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Enablers and Barriers for Quality Assurance: A Comparative Study of Vietnamese Case and International Trends

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Abstract

The study aimed to explore the internal and external enablers to quality assurance (QA) and identify barriers to QA in Vietnam as compared with international trends. Data was collected through a survey questionnaire on enablers and barriers to QA which were delivered to institutional leaders, middle administrators, lecturers, and support staff of 13 HEIs. Stratified sampling was used to select 13 out of 44 HEIs (both public and private) in one city of Vietnam. Data analysis includes descriptive statistics of factors or variables of interest identified. The results show that both internal and external forces contributed to the development of QA. Wide participation of all staff and the quantity and quality of QA staff were perceived as the most influential internal drivers respectively, followed by other internal factors. The desires to enhance HEI's image and the state policies were prompted as the major external drivers, followed by other external factors. The biggest challenges to the QA implementation were staff resistance and incompetent QA staff. The comparison across responding universities reveals several significant differences among the surveyed universities. The findings suggest that decentralisation in governance and autonomy be given to HEIs so that their responsibilities to QA endeavours can be exercised through self-regulation and self-improvement.

Keywords: internal and external enablers to QA, barriers to QA, international trends, Vietnamese case, capacity of QA staff, participation of all staff.

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1. Introduction

Quality assurance was first introduced into higher education systems worldwide more than 100 years ago under an accreditation approach in the US and now has been implemented in almost all countries worldwide with more than 300 members (INQAAHE, 2021). This global phenomenon, however, has been implemented differently. The differences are evident as shown in the literature, including the ways quality and quality assurance have been conceptualised; QA objectives; QA approaches and methods; actors in QA at various levels: macro, meso, and micro; mandated or voluntary QA mechanisms; the QA focus (institutional or programmatic); and QA procedures (Elassy, 2013; Pham, 2019). Various factors have been found affecting the effectiveness and the success of QA (Cardoso et al., 2017; Cardoso et al., 2019; IIEP, 2017; Kristensen, 2010; Pham, 2019). These factors could be categorised as external and internal drivers (IIEP, 2017; Martin, Parikh, 2017; Westhuizen, 2002). External drivers are usually reported as policy changes or government initiatives to reform higher education with two primary purposes: accountability and quality improvement (Danø, Stensaker, 2007; Horsburgh, 1997; Kristensen, 2010; Lemaitre, 2004; Westhuizen, 2002) forming an external component of the QA mechanism (EQA). External enablers could be from the market and society (Agasisti et al., 2017). Internal drivers of QA are usually reported as driving forces for forming internal quality assurance, another component of the QA mechanism (IQA). Related studies have reported common internal drivers of IQA, including institutional leadership, wide participation of various stakeholders in higher education, collaboration, and cultures (EUA, 2005; IIEP, 2018; Lange, Kriel, 2017; Santos, Dias, 2017; Stalmeijer et al., 2016).

2. Results and discussion

Quality assurance in higher education

Research and reports show that global changes in economics and societies have contributed to the introduction of QA mechanisms worldwide in a way that HEIs are required to have a more transparent role in these changes (Bigalke, Neubauer, 2009). This happens when higher education quality is no longer an internal issue of this sector; it becomes a public debate (Green, 1994) since higher education has been transferred from elite to massification together with the widespread development of private institutions. This has demanded more accountability and transparency from HEIs (Smidt, 2015).

These pressures triggered a new form of public management labelled as new public management (Homburg et al., 2007). Managerialism of this reform applies 'business-type management into the public sector and emphasises more freedom for managers to manage, explicit standards and performance measures, output controls, use of private sector management techniques, and more efficient use of resources' (Pham, 2013: 22). This requires institutions to be internally managed effectively and efficiently. For external pressures, institutions are required to be accountable to the public for educational quality. In this management model, QA systems are created to evaluate the performance of institutions (Ntsohe, Letseka, 2010).

During globalisation, QA has become a universal concept. Almost every single country has established its QA system based on different methods: accreditation, audit, evaluation, benchmarking and rankings with legal frameworks to address public and societal expectations of quality (Singh, 2010; Weber, 2010). Some countries are successful in developing their approach matching the local needs, but some others seem to be still at a developing and piloting stage of completing their QA systems (Niedermeier, Pohlenz, 2016; Weber, 2010).

There are two claimed primary purposes of this approach: accountability and improvement (Sachs, 1994). In practice, Harvey and Newton (2004) believed, 'Compliance and accountability have been the dominant purposes and any improvement element has been secondary' (p. 152). This echoes with the argument made by Harvey and Knight (1996) that QA approaches had rapidly developed and become the dominant approach of accountability.

To be effective and able to fulfil both purposes of a QA mechanism, the system needs to be a vital tool to help stakeholders all do a better job for students, society, and themselves (Williams, 2011). Research shows that a successful QA system should be built with a focus on processes by institutions to convince both internal and external stakeholders that the institutions are able to provide high-quality outcomes. The process needs to be continuous, active, and responsive with strong evaluation and feedback loops (Wilger, 1997). To be specific, Weber, Mahfooz, and Hovde

(2010) identified five lessons for such a system. It should (1) examine the missions and strategies followed by an institution; (2) focus on QA processes more than on pre-defined criteria; (3) be as much institution-driven as agency-driven, meaning that internal quality assurance procedures are an important element of quality assurance; and (4) be as light as possible; and (5) be adapted to the types of institutions in the country (p. 3). Such a system, in general, should promote self-regulation and self-improvement.

Quality assurance and accreditation system in Vietnam

The QA system in Vietnam (a Southeast-Asian developing country), which has been developed for nearly 20 years to primarily control and assure the quality of Vietnam's higher education, depends on mandatory accreditation of HEIs and programmes (Do et al., 2017). The system consists of three levels: the macro, the meso, and the micro (Nguyen, 2021). The macro level includes the Vietnam Education Quality Management Agency (VQA), Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), which is in charge of making QA policies and offering guidance and monitoring QA practices of all HEIs in Vietnam. The meso level includes accrediting agencies established by MOET that offer external assessment and accreditation at institutional and programme levels based on MOET's QA standards. The micro-level is whereby HEIs exercise their QA and accreditation activities in compliance with regulations and guidelines issued by VQA and MOET (Pham, 2019; Tran, Vu, 2019).

It is essential to note that the meso level is also marked by the presence of international accreditation agencies in addition to the domestic ones (Pham, Nguyen, 2020). By July 2021, there have been five domestic accreditation agencies under operation and two other newly-established ones in progress for full operation. Although Vietnam's QA system was developed in 2003, it is until 2016 when external evaluation was implemented. From then to May 2021, 167 HEIs out of 237 ones were acredited; and 426 programmes out of more than 5,000 programmes were accredited by both domestic and international accreditation agencies (MoET, 2021a; MoET,2021b)

There still exist many challenges for the QA system in Vietnam. First of all, it is a lack of qualified QA staff of all levels (Nguyen, 2021). Then, there is a lack of a comprehensive QA framework (Nguyen, 2021; Pham, 2019) because the IQA component did not receive attention. It is also noted that the QA system appears to rely on accreditation agencies (Pham, Nguyen, 2020), thus leading to coping strategies for compliance (Pham, 2018). Yet, Vietnam has used the AUN-QA guidelines for its QA policies whereby IQA is one accreditation criterion at the institutional level. However, there still lack guidelines for implementation, and the IQA system by AUN-QA in 2006 that HEIs have adapted (AUN-QA, 2016; Tran, 2015) appears to be excluded from the AUN-QA framework (AUN-QA, 2020).

International trends for external and internal drivers and challenges for quality assurance

This section summarises the results from an international study by Martin and Parikh (2017) to examine drivers of and challenges to the development of QA worldwide. A questionnaire was sent to HEIs across the world. A total of 400 institutions responded, of which 311 were included in the analysis after data screening. The results of the study were used to compare with the results in this study for the Vietnam QA system.

External drivers

Institutions were asked to identify the importance of five external drivers in the development of QA. The order of importance is: (1) national requirements (89 %), followed closely by (2) the university aspirations to improve its image (87 %), (3) desires of international partners (80 %), and (4) government requests to comply with a national qualification framework (77 %) and to develop QA (75 %), the least important factor. The international study was designed to allow regional comparisons, variations across regions were found in terms of the most important factor. In Asia and Pacific, policy changes requiring higher education to develop a national QA system and reputation are the most driving forces. For Africa, they are the enhancement of self-image and international aspiration. That Europe and North America require to establish external QA mechanisms most motivates the development of QA.

Internal drivers

Martin and Parikh (2017)'s study found that for internal driving forces, the importance of nine pre-defined factors is: (1) leadership support (90 %), (2) participation of staff (88 %), (3) data available to support the analysis of quality issues (82 %), (4) adequate involvement of academic

departments (80 %), (5) clarity on the benefits of QA (79 %), (6) transparent and well-known QA procedures (79 %), (7) qualified QA practitioners (77 %), (8) the participation of students in QA activities (68 %), and finally the least recognised factor, (9) incentives for academic staff to participate in QA (around 55 %).

The regions in the study vary in identifying the most and least internal forces. The most important factor for Africa, Asia and Pacific and European, and LAC institutions was leadership support whereas for North America, it was academics' participation in QA. The most equally important one for Africa is transparent and well-developed QA procedures. The factor comes second for European and LAC institutions is the participation of staff. The least important driver for Africa and LAC is the participation of students in QA development, for Asia and Pacific and also for European and LAC institutions is the incentives for QA participation.

Challenges

As regards the obstacle to QA in developing and implementing QA worldwide, the pre-defined challenges suggested in the literature no longer exist at the surveyed institutions with remarkedly low variations across regions. The study was not able to conclude on the most important barriers for the 311 institutions. Around only a fourth of responding universities faced these suggested challenges. For regional comparisons, Asia and Pacific reported the highest level of challenges, followed by Africa, and limited challenges were identified in Europe, LAC, and North America.

Theoretical framework for enablers and barriers of quality assurance

Based on a framework designed to survey QA internationally by Martin and Parikh (2017) (Figure 1), a questionnaire was developed to explore enablers and barriers of quality assurance in a city in Vietnam. The questionnaire was modified to suit the Vietnamese context, in particular, the challenges of quality assurance (Figure 2).

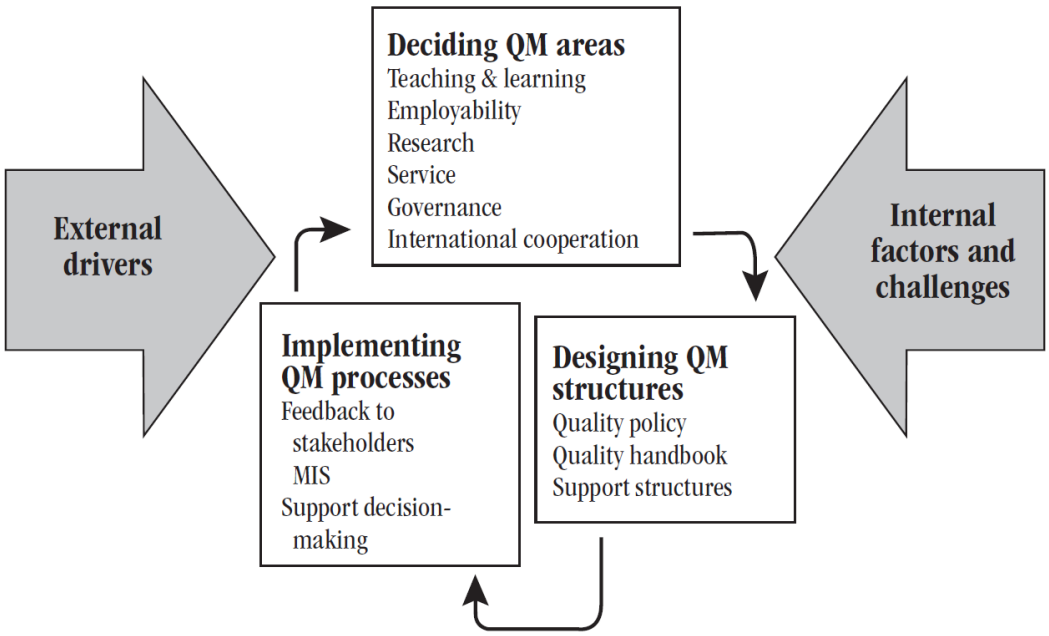

Fig. 1. Systemic view of quality assurance (Martin, Parikh, 2017: 20)

External drivers

External drivers were identified based on "the state–market dichotomy" covering governance reforms (QA schemes and national qualification frameworks) and "the enhancement of external image or an aspiration for international visibility" (the market position of an HEI). So, external drivers can be conditioned by public policy or the market (Martin, Parikh, 2017).

Internal drivers

Research has shown that QA, as a management tool, has to be supported internally for quality improvement. Some internal factors that are frequently expressed in the literature are the

support of top management leaders, wide participation of various stakeholders outside and inside od HEIs as well as all departments of the HEI, clear purposes of QA, transparency of the QA system, appropriate system to manage information, and adequate recognition and reward schemes/incentives QA participation (Martin, Parikh, 2017).

Challenges

There are particular challenges to the development of QM that emerge from the literature. Four types of challenges have been identified: (1) *staff resistance*, in part attributable to the increased workload for both administrators and academic staff, depending on the particular nature of QM in a given HEI; (2) *integration of QA with strategic planning; (3) integration of QA with academic planning*, and (4) *the use of data collected from QA processes*. Frequent complaints were found related to the limited usages of huge data generated from QA activities. In other words, knowledge from QA "is not necessarily well integrated with planning, decision-making, and change" (Martin, Parikh, 2017).

The review of the associated literature also shows particular challenges for the Vietnamese QA scheme. One of them is related to the professional competencies of QA practitioners (Nguyen, 2021), insufficient financial support for QA activities, and lack of support from top management of the HEI. These challenges were added to the questionnaire.

Figure 2 presents the foundations to revise the questionnaire for the Vietnamese case.

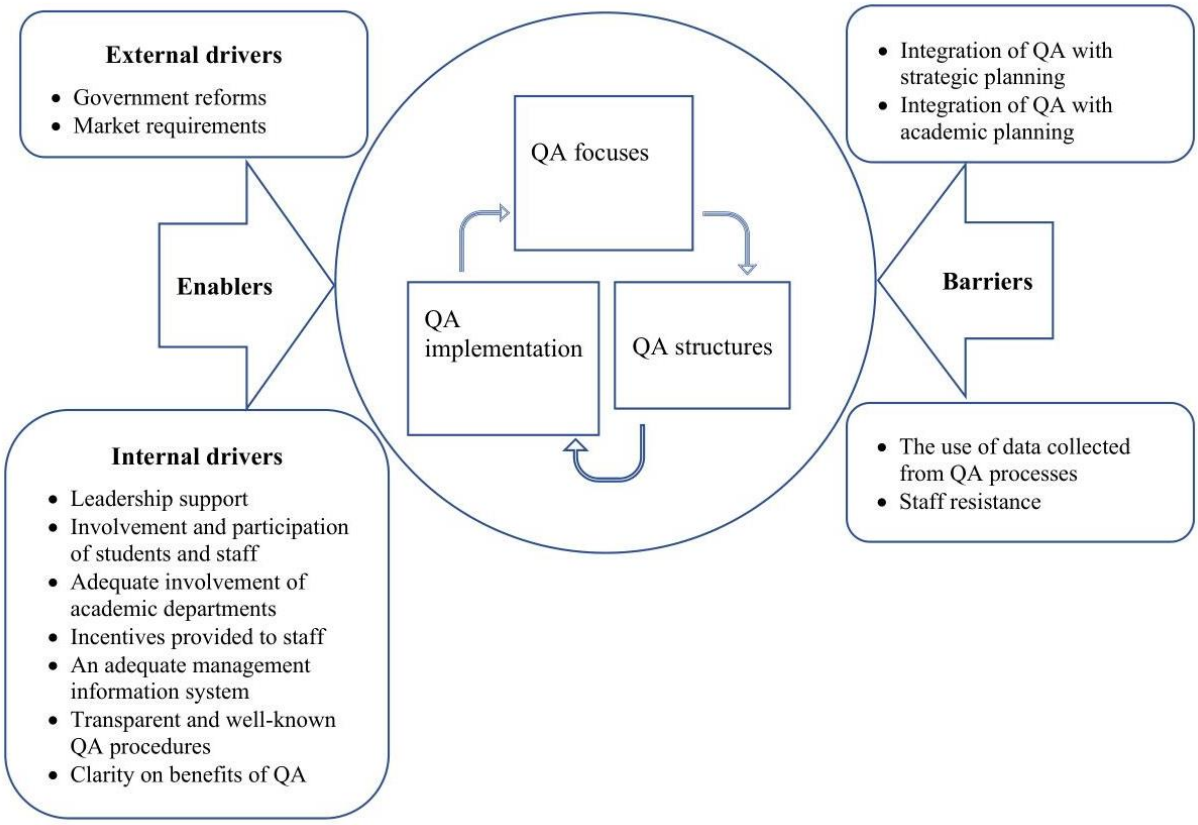

Fig. 2. Enablers and barriers to QA

Methods and participants

The study was carried out with a survey method. A questionnaire was designed to survey institutional leaders, middle administrators, lecturers, and support staff on enablers and barriers to QA. Stratified sampling was applied in this study to select 13 out of 44 universities in one city of Vietnam, representing different types of universities (public and private), accounting for approximately 30 % total number of higher education institutions in one big city of Vietnam. In addition, another criterion was applied to select universities to participate in the research: the participating universities have been externally evaluated and recognized.

Sample of the study

After data screening and cleaning, 769 responses were used for further analysis. In general, in terms of the positions of participants for each university, the sample structure is satisfactory for the analysis and is relatively consistent with the general structure of a university. For statistical analysis, participants were grouped into five positions: (1) university leaders, (2) QA practitioners, (3) faculty/department leaders, (4) lecturers and researchers, and (5) other support staff (Table 1).

Table 1. Sample: University – Position

Positions	University A	University B	University C	University D	University E	University F	University G	University H	University I	University J	University K	University L	University M	Total	*Missing*
Chairperson of University Council	2	2												4	
Vice-Chairperson of University Council					2									2	
Rectors (or equivalent)				1										1	
Vice-Rectors (or equivalent)	1													1	*1*
Leader of QA unit	2		2	7		2			1	1			2	17	*8*
QA staff members	1	1	2	15	3	1		1	4	3	1		1	33	*5*
Head of functional departments	2		1	11		1					1	1		17	*3*
Head of academic departments	3		7	5	2	6	4		3	4	5	2	3	44	*4*
Head of professional divisions	10		3	14	6	1	2	3	1	7	11	1	2	61	*13*
Lecturers	52	23	58	22	35	30	45	12	21	34	3	10	8	353	*39*
Researchers	1	1		1										3	*2*
Other support staff	12	11	30	28	5	9	4	3	2	17		1	6	128	*6*
Others	6		1				2		3	2				14	
Total	92	38	104	104	53	50	57	19	35	68	21	15	22	**678**	*81*
Missing	*1*														*10*
Head of HEI	3	2		1	2									8	*1*
QA practitioners	3	1	4	22	3	3		1	5	4	1		3	50	*13*
Head of units	15		11	30	8	8	6	3	4	11	17	4	5	122	*20*
Lecturers	53	24	58	23	35	30	45	12	21	34	3	10	8	356	*41*
Support staff	18	11	31	28	5	9	6	3	5	19		1	6	142	*6*
Total	92	38	104	104	53	50	57	19	35	68	21	15	22	**678**	*81*
Missing	*1*														*10*

Information related to the types of HEI, orientation, and nature of HEI is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Universities – Characteristics

		University A	University B	University C	University D	University E	University F	University G	University H	University I	University J	University K	University L	University M
Ownership	Public	1	1	2		1	1			2	2	2	3	2
	Private				3			3	2					
Nature	Public, state funding	1	1	1			1			2	2		3	
	Public, autonomous financing	1				1						2		2
	Private, not for profit				2									
	Private, for profit				2			3	2					
Orientation	Research-oriented	1			2						2	2	3	2
	Teaching-oriented	1	1		2	2	1	3	2					
	Research + teaching			3	1		1		3	2				
	Others					1								

External drivers of QA in Vietnam

The results of surveying participants on external drivers were presented in Table 3, showing that

- For factor analysis, one factor (external drivers 1) is formed from six variables (α =.909), and accountability to government and society forms another external factor (external driver 2 with one variable)

- It can be seen that the external driving forces (of factor 1) are generally perceived of equal importance (means of 3.0 and 3.1), except for the requirements and desires of the international partners (M = 2.7).

- Among participating universities, there is a remarkable difference for factor 1, the highest is University B (M = 3.5), University M and University K (both with M = 3.3), the lowest is University H (M = 2.4) and University G (M = 2.5). The importance of accountability to the development of QA was similarly reported.

Table 3. External drivers: importance for IQA development

EXTERNAL drivers	University A	University B	University C	University D	University E	University F	University G	University H	University I	University J	University K	University L	University M	**Mean**
Requirements of the national QA system	2.8	3.7	3.2	3.2	3.1	3.0	2.7	2.3	3.2	2.9	3.3	2.6	3.0	3.0
Requirements of the national qualifications framework	2.9	3.4	3.1	3.3	3.0	3.0	2.6	2.3	3.0	2.8	3.0	2.6	3.1	3.0

Government request to develop QA	2.9	3.5	3.1	3.2	3.1	3.1	2.5	2.6	3.0	2.8	3.1	2.5	3.3	3.0
Requirements and desires of international partners	2.7	3.2	2.6	2.6	2.8	2.9	2.5	2.4	2.9	2.5	3.3	2.7	3.2	**2.7**
Enhancement of the image of the HEI	2.9	3.6	3.1	3.1	3.2	3.1	2.5	2.5	3.5	2.8	3.6	2.8	3.6	**3.1**
International aspiration of the HEI	2.8	3.4	2.9	3.1	3.2	3.0	2.3	2.7	3.4	2.8	3.6	2.9	3.6	3.0
Total for EXTERNAL drivers 1	2.8	**3.5**	3.0	3.1	3.1	3.0	**2.5**	**2.5**	3.2	2.8	**3.3**	2.7	**3.3**	3.0
Accountability **EXTERNAL driver 2**	2.7	**3.6**	2.9	3.2	2.9	3.1	**2.4**	**2.2**	3.1	2.7	**3.2**	2.7	**3.3**	2.9
N	82	38	103	104	53	47	56	14	36	61	20	15	22	650

Internal drivers

Participants were asked to evaluate the importance of internal factors affecting the QA developments at their HEI (Table 4). The results show that,

- For factor analysis, one factor (internal drivers 1) is formed from eight items (α =.929), participation of staff in the QA procedures is separated to form another factor (Internal driver 2).

- Internal drivers played an equal importance role in developing the QA system at the investigated universities with no significant differences. For descriptive statistics, the highest equal importance lies with leadership support and competent QA practitioners (M = 3.3), lowest is for the participation of students in the QA procedures (2.9). In particular, the participation of academic staff and support staff in the QA procedures (Internal driver 2) is reported to be rather high (M = 3.2).

- There is a certain difference between participating universities, for internal factors 1, the highest is University M (M = 3.6), University B and University K (both with M = 3.5), the lowest is University L (M = 2.7) and University H (M = 2.9). The participation of academic staff and support staff in the QA procedures received a similar disparity among the universities.

Table Internal drivers: importance for the development of QA system

INTERNAL drivers	University A	University B	University C	University D	University E	University F	University G	University H	University I	University J	University K	University L	University M	**Mean**
Leadership support for QA	2.9	3.5	3.3	3.5	3.1	3.3	3.2	2.9	3.5	3.0	3.5	2.7	3.5	**3.3**
Competent QA practitioners	3.0	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.2	3.3	3.2	2.9	3.5	3.0	3.5	2.8	3.6	**3.3**
Participation of students in the QA procedures	2.9	3.1	3.0	2.6	2.9	3.2	2.9	2.9	3.3	2.8	3.3	2.7	3.3	**2.9**
Clarity on benefits of QA	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.2	3.0	3.4	2.9	2.9	3.2	3.1	3.1	2.9	3.5	3.1

Statistical information available to support analysis of quality issues	3.0	3.0	3.2	3.2	3.1	3.3	2.9	2.7	3.3	3.0	3.4	2.9	3.3	3.1
Technically qualified staff available to support QA processes	2.9	3.1	3.1	3.1	3.0	3.3	3.0	2.5	3.2	3.0	3.2	2.9	3.5	3.1
Incentives for staff to participate in QA processes	3.1	3.0	3.0	3.2	3.1	3.2	2.8	2.6	3.4	2.8	3.3	2.7	3.0	3.0
Adequate involvement of the department(s) in the responsibilities for QA	3.1	3.3	3.1	3.1	3.0	3.2	2.8	2.5	3.4	2.8	3.4	2.9	3.2	3.1
Total for INTERNAL drivers 1	3.0	3.2	3.2	3.2	3.0	**3.3**	2.9	**2.7**	**3.3**	2.9	**3.3**	**2.8**	**3.4**	3.1
Participation of staff in the QA procedures **INTERNAL driver 2** (one variable)	3.0	**3.5**	3.2	3.3	3.0	3.3	3.2	**2.9**	3.4	3.0	**3.5**	**2.7**	**3.6**	3.2
N	83	36	102	104	53	51	56	14	36	64	20	15	22	656

Challenges

With the pre-defined obstacles to QA development at the HEI, the results are displayed in Table 5, showing that

- For factor analysis, two factors are formed. The first factor consists of three items (α = .931) of challenges related to the competence of QA practitioners. The second factor consists of six items (α = .941) for other internal challenges to the development of IQA: the participation of all departments/units in QA activities, resources and policies for QA implementation.

- QA practitioners were believed to be incompetent, and this is consistent across the institutions (means of 2.0 to 2.3). This type of challenges is evaluated to be higher than other internal challenges.

- For other internal challenges, the most challenge is the awareness of the staff about the importance of QA (M = 1.9), lack of incentives to engage staff in QA activities, and limited use of QA data for quality improvements (M = 1.8). Leadership support and the integration of QA into academic and strategic planning seems not to be challenges (M = 1.5).

- As regards the competence of QA practitioners, the results for Universities F (M = 2.8), E and I (M = 2.6) are significantly different from those for Universities C (M = 1.6), D and H (M = 1.7).

- Regarding other internal barriers, some universities reported a higher level of challenges are Universities G (M = 2.4) and F (M = 2.3) whereas there seems to be no challenges facing some other universities, including Universities C (M = 1.1), D, and I (M = 1.3).

Table 5. Obstacles to the development of QA

Obstacles to QA development	University A	University B	University C	University D	University E	University F	University G	University H	University I	University J	University K	University L	University M	Mean
Lack of QA staff	2.4	1.9	2.0	2.0	2.6	3.0	2.5	1.8	2.7	2.6	2.3	2.5	2.3	2.3
Unqualified QA staff	2.2	2.1	1.6	1.5	2.5	2.8	2.6	1.7	2.6	2.5	1.9	2.2	1.6	2.1
Inexperienced QA staff	2.1	2.1	1.4	1.5	2.6	2.7	2.4	1.6	2.6	2.3	1.6	2.3	1.6	2.0
Factor 1: Challenges related to QA staff	2.2	2.0	**1.6**	**1.7**	**2.6**	**2.8**	2.5	**1.7**	**2.6**	2.5	1.9	2.3	1.8	2.1
Leadership support	1.9	1.7	0.9	0.9	1.9	2.1	2.4	1.5	1.2	1.6	1.6	1.8	1.1	**1.5**
Awareness of QA importance/purposes	2.0	2.4	1.3	1.8	2.1	2.4	2.3	1.6	1.5	2.0	1.9	2.0	1.5	**1.9**
Integration of QA into strategic planning	1.7	1.3	1.0	0.8	2.0	2.1	2.4	1.7	1.4	1.7	1.2	1.9	1.0	**1.5**
Use of QA data for improvements	1.7	1.8	1.2	1.7	2.1	2.5	2.4	1.8	1.6	1.7	1.7	2.1	1.1	**1.8**
Incentives to engage staff in QA activities	1.8	2.9	1.2	1.3	2.1	2.5	2.4	1.7	1.2	1.8	1.7	2.0	1.5	**1.8**
Financial support for QA	1.7	3.1	1.1	1.1	1.9	2.2	2.4	2.2	1.1	1.7	1.4	2.1	1.4	1.7
Factor 2: Other internal obstacles	1.8	2.2	**1.1**	**1.3**	2.0	**2.3**	**2.4**	1.7	**1.3**	1.7	1.6	2.0	**1.2**	1.7
N	73	34	96	103	52	49	55	13	36	58	20	15	21	626

Institutional variations

Table 6 displays a synthesis of the results on drivers and challenges to QA development in higher education institutions in one big city of Vietnam. Participants from three large universities with the autonomous financing mechanism (Universities B, K, and M) believed that the development of QA at their universities are supported by many internal and external drivers with a higher level of confirmation than other universities, in particular two private universities (Universities G and H) with the lowest level of support both internal and external. In addition, the participating universities faced various challenges to QA with different levels.

Table 6. Drivers and barriers to the development of the QA system

Drivers and barriers to the development of the QA system	University A	University B	University C	University D	University E	University F	University G	University H	University I	University J	University K	University L	University M	Mean
EXTERNAL drivers 1 State requirements and image enhancement	2.8	**3.5**	3.0	3.1	3.1	3.0	**2.5**	**2.5**	3.2	2.8	**3.3**	2.7	**3.3**	3.0
EXTERNAL driver 2 Accountability to state and society	2.7	**3.6**	2.9	3.2	2.9	3.1	**2.4**	**2.2**	3.1	2.7	**3.2**	2.7	**3.3**	2.9
INTERNAL drivers	3.0	**3.5**	3.2	3.3	3.0	3.3	3.2	**2.9**	3.4	3.0	**3.5**	**2.7**	**3.6**	3.2

Drivers and barriers to the development of the QA system	University A	University B	University C	University D	University E	University F	University G	University H	University I	University J	University K	University L	University M	**Mean**
1 Participation of staff in QA procedures														
INTERNAL drivers 2 Participation of all units to QA procedures, QA data, and transparency of QA system	3.0	3.2	3.2	3.2	3.0	**3.3**	2.9	**2.7**	**3.3**	2.9	**3.3**	**2.8**	**3.4**	3.1
Challenges 1 QA practitioners	2.2	2.0	**1.6**	**1.7**	**2.6**	**2.8**	2.5	**1.7**	**2.6**	2.5	1.9	2.3	1.8	2.1
Challenges 2 Other internal challenges (leadership, academic staff, support staff, data, strategic planning, and budget for QA)	1.8	2.2	**1.1**	**1.3**	2.0	**2.3**	**2.4**	1.7	**1.3**	1.7	1.6	2.0	**1.2**	1.7
Ownership-nature of HEI*	CN	CN	CN	TT	CT	CN	TT	TT	CN	CN	CT	CN	CT	
Size of student body**	n	L	L	L	L	n	n	n	n	n	L	n	L	

Notes:
* CN: Public, state budget, CT: Public, autonomous in finance, TT: Private, for profit
**: L: large university, >20,000 students, n: small university, <20,000 students

Discussion

This section will compare the results collected from 13 universities in one city in Vietnam with the international trends reported in a study by Martin and Parikh (2017), followed by lessons learnt for Vietnam higher education in an attempt to strive for quality and future development of a successful QA system.

Similar to international trends, this study also confirmed the contribution of both external and internal factors to the growth and development of the QA system in individual universities in Vietnam. From the three initial categories of external and internal drivers and challenges, the results of this study show that there are two subgroups of each category emerged from the data, forming six groups of factors affecting the QA maturity. Out of these six factors, wide participation of all staff of the HEI seems to be the biggest driver of QA development, followed by other internal drivers. Also related to human resources, there is a concern with QA practitioners both quantitatively and qualitatively as this is reported to most negatively affect the maturity of QA.

This study reflects some similarities to and differences from the international trends. For external drivers, the QA development in the participating universities in Vietnam is most driven by the desires to enhance their images, followed by the state policies and least by the requirements of international partners. This is a difference from the international trends regarding the order of importance of these two drivers. The global results have identified government requirements as the most driver of QA, followed by image enhancement. The Vietnamese results do not reflect exactly any regional trends as analysed in Martin and Parikh (2017)'s study. It could be only said that for the most important external driver, Vietnam shares the same result with the LAC region, of which the reputation of the HEI (self-image) is central. Nevertheless, for the general tendency of all external drivers, Vietnam shares similar results with Asia and Pacific region.

As regards internal factors driving QA activities, the Vietnamese results share a similar tendency with the international survey. They all believed that leadership support plays an important role in the success of QA. Interestingly, the results of this study indicate that competent QA practitioners are equally a key element as leadership support. Despite being part of Asia-Pacific, yet the Vietnamese case is similar to countries in Africa with the most important factor being leadership and the least important one being students' participation in QA.

The third aspect that has been investigated in this study is internal challenges. The global study only surveyed two major challenges to QA that have emerged in the literature, i.e., staff resistance and integration of QA into strategic and academic planning. While these obstacles are no longer concerns for the surveyed institutions in the international trends, staff resistance is still the most obstacle to QA implementation in Vietnam. For the Vietnamese QA development, as confirmed in other studies, QA practitioners, if qualified would be a key driver for the QA implementation at the university and if not, would become a major obstacle to QA, the biggest challenge as founded in this study. The results are somehow similar to the Asian and Pacific region.

Based on the results, this paper offers some suggestions for the future development and implementation of the QA system for individual universities. First and foremost, it is evident in this study that while external requirements could be a prerequisite of QA development and implementation at a certain HEI, the success and effectiveness of the QA system depend largely on internal forces. The former could only result in compliance whereas internal intentions and efforts would contribute to meaningful QA activities. Out of internal drivers affecting QA, participation of all staff both academic and support to QA procedures would be a key indicator of success. This echoes with the extant literature on factors for the successful development of IQA and quality culture which requires the daily commitment of every single staff to quality (Tavares et al., 2017; Vukasovic, 2014). Sufficient empirical data have shown the correlation between participation and enhanced academics' ownership in research and teaching (Cardoso et al., 2018; Hou et al., 2018; Pham, 2014). Therefore, it is suggested that HEIs in Vietnam take actions to involve as many as possible academic and support staff in its QA endeavours. This might take universities years to make this happen, yet worthwhile. The second prevalent factor is also internal, consisting of other internal drivers: collaboration of all departments, QA data, and clarity and transparency of QA procedures. This perhaps correlates with the capacities of QA practitioners, the first and ultimate challenge to the Vietnam QA, also reported in the recent study by Nguyen (2021), which leads to the second suggestion. Vietnam HEIs should train more staff to work at various levels. For the current QA staff members, continuous professional development and training in QA competencies is essential, similar with the Nguyen (2021)'s suggestion. Last but not least suggestion to the QA development connects to the comparison results of 13 institutions joining the survey. Public universities with financial autonomy seem to be more successful in developing the QA systems. This result aligns with other studies in Vietnam discussing that universities that enjoy full autonomy are likely to take responsibility for the quality of education offered (Le, Hayden, 2017; Pham, Nguyen, 2020). The findings of this study present another evidence for the Vietnamese government to speed up the reform of higher education governance to decentralisation so that individual institutions could be self-regulated and self-improved instead of compliance and, consequently, increased bureaucracy for QA activities.

3. Conclusion

The study identified both external and internal factors that are perceived to contribute to the development of the QA system in individual universities in Vietnam. The key internal drivers include the wide participation of all staff as the most influential, followed by the quantity and quality of QA staff and other internal factors. The key external drivers include the desire to promote the reputation of the university as the major factor, followed by the state policies as well as other external factors. In addition, staff resistance and incompetent QA staff were perceived as the major challenges to the QA implementation. The findings suggest that greater attention be given to both internal and external forces for individual HEIs' future development and implementation of the QA system to be successful. Specifically, it is necessary to develop a quality culture to promote staff participation in the QA process. Then, continuous professional development and training in QA competencies for QA practitioners is vital to success because they are the mediators and

collaborators in the QA process. Finally, decentralisation in governance and autonomy should be granted to HEIs so that they could be self-regulated and self-improved for QA endeavours.

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