2005).As a result, HEIs have developed various quality assurance (QA) policies and mechanisms. However, it remains unsure whether the standardisation and legalisation of QA have led to improvement of teaching and learning (Harvey & Williams, 2010). External quality assurance approaches have not necessarily been found to improve the student experience or transform quality in the tertiary sector (Cardoso, Rosa, & Videira, 2018; Vincenzi, Garau, & Guaglianone, 2018). External quality monitoring processes are widely perceived as bureaucratic and time consuming in academic communities(T. H. Pham, 2018), whose members perceived their professional values to be in conflict with the QA agencies and governments, probably because the external processes reflect the power of the agencies over the academic staff (T. H. Pham, 2014, 2018). Kristensen (2010) argued that the success of the external process in quality improvement was reliant on well-developed internal quality systems or on the culture. The concept of 'quality culture' in higher education has been introduced more recently, to express the idea that educational quality and culture of an organisation are not independent entities(Bendermacher, Egbrink, Wolfhagen, & Dolmans, 2017); "quality stems from a broader cultural perspective" (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008, p. 431). In 2019 a research attempted to propose a model for quality culture in higher education which was then used to develop quality culture inventory(Hildesheim & Sonntag, 2019).

Quality culture in higher education

As established, the contested concept of quality (Iacovidou, Gibbs, & Zopiatis, 2009; Newton, 2007; T. H. Pham & Starkey, 2016; Watty, 2005) and the need to recognise varying goals of external quality monitoring and internal quality assurance are a balancing act (Carr, Hamilton, & Meade, 2005; Churchman & Woodhouse, 1999; Harvey, 2006), and negotiations of that balance are forming the current trend in quality assurance: a quality culture approach. This approach has been first promoted by European University Association (EUA) (EUA, 2006).

The EUA Quality Culture Project (2006) reported that any quality culture was based on two distinct elements: culturally/psychologically a set of "shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality," and structurally/managerially, a "defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts" (p. 10) (Figure 1). These two aspects, however, were not to be considered separately: both elements must be linked through good communication, discussion, and participatory processes at the institutional level (EUA, 2006).
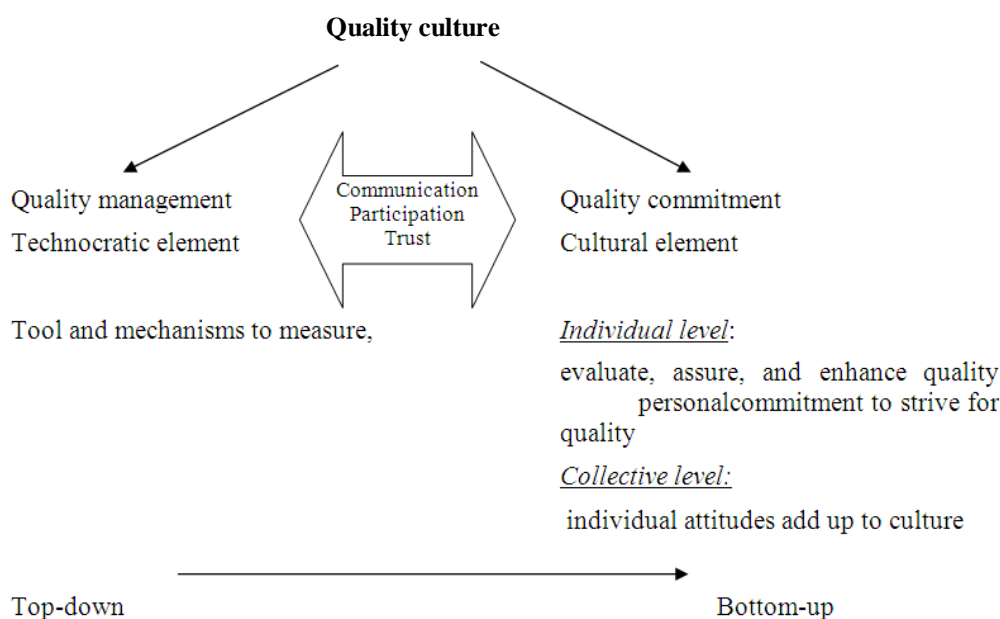
Fig. 1 Quality culture developed by the EUA (2006, p. 10)

The research also combined another approach examining the concept of quality culture in a "cultural theory framework" developed by Harvey and Stensaker (2008)for understanding and analysing individual involvement in quality assurance activities and their underlying driving forces. They created four possible Weberian ideal-types of quality cultures (Table 1).

Table 1. Weberian ideal-types of quality cultures

Intensity of external rules / *Degree of group control*	**Strong**	**Weak**
Strong	*Responsive*	*Reactive*
Weak	*Regenerative*	*Reproductive*

(Harvey & Stensaker, 2008, p. 436)

In line with this theory, quality cultures of HEIs in the Vietnamese context can be identified based on the level of individual's involvement in the quality assurance processes (Table 2).

Table 2 Explanation of the four quality cultures

		Degree of group control	
		Strong	Weak
Intensity of external rules	Strong	*Responsive* quality culture: led by external demands, opportunistic, combining accountability and improvement, but perhaps also sometimes a lack of ownership and control	*Reactive* quality culture: reward or sanction led, task-oriented, doubts about the potential of improvement, compliance, reluctant ("beast to be fed")
	Weak	*Regenerative* quality culture: internally oriented with strong belief in staff and existing procedures, widespread, experimental, although not always adaptive to external demands and developments	*Reproductive* quality culture: wanting to minimize the impact of external factors, focusing on sub-units, and lack of transparency throughout the institution, emphasise the expertise of the individual

(Adapted from Harvey & Stensaker, 2008)

Harvey and Stensaker (2008) believed that this new approach was worth striving because of its improvement potential. Since its first official introduction in European universities, many authors have discussed the complexity of the concept of quality culture (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Katiliute & Neverauskas, 2009). Most discussions have focused on the differing theoretical frameworks and complicated nature of the issues, as well as literature around the two concepts, quality and culture, reflecting the possibility that many diverse efforts in building a quality culture are linked to transformative learning and teaching. Recently, based on the EUA definition, Hildesheim and Sonntag (2019) conducted a systematic literature review related to the concept of quality culture together with data collected from interviews with international expert to develop quality culture inventory (QCI). The QCI consists of "two questionnaires operationalizing various quality culture dimensions within HEIs" (p. 7).

Quality assurance and accreditation and quality culture in Vietnam

Vietnamese higher education is unsurprisingly a massive system. As of 2018, there are 235 universities and 214 colleges, the total number of students studying at universities exceeding 1.7 million (Ministry of Education and Training, 2019). In alignment with the global trend, Vietnam is establishing a QA system at a time of mass education. Educational quality accreditation was officially brought into the Vietnam Amended Education Law in 2005 (Vietnam National Assembly, 2005), specifically stated in articles 17, 58, and 99. Until now, five QA centres were established, responsible for quality assurance and accreditation (QAA) for HEIs in Vietnam. Also, as required by the Education Law, HEIs in Vietnam have started to establish their own units of QA. The government has promulgated and revised institutional and programmatic standards for QAA in an attempt to improve the quality. However, developing a quality culture in each institution has been discussed as another solution for quality improvement because the standards appear to be unable to improve the quality as anticipated.

In Vietnam, Westerheijden, Cremonini, and van Empel (2010) believed that internal quality assurance could not develop without the stimulus of external scrutiny. With this understanding, accreditation appears to be a prerequisite for quality culture development in Vietnamese higher education. Higher education policy in Vietnam, therefore, seeks to combine improvement with control (Westerheijden et al., 2010).

QAA in Vietnam is in its early stage of development and still piloting the anatomy of a culturally appropriate QA system and is experimenting with the adoption of meaningful quality standards (Niedermeier & Pohlenz, 2016; T. H. Pham, 2019), and limited research has been done to identify how structure and culture inform quality assurance systems in higher education.

Aim of the paper

Based on the proposed theoretical framework of quality culture by EUA and four possible ideal-types of quality culture suggested by Harvey and Stensaker (2008), this paper examines quality culture of three universities in Vietnam. This research was located in the area of quality management and quality commitment of higher education. Through the analysis of empirical studies in the literature of quality assurance, it has been noted that these studies were undertaken focusing on participants' understandings of quality assurance structures and their responses to these structures, without considering underpinning beliefs and values of different contexts under investigation (Anderson, 2006; Harvey, 2006; Jiang, 2007; Jones & De Saram, 2005; Mhlanga, 2008;

Newton, 2000). Contextual factors received little attention regarding quality commitment. Existing empirical studies have focused repeatedly on the controversies and conflicts across different groups of stakeholders, attending less to key stakeholders' perspectives on appropriate ways to moderate these conflicts towards quality commitment. Consequently, these issues were addressed in this research, exploring how structure and culture informs quality assurance/improvement.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative paradigm with an inductive inquiry analysing context bound information emerging to explore policies and practices of quality management and assurance at three institutions. The data for analysis in this qualitative multiple-case study were collected using documentation and interviews as the research methods.

The study was designed to examine the quality culture of the three HEIs through the perceptions of academic leaders, academics, and QA staff. Thirty five participants, including 4 academic leaders, 22 academics of 3 business English (BE) programmes, and 9 QA members joined the research.

Academic leaders were recruited as practitioners and managers of QA from the top. They varied across the selected universities on the basis of willingness to participate in the research and with consideration to contextual factors of each institution. QA members are likely the persons who could provide rich sources of information on quality management and assurance; therefore, they were part of participants in this research. To ensure the maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002), the number of QA members invited to join the research depended on availability of these staff working at two levels: institutional and programmatic ones. The selection of academic participants also varied across the three universities. Purposive sampling was applied at two universities considering academics' genders, age and experience, and full time and parttime academics to ensure maximum variation sampling: at least eight academics at each institution. Another sampling strategy, snowballing, was applied at the third university.

The research presented here covers current practices of assuring quality in different HEIs in Vietnam. The case study approach, therefore, was suitable because of the contextual nature of assuring quality. Furthermore, a multiple case study approach was chosen to allow for cross-comparison of contexts and to capture a wide spectrum across factors influencing QA. Within a qualitative paradigm, the major technique of sampling is purposive as opposed to probability sampling. Purposive sampling seeks information rich cases which can be studied in-depth (Patton, 1990). They can be "individuals, groups, organisations, or behaviours that provide the greatest insight into the research question" (Devers & Frankel, 2000, p. 264). The case in this study was a holistic, intensive, rich description and analysis of policies and practices to assure quality of BE undergraduate programmes at three selected HEIs in Vietnam.

The strategies for cases in this study were subject to categories classified by Patton (2002). First, homogeneous samples were used for the researcher's selection of cases to enable her to describe "some particular subgroup in depth" (Patton, 2002, p. 235) or to describe "the experiences of subgroups of people who share similar characteristics" (Mertens, 2005, p. 318). In this study, three different HEIs which delivered similar undergraduate professional programmes in business English (BE) were selected as cases in order to identify both similarities and contrasting results in conducting QA activities, from top-down policies to bottom-up implementation. BE undergraduate programmes, rather than other disciplines, were chosen because of what Patton (2002) calls convenience sampling. They were accessible to the researcher regarding experience and understanding of the complexities of BE programmes. The researcher knew which questions were important to ask for clarification.

In addition, stratified purposive sampling was used to select these HEIs within one city in Vietnam. They were selected based on the varied nature of the institutions, which Hopkin (2004) refers to frame factors. This helped categorise institutions as mature, evolving, and embryonic. His categories include "the traditional elaborate tertiary education systems of developed states" as mature, "younger tertiary education systems" as evolving, and "tertiary education systems that are at the early stage of development" as embryonic systems (pp. 191-192). He suggests that the most meaningful implication of this categorisation was the stage of higher education systems in itself as a frame factor. In this research, one university was classified as embryonic (University A), one as evolving (University B), and one as mature (University C) (Hopkin, 2004). These three cases differed on a variety of frame factors, both internally and externally influencing each institution, including levels of development, institutional size, resource availability, quantity and quality of personnel, their general contextual environment, and their unique historical characteristics (Table 3). These varied cases allowed the researcher to collect rich information on the fullest possible range of factors that inform policies in assuring and improving quality in Vietnamese higher education.

Table 3. Basic information of three tertiary universities

Basic information	University A	University B	University C
Length of establishment as a university	0-10 years (in 2000s)	0-30 years (in 1990s)	30-50 years (in 1970s)
Type of university	State-owned, autonomous in finance	State-owned, autonomous in finance	State-owned, state-funding
Number of official employees **Contracted employees**	0-300 300-500	500-1,000 1,000-1,500	800-1,000
Official academics with: - bachelors degree - masters degree - doctoral degree	0-200 50-100 50-100 5-10	200-500 50-100 125-300 25-30	500-800 100-200 300-400 50-100
No of professors and associate professors	0-5	5-10	20-25
Academic departments	10-15	10-15	15-20
Various centres **Functional offices**	5-10 5-10	10-15 15-20	15-20 15-20
Academic programmes: **-Undergraduate** **-Master** **-Doctor**	Yes – 5-10 Yes – 0-5 No	Yes – 10-15 Yes – 5-10 No	Yes - 35-40 Yes - 20-25 Yes - 5-10
Spread of campuses	Within one city	Across two provinces	Within one city
Research involvement	Departmental and institutional projects	Ministerial and institutional projects	National, Ministerial, city level and institutional projects International and national seminars, conferences, and workshop

The study applied three strategies proposed by Yin (2009) for data analysis. The research initially relied on theoretical propositions that were developed from the review of literature. This allowed a similar data collection plan for selected universities. Secondly, a comprehensive understanding of quality management and commitment in each case was analysed, and then patterns or themes were recognised across cases through a coding process. Pattern-recognition did not aim at generalisation beyond the case; rather, it was for understanding quality cultures across cases. Examining rival explanations was also used as another strategy to analyse the data for any contrasting and emerging themes across cases. The following section synthesises and presents findings across cases.

III.   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings on how quality of BE programmes was assured (quality management) and the level participants in this study (from three groups of stakeholders) committed to quality (quality commitment).

The findings of this study support the observation by Hayden and Lam (2007) that higher education in Vietnam has a highly centralised control system for management and governance. T. N. Pham (2010) argued that the "controlling" behaviour of the MoET "has been counter-productive because it has resulted in excessive conservatism and adherence to out-dated management and pedagogical practices that discourage innovation by higher education institutions" (p. 55).

At the university level, the centralism had impacts on the level of autonomy at the three institutions. They were not autonomous in the sense that they decide on programmes, the salaries paid to teaching staff as well as student assessment.

National programme framework (NPF) - Perceived obstacles to departmental efforts to quality

Programme design at the three departments was reported to rely on the national programme framework for the English language. It was imperative for these programmes to be designed in compliance with the NPF, and academic affairs offices in all three cases checked the compliance. Consequently, the departments all felt they lacked academic autonomy to design programmes. The framework was believed somehow to be in conflict with the aspirations of the three departments to develop their own programmes.

Table 4 lists obstacles faced at the three departments regarding the designs of the three programmes.

Table 4. Obstacles identified with the three programmes

Universities	*University A*	*University B*	*University C*
Obstacles	Heavy study workloads at the general stage		Not discussed
	Mismatch between compulsory courses and textbook availability		Used to be an issue
	Not discussed	Perceived redundancy of British and American literature courses	
	Used to be an issue	Insufficient time for the professional education stage	Not discussed

Quality was believed to be improved if the framework could be changed at Universities A and C. Freedom to design academic programmes is among the specific freedom elaborated by Tight (1992) and form part of the construct of institutional autonomy (Hayden & Lam, 2007). This lack of autonomy is also due to the MoET's role in determining programmes which Tran, Nguyen, and Nguyen (2011) referred to as "close-to-absolute power." The three institutions investigated in this study were not granted full autonomy for designing their programmes. The centrally imposed obligation could only promote a culture that developed coping strategies for compliance, rather than improvement at local level. At University A, the dean wrote syllabi for all courses of the programme for central inspection. One academic confirmed that he wrote 24 syllabi for the previous programme, but "no one followed them" (TTC2). Without autonomy, participants expressed doubt in the possibility for innovation at the institutional and individual levels.

Participants' engagement and commitment in programme development

Table 5 summarises the extent to which each group of participants engaged in the development of the programmes.

Table 5. Accountability and engagement of academic leaders, QA members, and academic communities in programme development at the three departments

Activities	*University A*	*University B*	*University C*
Academic leaders			
Programme design	Solely responsible	Different levels of engagement	Solely responsible
Syllabus to be attached to the programme		Responsible for approving common syllabi	Responsible for approving syllabi prepared by academics
Textbook selection		Responsible for approving suggested textbooks by academics	Solely responsible for selecting textbooks used at general stage and approving suggested textbooks by academics at professional stage
Testing and assessment	Responsible for approving test papers by academics	Responsible for approving common tests	Responsible for approving test papers prepared by academics

QA members			
Programme design	Not engaged		
Syllabus to be attached to the programme			
Textbook selection			
Testing and assessment	Engaged only in administration		Not engaged
The wider academic community			
Programme design	Not engaged	Limited to ideas contribution	Not engaged
Syllabus for teaching	Dependent on each academic's sense of responsibility to design a syllabus	Varied and dependent on experience and expertise of individual academics	Fully responsible for syllabus design
Textbook selection	Not engaged	Varied and dependent on experience and expertise	Varied and dependent on experience and expertise
Testing and assessment	Fully responsible for test papers, which are then approved by the dean	Varied and dependent on experience and expertise	Fully responsible for test papers, which are then approved by the dean

Universities A and C shared similarities in the process of developing the programmes. The dean at Universities A and C played a dominant role in programme development, and academics were granted autonomy in using required textbooks and extra materials to teach, as well as in assessing students. In contrast, the programme at University B was created by various teams, and academics were required to follow common approved syllabi, including required textbooks for teaching and common tests for student assessment. QA members had a limited role in programme development and syllabus design, limited to testing administration at Universities A and B.

Academic leaders were believed to play a crucial role in engaging the wider academic community in programme development. Depending upon their perspectives, individual leaders could be a single player or seek for contribution from other players. The more academic staff involved in academic activities, the more detached and comprehensive they were able to be about the programme. Academic leaders at Universities A and C shared similar practices in developing the programmes. They decided solely the objectives and designs of the programmes and required textbooks for the programmes. This practice was reported to allow little contribution from the wider academic communities. Most academics at Universities A and C were unsure of the design processes and objectives of the programmes, leading to the reported uncertainty about future careers for students:

> I am not sure about the process of developing a programme and how to change it because it belongs to a certain professional committee … something. (TTA6)[1]
> I do not know what students of the programmes can do. You know, for TESOL [teaching English to speakers of other languages] students will become teachers of English, translation-interpretation students can become interpreters and translators. How about students of the BE programme? They are not good at business. They lack the pedagogical knowledge to become good teachers. (TTC6)

At University B, the programme design involved a range of working teams with the participation of experienced academics. Most academics, except visiting and young ones, indicated awareness of the programme objectives

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[1] Quotes from academics were coded as TT, academic leaders as AL, and QA staff members as QA.
Letters A, B, and C after these codes indicates quotes from University A, B, and C respectively.
Numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 at the end of each code were used to identify individual participants in each group of stakeholders. A code example is TTA1, which would denote a quote from an academic no. 1 at University A.

and design. The head of the BE division indicated his ownership of the programme because of reported contribution to the process.

At the programmatic level, Bolander, Josephson, Mann, and Lonka (2006) noted that involvement in design and review is important for academic staff if they are to interpret a core curriculum. The absence of such engagement at University A resulted in varied perceptions of the programme's objectives among the wider academic community. Participation of some academics in programme development at Universities B and C in syllabi design resulted in faculty ownership of the programme and the courses. Without such measures, academic staff may have no sense of commitment and ownership to the assessed objectives (Gray, 2002). Similarly, Tobin (1994) argued, "You cannot get positive change without informing and involving faculty" (p. 33). Those who take part in the decision making process are not necessarily the ones who need to add value to the decisions made (Meyer, 2007). Academic engagement could also prevent the resistant attitude to top-down policy that may jeopardise fundamental motivations of academic work, including professional autonomy and academic collegiality (Houston, Meyer, & Paewai, 2006). Doring (2002) argued the role of academics can be either as change agents or victims of change. If academics are at risk of being victims of change rather than change agents, there will very likely be repercussions for teaching and learning quality, which could lead to the next generation of students "largely unstimulated and unskilled in debate, challenge and thinking" (p. 146).

National salary scheme - Perceived low salary, moonlighting, and lack of qualified staff

Academics in Vietnam enjoyed a similar national salary scheme, which was perceived as extremely low by all participating academics and leaders.

> It is true that working for the government, academics receive low salaries. Time decides who will be suitable for the teaching career. The government pay is not high. I myself teach extra hours [besides standard teaching hours] and teach elsewhere. That is a pattern for academics of English. (ALC1)
>
> Frankly speaking, the government needs to take into account the reasons why some academics are not committed to their career, whether the salaries they receive are appropriate. (TTC1)

Academic staff at the three universities, both implicitly (University A) and explicitly (B and C), articulated linkages between low salary and moonlighting to maintain their standard of living. They took extra teaching hours or ran small business, which allowed them limited time to engage in teaching improvement:

> If the salary is higher, I will reduce teaching hours and spend more time on each lesson delivered. (TTA4)
>
> Many academics quit the career because of low salary. Only those who love teaching remain in this profession. (TTB3)
>
> I wish for a more adequate salary scheme so that academics can reduce their teaching time, dedicate more to research, and spend more time with students. At the moment, academics are too concerned about money earning. (ALB2)
>
> Remuneration for academics is extremely low if compared to an average salary [in Vietnam]. (TTC3)

Heavy teaching loads appeared to result in compromise of teaching quality. A leader at University B directly spoke of her compromise to the teaching quality. The compromise of quality at Universities A and C, though not explicit, was reflective in the way the programmes were monitored, including academic recruitment and management, academics' perceived subjectivity in student assessment and academic evaluation.

Limited autonomy in deciding the salary for academic staff also contributed to the reported lack of qualified staff to teach in the programmes:

> I think for better quality, the institution needs to invite overseas masters and doctors to teach. The problem is they do not choose the teaching career. Neither do I even though I only have a bachelors degree. I have the professional knowledge for the programme, and I can earn more money elsewhere. (TTB7)
>
> We feel sorry for us when some academics competent to teach left the department because of the salary scheme and poor remuneration. They are indeed talented. They did not cooperate with us anymore. (ALB2)

Another academic said, "The board of leaders is unable to invite qualified staff to teach because they cannot afford to pay them" (TTC2). This was described as a "perplexing issue" (TTC1) or as "the most serious problem" (ALC1) at all three institutions.

Academic commitment to teaching

Academics' commitment to teaching seems to be affected by academics' widespread moonlighting. This becomes an impediment to quality improvement efforts and is possibly associated with the perceived poor quality of education. The need to moonlight is attributed to low payment. Hayden and Lam (2010) claimed that academic staff in Vietnam lacked "a strong financial incentive to remain committed to their role" (p. 25)

The amalgamation of various factors, including financial incentives and centralism, has caused academics to teach from textbooks rather than to foster a commitment to innovative and creative teaching. The

tendency to teach straight from textbooks destroyed the ideas of using textbook as "a resource for inspiration and creativity, a learning tool for their learners and a means to an end in their learning" (Cunningsworth, 1995, p. 139). Academics in this study perceived that they (academics of the English language, a foreign language in Vietnam) were unable to write a course book in English and had to use those published overseas. If academics claimed that they were unable to compile a textbook in English, possibly different research is required to explore academics' perception of the textbooks used in their programmes, in particular the BE programmes and perhaps of teaching at higher level. Teaching from textbooks could be a result of less time available for them to prepare their teaching sections, possibly not because of their incompetence to break away from the textbooks as concluded by Reynolds (1974). Lack of qualification in professional knowledge could be another reason of teaching from textbooks at the three programmes.

National regulations on student assessment – Perceived autonomy vs. absence of impartiality in assessment
The document review shows that all three universities conformed to the national regulations in assessing students, particularly through score ratio and breakdown in assessing students.

> [Student assessment] is in compliance with the institution's regulation, stated in each syllabus. (TTC1)
> From 2012, a new regulation has been applied to assess students who take credit-based programmes, new forms of assessment: progress assessment (40%) requires various assessment strategies and details scores, such as 5% for checking attendance, 10% for a midterm test, 20% group work, and up to 40% of a final test. (TTC6)

Two types of student assessment were identified: progress assessment and final course examination. Progress assessment was conducted by course academics and was defined in common syllabi detailing assessment methods and grade ratios. This varied across courses, comprising checking attendance, teamwork, class presentations, assignments and/or midterm test(s).

Despite the reported compliance with the national regulations in student assessment, academics believed that they were granted sufficient autonomy in deciding what and how to assess their students. The autonomy enjoyed by participating academics was reported to contribute to the perceived absence of impartiality in assessing students at Universities A and C because of the belief that the departments did not have shared rubrics in student assessment:

> Many academics 'like' [tolerate] students, and then their test papers tend to be easy. Therefore, students get better scores. (TTC5)
> There are disparities in test papers and marking among academics. (TTA9)

A lack of knowledge in testing and assessment was also articulated to affect the quality of assessment. This was significant at University A:

> Academics could have some pedagogical knowledge, yet limited testing knowledge, which is important in assuring quality. (TTA6)

> In contrast, academics at University B believed impartiality was assured through common tests applied at this university. The divisional heads at this university were in charge of checking, synthesising, or selecting the most reliable tests to become common tests among the tests submitted by course academics. This strategy contributed to the perceived impartiality in assessing students because of the belief that variations in grading were kept minimal. Further, two academic leaders expressed belief in academics' fairness while marking students' work and papers.

The autonomy of academics in student assessment at Universities A and C indicated large disparities that could not be solely attributed to individual academics' perceptions of how to assess students, but were probably based on textbooks and their own criteria and competence at translating their goals for assessment into tests. The reported assessment practice at higher level in Vietnam is perhaps situated in a condition that Davidson et al. (2009) described as an amalgam of academic tradition and mixed understandings of the purposes of assessment, leading to considerable disparity. Consequently, academics may benefit from some standardisations in testing and assessment, perhaps to protect them from being classified as strict academics, which might lead to low grading from students. The expectation for standardisation is also aimed at ensuring equity in assessment.

Yet autonomy in assessment requires consistency and equity. The use of common tests at University B could be a solution to minimise perceived inequity in testing and assessment at Universities A and C, but the common tests are required to be designed in a way that ensures the validity, reliability, and utility in student assessment. Further, academics at University B were criticised and even criticised one another (perhaps including themselves) in the way students were evaluated and graded using the memorisation of knowledge, an evaluative strategy that has led to limited attention to creativity and critical thinking (T. N. Pham & Sloper, 1995).

Reactive quality culture

According to four types of quality culture developed by Harvey and Stensaker (2008), the three universities were characterised by some signs of a reactive quality culture which Jonach, Gramlinger, and Hartl (2012) discussed as a result of their five-year long experience in working with vocational schools in Austria and Germany (Figure 2).
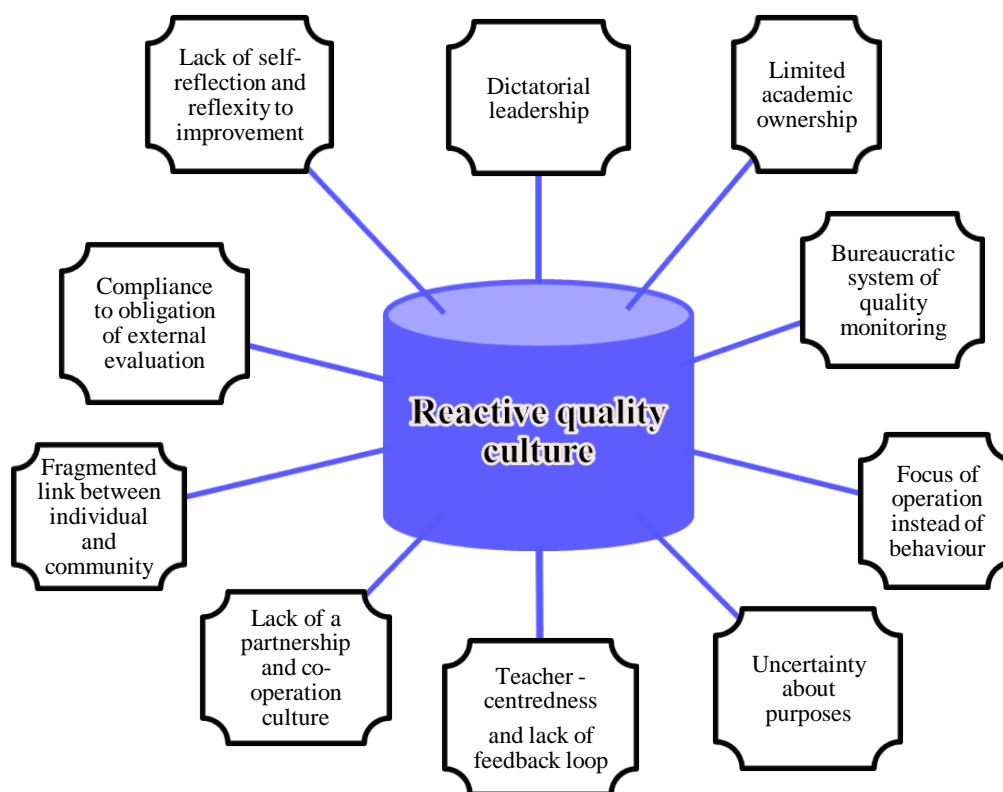
Fig. 2 Characteristics of the reactive quality culture at the three universities

As in this study, through the analysis of how quality of the three BE programmes was assured, several characteristics of a reactive quality culture were evident at the three universities: (1) Academics demonstrated their limited ownership with some exceptions at University B; (2) Participants indicated compliance with national regulations and external evaluation; (3) Academics also were not certain about the purposes of the programme they were teaching in; and (4) The links between individual and community across the three cases were somehow absent. For academics, their practices in teaching and assessing students indicated limited self-reflection and reflexity to improvement.

IV. CONCLUSION

The study found that quality culture at the three universities was reactive. For quality improvement, academic leaders are found to play a crucial roleas underlined in various studies (Ardi, Hidayatno, & Zagloel, 2012; Flumerfelt & Banachowski, 2011). Academic leaders, particularly the dean and head of the BE programmes, must be proactive in engaging the wider academic communities at their departments in decision-making about academic issues including programme development and review. They also play a vital role in organizing academic activities to promote professional development including creating a supportive working environment and developing shared testing and assessment strategies. Middle leaders in this study, particular at University B, are somehow able to address impeding elements relating to the structural/managerial organisational context dimension as analysed in other studies (Calvo-Mora, Leal, & Roldan, 2006; Flumerfelt & Banachowski, 2011). They are the persons in a position that can create partnerships, clarify roles and responsibilities, and influence people (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Hildesheim & Sonntag, 2019). At the departmental level, leaders will create a climate of trust and shared belief, leading to the development of quality culture (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Knight & Trowler, 2000).

This research indicated that without academic input in developing programmes, academics were opposed to the objectives predetermined by the deans and the heads, and often unaware of the objectives, which

lead to varied interpretations of the objectives. This research also demonstrated that academic involvement in programme design and course syllabi created a sense of ownership to the involved activities, which echoes Truong (2013), who found teachers' involvement in a decision-making process increased the quality of decisions and motivated subordinates' responsibility. As argued by Bendermacher et al. (2017) that "a lack of employee commitment might be a consequence of a lack of involvement of staff in organisational decision making" (p. 48). In this study, it is also found that academics' limited commitment to quality teaching was a consequence of other factors as well including low salary, incentices, and appropriate mechanisms for academic professional development. This is what Bendermacher et al. (2017) discussed in their paper that commitment is a mechanism which "emerges from providing incentives to staff, involving them in organisational decision making, alignment of staff and management values and an appeal to staff expertise" (p. 52).

The future governance of higher education at institutional and departmental levels requires a new approach to accommodate academic input into the decision-making processes(Bendermacher et al., 2017; Harloe & Perry, 2004). However, values of hierarchy in Vietnam impeded academics' involvement in decision-making. Subordinate involvement found in this study was limited. However, this does not mean these cultural obstacles could not be addressed. Academic leaders, as stated by most of academics in this study, can determine faculty involvement in decision-making processes as in the case of University B, perhaps through acknowledging the cultural impediments to a participative decision-making. In this study, middle leadership (deans of academic departments, heads of programmes) played an important role in connecting structure(s) and culture(s) of a HEI. As Harvey (2009) concluded, "Quality culture is not a process or set of procedures, much less one that can be imported or imposed" (p. 9).

Further research could investigate what might go into an undergraduate programme design (because the NPFs were made ineffective in 2013), staff recruitment decisions, building up criteria to evaluate academics; what a shared understanding of student assessment might look like; and whether mentoring and coaching process could be productive. Included in such a study could be an exploration of teaching, learning, and assessment methodologies to enhance student learning and student experience. Students could be participants in the research. The association between participation and ownership could be part of the study.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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