COVID-19 and higher education in Vietnam: Systematically rethinking the quality assurance system and practices towards the ‘new normal’ in post-crisis era

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Abstract
COVID-19 has spawned a critical shift in the landscape of higher education (HE) worldwide, entailing transformations of practices across the field, in which quality assurance (QA) for HE has also evolved to both reflect and stay adaptive to the ‘new normal’ formed during and beyond the pandemic. Against the COVID-19 context, this paper retells some of the existing debates for Vietnamese QA and accreditation activities, as well as identifies emerging challenges in QA practices in the post-pandemic era. Theoretically, the paper contributes a conceptual tool to examine the QA of the Vietnamese HE system, embracing three dimensions of teaching and learning, inputs and outputs. This further underpins our inquiry for QA practices in the Vietnamese HE context which has been scaffolded and developed accordingly. Drawn from a critical review and analysis of emerging policies and existing literature, practical implications and projections for the directions of Vietnamese QA in the future will be provided. This paper presents a timely insight for the process of policy-making and the implementation process of QA in Vietnamese HE during a time of uncertainties and looks towards building resilience to future crises.

Keywords
COVID-19, quality assurance, higher education, Vietnam, crisis, new normal, post-pandemic

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Introduction

The global spread of the novel coronavirus has had unprecedented impacts on every aspect of life, shifting the way we see the world and think of the society in which we are living. In the context of higher education (HE) in particular, the pandemic is causing a ‘tidal wave of disruption to the higher education sector’ (MacIntosh, 2020, n.p). Vietnam has experienced numerous waves of the COVID-19 outbreak since the first infection detected in January 2020, leading to constant switches between online and offline learning with significant effects on how teaching and learning occurred. Vietnam issued Government Decision 749 on the National Digital Transformation Program and from 3 May 2021, the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) approved all higher education institutions (HEIs) to transfer up to 30% of their programs to online platforms (MoET, 2020c; 2020d). These critical transformations have led us to question the potential ramifications to QA and accreditation activities in Vietnamese HE during and post-COVID times. This study aims to explore the changing landscape of QA during this time of crisis. The paper begins with the conceptualization of QA before moving on to the presentation of the QA structure of Vietnamese HE. The following section expounds our discussion on extant literature on QA and accreditation and recent policy documents issued by the Government of Vietnam (GoV) and MoET in 2020 and 2021. Against the COVID-19 context, whilst we retell some of the existing debates on QA in Vietnam regarding external QA (EQA) and internal QA (IQA), we argue that these existing problems will be intensified when the entire HE system has been restructured during the global crisis. Based on the analysis, the paper provides implications for future policies and practices for the QA system and accreditation initiatives.

Conceptualization of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Quality has long been an established theme in literature across disciplines including education. However, within HE, quality has always been identified as the most contestable notion due to the multi-layered, overlapping characteristics of the sector itself. Developed from the ideologies of total quality management and system approach (Tenner and DeToro, 1992), Cheng and Tam (1997: 1477) defined education quality as “the character of the set of elements in the input, process, and output of the education system that provides services that completely satisfy both internal and external strategic constituencies by meeting their explicit and implicit expectations”. Ellis (1993), however, equated quality to the standards needed to satisfy students-as-customers whilst standards are understood as the minimum threshold by which performance is evaluated (Ashcroft and Foreman-Peck, 1996). According to Harvey (2002: 247), quality refers to areas such as ‘control, assurance, management, audit, assessment, policy and funding’ which can be investigated through five interrelated approaches: quality as exceptional, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money, and transformation (Harvey and Green, 1993). Although it is subject to various interpretations which are ‘dependent largely on specific national circumstances, which change over time’ (Brockerhoff et al., 2015: 9), the discourse of quality has progressively gained a dominant role in the national development agenda of many institutions, countries, and educational settings, including Vietnam.

Similar to quality, the conceptualization of QA has not yet been universally agreed upon. QA has long been employed as a collective phrase for monitoring, assessing or reviewing. It has been described as a ‘catch-all phrase’ (Williams, 2016: 97), which examines all associated policies, processes, and actions used to maintain and develop the quality of HE (Campbell and Rozsnyai, 2002). QA is also described as an ‘ongoing, continuous process’ of quality evaluation across HE.
systems, institutions, or programs (Vlăsceanu et al., 2004: 74). In other words, the ultimate goal of QA is to evaluate quality and measure the standards of teaching and learning outcomes (Harvey, 2002). Cheng and Tam (1997) proposed that QA incorporates an evaluation of inputs, processes, and outputs. In a similar vein, Boyle and Bowden (1997) presented QA for HE as an ongoing evolution and application of ethos, policies and processes intended to preserve and ameliorate quality according to articulated values and stakeholders’ demands. A recurring theme across QA discourses is quality values (e.g. academic, managerial, pedagogic, employment focused) and stakeholder-driven power that determine QA typologies, approaches and models for HE (Boyle and Bowden, 1997; Feigenbaum, 1951; Harvey and Knight, 1996; Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007). Regardless of the receptive nature of QA, there remains a long-standing controversy over the notion of QA for accountability (QA serves both as a response to the demands of external standards and as a foundation for enhancement) versus QA for improvement (continuous enhancement is placed at the heart of any QA activities or periodic oversight, internally derived from institutional needs to improve quality) (Wilger, 1997). These traits are found as the intrinsic and extrinsic functions that construct two integral components in any QA system: IQA, driven by the commitment for improvement of the institutions and EQA, underpinned by an accountability-oriented perception (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2007).

IQA embraces a totality of all institutional processes in place to regularly monitor, reflect and enhance the quality of education provided by HEIs to students. Harvey (2002) and Mishra (2006) shared their viewpoint with Westerheijden et al. (2007) and categorized the focus of IQA in HE into three major aspects:

- **Teaching and learning**: this measure refers to factors that contribute to the quality of education delivery and reception of learners such as curriculum content and distribution, assessment/graduation evaluation, standards for learning outcomes and academic competence.

- **Inputs**: this includes resources fundamental to teaching and learning, for instance the issues of HEIs facility and infrastructure, human resources, and budget.

- **Outputs**: this examines the intensity and scope of knowledge and experience advancement. Lecturers’ performance and professional development, the outcomes of students / dropouts, and graduates’ employability are commonly adopted to analyse the quality of educational delivery.

EQA, on the other hand, refers to the supra-institutional policies and practices of authorized governance at the national level whereby the participation of external bodies such as auditing and accrediting agencies plays a fundamental role in the monitoring and cross-checking of the implementation process (Dill, 2007). There is a wide array of approaches to external quality monitoring such as evaluation, accreditation, assessment, and audit (Harvey, 2002). It is noteworthy that both IQA and EQA establish stakeholders’ confidence in the attainment of qualities as stated in the educational goals and missions of the HE providers (Blackmur, 2007; Harvey, 2002; Stella, 2008). Some researchers also associate EQA with the perceptions of quality as fitness for purpose and value for money whilst the transformative characteristics of quality are entrenched in the locus of IQA (Fresen and Boyd, 2005; Harvey and Askling, 2003; Harvey and Knight, 1996; Welzant et al., 2011).

In this paper, we pursue the conceptualization of QA by Harvey and Green (2002), Mishra (2006), and Dill (2007) to explore the QA of HE in Vietnam at external and internal levels as visualized in Figure 1. How this conceptualization is interpreted in the Vietnamese HE context will be further elaborated in the following sections of the paper.
This conceptualization is designated because firstly, it is not our primary intention to explore QA variations, but other than that, we concentrate on what QA actually does and how it is implemented in practice. The stakeholder-driven nature of QA proposed by Harvey (2002) and Dill (2007) provide us with multi-dimensional insights to explore the HE system in Vietnam, one that has long been characterized as ‘complex and fragmented’ and involved multiple actors in the policy-making and policy-implementing processes (Pham and Nguyen, 2019:60). Secondly, COVID-19 has rapidly propelled Vietnamese HE into an advanced stage of development, which espouses two emergent characteristics of education as being open and life-long-oriented (Pham, 2021). Thus, quality itself will also have to evolve to adapt to this new shape and standard of education. This approach offers us a critical systematic tool to revisit both the multiple aspects of quality and the existing and emerging concerns of QA in Vietnam through the (re)configuration of new boundaries and transformability formed and intensified pre-, during and post-pandemic with relevant and practical implications to education governance and policy-making.

**An overview of Quality Assurance in Vietnamese Higher Education**

According to Vietnam Higher Education Law 2012 and the Revised Higher Education Law 2018 (National Assembly, 2012, National Assembly, 2018), Vietnam follows the American program and institution accreditation models (Pham and Nguyen, 2019). Accreditation, also known as EQA in the Vietnamese QA system, is a process by which ‘a (non)governmental or private body evaluates the quality of a higher education institution as a whole or of a specific educational programme in order to formally recognize it as having met certain pre-determined minimal criteria or standards’ (Vlăsceanu et al., 2004: 25). However, unlike the US model which operates voluntarily and independently, accreditation in Vietnam is under governmental oversight and is conducted in a
mandatory manner (Pham and Nguyen, 2019). The Higher Education Law also stipulates that accreditation outcomes will determine quotas for student enrolment, and the level of state funding, recognition and eligibility for transfer of academic credits. Circular No. 62/2012/TTBGDDT and Circular No. 38/2013/TTBGDDDT issued in 2012 and 2013 respectively provide four steps in the accreditation procedure, which are (1) self-review by HEIs, (2) registration with an accrediting agency for external review, (3) site visit to HEIs by an accrediting agency and (4) final recognition. The result is valid for 5 years (National Assembly, 2012, National Assembly, 2018).

EQA and IQA activities have mutual influences within the national HE system (Do, 2019). EQA is grounded on the assessment and recognition of quality standards of an HEI whilst it is the role of IQA embedded in the HEI to provide a robust mechanism with adequate evidence for EQA to arrive at informed decisions and accurate accreditation outcomes. Hence, the contribution from each component impacts the practices of every other. In this paper, EQA activities and accreditation will be employed interchangeably as this is the sole EQA mechanism that has been legalized in Vietnam to date (Pham and Nguyen, 2019). Externally, the QA mechanism of Vietnamese HEIs consists of (1) state-control through the management of MoET and the Vietnam Education Quality Management Agency (VQA), and (2) the involvement of 10 accrediting agencies (international, public, and private) located across the country. MoET also advocates the employment of accrediting services administered by overseas agencies such as ASEAN University Network-Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) and Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET). Internally, as of June 2021, almost every Vietnamese university has established and financially funded the operation of their own Quality Assurance Units (QAUs) (Ministry of Education and Training MoET, 2021a). GoV, MoET, employers and representatives of professional bodies are the key stakeholders involved in EQA whilst IQA driven individually by each HEI embraces the participation of their own managers, academic staff, QA specialist, and students.

The Vietnamese HE system has been shaped by various reforms driven by both national and international drivers, which have exerted critical influences onto the QA system (Phan, 2022). Three major achievements of the Vietnamese HE system are (1) the progressive granting of autonomy to HEIs, (2) the socialization and privatization of HE in general and QA activities specifically, and (3) the promotion of online training and digital transformation in the university sector. In recent years, the eight-level National Qualifications Framework – from certificate (Levels 1–3) through to doctorate (Level 8) - that targets standardizing educational degrees and quality to attain regional and international recognition, was also introduced and enforced within the Vietnamese education system (MoET, 2021).

In brief, the QA system of Vietnamese HE underpinned by EQA and IQA mechanisms has gone through stages of development over the last decades. How it has been challenged by the enormous impacts of COVID-19 will be discussed followingly.

**Methodology**

Based on the conceptualization above, we conducted document analysis on policy statements, statistical reports, consultation papers, legislations and information on websites produced by MoET and GoV. These cover recent guidelines and directives issued by MoET under the impacts of COVID-19, coupled with extant literature on QA of Vietnamese HE and QA and the COVID-19 effects. The policy documents include:
Document No. 795/BGDDT-GDDH (2020): Guidelines for universities, academies, and colleges to actively implement distance learning and conduct teaching and learning activities through digital platforms.

Document No. 988/BGDDT-GDDH (2020): A follow-up of Decree No. 795/BGDDT-GDDH offering instructions to unify the implementation of QA activities and recognize accumulated learning results (credit-based) in Vietnamese HEIs during the COVID-19 pandemic, on the basis of practical conditions.

Document No. 707/BGDDT-GDDH (2021): Guidelines for evaluating graduation projects and theses delivered online during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Document No. 2077/BGDDT-GDDH (2021): Guidelines for organizing teaching and learning activities, end-of-academic year and recruiting/enrolling students during the COVID-19 pandemic at HEIs.

Moet also issued Circular No. 38/2020/TT-BGDDT acknowledging blended/hybrid programs jointly delivered with foreign universities for Masters, and Doctoral degrees and Circular No. 39/2020/TT-BGDDT fortifying standards for assessing quality of programs. Universities hold accountability for ratifying these guidelines and keeping them updated within their institutional quality review and program operation.

The analysis was grounded on the conceptualization of QA presented in the previous section (Dill, 2007; Harvey and Green, 1993; Mishra, 2006). Accordingly, QA practices in Vietnamese HE in this paper are examined through EQA and IQA. Specifically, in terms of EQA, issues are investigated through the accreditation mechanism, policies and policy-making practices at the national level, all of which aim at ensuring accountability and conformity to stated quality standards (Dill, 2007; Harvey, 2002). Besides, as universities are obliged to operate within a national policy framework designated by the government (GoV and MoET in this case) to assure academic standards (Dill, 2007), the discussion also situates HEIs at the intersection of accreditation-related policy-making and planning process where they act as interrelated entities with their own governance and programs under the overarching management of MoET and GoV. Therefore, reviews will also draw on key existing and emerging challenges posed by accreditation as an EQA mechanism that has accompanied recent reforms in national policies and the issues they raise for HE. In terms of IQA, the operationalization of IQA of Vietnamese HE will be explored through three principles of quality monitoring developed by Harvey (2002) and Mishra (2006), including teaching and learning, inputs and outputs. We position HEIs as single IQA units with their (i) own systems of staff, programs, courses, etc. and (ii) unique characteristics and practices that can facilitate or hinder the development of quality and implementation of QA before and during crisis. IQA of HEIs hence will be discussed in relation to the social and political dynamics within the wider Vietnamese HE context.

Existing debates on Vietnamese QA and the emerging issues against the context of the pandemic

In this section, we will present the existing problems that the Vietnamese QA system has been confronting, and at the same time, argue how these problems became more challenging as the global crisis occurred. In light of the conceptualization of the paper, we will present the analysis in terms of EQA and IQA.
External Quality Assurance

After almost two decades of development, Vietnam still possesses an incomplete QA system. Its accreditation remains in ‘a nascent stage’ (Nguyen, 2019: 253). Even prior to the pandemic, Vietnamese QA was confronted by a number of obstacles.

At the national level, the governance of Vietnamese HE itself is very ‘complex and fragmented’, with diverse involvement of entities ranging from specialised, small HEIs and big, multidisciplinary public universities to private institutions and international branch campuses (Pham and Nguyen, 2019). A majority of HEIs are affiliated with their line ministry (e.g. Ministry of Health, Ministry of Finance), whilst only one-third of them report to MoET (Le et al., 2019). These HEIs are not entirely independent in terms of finance and management from their line ministries, as HEIs still need to seek permissions on decisive matters and report back to them as well as to MoET. Furthermore, despite MoET’s declaration of its long-term strategy of decentralizing the QA system, scepticism persists over the gap between policy and practice given the complete dependence of the operation of VQA on MoET (in terms of finance, human resources, staff quota and so on). Additionally, policies issued in Vietnam are constrained by a mandatory acknowledgement of the Communist Party’s guidelines and resolutions (Pham, 2019a). This justifies the centralized, top-down characteristics of Vietnamese QA with GoV promulgating core legal frameworks and MoET playing the central role in monitoring quality at the national level. MoET’s responsibilities range from setting up QA regulations, to supervising and authorizing accrediting agencies across the country. All in all, the overlapping roles of various actors in the system management, as well as the half-way decentralization of QA practices in the Vietnamese socio-political setting, can become a great hindrance for the timely response to imperative adaptations needed in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, Vietnamese QA, in its current state, was already vulnerable to crisis even prior to the advent of the crisis.

Meanwhile, at the institutional level, ways of ensuring that QA is practised effectively during the pandemic remains a big concern to institutions. Since this process of institutional autonomy is unsettled, many QAUs belonging to HEIs are left with limited power in deciding what to do with their accreditation whilst being deterred from developing effective QA (Pham, 2018). At the program level, the pace of institutional and program accreditation was already being criticized for being slow and stagnant even before COVID-19 (Pham and Nguyen, 2019). The pandemic has arguably cast a heavier burden on the process, making it difficult to regularly review and update all programs. Lockdowns, as a result of COVID-19, have initiated a tremendous deviation in the way education and QA operate (Eaton, 2020). The relocation of accreditation activities, for instance physical site-visits to online site-visits, has recently sparked discussions and debates among MoET and scholars for it is deemed an overwhelming mission for many HEIs, especially HEIs with limited infrastructures, resources, and in rural areas where the Internet is not stable and the digitalization of teaching and learning and QA activities is still limited (Duong, 2021; Pham and Ho, 2020). Concerns also arise over the insufficient information technology resources as many QAUs are unprepared for quality online support structures and tools, including robust databases, document depositories, and advanced online meeting tools (Pham, 2021; Tran et al., 2020).

Likewise, the overlapping roles of many stakeholders in the decision-making and governance process in the Vietnamese HE context as addressed by Le et al. (2019) might lead to ineffective communication among staff and leaders as they conduct institutional reviews pre and during the crisis. This may also hinder students from delivering informed evaluation of the quality of education they received. For Vietnamese students who are ‘latent stakeholders’ holding the least power in the QA process, their voices are only heard indirectly through surveys and occasional interviews in site-visits (Pham, 2019b: 155). They now may find themselves obstructed from authentically engaging in QA activities, given that they are stranded in their hometowns under social-distancing measures.
**Internal quality assurance.** The section below attempts to highlight the challenges posed by the pandemic to the IQA of Vietnamese HEIs following the conceptualization of quality (Harvey and Green, 1993; Mishra, 2006) that embodies three dimensions of teaching and learning, inputs and outputs. Existing obstacles and complications that emanated from the pandemic will be simultaneously analysed according to each dimension outlined in the framework.

**Teaching and learning.** The repercussions of the COVID-19 crisis on the quality of teaching and learning in Vietnamese HE is most explicitly manifested in the areas of curriculum, content delivery and assessment.

Firstly, in terms of curriculum, it has been emphasized that in the challenging context of COVID-19, curriculum serves not purely as “a conveyor or product of a particular body of knowledge” but also needs to be flexibly reinforced to accommodate an active course of substantive learning inquiry (Nan-Zhao, 2005: n.p). Whilst curriculum represents one key measure of educational quality and students’ learning outcomes that has been standing at the heart of national efforts in enhancing the quality of HE worldwide (UNESCO, 2004), the suspension of physical, in-person classes has induced Vietnamese HEIs to rethink their delivery approaches. Under Directive No. 795/BGDĐT-GDĐH issued in 2020, detailed guidelines for universities, academies and colleges were set out by MoET to encourage and instruct HEIs to actively embrace distance teaching and learning. However, ‘difficult’ and ‘challenges’ are the most frequently repeated phrases in the latest quick report from MoET on the implementation of online teaching and learning after the 2021 new school year commenced (Duong, 2021). Since this was the first-time online and blended learning was officially recognized and widely applied in Vietnam, these policy mandates were relatively generic, top-down structured rather than institutionally quality-focused. This swift transition which embraces the incorporation of a new fully online mode into university curricula raises concerns over the sustainability of quality itself in the long run. For some Vietnamese HEIs that have been intensively internationalizing their curriculum following the Higher Education Reform Agenda, the digitization of curriculum in the time of crisis presents implications for reshaping the competencies of the educators to adapt to new quality standards (Nguyen et al., 2019). These challenges and expected changes in educational practices in Vietnam echo the findings in studies carried out by Cunningham and Pardo (2019), Jones and Sharma (2020), and Famularsih (2020).

Secondly, regarding content delivery, an exemplary issue is programmes that involve practicum. According to Pham and Ho (2020), the unplanned shift to online practicum in many institutions and disciplines undesirably turned many universities into submissive e-learning laboratories without properly updating their learning objectives, syllabuses, and content outlines. Furthermore, many HEIs have struggled during the crisis to maintain their quality and satisfy students’ needs due to a scarcity of e-learning materials (Dinh and Nguyen, 2020; Ho et al., 2020). In some specialised majors such as medical studies, although the theoretical components can be delivered online, it is not always possible to compensate for the practical and clinical training that students miss during lockdowns. Indeed, such a deficiency of interactions with peers and field work opportunities likely hinder students from developing cooperative and individualistic learning skills as well as attaining cognitive instructional objectives (Bloom, 1956).

In terms of assessment, Document 707/BGDĐT-GDDH by MoET in 2021 provides guidelines for evaluating graduation projects and theses delivered online during the pandemic, and many universities have commenced to adopt various forms of online assessment. Accordingly, HEIs grant autonomy of organizing examinations to faculties and departments, who mostly rely on the learning outputs or standards of a particular module/discipline to decide the most appropriate methods of assessment. Assessment tools vary from online oral quizzes, and multiple choice exams to essay exams, and assignments (See Ministry of Education and Training, 2020a, Ministry of Education and Training, 2020b). However, many universities encountered critical hurdles during implementation; the most identifiable issues were administering test questions, organizing exams, ensuring reliability
of academic results and addressing equality in accessing fair and transparent assessment (Pham, 2021; Tran et al., 2020). Findings from an online survey conducted across 225 undergraduate students at Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology and Education demonstrated that insufficient interactions and constraints in infrastructure are compelling drawbacks leading to inaccurate reflection of their actual performance in partaking of e-assessment during the pandemic (Lu and Nguyen, 2020). This calls for an evolution in evaluation practices that requires more holistic and flexible e-learning criteria for the purpose of quality assessment to ensure credibility of learning outcomes in a virtual world (Eaton, 2020). Implications of the process may include the construction of national academic test banks and complete online testing systems as well as innovation in strengthening quality culture across involved stakeholders.

**Inputs.** Regarding inputs for quality provision of HE, Vietnam has been confronted with underdeveloped resources, both physically and virtually in the areas of infrastructure, human resources and finance (Pham and Ho, 2020). These obstacles have been intensified under the enormous impacts of COVID-19 and critically challenged educational quality.

The adoption of hybrid or online education during the COVID-19 pandemic obligates a process that is composed of collective efforts and procedures. These vary from developing a robust internal QA system for e-learning to incorporating perspectives from all stakeholders including students, academics, support staff, alumni, and employers. Empirical evidence from the case of Vietnamese social work educators and students (e.g. Dinh and Nguyen, 2020; Pham et al., 2021) demonstrates that restricted access to technology resources (e.g. disrupted Internet connection and low-quality sound of the lectures) has impeded effective participation in online courses during COVID-19. These studies indicated that the level of satisfaction of students and lecturers of educational quality was significantly lower than pre-COVID face-to-face instruction delivery. It is noteworthy that in some distant, isolated areas such as Dien Bien, Quang Nam, 70% of students do not have access to electronic devices, not to mention stable internet connection (Duong, 2021). The transformation to e-learning enacted by social-distancing mandates further widens the existing gap in resource accessibility between rural and urban regions, which almost seemed invisible prior to the pandemic thanks to the availability of physical classes (Ewing, 2021; Tran et al., 2020).

Furthermore, a critical shortage in well-trained, qualified QA human capital as well as appropriate staff capacity building schemes has been identified as one of the long-term impediments to the development of the internal QA mechanism within HEIs (Nguyen, 2019; Pham, 2018). For active Vietnamese QA specialists working at QA Units of universities, their challenges comprise a deficiency of knowledge, skills, experience and low English command. This situation is ascribed to the existent Vietnamese HE context, which leaves little or no room for a sufficient, ongoing scheme of professional development for QA staff (either formally through intensive QA-focused education or informally through professional workshops and training), their irrelevant profiles prior to undertaking QA roles, as well as the growing involvement of inexperienced young professionals, who possess inadequate comprehension of HE operations. Meanwhile, the limited English competencies also hamper these personnel from profoundly engaging with the international QA community, reflecting on enhanced models of QA and accreditation globally, and strengthening their professional practices (Nguyen, 2021).

In times of instability and disruption, the lack of competence and experience in implementing online QA practices may jeopardize the effectiveness of QA policy/guideline implementation. Their participation as professional interlocutor for national control and institutional governance will potentially bring pertinent implications for the post-pandemic realities that require Vietnamese HEIs to critically ‘re-evaluate, rethink, and retool approaches to instructional practices’ (Felix, 2021: 1) to maintain and enhance educational quality in preparation to stay more resilient to future crises.
As to financial resources, despite repeated calls for fostering institutional autonomy in governmental documents over the years (Higher Education Law, 2012; Revised Higher Education Law, 2018; Fundamental and Comprehensive Education Reform, 2013), moderate progress has been recorded in HEIs in Vietnam. This is partially attributed to an absence of a homogeneous scheme for institutional financial management. In Vietnam, annual funds allocated to public HEIs are managed by the Ministry of Finance and not until reimbursement is made to them will an annual budget for QA activities be finalized and assigned by institutions themselves. As an indirect receiver of funding, many HEIs position themselves as being stranded in a half-way institutional autonomy, submissive and ‘exercise a little independence in the management of their own matters’ (Le et al., 2019: 7). During a time of crisis, inflexibility in finance management can impede many Vietnamese HEIs from settling budgets in response to urgent quality-improvement demands and high-cost services.

**Outputs.** In terms of output, staff performance, learning outcomes and employability are key quality outputs that have been substantially suppressed by the pandemic’s turbulence.

One concern that emerged from the COVID-19 era for many HEIs is staff performance and professional development. For academics, the hasty transition from traditional ‘talk-and-chalk’ classrooms to virtual teaching without foundational IT-training or professional development activities has been reported as a frustrating experience. According to a large-scale survey conducted on the COVID-19 impacts in HEIs across 47 countries/territories including Vietnam, individual psychological and behavioural responses have been confirmed to be negatively influenced (Asian Pacific Quality Network, 2020). However, issues of mental health support have long been overlooked in the Vietnamese education system. As we have studied through all the related QA documents in Vietnam, teachers’ mental health and well-being has never been acknowledged as a quality index in any QA measurements. At the crisis juncture, little attention has been paid to how pedagogically stressful it has been for teachers due to the switch of the instructional mode of delivery.

Similarly, personal strains on lecturers resulting from the pandemic such as health concerns, emotional care, new family and domestic responsibilities, professional and personal plans, or household organisation are rarely put in the forefront, if at all considered. Studies have shown that Vietnamese teachers are undesirably pushed to stay more resilient to unexpected transformation in daily teaching routines caused by the pandemic (Pham and Phan, 2021; Pham et al., 2021). Indeed, despite the volume of work and additional training needed to adjust to online teaching and assessment during COVID-19, teacher remuneration paradoxically remains unchanged (Pham, 2021). That said, the pandemic has created a constant struggle of lecturers to balance between moral profession, cultural norms, teaching quality and the essentiality to financially sustain over a time of uncertainties. The extrinsic contextual and societal factors subsequently call for an ongoing ‘negotiation and reconstitution of values and identities’ (Phan and Phan, 2006: 136). It is hoped that this will indirectly mitigate adverse influences on the quality of academic outputs of teachers and learning outcomes of students throughout the pandemic compared to their pre-crisis teaching and learning.

Besides, education systems and employability skills are two key determinants that have the most severe effects on the unemployment rate in Vietnam under the COVID-19 impacts (Nguyen et al., 2019). Investigations into the employability of Vietnamese students majoring in English education during the pandemic revealed that the switch to remote learning mode has had ‘significant impact on their employability capital’ and imposed restrictions on their post-study career plans as well as their career-related decision-making, with variations recorded among groups of various backgrounds (Vu et al., 2022).
A post-COVID era: Implications for Vietnamese QA

An overall picture that is clearly discernible in this article is that COVID-19 has provided the HE system in Vietnam with new challenges that need intense reworking and rethinking, as much as it has elsewhere in the world (Crawford et al., 2020; MacIntosh, 2020, n.p.). As Altbach and De Wit (2020) have asserted, although predicting a post-COVID future for universities is not an easy task, demand for higher education is still significant and will continue to grow. This means that QA cannot afford to lose its importance and may play an even more important role. It should be noted that keeping QA activities going is important also to ensure continually maintained trust in the quality of education provision within and between systems, especially with the inclusion of online education for the past year and in the future. As the Vietnamese HE system is moving from temporary measures to longer-term sustainable adjustments that hopefully can be the antidote to a future crisis on a global scale, some initial projections towards the future landscape of Vietnamese QA for HE as the result of the COVID-19 crisis are presented in this section.

QA in a future where blended learning is the new trend. What looms in the post-pandemic future is a new paradigm of teaching and learning that might depart from traditional and lecture-based activities and skew towards more digitally facilitated group activities, discussions and individual self-exploration of online educational resources in Vietnam (Pham and Ho, 2020; Pham and Phan, 2021). In that sense, QA policies and practices need to follow and follow-up these possible changes. As learning now happens far beyond a four-walled room and may occur anytime, anywhere, both synchronously and asynchronously, evidence-based criteria for QA purposes might be more difficult to achieve and collect (Eaton, 2020). Learning, predicted by Ewing (2021: 39), will become more oriented to ‘stackable segments’ whereby participants can receive ‘education which is primarily just-in-time not just-in-case’. However, we should be mindful that digital learning requires stable infrastructure and digital platforms, which might be unevenly distributed across Vietnam. The disruptions to traditional classrooms created by the conversion to online learning has only occurred in provinces or cities where there was an outbreak. This requires flexibility in QA policies and practices, and the criteria of QA should be refined in order to satisfactorily address the situation of combined online and offline learning and teaching. Furthermore, learning may be disrupted for particular groups of marginalized students such as those of ethnic minorities in Vietnam living in disadvantaged conditions. The challenge for QA here is to embrace a holistic approach to online learning and teaching that not only guarantees effectiveness and transparency of the QA process, but also minimizes any inequalities caused by this incoming shift in instruction delivery. In this case, we expect there will be training for teachers in terms of content development, as well as assessment in online learning, or the combination of both online and offline learning when possible so that students in less advantaged areas will not be further disadvantaged by the ongoing crisis.

QA in a future where there is increasingly profound involvement of students in QA activities. It has been recommended that seeking collaborative opportunities between students and staff academic representatives is necessary so that students can be involved in the conception, design, implementation and review of any future programmatic and institutional changes (Whelehan, 2020). This partnership with students, hopefully, can contribute to a more student-led approach in the post-digital learning era. Concurring with Whelehan (2020), we foresee a future in which both students and teachers are on a similar learning journey in a digital learning environment. If this is to happen, QA policies and practices are expected to get involved in feedback mechanisms at an institutional level. In Vietnam, QA is seen as a ‘ritualistic activity’ carried out in HEIs to fulfil requirements set by GoV’s regulations (Tran and Vu,
2019: 115), sometimes the discourse only exists between universities’ leaders and their QA staff. The role of students in QA processes is restricted to surveys on teaching quality, programs, libraries and services offered at the institutions. The culture of student partnership or students-as-partners, a practice adopted by other developed QA systems such as those in the UK, Scotland and New Zealand, remains a completely new concept in the Vietnamese HE context (New Zealand Academic Quality Agency, 2017, Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland, 2012). The new situation of COVID-19 can be an opportunity for a collaborative approach to QA at the programme and institutional level that may play an important role in ensuring students successfully attain a quality education.

A future where QA is going hybrid. Whilst QA traditionally relies on actual classrooms, physical infrastructure and physical teacher-student interactions in HEIs to assess the educational settings, now QA policies and practitioners including QA policy makers at national and institutional levels and QA officers at QA units may need to take the virtual environment into consideration. From the institutional perspective, it is crucial to envision a future where both IQA and EQA operate on a hybrid basis. Specifically, HEIs may need to prepare for online visits of QA practitioners by better equipping themselves with technological support structures and tools, such as databases, document depositories and well-established online meeting platforms so that institutions and programs going through an online review are not disadvantaged. Hybrid forms of QA that combine both online and offline assessment are possible and desirable in the future.

It should be noted that online QA practices require rigorous examination of numbers, documents from experts, maintenance of confidentiality, professionality and non-conflict of interest, as well as acknowledgement of the specific challenges from the online environment (Kelo, 2020). We propose that online QA practices and/or hybrid QA practices are not only a ‘fire-fighting strategy’ to be used during the COVID-19 outbreak but can actually serve a longer-term purpose in Vietnamese HE for several reasons.

Firstly, online visits offer the possibility to engage experts of QA from abroad with less additional cost and to interact with more stakeholders, which Vietnam has needed for the implementation and improvement of its QA system. Going online can save travel time for practitioners and allow them to focus more on what matters most in the QA process, especially for EQA. Secondly, as expected and specified in the QA regulations of MoET, institutions will gradually bear the cost of QA by themselves. Hybrid QA practices can facilitate initial stages of EQA procedures such as initial accreditation, initial fact collection and fact checking. This will not only reduce the estimated cost of QA but also bring benefits such as timesaving, efficiency and wider participation of stakeholders (such as employers, policy makers, teachers, students and parents). Physical visits can be reserved for activities such as verification and feedback, which are critical for the improvement of QA in Vietnam due to great discrepancies among institutions of different geographical areas in the country.

The predicted rise of transnational higher education in Vietnam and challenges for QA. Global mobility has been stalled and international education, though still enticing for many students, may be negatively affected in the future (Yang, 2020). The hit of the novel virus has been detrimental to global economies and, henceforth, parents and students will need to take monetary expenditures into more serious consideration. Students may choose to stay in their home country rather than travel abroad for international education. Foreign students may also be denied study visas under the COVID-19 rules (as in the cases of border closures in Australia and New Zealand), and international travel may be more expensive and subject to more restrictions than before. The precarity and fear induced by the global outbreak of COVID-19 and the resultant restrictions on movement may lead students to opt for alternative to gain an international education experience other than physical
mobility, such as transnational higher education (TNHE), or international education at home. This educational provision is offered through different variations of modalities such as joint-degree, twinning or articulation programs (e.g. 2+2, 3+1) and international branch campuses. In the former model, students pursue their degrees being co-delivered by a Vietnamese university and a foreign institution through which they spend the first phase (2 or 3 years) in Vietnam and the remainder overseas. The latter model requires the physical presence of a foreign institution in Vietnam that offers its programs offshore (e.g. RMIT University with their branch campuses based in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City). Other modes of TNHE (e.g. online courses) are excluded from the scope this paper covers. The nature of TNHE practices is complex and diverse (Knight and McNamara 2015) Hence, during the time of crisis, QA for TNHE programmes will draw more attention from policymakers and practitioners. This area of QA is still the least monitored in Vietnam (Nhan and Nguyen, 2018) and also the most challenging aspect because, as Ziguras and McBurnie (2014) specify, the nature of transnational partnerships in education entails difficulty in regulating and ensuring the quality of programs delivered whilst ensuring the quality of joint programs is one of the most important issues in implementing transnational education (Hou et al., 2016; Kallo and Semchenko, 2016). With the post-pandemic increasing interest in this form of education from students and parents, we expect the demand for QA practices of joint programmes and transnational higher education will also increase so that students can gain the actual benefits of international education.

Conclusion

All in all, COVID-19 is a crisis that brings about danger, but also possible changes and transformations. This paper has outlined the status quo of the Vietnamese QA for HE, what we think will be problems emerging out of the pandemic context in Vietnam and how its QA system will need to evolve to respond to the ‘new normal’. After years of development, Vietnam has worked to establish a QA system for HE that consists of both IQA and EQA (accreditation) components and involves various actors in the monitoring of quality at institutional and program levels. These range from GoV, MoET, line ministries, and domestic and international accrediting agencies at the external and macro-management level to higher education institutions including QA specialists, academics and students at the internal level.

Based on the conceptualization of QA (Dill, 2007; Harvey and Green, 1993; Mishra, 2006), we position Vietnamese HE as a case study and QA at the epicentre of systematically rethinking educational policies and practices in this time of uncertainties and strive to present a holistic picture with emerging challenges and practical considerations for the quality of HE at the external and internal levels. Such an assortment of challenges posed by COVID-19, if examined through a positive lens, can intersect with the ongoing motion of Vietnamese HE and become the country’s opportunity to rethink and restructure its accreditation and QA evolution. Our arguments from the unique perspective of Vietnam may also help enrich the ongoing debates on the quality of education delivery through the digitalization of HE in a post-pandemic climate which involves the evolution of hybrid and online teaching formats.

As one among the first papers to initiate the discussion on the post-pandemic HE landscapes in Vietnam, we acknowledge several limitations of our work. These include the scope of review and the restricted availability of publications in the research areas, especially those with empirical evidence investigating Vietnamese HE in general and QA in particular due to the contemporary nature of the crisis. Future scholars are encouraged to develop this discussion to a larger extent of audience across HE in order to craft guidelines on good practices of specific quality dimensions such as pedagogical innovation or professional development in delivering remote teaching and learning. A comparative study in QA across regional and national contexts is also potentially beneficial to depict the impacts of cultural variations of stakeholders’ responses in times of uncertainties.
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