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Impact Study of Programme Assessment at Three Universities in Vietnam: Students' Perspectives

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Abstract

The study examines the impact of the AUN-QA assessment at the programme level on quality improvement from the students' perspective. Data was collected through a survey questionnaire distributed to 439 participating students in the third and final years of the three programmes from three universities that were assessed and recognised by AUN-QA in 2018 and 2019. The findings indicate very positive changes observed by students during the AUN-QA assessment process at the programme level. Most students observed changes in curriculum design and development, teaching methods, student assessment methods, equipment and facilities, and research while few students observed changes in academic staff, support staff, and student support services. These changes appeared to be attributed to the adaptation of the OBE approach by the universities in this study as well as the requirements of the AUN-QA for programme assessment. However, the study also shows a difference in the students' self-reported evaluation or observation of changes at the three universities. It is suggested that further studies should be conducted using more direct methods of measuring changes such as direct assessment of student learning for evaluating the impacts of external QA. Another research applying a qualitative approach (such as interview) could provide more in-depth information on the impacts of AUN-QA assessment from the students' perspectives.

Keywords: assessment of study programme, AUN-QA Guideline to assessment, students' perspectives, impact study.

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1. Introduction

Higher education accreditation in Vietnam only started five years ago in 2015 after nearly 20 years of development. The government's initial attempt to external quality assurance was on institutional accreditation in 2003. For the programme assessment and accreditation, the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), through regional and world-funded projects, encourages universities to participate in the regional and international assessment such as AUN-QA, ABET, CTI, and AACSP. Of these standards, AUN-QA Guideline for assessment at the programme level was common for most universities in Vietnam. However, very few studies have been done in Vietnam to evaluate the impact of the AUN-QA assessment, a regional agency, on the programmes assessed.

Many studies have been conducted worldwide to examine the impacts of external quality assurance (EQA) (in all methods: assessment, audit, and accreditation) at both institutional and programmatic levels. These studies are also varied and different as regards participants of the studies (QA managers, academics, top university leaders, QA practitioners, and students) as well as research designs (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods). Research topics are also very diverse for different types of higher education institutions (public and private). In general, there are three groups of impacts have been reported from these studies: expected impacts, undesirable impacts, and mixed impacts.

Impacts of external quality assurance

T.H. Pham (2018) reviewing related literature on the impacts of external QA has identified certain positive impacts and negatives impacts. Three key contributions of EQA include a cultural change in management and evaluation, improvements as a result of external recommendations, and engagement of various stakeholders in quality conversation. For negative impacts, three themes were identified, including bureaucratic, expensive and time-consuming, resistance and distrust by academics and professionals, and limited improvements on teaching and learning (Pham, 2018). She concluded that EQA current practices have "multi-dimensional impacts" (p. 6) on both institutions and programmes being assessed.

Some studies have also reported mixed impacts of EQA. It is evident in an impact study of the national QA system on a university in Australia by Baldwin (1997). On one hand, significant gains were found in three aspects: more rigorous course approval procedures, increased awareness of students' perspectives on teaching and learning, and a perceptible shift in the climate as a result of combining EQA requirements and IQA of the university (pp. 59-60). On the other hand, external processes were found to negatively influence quality of the university:

Excessive bureaucratisation of procedures, with associated pedantry and legalism; a greatly increased administrative workload for academic staff taking them away from their 'core business; a formalism that was stifling creativity and individuality, the very qualities that universities should foster; a de-professionalization of academic staff, associated with a policing mentality and a lack of trust. (pp. 60-61)

Similarly, Wahlén (2002) reported both desirable and undesirable impacts of EQA practices in Sweden higher education. The audit approach applied in Sweden education were found to facilitate the development of policy and structure at the institutional level but also promote a tendency of standardisation and the potential of counteracting the further development of quality work in universities and colleges due to the exclusion of reviews carried out as a process of internal quality assurance and other measures. Mixed impacts of a quality monitoring system were also found in work by Stensaker, Langfeldt, Harvey, Huisman, and Westerheijden (2011). Positive impacts were found on new routines and procedures, on the scholarly discussion of learning and teaching, and on the quality of education and teaching, as well as on staff engagement in learning and teaching questions. However, their study also cautioned against a real danger that QA mechanisms could be inefficient and aimed at developing processes that stimulated bureaucracy, organisation, and regulation far more than they addressed core issues according to academics' and students' perspectives.

In summary, positive impacts from quality assurance processes in the extant literature mainly focused on strengthening quality structure and quality work, improving discussion, conversation, and cooperation with academics units that could lead to teaching improvements. However, external quality assurance approaches have not necessarily been found to improve the student experience or transform quality in the tertiary sector (Shah, 2012). Kristensen (2010)

argued that the success of the external process in quality improvement was reliant on well-developed internal quality systems or on the culture, regardless of the above-identified positive impacts of various external quality monitoring approaches. External audits and other forms of external evaluation could serve as a driver for change and improvement in processes, but well-developed internal quality assurance and individual institutions are key to transformation in quality.

The quality assurance framework in Vietnamese higher education

The Vietnamese QA system

According to the Higher Education Law in Vietnam (2019), higher education institutions (HEIs) and study programmes are required to be accredited every five years. In Vietnam, accreditation is the chosen national QA mechanism (Do et al., 2017). For both institutional and programmatic accrediation, the MoET decided to translate the AUN-QA standards to be used for Vietnamese higher education system. The Vietnamese version will be used by HEIs who choose to be accredicted by Vietnamese accrediting agencies (MoET, 2016). Because of the similarities of the Vietnamese standards and AUN-QA standards, many HEIs have chosen to be assessed by AUN-QA, which is a regional external QA agency and is believed to be "better" than national recognition. Furthermore, the availability of AUN-QA programme standards soon in 2004 also contributed to the popularity of these quality standards in Vietnam, a member of the ASEAN University network. Twelve years later, the MoET has just recently translated the standards (version 3) into Vietnamese in 2016.

International programme accreditations

There have been attempts in Vietnam to align with international trends in QA at both national and institutional levels. Vietnam is a member of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), the Asian-Pacific Quality Network (APQN), and AUN-QA. Besides MoET quality standards, the government encourages HEIs to apply for international accreditation, including AUN-QA, ABET, FIBAA, and ACBSP.

One hundred and forty seven programmes from HEIs were assessed by AUN-QA as of 31 May, 2020. In early 2015, the University of Science of VNU-Hanoi registered for AUN-QA institutional accreditation, which is the first case of institutional accreditation in the region. The University of Technology of VNU-HCMC and FPT University was applied for ABET accreditation of their programmes. Some other universities such as the University of Technology of VNU-HCMC and Hoa Sen University pursued ACBSP accreditation (Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs).

As of 30 May 2020, 307 study programmes have been assessed in Vietnam (Table 1), of which 186 programmes were assessed by international QA agencies.

Table 1. Number of study programmes being assessed and recognised

No.	Accrediting agencies	Number of programmes
I.	**Vietnamese accrediting agencies**	**121**
II.	**Foreign agencies**	**186**
2.1	ASEAN University Network – Quality Assurance	147
2.2	Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology	6
2.3	Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs	6
2.4	Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation	9
2.5	Commission des Titres d'Ingénieur	16
2.6	Other agencies	2
	Total	**307**

Source: Vietnam Education Quality Management Agency, 2020

Table 1 shows that the number of programmes that have been assessed and recognised by AUN-QA outnumbers those by other agencies including Vietnamese accrediting agencies.

Several factors may contribute to the popularity of international programme accreditations in Vietnamese higher education. It could be the absence of a national set of quality standards for

programmes until 2016. Another driver for this tendency is the international supports for local universities to pursue international accreditations. Yet, as concluded by Do et al. (2017), "underlying the pursuit of international accreditation in the Vietnamese higher education are matters beyond quality" (p. 204). International recognition of Vietnam education and student mobility in the ASEAN region are among the motives for the trend. International accreditation is an important "selling point" of a programme. The international accreditation status helps HEIs to attract both local and foreign students (Do et al., 2017).

Aim of the study

This project aims to assess the impact of external quality assessment, i.e. AUN-QA on the study programmes. It also offers suggestions to improve quality for universities and accrediting activities in Vietnam.

The specific objectives of the study include: (1) exploring the changes observed by students during the AUN-QA assessment process which includes both the self-assessment process by the universities and the site visit by AUN-QA assessment team; (2) identifying any association between student perspectives at the three universities and the changes they reported; and (3) informing policy makers on the possible development of quality assurance in Vietnam.

Participants and research methods

Data were collected through a survey questionnaire distributed to students who were studying in the third year and fourth year in their undergraduate programmes which have been assessed and certified by AUN-QA in 2018 and 2019. Out of 17 programmes that were assessed during the two years, three programmes were selected purposefully to join the study so that they could represent three different disciplines at three different universities: (a) Education, (b) Finance-Banking, and (c) Chemical Engineering.

1.1. Participants

Table 2. The number of participating students

HEIs	**N**
University A – Finance – Banking	96
University B – Education	157
University C – Chemical Engineering	186
Total	**439**

There were 439 students in the third and final years of the three programmes (Education, Finance-Banking, and Chemical Engineering) of the three universities (A, B, and C) participating in the survey.

1.2. Number of assessed programmes at the three universities

The total number of study programmes assessed and recognised by AUN-QA as of August 2019 at the three participating universities is as follows:

Table 3. Number of the programmes assessed by AUN-QA at the three universities

No.	*HEIs*	*Total number of programmes assessed by MoET*	*Total number of programmes assessed by AUN-QA*	*Total number of programmes assessed by other international standards*
1	University A	0	2	0
2	University B	0	6	0
3	University C	0	9	3

Source: Vietnam Education Quality Management Agency, 2019

1.3. The survey

The questionnaire covers the changes students can observe in major aspects related to AUN-QA criteria: Curriculum design and development; Teaching and learning approach; Student

assessment; Academic staff; Support staff; Student support services; Teaching and learning facilities and equipment/infrastructure; and Research. The rest of the survey questionnaire items used in this study were adapted from the European impact evaluation project (Bejan et al., 2018; Leiber et al., 2018; Leiber et al., 2018) which were asked for changes in course types used in assessed programmes; perceived initiatives of changes; QA instruments; constructive alignment between student assessment and learning outcomes; observability of QA effects and quality improvements; attitude towards internal QA and external QA; perceived attitude of leadership towards QA; assessment of expenditure/benefit for programme assessment; challenges during programme assessment; and suggestions for QA activities. This paper focuses on the changes students might observe in the eight major aspects of AUN-QA criteria, in the course types used in the programmes, and who or what initiated the changes they observed.

1.4. Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to calculate the percentages of students of each programmes responded to each item in the questionnaire. In this paper, students were asked to report on any changes they might observe and the levels of change in the study programmes and course types. They were also asked to report on what or who are drivers of changes.

To identify if there is any difference between students'perspectives at the three universities and the reported changes at each level, chi square tests were used and reported.

2. Results

Observed changes in study programmes

Table 4 shows the changes that students could observe in the AUN-QA assessment of study programmes.

Table 4. Observed changes in HEIs and study programmes across the three universities and presentation of results from chi-square analysis with three groups of students

No.	Observed changes and level of changes		HEI A	HEI B	HEI C	χ2 (df)	p	Cramer's V
1	Curriculum design and development**	Major	15,6 %	22,3 %	35,5 %	27.170 (6)	.000	.177
		Partial	55,2 %	44,6 %	45,7 %			
		Unchanged	6,3 %	17,8 %	7,0 %			
		No opinion/ information	23,0 %	15,2 %	11,9 %			
2	Teaching and learning approach*	Major	25,0 %	29,9 %	33,9 %	16.430 (6)	.012	.138
		Partial	52,1 %	43,4 %	46,2 %			
		Unchanged	10,4 %	20,3 %	7,2 %			
		No opinion/ information	12,5 %	6,3 %	12,4 %			
3	Student assessment *	Major	31,3 %	22,3 %	29,6 %	16.458 (6)	.011	.138
		Partial	43,8 %	43,3 %	46,2 %			
		Unchanged	13,5 %	25,5 %	10,8 %			
		No opinion/ information	11,4 %	8,9 %	13,4 %			
4	Academic staff**	Major	20,8 %	18,5 %	21,5 %	20.519 (6)	.002	.155
		Partial	31,3 %	38,9 %	41,5 %			
		Unchanged	24,0 %	34,4 %	19,4 %			
		No opinion/ information	24,0 %	8,2 %	27,8 %			
5	Support staff**	Major	12,5 %	10,2 %	24,2 %	35.159 (6)	.000	.202
		Partial	38,5 %	31,8 %	38,2 %			
		Unchanged	20,8 %	42,7 %	19,4 %			
		No opinion/ information	28,1 %	15,3 %	18,3 %			

6	Student support services**	Major Partial Unchanged No opinion/ information	14,6 % 41,7 % 22,9 % 20,8 %	10,2 % 46,5 % 28,7 % 14,7 %	30,1 % 40,3 % 13,4 % 16,2 %	30.049 (6)	.000	.188
7	Teaching and learning facilities and equipment/ infrastructure**	Major Partial Unchanged No opinion/ information	21,9 % 30,2 % 32,3 % 15,6 %	17,8 % 42,7 % 30,6 % 8,9 %	36,6 % 44,1 % 6,5 % 12,9 %	49.747 (6)	.000	.240
8	Research**	Major Partial Unchanged No opinion/ information	6,3 % 41,7 % 18,8 % 33,3 %	15,9 % 42,7 % 21,0 % 20,4 %	34,4 % 44,6 % 5,3 % 15,6 %	50.388 (6)	.000	.245

** Groups are significantly different (p < .05)*
*** Groups are significantly different (p < .01)*

The changes (major and partial) observed in the three universities from the students' point of view are visually presented as follows:

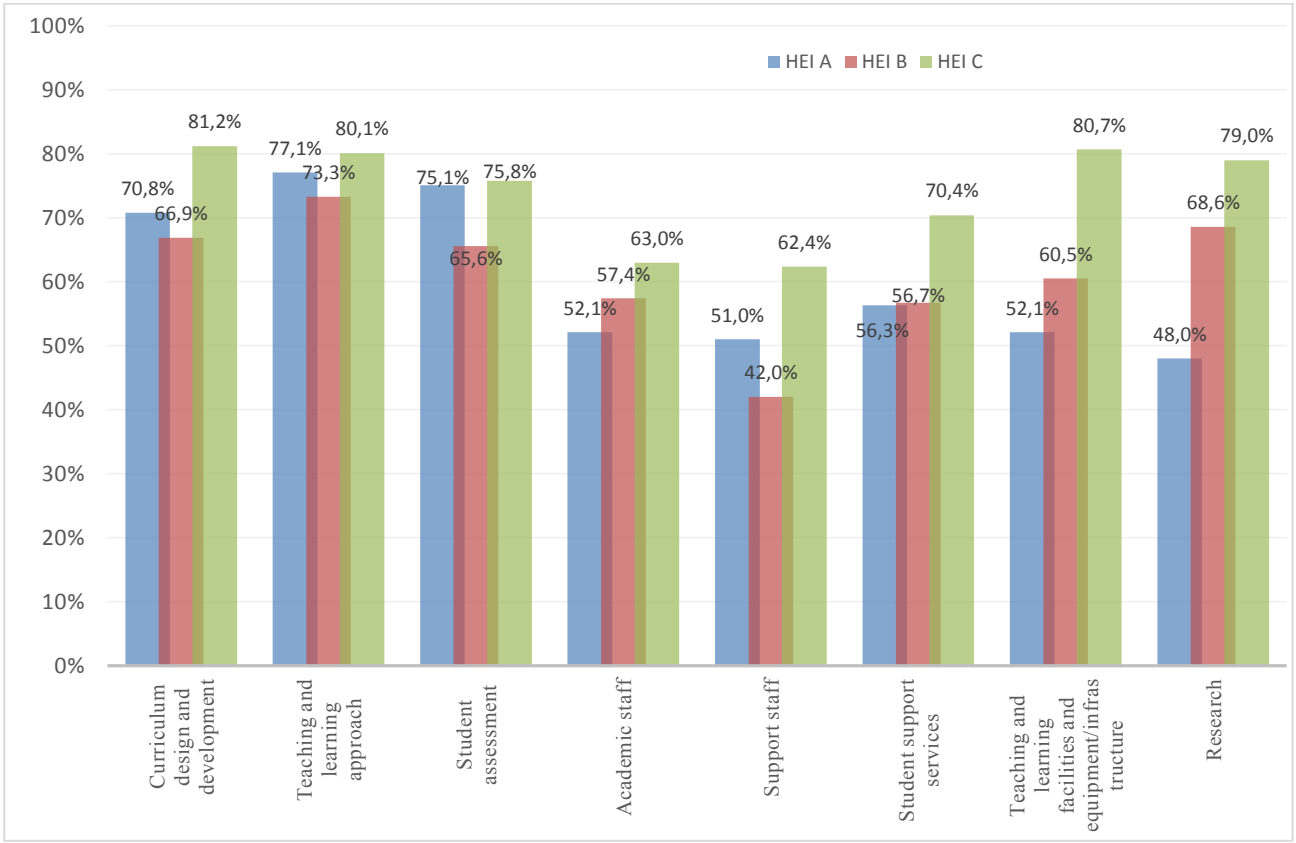

Fig. 1. Changes (at the major or partial levels) observed by students

Figure 1 shows that the students at University C observed the most (major and partial) changes in almost all surveyed aspects. Most of them can observe changes in curriculum design and development (81.2 %) and also changes for teaching and learning facilities and infrastructure (81.7 %). In other aspects, the students of University C also observed more changes than those from the other two universities. For University A, students observed the most change for teaching and learning approaches (77.1 %), and limited changes were reported for research (48 %), among those

of the other two universities. Not many students (less than 50-42 %) at University B self-reported that they could observe changes related to support staff (42.0 %) but in research (68.6 %) which is relatively higher than that of University A.

As also seen in Table 4, the comparison of the three groups of students at three universities in general shows significant differences between the three groups in reporting changes they observed at their universities. Figure 1 shows the details of differences.

The survey results show that to some extent students studying at the three programmes share some similarity in reporting their observation of changes most in curriculum design and development, teaching methods, student assessment, equipment and facilities, and research. Few students observed changes in academic staff, support staff, and student support services.

Observed changes in course types in the programmes by students

For the study, students were asked to report on any changes they observed in course types used in the programmes and the initiatives of the changes. Table 5 shows the survey results of changes students observed as regards course types.

Table 5. Recent changes related to course types and presentation of results from chi-square analysis with three groups of students

No	Course types.	Level of changes	HEI A	HEI B	HEI C	χ2 (df)	p	Cramer's V
1	Lecturing **	Increasing	34,4 %	15,3 %	43,5 %	43.138	.000	.223
		Decreasing	22,9 %	46,5 %	28,5 %	(6)		
		Unchanged	31,3 %	31,8 %	18,8 %			
		No opinion /informatio	10,4 %	6,4 %	9,2 %			
2	Interactive courses *	Increasing	64,6 %	50,3 %	63,4 %	15.052	.020	.132
		Decreasing	6,3 %	19,7 %	11,8 %	(6)		
		Unchanged	16,7 %	21,0 %	19,4 %			
		No opinion/ information	12,5 %	8,9 %	5,2 %			
3	Courses with practice-related elements **	Increasing	27,1 %	40,1 %	59,7 %	62.770	.000	.269
		Decreasing	7,3 %	22,9 %	10,2 %	(6)		
		Unchanged	37,5 %	28,7 %	21,5 %			
		No opinion/ information	28,1 %	8,2 %	8,6 %			
4	Courses with project-based elements**	Increasing	22,9 %	25,5 %	5,7 %	51.003	.000	.243
		Decreasing	9,4 %	24,8 %	10,8 %	(6)		
		Unchanged	36,5 %	31,2 %	22,6 %			
		No opinion/ information	31,3 %	18,5 %	13,9 %			
5	Online courses**	Increasing	18,8 %	28,0 %	18,3 %	30.997	.000	.190
		Decreasing	11,5 %	17,8 %	24,7 %	(6)		
		Unchanged	37,5 %	39,5 %	25,8 %			
		No opinion/ information	32,3 %	14,7 %	31,2 %			
6	Courses with simulations**	Increasing	17,7 %	11,5 %	*52,2 %*	78.555	.000	.304
		Decreasing	9,4 %	24,8 %	10,8 %	(6)		
		Unchanged	36,5 %	29,9 %	19,9 %			
		No opinion/ information	26,5 %	*33,8 %*	17,2 %			

** Groups are significantly different (p < .05)*
*** Groups are significantly different (p < .01)*

Students were asked to select among the four levels of change (increasing, decreasing, unchanged, and no information/no answer).

For University A, the highest percentages (or most students selected) were for:

- increasing: interactive courses (64,6 %), lecturing (34,4 %)
- unchanged: courses with practice-related elements (37,5 %), courses with project-based elements (36,5 %), online courses (37,5 %), and courses with simulations (36,5 %)

For University B, the results were as follows:

- Increasing: interactive instruction (50,3 %), courses with practice-related elements (40,3 %),
- Decreasing: lecturing (46,5 %),
- Unchanged: online courses (39,5 %), courses with project-based elements (31,2%), and courses with simulations (33,8 %)

For University C, the results were as follows:

- Increasing: lecturing (43,5%), interactive courses (63,4 %), courses with practice-related elements (59,7%), courses with simulations (52,2 %)
- Unchanged: courses with project-based elements (22,6 %)
- No idea/information: online courses (31,2 %)

At University A, 64,6 % of students agreed that interactive courses were used increasingly while a third of students observed an increase in lecturing as a method of teaching in the Bachelor programme of Finance and Banking. Approximately 30 % of students reported unchanged for most of the teaching methods and approaches. At University B, students observed different changes in course types used in the Bachelor programme of Education. Unlike what was reported at University A, for 46,5 % of students at University B, lectures were used less while 40,3 % of students observed more courses with practice-related elements. Similar to the results at University A, more interactive courses were used in the programme for 50,3 % of students – the highest percentage. For the rest of the teaching methods, students were also divided with an almost equal number of students reported unchanged (around 30 %). To some extent, students at Universities A and B share certain similarities in reporting changes in the course types used in the undergraduate programmes of Finance and Banking and Education. For University C, the patterns seem to be different and more positive. Modern ways of education delivery were used increasingly in the Bachelor programme of Chemical Engineering: interactive courses (for 63,4 % of students), course with practice-related elements (59,7 %), and courses with simulations (52,2 %). Only project-based teaching and learning was reported to be unchanged.

For comparing the differences of the three groups of students at three universities, chi-square analyses with three groups of students were used. Table 5 presents the results from chi-square analyses showing significant differences between the three groups in reporting changes they observed in course types. In general, changes taken place at University C tend to be the most positive.

Drivers of observed changes

Students were also asked about who and what initiated the changes in course types. Table 6 shows the results of students self-reported about who or what initiated a lecturer to change his/her teaching methods:

Table 6. Self-reported drivers of observed changes in course types and presentation of results from chi-square analysis with three groups of students

No.	Who or what initiated the changes	Levels of change	HEI A	HEI B	HEI C	χ2 (df)	p	Cramer's V
1	Students**	Major	26,0 %	25,5 %	50,0 %	40.026	.000	.214
		Partial	53,1 %	54,1 %	36,0 %	(6)		
		Unchanged	9,4 %	15,3 %	5,4 %			
		No opinion/ information	11,5 %	5,1 %	8,6 %			
2	Other academic staff**	Major	20,8 %	13,4 %	45,7 %	65.926	.000	.275
		Partial	53,1 %	56,7 %	33,3 %	(6)		
		Unchanged	2,1 %	14,6 %	4,8 %			

		No opinion/ information	24,0 %	15,2 %	16,1 %			
3	Board of Rectors**	Major	32,3 %	13,4 %	52,2 %	69.518	.000	.283
		Partial	43,8 %	48,4 %	2,6 %	(6)		
		Unchanged	3,1 %	17,2 %	8,1 %			
		No opinion/ information	20,8 %	21,0 %	17,2 %			
4	External quality assurance (accreditation)**	Major	26,0 %	23,6 %	51,1 %	39.320	.000	.214
		Partial	44,8 %	42,7 %	23,7 %	(6)		
		Unchanged	6,3 %	12,1 %	5,4 %			
		No opinion/ information	22,9 %	21,7 %	19,9 %			
5	Internal quality assurance (from the results of surveys)**	Major	16,7 %	15,9 %	44,1 %	45.651	.000	.230
		Partial	47,9 %	47,1 %	28,5 %	(6)		
		Unchanged	7,3 %	12,7 %	8,1 %			
		No opinion/ information	28,1 %	24,2 %	18,3 %			
6	Legal regulations**	Major	16,7 %	14,0 %	29,6 %	36.373	.000	.205
		Partial	34,4 %	31,8 %	31,2 %	(6)		
		Unchanged	11,5 %	27,4 %	8,1 %			
		No opinion/ information	37,5 %	26,8 %	31,1 %			
7	Employers**	Major	13,5 %	17,2 %	32,3 %	32.707	.000	.197
		Partial	43,8 %	40,1 %	44,6 %	(6)		
		Unchanged	8,3 %	18,5 %	4,3 %			
		No opinion/ information	34,3 %	24,2 %	18,8 %			

*** Groups are significantly different (p < .01)*

The results indicate that multiple sources are attributed to how academic staff changed their teaching methods. In other words, most of the students perceived that all the drivers surveyed had a certain level of influence on observed changes in teaching methods. The results show that the drivers of the changes (major and partial) as perceived by students at the three universities are somehow similar. For University A, the three major initiatives for changes came from students (79.1 %), from other academics (73.9 %), and from the Board of Rectors (76.1 %). For University B, the initiatives for changes also came from students (79.6 %), from other academics (70.1 %), and from external quality assurance (66.1 %). For University C, the initiatives for changes came from students (86 %), from other academics (78 %), and from employers (76.9 %). Despite the disperencies in the percentages, the two major initiatives of changes in the teaching methods originated from students and other academic staff as perceived by most students at all three universities (for 70-86 %). They differed as regards the third source of changes: the board of rectors at University A, external QA at University B, and employers at University C. This possibly can tell a different story related to internal quality assurance systems at these universities and the role of these stakeholders in triggering changes for the university (such as course types in this study).

Findings presented in Table 6 show that University C are significantly different to the other two in terms of the degree of impact, the percentages of students reported "major change" are higher than "partial change" compared to the other two universities. A relatively small proportion of students that did not have information and did not respond to all surveyed content varied from 5.1 % (in University B as regards the changes initiated from students) to 37.5 % (in University A as regards "legislative changes"). The results of chi square analyses also show the differences between three groups of students at Universities A and B in reporting drivers of changes. This somehow reflects the current situation of how many and how much students participated in and knew about the activities of the University. The number of students who had limited information related to what and who initiated the changes could be explained as follows: (1) either these students were not interested in the activities at the university level or (2) they were not directly informed of the related activities.

3. Discussion

The article presents the results of surveying students' perspective on the changes during the AUN-QA assessment process at the programme level by recording observed changes. Regarding the changes observed by students in the assessment process, students of all three universities perceived that there were changes (major and partial) in most of the surveyed aspects: curriculum design and development, teaching and learning methods/approaches, student assessment methods, academic staff, support staff, student support services, teaching supporting equipment and facilities, and research. These are positive changes at the programme level. This is similar to the results in the study of Buwalda, Braspenning, Dijk, and Visser (2018). All three bachelor programmes were re-designed to reflect outcomes-based education pursued by AUN-QA (AUN, 2015). This education paradigm shift requires universities in Vietnam to declare programme learning outcomes and ensure the constructive alignment suggested by Biggs (2014) between the programme learning outcomes, teaching and learning, and student assessment. Another visible impact that the AUN-QA scheme directly on higher education governance is the participation of stakeholders inside and outside of the university (Pham, 2019).

These changes can be seen to be very positive. AUN-QA is considered to be the first organisation to assess study programmes in Vietnam when the government attempted to develop a national quality assurance system, and there was no domestic accrediting agency. The AUN-QA's approach to curriculum design and development according to outcomes-based education was then imported to Vietnam. Since then, any study programme that aims to be certified the AUN-QA needs to change accordingly to meet its requirements. HEIs have changed to design and declare their graduates' expected learning outcomes. This approach is completely new to higher education in Vietnam. Most HEIs that choose to participate in the AUN-QA assessment have just changed in this direction. In addition, because Vietnam's Qualification framework (VQF) has just recently been issued in 2017, not many HEIs have reviewed the curriculum to be in line with the VQF. Thus, it can be said that before 2020, most of the study programmes changing towards OBE is to meet the requirements of the AUN-QA.

Since then, there have been changes in teaching approaches and assessment methods to align with the declared expected learning outcomes. Changes in curriculum design and development also require the participation of stakeholders including students. Therefore, the survey results show these changes from students' observations and possibly from their participation in the process of reviewing and designing the curriculum according to the OBE approach. Another change many students observed is the change in equipment and facilities. All three universities had a certain investment in facilities for the study programmes applying for the AUN-QA assessment. This investment is understandable. In this respect, these bachelor programmes were benefited from participating in the AUN-QA assessment because the investments in facilities and equipment are relatively expensive that few HEIs could do periodically if there were no external funding resources (from non-governmental organisations, or the state budget).

There was a limited number of students who observed changes in academic staff and support staff, which could be explained from students' perceptions of what change is. Students reported changes in academic staff could be the same one who reported the changes in teaching approaches and assessment methods. Students who did not think there was a change in academic staff and support staff possibly because they saw the same academic staff, support staff, and no new staff. For the support staff, a change in the students' perspectives can be from two aspects: quantity and quality of service. A small number of students that selected "changed" in both aspects may be an area for improvement. However, although the results varied from the students' perspective, the overall assessment (the highest percentage) at Universities A and B is "unchanged" in most teaching approaches and methods. This result can be seen to be similar to some previous studies on the impact of external QA on the quality of teaching and learning as in studies by Buwalda et al. (2018), Cardoso, Rosa, and Videira (2018) or Vincenzi, Garau, and Guaglianone (2018). In particular, there is no change in some learner-centered teaching methods.

Regarding the results related to the factors triggering the observed changes, although the rates were different, the requests by students and academics were perceived by students of all three universities as contributing to the changes. This reflects the students' perceptions of two closely related parties in university: the students themselves and the academics, who can be considered as the two core partners of the teaching and learning process. In addition, it can be seen that the

students were aware that the university is now attempting to support them in learning and that their voices are heard. There are certain differences in students' perceptions of the third group of factors initiating the changes in teaching methods. Students at University A perceived that the changes were due to the requests from the Board of Rectors while in University B they were attributed to the requirements of the accreditation of education quality. At University C they were from the employers' needs. This difference may be due to the difference in the ways students were communicated about activities at the university. Students at University A may have found little information about the impact of the AUN-QA assessment on the changes. University B students may have been aware of the AUN-QA assessment of their study programme, which could have affected the survey results. At University C, the way the university informed and involved students in the process of assessment and changes may have shaped their belief of who and what initiated the changes. They believed that the changes were for their sake to improve their employability, i.e., from the needs of employers. University C, therefore, seems to be able to integrate the external requirements into practical actions towards internal quality assurance.

For the purposes of comparing the differences between the three groups of students in reporting changes they observed at their universities, changes in course types, and drivers of changes, chi square analyses were used. The results show that there is significant differences between the three groups of students. Students at University C reported more positive changes in almost all surveyed aspects and internal quality assurance tends to be more developed than the other two universities.

4. Conclusion

This study was conducted through the survey method to examine students' perspectives of the impact of the AUN-QA assessment at the programme level, the quality assurance mechanism of the ASEAN. Very few past studies have been done with students on examining the impact of external QA. As part of this project, T. H. Pham and Nguyen (2020) reported on the results exploring the perspectives of academic staff from the same universities. Comparing with the results in this study, it can be seen that academic staff observed more positive changes in many areas related to the assessed study programmes than students. This shows that the changes observed by students were not the improvements in the quality of teaching and learning (except for University C) because such changes could not lead to real changes in the quality of education but it takes time for the universities to transform or for more visible lasting impact (e.g., University C). Similar studies can be done in these three universities after two to three cycles of assessment of the study programmes to be able to assess the long-term impacts of external QA. Although the results are only of perception survey, the study shows initial (positive) impacts of the AUN-QA assessment, especially in curriculum design and development based on the OBE approach. Further studies can use in-depth interviews with students to further explore the impact level of external QA or AUN-QA, a QA organisation in the ASEAN region for recommendations suitable with the specific situation of each university. This may be related to the quality culture and quality assurance system within each university, especially the difference between University A, University B, and University C.

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