

# The Need for Establishing Criteria Exclusive for Assessing the Quality of Non-public Higher Education Institutes in Vietnam

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**Abstract**—Due to the demands of the country as well as the impact of the process of globalization and privatization, Vietnam has witnessed the steady increase in the number of non-public institutes. They have made contributions to society especially in terms of sharing the burden with the state, offering more choices to students and creating the competitiveness in the field of higher education which was quite passive with the dominance of public universities. But in the course of their development, non-public institutes have revealed many problems in different aspects from the quality of teaching staff and students to facilities. The mechanism for assessing, evaluating and ensuring the quality of higher education institutes in Vietnam which is said to have major limitations when applied to the private sector reveals more shortcomings. Therefore, having some separate criteria for assessing and assuring the quality of non-public institutes as well as accrediting these institutes is a matter to be considered. The article provides some ideas explaining why there should be exclusive criteria for non-public institutes based on an analysis of the specific characteristics of these organizations in Vietnam. Main recommendations on the elements which should be present in the process of forming these criteria are also included. To achieve these objectives, this research paper, as secondary research focuses on the analysis of existing academic literature and government policy documents.

**Index Terms**—quality assessment, quality assurance, accreditation, non-public institutes

## I. INTRODUCTION

Due to economic difficulties, in December 1986, the National Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party launched a policy package of economic reform. The reform shifted Vietnam's economy from the centralized planning system to a regulated market economy [1]. As a result of this overall change in national development strategies, Higher Education (HE) has become more diverse since the government officially accepted the participation of the private actor. In that spirit, at the end of 1988 the Thang Long Tertiary Education Center in Hanoi was founded. This center was soon given official recognition as university, becoming the first private university in Vietnam in 1993 [2]. Over 23 years, the

country has had 90 non-public academic institutes (60 universities and 30 colleges) [3]. This number is still likely to increase since the resolution on "Fundamental and Comprehensive Renovation of Higher Education for Period 2006-2020" issued in 2005 gave emphasis on the expansion of the private sector with enrollments at non-public universities and colleges to account for 40 per cent of all higher education enrollments by 2020 (up from about 13 per cent at present) [4].

To monitor and improve the quality of non-public higher education institutions (HEIs), there is a call for the establishment of criteria which can serve better in monitoring the quality of these institutes. This paper will highlight major reasons for this demand and give main recommendations on the elements which should be included in the process of forming these criteria as well as their contents. To achieve these objectives, this research paper, as secondary research, will mainly focus on the analysis of existing academic literature and government policy documents.

## II. RATIONALES FOR THE FORMATION OF THE CRITERIA

There are many studies and documents related to university quality assurance, but the definition of quality has not been much and comprehensively discussed. This lack has lead to the fact that it is difficult to determine what quality elements need to be ensured and measured when it comes to quality improvement. This can be seen through a number of documents on higher education by research institutions or governments. For instance, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area issued by the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education provided information on helping HEIs ensure their quality but did not describe or identify quality criteria [5]. In this article, the quality of a university is understood to be the combination of the quality of many factors primarily including the quality of students, faculty, training programs, and facilities. It means how well these elements support institutional management, teaching and research, and learning activities.

There are various reasons for the establishment of appropriate criteria for assessing and assuring the quality

of non-public institutes as well as accrediting these organizations. The first and foremost one is to monitor the increasing impact of the non-public sector in Vietnam's HE system in line with its growing number. By 2015, nearly half of all provinces in the country had the presence of non-public universities. These organizations make up 27 percent and 13 percent of the total number of universities and students respectively in the national higher education system [3]. Since the operation of the first private university, this sector has contributed to meeting the enrollment demand [6] and alleviating funding pressure on the government [7], [8] [9]. In addition, it has been appreciated for creating "a degree of competition in a moribund public system" [10]. Unlike public institutions which have an interest in preserving traditional fields of study that promote nationalism and the development of particular cultural or political identities, non-public universities usually offer programs which meet the current requirements of labor market to increase student registration [11]. To a certain extent, this has diversified fields of study in HE. To sum up, the increasing presence of non-public HEIs in Vietnam has largely influenced many aspects of the nation's tertiary education ranging from enrollment, administration style to research and development [12]. Therefore, it is imperative to have criteria for assessing quality of these HEIs so that efficiency measures can be implemented timely to restrict or prevent negative impacts as well as promoting positive aspects of their operation and growth.

Furthermore, the formulation of these criteria in Vietnam will help the government and non-public HEIs address complex problems about the quality. The growth of these HEIs mainly reflects quantitative expansion of HE and the accompanying impacts as mentioned above but not necessarily productivity gains, improvement of instructional quality, or better academic recognition [13]. Reality has revealed a large number of issues concerning non-public HEIs in Vietnam such as the low quality and modest quantity of lecturers and facilities [14]-[16] and the lack of enrollments [17]. To deal with these difficulties, a quality assessment system with criteria designed for the private sector will work satisfactorily as a tool to assist the government in monitoring the situations systematically. With verified information, the government then can take reasonable steps towards quality assurance and accreditation. The system of quality assessment, assurance and accreditation with criteria for the non-public sector also provides non-public HEIs with appropriate guidelines for resolving their exiting and potential issues.

Apart from addressing plenty of existing problems in HE quality, the system included criteria exclusive for non-public HEIs will facilitate the implementation of other educational strategies such as stratification and funding allocation. Striking examples of this role can be seen from Vietnam's neighboring countries namely Malaysia and the Philippines. The National Higher Education Fund of the Malaysian government just provides loans to needy student of accredited programs

[18]. Similarly, the Philippines' Government Assistance to Students and Teachers in Private Education law stipulates that government financial funding is accessible to student of private HEIs that have accredited programs or are applying for accreditation [19], [20].

It may raise the question of why the present system cannot be applied to the non-public sector in HE. There are some responses to this concern. As is evident, the use of the same system has posed various limitations in practice because the two sectors have different structures, orientations, financial conditions and strategies. For instance, while it may be reasonable to use research productivity as an indicator of quality for most of public universities in Vietnam due to their long history and annual funding from the government, such indicators may not be appropriate for teaching-oriented institutions like the majority of non-public HEIs. For those institutes, job placement of graduates and graduates' subsequent success in their work might be more suitable. It is true that there are many countries applying the same system to both the public and the non-public sector but it depends on the reality of each country. Malaysia and Indonesia, for example, use one quality assurance framework for the two sectors [21] because private HE in the two countries is considered parallel and extensive respectively compared to public HE. Vietnam shares no similarities as non-public HE plays only a peripheral role and hence it is impossible to use the one-size-fits-all approach. It is true that the regulations on quality assessment and assurance as well as accreditation of universities officially issued in November 2007 by the Ministry of Education and Training have some terms related to non-public institutes; however, they are primarily concerned with the requirements for the establishment and operation of non-public institutes while other matters related to training quality are not taken into full consideration. This big gap needs to be filled in with the establishment of quality assessment, assurance and accreditation criteria for non-public HEIs.

Additionally, the current system has big drawbacks. To be specific, to manage the quality of institutes, the state has simply imposed control over enrollment quotas, training programs, and ceiling levels of tuition fees [2]. However, this method is input-oriented and not generally regarded as a secure basis for establishing comparability between outcomes. In practice, it has limited the ability of non-public institutions to "act as market-oriented organizations, or quickly adjust their offerings to the needs of the labor markets" [22]. Another weakness of the existing system is that it is mainly built based on a foreign accreditation model - the U.S model [23]. Undeniably the U.S. "likely has the longest tradition of institutional and programmatic accreditation and is often held up as a model in the case of diversified education systems" [24], yet many people doubt the effectiveness of this system due to the wide disparity between the two countries in economic, cultural, historical and political characteristics [25]. For example, using this model requires that the processes of self-study, peer review and external evaluation at the national level are examined, but

when applied in Vietnam, these standards face enormous obstacles. The effectiveness of self-study seems unknown because no one can be sure of the accuracy of current mechanisms used in the universities [25]. In addition, there has been a lack of guidance on self-study from the government, leading to the confusion for universities in implementing this model. Apart from that, peer review and external evaluation have existed in Vietnam to a limited extent [26].

To sum up, on the basis of the reality of non-public HEIs in Vietnam and national educational strategies, the addition of criteria exclusive for the non-public sector in the current system of quality assessment, assurance and accreditation of higher education is necessary. Even though the relationship between quality assurance and quality enhancement is still in need of more research [27], it is obvious that the system with additional criteria will both help the governmental agencies in systematically managing non-public HEIs and provide HEIs with orientations towards quality development. This system will also address the issue of low public confidence in non-public HEIs in the country which results from the lack of a regulatory framework as well as an effective accreditation system [28]. Given the fact that HE system in Vietnam is constrained by highly centralized management by the state [29], it can be said that the adjusted system could be implemented across the country without much difficulty in terms of compliance.

### III. RECOMMENDATIONS ON THE PROCESS OF ESTABLISHING THE CRITERIA

In the highly centralized and controlled tertiary education system, the process of establishing quality assessment and assurance as well as accreditation criteria for non-public HEIs must be conducted by the state. In other words, these criteria will be added to the set of criteria promulgated in 2007 by the Ministry of Education and Training. Unlike in some countries, the formulation of the criteria used for non-public HEIs does not necessarily require that there is a complete new system separate from the present one used for Vietnamese HEIs in general. The adjustments to the current system ensure the flexibility and suitability when applied to the both sectors. Also, in the context of the country this improvement facilitates cost saving and encourages fairness in the evaluation of all types of HEIs vis-à-vis the formation of an entirely new system. As such, the new system has the same quality criteria for all types of institutes as well as specific criteria for each type.

Besides, close attention must be paid to the design of these criteria. They need to be diverse to make sure that various characteristics of different institutes are included. In addition to the diversity, the government should develop criteria that focus more on the output and that are guided by the mission and objectives of each institute. This is because many criteria of the current system mainly focus on the input while learning outcomes, research and social services are overlooked [30]. This results in various issues such as many graduates do not meet the requirements of the labor market although they

had high scores in the university entrance examination. Furthermore, the incomplete consideration has also caused substantial obstacles for external reviewers when assessing different universities which have different missions and objectives [31]. Additionally, the standards had better avoid the tendency to encourage only the documentation of past and present achievements as can be seen in the current system. They should encourage future-oriented improvements as well.

Apart from building diverse and comprehensive quality criteria, the state also needs to take notice of creating opportunities for each non-public institute to move beyond minimum standards and to establish internal approaches. These approaches will encourage reflection on change and embed a culture for continuous improvement. As for the internal quality system, this is an essential component for any road map for institutional development that will bring responsiveness to economic and industry needs [32].

It is also important that the government revise regulations on enrollment quotas and tuition fees which have caused the decrease in the number of students and returns in order to facilitate the flexibility of the non-public sector.

Another element must be included in the revised system is regulations relevant to financial capability for non-public HEIs. Unlike public counterparts which receive yearly governmental funding, non-public HEIs in Vietnam are not financed by the state. Therefore, there should be regulations on periodic reports of financial situation of the institutes as well as external financial supervision. This aims to ensure that these HEIs have enough abilities to maintain and enhance the level of education and research, avoiding compromise on quality of training and institutional efficiency.

In parallel with the development of quality standards and regulations, there should be more professional manuals, documents and regulations for the new set of criteria. The lack of clear guidance will cause confusion for HEIs in the process of implementation. Along with the clarity, the proposed manuals should stress the value of flexibility, rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach to quality [31].

Last but not least, investment in developing the quality and quantity of experts in assessment, accreditation and quality assurance on this type of institutions is necessary to avoid the risk of limited human resources and lack of capacity to provide and operate the system of non-public institutes. The presence of these experts in these processes and activities will facilitate fairness and comprehensive understanding of the non-public sector as well. Another flexible approach to cope with the dearth of experts adopted in some countries which Vietnam could consider is utilizing a mix of national experts and international experts in assessment and accreditation [33].

### IV. CONCLUSION

The establishment of quality assessment, assurance and accreditation criteria exclusive for non-public HEIs is a major step in quality management of Vietnam's HE.

Among many different ways, in the current context of Vietnam the formation of these criteria should be based on achievements of the present assessment, assurance and accreditation system applied to the public sector to reduce cost and ensure comparability between public and non-public HEIs. Additionally, flexibility, diversity and comprehension are important factors must be included in these new criteria.

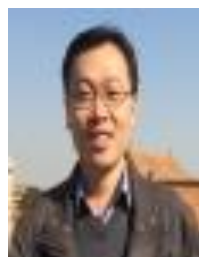
Obviously the adjusted system cannot address all of the problems concerning HE quality without the implementation of other supporting policies. Apart from that, the process of formation and operation of this new system also requires a lot of time, effort, and money from various stakeholders. Nonetheless, the results which it produces are desirable. The system with additional criteria will help the state monitor non-public HEIs systematically, thereby taking timely measures to support these institutes. It also assists the non-public sector which has been beset with many quality problems in finding right directions on the path to sustainability and growth. Besides, an effective system would be a reliable basis for stakeholders to understand the situations of HEIs to make right choices about investment, study and collaboration.

Setting exclusive criteria for the non-public sector should not be understood as a discrimination in the higher education system. Many countries in the world have adopted these policies and have produced positive results for their higher education. These criteria help non-public HEIs be able compete with public ones while the presence of their own characteristics are still ensured. This study only reveals the existing issue, the process of setting specific criteria and doing other relevant activities will require a great deal of input from various stakeholders.

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