International accreditation impacts on teaching and learning: Case of Vietnam non-public universities

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The study examined the relationship between international education accreditation and teaching and learning improvement in four non-public Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in Vietnam. With a qualitative multiple case approach, the study conducted in-depth interviews with 28 lecturers to collect data and then confirm the research model proposed. The study results showed that international accreditation positively impacts the learning and teaching activities in accredited programs of non-public universities, despite its burdensome, time and effort-consuming lecturers. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of accreditation by providing empirical evidence on the relationships between accreditation and teaching and learning and lecturer engagement. This study also provides valuable implications regarding quality assurance for researchers, university managers, policymakers, and lecturers.

1. Introduction

Vietnam has introduced education quality accreditation first in 2005 and signed into the Education Amended Law (MOET, 2019). The number of HEIs participating in quality accreditation to enhance their position in education is growing. According to the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET, 2021), 159 HEIs in Vietnam have been successfully qualified by domestic and international agencies for education accreditation using a specific set of quality criteria. While the impact of quality assurance on the performance of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is undeniable, the question is whether there is a relationship between quality accreditation on the HEI’s teaching and learning activities. On the one hand, the competition among universities is intense, and those with competitive advantages in education quality accreditation may appeal to more prospective students. Students and parents may find it less struggling and more confident to enroll in a university that has been successfully accredited (Makhoul, 2019).

On the other hand, engaging in accreditation promotes universities to enhance their governance capacity (Klasik & Hutt, 2019; Makhoul, 2019) and purposely improves teaching and learning activities. Compared with public universities funded partially or in whole by the state, non-public HEIs are concerned with accredited certification, learning, teaching activities, and the ultimate operational performance of their institutions. Non-public schools often decide by themselves one of two self-assessment or external assessment methods in accordance with the school’s resources to carry out the accreditation.
The international and regional education quality assurance systems have been largely adopted by HEIs in Vietnam (Umemiya, 2008). Some of the education quality standards that the universities mainly apply for accrediting at the program level are Quality Standards of the Southeast Asian University Network (AUN-QA), Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP), Accreditation Fund for Management Programs International Business (FIBAA) and Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET). The most applied assessment standard is AUN-QA, with 164 out of 212 programs having international accreditation (MOET, 2021). For non-public HEIs, many universities have carried out a quality assessment by inviting external accrediting organizations to conduct quality assessments. For instance, the Nguyen Tat Thanh University (NTTU) has been successfully accredited by AUN-QA for four programs (Information Technology, Business Administration, Finance - Accounting, and English Language). ABET has accredited Duy Tan University for three programs (Communication Network Engineering, Management Information Systems, and Electrical and Electronic Engineering). ACBSP has recognized five bachelor programs of Hoa Sen University to meet its quality criteria: Marketing, Business Administration, Human Resource Management, Accounting, and Finance. The International Accreditation Council of American Colleges of Business (IACBE) has recently awarded the certification to the Business Department of Saigon International University. However, the impact of the accreditation process on learning and teaching activities has yet been comprehensively examined.

This study attempted to investigate whether quality accreditation influences teaching and learning enhancement in non-public HEIs in Danang and Ho Chi Minh City. The study employed a qualitative approach, with a multiple-case study design and semi-structured interviews to collect data (Yin, 2003). Survey data were analyzed to evaluate the impact of quality accreditation on teaching and learning from the perspective of departmental managers and lecturers of non-public HEIs. The study results contribute to our understanding of education quality assessment literature and enlighten guidelines for quality assurance to education administrators, accreditation professionals, and policymakers. The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 (Reviews the basic theories and education notions, after which hypotheses are developed); Section 3 (Research methods applied for the study); Section 4 (The findings, followed by the discussions, implications); and Section 5 (Conclusions).

2. Theoretical background of accreditation

2.1. Quality assurance, assessment, and accreditation

Education quality

Scholars have struggled to agree on what quality is and how it is perceived in education. Nonetheless, education quality is understood as the philosophical and conceptual term, and Researchers have defined it contextually and in multiple approaches (Elssy, 2015; Harvey & Green, 1993; Pham & Starkey, 2016). In this study, the quality was referred to as a multi-approach concept including five components including (1) conformance to standards set by the HEI, programs or external quality body and to be accredited by a qualified accreditation agency; (2) fitness for purpose that set by HEI stakeholders, or the best practices that fulfilled the HEI and its stakeholders’ goals and expectations; (3) satisfying customers’ need that causes controversial argument on whether a student is a customer or a product, or both; and (4) quality as (traditional) perceived excellence of the target accredited (i.e., programs, institutions); (5) transformation, meaning enhancement and empowerment for student-customer or learner-orientation.
Quality assurance

El-Khawas (2013) argued that quality assurance today occupies the main place in higher education policy. There are various definitions of quality assurance depending on contexts of studies (Elassy, 2015; Welzant, Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, & Crawford, 2011). Y. C. Cheng (2003) pointed out three approaches to define quality assurance. First, quality assurance means three quality waves, including “Internal”, “Interface” and “Future”. Internal ensures the HEI internal processes, the effectiveness of learning and teaching to achieve the expectancy. The interface ensures that education services satisfy the needs of customers-students and society. Future quality assurance ensures the relevance of goal, practice, and education values to the future. Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, and Pârlea (2007, p. 48) stated that “an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating (assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and improving) the quality of a higher education system.” This study refers to quality assurance as “the policies, attitudes, actions and procedures necessary to ensure that quality is being maintained and enhanced.” Quality assurance is applied contextually with specific sense, either to imply the accomplishment of quality criteria or to refer to “assuring stakeholders that quality is being achieved (i.e., accountability)” (Woodhouse, 1999, p. 30).

Quality accreditation

Quality accreditation is defined by Woodhouse (1999, p. 32) as “an evaluation of whether an institution, a program qualifies for a certain status”. Meanwhile, accreditation is referred as “the process by which a public or non-public or private organization conducts an assessment of an educational institution or training program to formally accredit the institution or training program, achieve the set minimum standards or criteria” (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007, p. 37). The definition of accreditation is emphasized by three pair of equivalent expressions that is “evaluation” or “assessment”, “qualify” or “achieve” and “status” or “standard”. Though accreditation and assurance are similar, they are distinct activities to some extent. It is necessary to determine whether the terms, quality, quality assurance, and quality accreditation are applicable in certain research due to the differences in national, regional, and organizational contexts. In several cases, the terms quality assurance and accreditation are used interchangeably, while in others, these terms are regarded differently and separate (Welzant et al., 2011).

Assessment

Koslowski (2006, p. 284) referred to assessment in higher education as “the explicit outcome of quality thinking.” The author classified HEI assessment into four types: guided self-assessment, intermediary conducted the assessment, independent self-assessment, and provider or intermediary conducted student competencies-based assessment. The assessment is also defined as “an evaluation that results in a grade, whether numeric, literal, or descriptive”. Furthermore, the quality audit is considered as “a check on an HEI’s explicit or implicit claims about itself” (Woodhouse, 1999, pp. 31-32). Figure 1 below depicts the relationships of accreditation, assessment, and audit.

It seems that the definitions separate the three concepts (accreditation, assessment, and audit). However, according to some output-related arguments, they may coincide and be used interchangeably.
2.2. Overview of accreditation impact studies

There are quite a few studies on the impact of education quality accreditation in the world as well as in Vietnam, compared with intensive research on quality assurance. One of the leading work of Brennan and Shah (2000) studied the impact of educational quality assessment values through surveys in 14 countries and provided impact models at the four levels, including individuals (staffs), basic units (departments), institutions or systems, and through three mechanisms: rewards/recognitions, policy/structures, and cultures. The authors claimed that the external assessment had influenced institutional changes through only two mechanisms, including (1) rewards (or penalties) for institutional or program status, income (e.g., changes of student enrollment), and influence (changes of comparative rank or reputation); (2) policy and structures (e.g., policy and strategy change, organizational restructure, staff rotation) (Brennan & Shah, 2000, pp. 338-340). Research by Pham (2018) addressed both positive (changing management and evaluation culture, improving after being recommended) and negative influences (bureaucracy, waste time and resources, inertia, and reactions of some individuals). In a case study of a Vietnam university, the author assumed that external accreditation has no significant impact on improving the quality of teaching and learning, except for the self-assessment stage. According to Makhoul (2019), the need for an advanced education system extending from the West to developing countries has forced these countries to have an external, objective education assessment system to serve as a basis for institutional or program improvements. The author proved that external accreditation implementation has positive impacts on teaching and learning enhancement in Lebanese institutions. Dill (2010) discussed three drivers, including the growth of academic knowledge, information technology applied to teaching, and learning. The internationalization of HEIs in terms of students and teachers that forces universities to replace the outmoded education assessment with an advanced and independent external assessment system to direct the school’s operation in globalization.

A continuum axis can be used to describe the results on the research impact of education accreditation, with one end being a negative impact and the other a positive end. First, for the negative impact, many studies have expressed skepticism about the effect of the assessment process on teaching and learning activities and HEI’s functions in general. M. Cheng (2009) argued that while lecturers and academic staff are professionals in their sophisticated fields, accreditation activities bring many burdensome and tensions during and after the assessment process to lecturers. From the context of pre-1992 education in the UK, the author pointed out three major causes of the tension between the external accreditation process and the lecturers’ professional working style, including (1) perceived distrust (lecturers perceive not being trusted); (2) the bureaucracy of the assessment procedure (external auditors attack illegitimately on lecturers’ autonomy); and (3) waste of time (uncompensated for the heavy administrative
burdensome audit activities) (M. Cheng, 2009, pp. 199-200). Also, in the UK context, Harvey and Newton (2004) claimed that the external quality monitoring only tackles HEI’s compliance and accountability but contributed little to the student learning experience (p. 149). Instead, student learning activities have been likely rooted in internal HEI’s factors. In addition, Harvey (2005) asserted that external quality monitoring includes “overlapping and burdensome processes” and fails to improve learning and teaching (p. 271).

In the positive end of the impact axis, various studies indicated that teaching and learning improvement are influenced by the accreditation process. Dill (2000) determined that the audit process has an impact on teaching and learning in three aspects, including (1) fostering the best practice of teaching and learning by placing it into the HEI’ target; (2) designating responsibility on teaching and learning to specific levels such as staffs, departments, and institution; and (3) facilitating communication, cooperation, and development from within academic units and across institutions as well as quality auditors. In a study by De Vincenzi, Garau, and Guaglianone (2018) for the Argentina educational context, the program accreditation process enhanced curriculum quality, improved technological and logistic resources for the academic environment, and revised student assessment. The author also argued that there existed sustained evident changes from teaching-centered to learning-centered methods and outcomes (p. 63). In the context of Canadian universities, from the view of organizational learning approach, Liu and Liu (2018) found that the external quality assessment process prompted a series of planned changes, including the internal quality processes and other HEIs’ governance operations. The authors (e.g., Brennan & Shah, 2000; De Vincenzi et al., 2018; Liu & Liu, 2018) implied that the assessment process itself and its report recommendations are “enabler” or “catalyst” of the internal changes for improvement. Another work conducted by Carr, Hamilton, and Meade (2005) in the case study of a university of New Zealand showed that external quality audits positively impact teaching and learning. The author also pointed out the importance of interaction between external assessment with internal processes and policies to enhance the HEI’s performance and make the external assessment process more effective.

Thus, to put it simply, quality is about the process, and standards are about outcomes, so the job of accreditation is to check whether the educational process meets the criteria. Quality accreditation is seldom an entirely voluntary activity for academic staff and lecturers (Brennan & Shah, 2000). Varying pressure levels from external accrediting bodies, HEI’s management, and faculty leaders are inevitable. Staff must participate in the accreditation process, and they have no alternatives, whatever the interest and dedication they may spare to the tasks or likely gain in during the process. Therefore, managers and researchers are interested in determining whether external quality accreditation provides quality enhancement that outweighs the resources spent.

In Vietnam, Vietnam National University - Hanoi and Vietnam National University - Ho Chi Minh City have been pioneers in evaluating programs according to regional and international standards since 2015. The amazing progress of universities from external accreditations is becoming one of the mandatory activities in quality assurance (Pham & Nguyen, 2020). Whereas previous studies on the impact of external accreditation on teaching and learning quality have mainly been conducted in public schools in Vietnam (Mai, Nghiem, Nguyen, & Vu, 2020; Pham, 2018), there has been little study on this impact in the non-public setting. While researchers have long asserted the importance of international accreditation for an HEI on the advancement of the quality of teaching and learning activities (De Vincenzi et al., 2018; Dill, 2010; Pham & Starkey, 2016), the question is how the international accreditation influences HEI’s primary activities including teaching and learning? This study aims to fill this gap by using a qualitative approach to
investigate the relationships between international accreditation and teaching and learning activities. Hence, the research questions are how external education accreditation affects teaching and learning non-public universities in Vietnam? and how does lecturer engagement influence the entire process of accreditation?

![Figure 2. Research model](image)

3. Methodology

This study was based on a qualitative multiple-case approach (Yin, 2003). In education research, a case study is referred to as an exploration of a bounded system or a case over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information and rich in context (Merriam, 1998). This multiple case study enables the researcher to explore differences within and between cases. With this design, it is essential that the participants are appropriately selected so that the researcher can predict comparable results across subjects or predict contrasting results based on a theory. The set of questions for the semi-structured interview was designed to examine the impacts of the entire process accreditation, including the self-assessment and final report. This approach allows researchers to understand individual opinions from experiences of the accreditation.

Snowball sampling was employed so that the selected lecturer proposes a lecturer as a potential interviewee. The interviewees who have had experience in external auditor are participating in re-accreditation by one of the organizations (i.e., AUN-QA) which are mainly applied for economic, management, and engineering programs (MOET, 2021).

The triangulation approach is adopted to collect and analyze the data set to ensure the study’s reliability and accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Hussein, 2009). Denzin (1978) referred to data triangulation as the combination of different data sources that are examined at separate times, places, and persons. Inspired from Denzin (1978) and Flick (2018), this study employed a triangulated data set by collecting from (1) the opinions of different types of selected respondents-surveyed subjects (i.e., lecturers, departmental and faculty managers); (2) two different places (i.e., universities located in Danang in Central region and Ho Chi Minh City in Southern Vietnam); (3) the interviews carried out in a different period of times (i.e., summer 2020 and Spring 2021); and
(4) separately analyzing by three authors of the study.

Based on the instruction of Baxter and Jack (2008) on determining case classification and unit of analysis in multiple case studies, this multiple case study was designed as follows and depicted in Table 1. The four HEIs selected for the study have a total of 15 accredited programs which were categorized under three types of cases. The large: seven programs, the medium: three and four programs and the small: 1 program.

Table 1
Number of participants interviewed per university

| No | Case | Program | Lecturer | HEI |
|----|------|---------|----------|-----|
| 1  | Large| 7       | 14       | 1   |
| 2  | Medium| 4     | 6        | 1   |
| 3  | Medium| 3     | 6        | 1   |
| 4  | Small | 1      | 2        | 1   |
| Total| 15    | 28     | 4        |     |

Source: Adapted from De Vincenzi et al. (2018)

Table 2
Semi-structured interview questions

| No | Questions                                                                                     | Stage                        |
|----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1  | What are the impacts of accreditation self-assessment on your teaching? If there are some, tell me more detailed | Self-assessment               |
| 2  | Do you take part in the meeting to review or update the teaching method? If yes, tell me more detailed | Self-assessment               |
| 3  | In your opinion, what breakthrough is needed (creating the most value and meaning) to the program? What resources are required in order to implement the changes? | Self-assessment               |
| 4  | Do you actively take part in any professional training courses organized by the university or the faculty? If yes, please give more information about time arrangement, acquisition, usefulness, difficulties, etc. | Self-assessment / After being accredited |
| 5  | In your opinion, is the current income satisfactory? Are there benefits, bonuses, or supplements? Do you receive the necessary support from the university or the faculty for best results? Are the requirements for techniques, tools, etc., adequate for teaching? | Entire process                |
| 6  | Do you find your students learning more actively after changing the curriculum/teaching content/interaction methods? | After being accredited        |
| 7  | What policies and procedures should be added/removed to improve or change the curriculum?     | After being accredited        |
| 8  | Do you see yourself as an active participant in (planning) the external accreditation project? In the quality assurance process? In re-accreditation? If yes, please provide details. | After being accredited        |

Source: Adapted from Makhoul (2019) and Pham (2018)

While data saturation for multiple case study is more explicit, the interviewers (the study’s
authors) used probe questions to check there were no new data and no new theme emerged when conducting interviews to acknowledge the saturation point (Fusch & Ness, 2015). There are 28 lectures (some were heads of departments) that have undergone interviews. They expressed consent to be interviewed and provided with accessible time. Among interviewees, 17 are male (account for 61%), 40 years old for average, and teaching experience is about six years. All 28 lecturers have master’s degrees (100%), 15 lecturers with Ph.D. degrees (54%), and one Associate Professor (4%). There are six lecturers out of 28 respondents for each medium group, 14 are lecturers from the large, and the remaining two lectures from small case universities. Interviews were conducted openly, lasting an average of 20 - 35 minutes mostly online and in convenient locations. These respondents are guaranteed anonymity, and personal information and content are not shared. Eight questions were prepared for the respondents to discuss. However, the interview format was facilitated to open the discussion when necessary (Table 2). The research issues were included in the interviews to get the respondents’ opinions. The interview questions and respondents’ comments have been translated into English by the authors and checked for equivalent meanings by an independent lecturer on Business English. Respondents are referred to as LN, LQ, LV, and LS to preserve their anonymity and facilitate study reporting.

4. Result and discussion

4.1. Result

The interview results are shown in Appendix A. Respondents have a variety of content and expressions answers. Most notably, most respondents were surprised with how the accreditation process stores documents named “proved evidence.” Many expressed that “This is an effective way to organize document storage and helps a lot for later retrieval.” The following themes are analyzed and reported.

Impacts on teaching

For impacts on teaching contents, over half of the responses (56%) showed that they have perceived that the preparation for self-assessment report impacted their teaching. Responses were:

Thanks to the preparation [self-assessment report] against the quality criteria, I need to improve my teaching. I have added some updated content while teaching and included practical assignments in my course. (LN1)

Of course, to be accredited, we must change. Changes are made by lecturers like me, by the department, and by faculty. I changed a lot “small contents” in the subject I oversee, such as case studies, case assignments. (LH1)

Improve and update or change of […] teaching activities, curriculums programs] are required without accreditation. So, I am not active [in that]. I am waiting for my leader [department, faculty] to appoint me to do. (LV1)

[…] currently, I am occupied by teaching and collecting evidence for re-accreditation. I made a lot of improvements last time. Do I need to […] improve in this time? (LV2)

These data reflect the general belief about the impacts of accreditation on teaching. Thanks to the preparation for self-assessment, lecturers and managers review the teaching activities and actively improve. But there exist, reluctant lecturers waiting for the assignment or waiting for periodic changes.

For impacts on teaching methods, about two-thirds (61%) of respondents answered that
they attended the meetings to update teaching methods. The lecturers found that the current teaching methods, to some extent, are not cached up with IT and a multimedia application. Interactive learning, online learning, e-library, etc., are in operation, so most lecturers have improved teaching methods. Respondents said:

I see these meetings are so important. Personally, [to me, and my colleague] … I must take some course using teaching aids such as blackboards, making video-clip… for input into my lecture. (LN2)

My departments have had updating examination assessments for the next academic years … and our lecturers are committing to the improvement of innovative teaching methods (LV3)

My teams and I have submitted a proposal on “online consultant” for students facing academic matters such as project topics, writing English, etc. (LH2)

**Breakthrough for program improvements**

About 75% (21 respondents) believed that strengthening the connection and alliance with businesses and professional associations in training (through business teachers) will help graduates have practical knowledge and meet the accreditation criteria.

About 29% (09 respondents) of comments talked about exchange programs at prestigious foreign universities or inviting foreign teachers to participate in their department teaching. Some other teachers said: “I am interested in professional training courses, such as a publishing scientific articles seminar”, and “There should be more intensive courses to using Quantitative methods in data analysis”.

Another respondent commented:

[No matter what, no matter what breakthrough you want to make] …then you need to empower the faculty, the department. (LN3)

The biggest and most important breakthrough is to see lecturers as professionals and researchers… [ no extra assignment like paperwork for the accreditation]. (LN4, LN6)

**Professional developing programs**

Over half of responses (61% or 17 respondents) showed that they have not deeply engaged in training with the reason of “not absorbing all the training contents” or “Can’t use it yet”. Some complained about time arrangement and duration of the training. However, some other lecturers said:

I am interested in professional training courses, such as “how to publish scientific articles seminar”, and “Quantitative methods in data analysis”. (LV4, LH14)

Of course, lecturers should attend [training course] to update new teaching methods such as CDIO, OBE, and rubric... I asked my lecturers to attend, and we discussed excitedly. (LH3)

More importantly, three respondents stated that:

More training courses on the quality standards and methods of developing [detailed] course curriculum should be organized (LN5, LH4)

[…QA] accreditation process is significant in program re-evaluation. The report and recommendations of […QA] are beneficial information to study and plan for
implementation. But the university and faculty should organize more seminars and training on post-accreditation improvement work. (LH5)

**Impacts on learning**

This topic was the most concern for lecturers and department managers. 75% or 21 respondents agreed with the positive impacts of being accredited on student learning outcomes. While commenting much on measuring the effect, most of the participating lecturers felt that there were many ongoing positive changes in students’ learning activities and learning outcomes.

Because after being recognized [by...] we [...] have done a lot and are doing more in terms of the academic environment, improving the curriculum, replacing old materials and textbooks. So… learning activities are enhanced. (LH6)

[...] saw how improved the classroom is now, teachers and students interact vividly, the learning atmosphere is vibrant and more students debates and presentations. (LN6)

I am confident in the learning activities. Students can communicate with me and my colleagues [...] anytime and anywhere through Learning Management System (LMS) or other social platforms. (LV4, LH13)

E-library is abundant, with multiple materials and lectures available for downloading (many participants)

For my course [...] field trip to [...] was a meaningful class. Class is not restricted to classroom and theory-reading. We [...] have suggested a change for some curriculums in our program. (LH7)

More significantly, some lecturers expressed confidently that the management of learning activities is systematized and digitized: student marks, attendance, subject registration, extracurricular activities, etc., and based on that system; the faculty can support students throughout the program.

**Policy and procedure change**

There are only four responses for this topic. The lack of comments can be attributed to lecturers’ lack of interest on governance, policies, and procedures. However, two participants suggested empowering the faculty to improve the program and course curriculum. Responses were

- Strengthening the role of the faculty (and university) Science and Training Council to advise the program and teaching method improvements. (LS1)

- Establishing a standing group to watch quality improvement and organize training classes (mandatory) for teachers on quality improvement according to accreditation criteria. (LV5)

- Without empowerment, we should not change policy and procedure for changing program or course curriculum. (LH11, LH8)

**Active engagement**

While less than a quarter (21% or six respondents) are considered active participants in the accreditation process, most lecturers agree that it is necessary to synchronously implement post-accreditation improvement throughout the university so that all departments and faculties can join the process. At the same time, the university needs to promote the image of quality assurance to attract prospective students, motivate lecturers to continuously improve teaching activities. Half of the lecturers joined the team because the faculty assigned them, and they carried out the task
unwillingly. The problem is troublesome for the university and the faculty. Respondents stated that:

Participating in non-teaching activities will put more pressure on the lecturers. Lacking a bonus mechanism, lecturers may refuse to participate. I am being overloaded with my teaching duty. (LH9)

International accreditation requires a lot of time, money, and effort, while the incoming volume of student enrollment is unclear. In my opinion, these resources should be set aside to increase the enrollment [and staff salary] for non-public universities. (LN6)

The (accreditation) self-assessment and improvement afterward are overloaded by paperwork, seeking proof of professionalism. (LN4)

Contributing to continuous improvement or PDCA takes more time and effort to implement. There should be clear instructions so that teachers do not avoid planning for improvement or follow the requirements from faculty, because teachers are currently overloaded in teaching and guiding students.

Furthermore, lecturers mentioned that their participation was still small in the improvement process after being accredited. Some responses were:

I have attended several Faculty meetings in the past year, but I am not active in improving. I think these things belong to the university and the faculty. (LH10)

[…] should outsource this re-accreditation. Lecturers will focus on improving their courses. (LS2)

4.2. Discussion

The results of the interviews were analyzed to understand lecturer perception on the impact of the external accreditation on learning and teaching activities. The findings indicate that the accredited university has more than a few significant positive changes on teaching and learning, including (1) improving and updating substances of lectures, teaching materials and references; (2) application advanced teaching methods, and (3) upgrading the associations with industries professional sectors. Firstly, the self-assessment process required universities to provide evidence for meeting the criteria of teaching lectures, such as updating, systematic and logical, and international integration of content, in Self-assessment reports. Therefore, lecturers should continuously improve what they need to educate and communicate through lectures as well as relevant materials. The accreditation (e.g., AUN-QA) insists on a 02 year-updating period to achieve the quality standards. Secondly, among the criteria that universities must ensure is the facilities or academic environment and infrastructure for teaching, learning, and research activities of lecturers and students. Thus, lecturers must enhance innovative teaching tools such as information technology (IT) and methods such as interactive learning and online learning. Finally, one of the remarkable changes in teaching is that the respondents acknowledged was the involvement of stakeholders in the teaching process, rather than the traditional way with the two-party association of lecturers and students. They are corporation executives, invited academics and researchers from prestigious foreign universities or professional associations in training.

There are three positive effects on learning that are recognized by all respondents: improvement of academic knowledge, student skills, and practical work experience. Obviously, the result of this increase is a positive change in teaching.
The study results were in line with previous studies on the positive impact of the quality accreditation process on teaching and learning activities (De Vincenzi et al., 2018; Dill, 2000; Makhoul, 2019) on lecturer challenges and tensions (M. Cheng, 2009). Teaching in internationally accredited training programs takes more effort for lecturers to meet the demands of continuous improvement in all content, methods, and qualifications. Therefore, there are also opinions about difficulties in procedures, less time, and unclear allowances of lecturers.

This research model was proposed and verified by the qualitative multiple-case method. Data were collected by semi-structured interview, following the saturation principle, with four non-public universities in Vietnam. The study’s novelty is the theoretical research model proposed to investigate the impacts of external accreditation on teaching and learning activities. So far, this study is among the first empirical investigations into the impact of accreditation on teaching and learning activities in the context of non-public universities.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

These study findings have significant implications for understanding how the external accreditation process influences teaching and learning. By empirically affirming the positive impacts of the accreditation on the core activities of the non-public university, the study can serve as a reference for HEIs, educational policymakers, accrediting agencies, and particularly lecturers involved in the process of accreditation.

The study findings suggest practical guidance for HEIs and lecturers in the following aspects. First, although it may bring unavoidable troublesome, the evaluation process impact positively on teaching and learning activities and provides plenty of improvements, such as: improving IT infrastructure and application; updating content and enhancing teaching methods, transforming into a learner-oriented environment, improving internal relations between faculty and university’s staff.

Second, a successful accreditation process will enhance the prestige and image of the university. The competitive advantages in non-public education will benefit the stakeholders and subsequently, society. The HEI should implement a promotion strategy both internally and externally to strengthen its image and affirm its quality.

Third, to ensure smooth and successful external accreditation and fulfill the criteria of the set of quality standards, the importance is the harmony between the task assignment and imposition for lecturers with the reward, financial and emotional support, and the recognition of the university and faculty managers. Particularly, for the HEIs that are planning to conduct the external accreditation or facing barriers in the ongoing process, managers may apply these therapies: (1) organize more training courses on assessment activities, innovative teaching methods including interactive teaching skills; (2) support lecturers with extra income, as well as having time for teaching, researching, participating in accreditation, improving and enhancing teaching methods.

Fourth, it is necessary for lecturers to actively engage in professional improvement courses, training on quality accreditation and assessment. The significance is the cooperation and exchange between lecturers and accreditation experts. The cooperation may facilitate the accreditation work, which eventually supports the university to improve quality and affirm its prestige.

This study still has some limitations. Firstly, the number of interviewees is small, and at the same time, this study only focuses on lecturers from four universities. In the future, it is necessary to expand the number of interviewees from various HEIs and other stakeholders. Secondly, the data collected is cross-sectional and does not fully reflect the change over time of
the individual participating in the testing process. Future studies will have the opportunity to explore this variation.

The ultimate goal of external quality assurance is to help universities reform processes and raise standards over time to ensure cutting-edge academics, continually improve the quality of teaching and learning. This research provides empirical evidence to understand how external accreditation brings value to a university through teaching and learning activities and lecturer involvement. Acquiring an accreditation certificate is only the first step in the quality assurance journey of a university.

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