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# Creating core conditions for quality teaching evaluation in Vietnamese higher education

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This paper investigates the context of Vietnamese higher education currently in the first stage of developing and introducing quality teaching assurance systems. The particular challenges encountered during this early period will be illustrated through preliminary results of the author's research on teachers and heads at three departments in three Vietnamese universities. Issues relating to quality teaching evaluation will be examined in relation to common concerns represented in current literature. Then, the factors contributing to these issues are identified and explained. Teachers' perspectives will be emphasized and key roles of middle managers will be analysed. The findings of this paper introduce core conditions that need to be satisfied if effective systems of quality teaching evaluation in Vietnamese higher education institutions are to be developed. These conditions are categorised into four major clusters that follow the stages of developing, introducing, and implementing quality evaluation systems, and a fundamental condition underlying all stages.

**Key words:** quality assurance; teaching evaluation; Vietnam higher education

## Introduction

In the last two decades, quality assurance in higher education has become both essential and universal. It is because of the expansion of higher education sector, with more students to be taught, that the importance of quality teaching has been reexamined and reassessed (Henard & Ringuet, 2008). In addition, the student body with its increased international and social-cultural complexity has led to changes in teaching delivery. Added to this, the fact that students are increasingly paying tuition makes them consider themselves as "clients" of institutions with the consequence that they expect the learning experience be worth their money (Telford & Masson, 2005). Moreover, as the culture of higher education has become market-oriented, external demands for quality of teaching have increased significantly (Green, 1993). Therefore, it is a universal issue that institutions support quality teaching, as a vehicle for recognition and assuring the quality of teaching becomes their core mission (Kanuka, 2010). As a result, universities all over the world have experienced different stages of introducing and implementing quality teaching evaluation systems internally and externally. Although the social, cultural and economic contexts of universities vary immensely, very often they share and repeat common problems in the process of carrying out those evaluation systems.

Vietnamese higher education institutions are among those in the early stage of introducing and implementing quality teaching evaluation systems. It is obvious that lessons of previous experiences over the world should be taken into account by them. In general, a quality evaluation system needs to have good feedback data, the willingness to act on it, and effective change in practice. This paper - with reference to the literature of previous studies, the

author's working background as well as preliminary data analysis of her research - focuses on issues to be addressed in the process of internal quality teaching evaluation. The core conditions necessary to foundation of successful quality teaching evaluation systems are indentified and explained.

## **Vietnamese context of quality assurance systems in higher education**

In 2007, the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) officially enforced '*Criteria system for educational quality assessment at universities*' (Decision 65/2007/QĐ-BGDĐT). The MoET instructed all universities in the country to implement this new criteria system from the 2008 academic year. In 2009, the MoET organised a Summation Conference on '*Quality teaching in universities from students' viewpoints*'. There were controversial opinions both for and against the idea that "*students evaluate their teachers*", which was new and threatening to the traditional Vietnamese educational culture. Another issue under discussion was that if the results from students' feedback were reliable, then, would they be used as a tool to rate teachers or not. During this year, only forty universities, over the total of 409, submitted their self-assessment results to the MoET. Later, the MoET confessed in a report that: "*We have not performed the task of supervising higher education quality effectively and not maintained standards of many higher education inputs.*" (Report 760/BC-BGD&ĐT, 2009). As a result, it became urgent to renovate higher education quality management, as "*a breakthrough element in order to enhance the quality and comprehensive development of higher education*" (Directive 296/2010/CT-TTg). Then, in 2010, the MoET approved a project named: '*Build up and develop Educational Quality Assessment Systems for higher and vocational education in 2011-2020 period*'.

In an attempt to increase the quality of education, from 2000 to 2011, the MoET carried out 'Project 322', sending 5,467 key staff and teachers in higher education institutes overseas to obtain their Master or PhD degrees. In 2012, the MoET passed 'Project 911', which aimed to produce 20,000 doctoral holders, and half of these to be educated overseas (Decision 207/QĐ-BGD&ĐT/2012). According to statistics provided by the MoET, in 2012 Vietnam had 420 higher education institutes, with 2.5 million students and 84,000 teachers, including 3.5% professors and associate professors, 10% doctors and 40% masters. This implies that there were about 50% teachers and lecturers who did not have a master or doctoral degree when these data were collected. The shortage of teachers created a threat of 'burnt-out', as teaching loads increase to 1,000 teaching hours per year, far beyond the standard of 260 hours. In brief, quality teaching in the next ten years is the most pressing concern facing the Vietnamese government and higher education institutes. They are taking measures to enhance the teaching workforce, through projects aimed at increasing the number of doctors and masters, and investing in establishing quality assurance systems at both national and institutional levels. However, there is also a need to prepare for the effective introduction of quality teaching evaluation systems, through the development of appropriate conditions.

## **Concerns to be taken into account**

### **Systems' ineffectiveness**

Quality management systems are supposed to assure and improve the quality of teaching and learning. However, previous studies have proved that it is not always the case. In Vietnamese higher education, the quality teaching evaluation systems were introduced in universities about five years ago, and they are still undergoing the same difficulties as stated in the literature decades ago. Firstly, the negative effect of student feedback was noted by Madu & Kuei (1993). This may lead to teachers responding to student feedback by adopting short-term

strategies, such as teaching less difficult material, more generous marking, or “*being nice*” in class to get a high grade in students’ evaluation of teaching. Further, Barrow (1999) concluded, from a research study conducted in New Zealand, that the quality management surveillance has not led to an improvement in academic quality but a degree of ‘*performance in peer reviews*’ or ‘*dramaturgical compliance*’. The ‘*implementation gap*’, between the intentions underpinning quality policy and the actual outcomes, was showed by a study of Newton (2000). He argued that more attention needs to be paid by institutions and external quality bodies to conditions and contexts of academics’ work or else quality monitoring is liable to become ‘*ritualistic practices*’, to meet accountability requirements. In brief, the systems’ ineffectiveness is often seen in universities being at their first stage of introducing and implementing quality teaching evaluation systems, and it needs to be investigated further.

### **Compliance and resistance of academic staff**

Academic staff are active, not passive, participants in the quality evaluation process. When they are being assessed by others in a centralised process, they respond, adapt to or resist in a variety of ways. Newton (2002) provided evidence that staff do not mutely accept the changes and demands of quality assurance systems, as the policy implementation is often complex and uneven. As Douglas & Douglas (2006) highlighted, teaching staff have very little faith in student questionnaires. Similarly, Maisuradze (2008) pinpointed a common problem, which is convincing academics of the importance of student feedback. Anderson (2006) followed this up, and showed that academics continue to resist quality assurance processes within their universities, even though they explicitly commit to quality in research and teaching. Moreover, Kleijnen, Dolmans, Muijtjens, Willems and Van Hout (2009) showed that the staff resistance, reflected in different organisational cultures, flexible and control-oriented cultures, was experienced in practice. In research conducted by the author, Vietnamese academic staff expressed a mute, but unsatisfied compliance, to problems raised by the quality teaching evaluation systems. Nonetheless, they did not resist because of their culture and job security issues. In short, if there are series of unsatisfied compliance or resistance performed by teachers to new policies within an institution, it would suggest that there are problems.

### **Difficulties of teachers**

Beside the compliance and resistance to changes of academic staff, difficulties that they have been undergoing also need to be addressed. Rosenholtz (1989) showed that teachers are concerned with their own identity, in particular with their sense of being part of learning community. ‘*Isolation*’ and ‘*uncertainty*’ are associated with settings where teachers learn little from their colleagues, and are not in a strong position to experiment and improve. This is exactly the case of teachers in Vietnam higher education, in recent years proved by my working experience and research. Another difficulty reported by Scott, Stone, and Dinham (2000), when conducting a study in Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and the United States, was a prominent negative theme labelled ‘*erosion of the profession*’. In the same light, aging Vietnamese teachers confessed to their close colleagues that “*the more we teach the more we decrease ourselves*”. As a reason of this ‘*erosion*’, Hargreaves (1994) talked about ‘*the intensification of teachers’ work*’ which creates persistent overload leading to lack of time to retool their skills, and keep up with the field, thus, resulting in a reduction in their quality of teaching.

What is more, the difficulties of Vietnamese higher education teachers which are evident from my research are the same as the findings of Lortie (1975). These difficulties identified in my research are:

- Teacher's training does not equip them enough for the realities of classrooms.
- The cellular organisation of schools makes teachers struggle with their problems and anxieties privately, spend most of their time physically apart from their colleagues.
- Because of the physical isolation and the norms of sharing, observing, and discussing each other's work, teachers do not develop a technical culture.
- When teachers do need help, the most effective source tends to be fellow teachers. Teachers desire more contact with fellow teachers.
- One of the predominant feelings that characterise the psychological state of teachers and their teaching is '*uncertainty*'- teachers are not sure whether they have made any difference and they encountered problems in self-assessing their work.
- The lack of time and the feeling of not having finished their work is a perennial problem experienced by teachers.

Apart from the difficulties mentioned above, teachers in Vietnam also experience low salaries, which make them fail to devote comfortably and fully to teaching at one place. Only when we'll be able to understand the difficulties that teachers experience, we'll be able to seek the adequate conditions to support their quality teaching and make them at ease with quality assessment.

## **Reasons underlying hindrances**

### **Lack of agreement on evaluation criteria**

The very first reason for teachers' resistance to being evaluated relates to disagreement on the notion of '*quality teaching*' among the stakeholders of the evaluation process. Anderson (2006) argued informed by study conducted with academics from ten universities in Australia that university managers, quality agencies and academic staff do not draw on mutually agreed understandings of the contested concept of '*quality*'. And meanwhile, academics will continue to resist quality processes treating them as games to be played, and systems to be fed. Further, the lack of agreement on a '*quality teaching*' definition also extends between teachers and students. Some studies (Kember & Wong 2000, Lecouter & Del Fabbro 2001) showed that there isn't an absolute definition of '*good teaching*', since it varies depending on individual conceptions of teaching and learning. Moreover, the characteristics of a '*good teacher*' vary from faculty to faculty, influenced by their needs, the disciplinary contents, and the possible practical activities conducted in the field (Maisuradze, 2008). Thus, overall, the criteria used in evaluating quality teaching will be resisted by teachers, if they are not discussed with them and in agreement of all stakeholders (who are teachers, managers and students) within a particular context of department, faculty, institution and nation.

### **Lack of 'scholarship of teaching' perception**

The underpinned reason for disagreement on evaluation criteria is the lack of acknowledgement among stakeholders, that the ultimate target of quality teaching is quality learning. Ramsden (1992) argued that "*The aim of teaching is simple, it is to make student learning possible*", and "*The aim of scholarly teaching is also simple; it is to make transparent how we have made learning possible*" Trigwell, Martin, Benjamin & Prosser, 2000 offered a tool to measure to which extent teachers are engaging in the scholarship of teaching, and advocated that to assess the level of this engagement we should consider:

- The extent to which teachers engage with the scholarly contributions of others, including the literature of teaching and learning of a general nature, and particularly that in their discipline;
- The focus of teachers' reflection on their own teaching practice, and the learning of students within the context of their own discipline;
- The quality of the communication and dissemination of aspects of practice, and theoretical ideas, about teaching and learning in general and teaching and learning within their discipline;
- Teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning, that is whether the focus of their activities are on student learning and teaching, or mainly on teaching.

The scholarship of teaching also demands that teachers change their negative opinion of teaching. They should consider problems as an opportunity to advance their knowledge on teaching and learning. The lack of scholarly teaching perception makes teachers less likely to confront the challenges of quality teaching evaluation.

### **Lack of collaborative communities for academic staff**

There is a lack of collaborative communities, especially apparent in the Vietnam context. As a result, teachers cannot share comments or difficulties, when there is the application of new policies in quality teaching evaluation. Therefore, not been able to create a collective able to have a voice able to share their concerns, with the upper levels, and promote change. Hargreaves & Fullan (1998) noted that there is simply not enough opportunity and not enough encouragement for teachers to work together, learn from each other, and improve their expertise as a learning community. Teachers need to participate in skill-training workshops, but they also need to have one-to-one and group opportunities to receive and provide help to others. Dovetailing with this theme, McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) established that a '*collaborative community*' of practice, in which teachers share instructional resources and reflection in practice, appears to be essential to their persistence and success innovating classroom practice. Van der Linden, Erkens, Schmidt, and Renshaw (2000) added that successful teacher networks build strong professional communities, that provide opportunities for teachers to develop deeper subject matter knowledge, greater pedagogical expertise, a collaborative culture, the skill of reflecting on their own practice, links with other professionals, and strategies for organisational change. In other words, collaborative communities of academics can help teachers together overcome their difficulties.

### **Lack of effective roles of middle managers**

Department heads and faculty deans, in some circumstances, do not play effective roles of middle

managers to bridge teachers and the university board of directors. From my research raw data, middle managers are the ones who express attitudes of indifference towards the problems and ideas of teachers and students, during the process of quality teaching evaluation implementation. If there is any feedback from teachers on the quality evaluation systems to middle managers, they will tend to shift the responsibility onto someone further up the hierarchy. Another thing is they do not provide teachers and students with preparation for and consultation about a new teaching quality evaluation system. Students' surveys and evaluating policies are sent down from middle managers and applied overnight to assess quality teaching. Moreover, every semester or school year, these policies and measurement tools are adjusted, from someone unknown, without showing reasons or consultation with teachers. All of these drawbacks promote resistance among teachers, and chaos in students, and they build

up a big gap between documental implementation and reality practice leading to an ineffective evaluation system.

There is substantial evidence from the literature of the expectations that need to be placed on the roles of heads and deans as middle managers in the evaluation process. Wright & O'Neil (1994) expressed a strong belief that deans and heads play a key role in improving quality teaching on campus. Schulz's (1988) findings also underlined the important role played by heads of departments. As deans and heads interact with faculty members on regular basis, their attitudes and actions shape departmental and institutional cultures and priorities. Moreover, by expressing and demonstrating a commitment to teaching, deans and heads can encourage the teaching improvement efforts of faculty. Rice and Austin (1990) outlined a number of specific areas, where heads can have a significant impact, such as in scheduling teaching assignments; in tenure and promotion considerations; in providing information on teaching and the valuing of teaching; offering guidance to junior faculty, and encouraging teaching staff to devote time to enhancing their teaching performance. Therefore, the roles of deans and heads in efforts to improve teaching is crucial, and instructional development strategies should not fail to take into account the influential roles of them.

## **Conditions to be satisfied**

### **Conditions for the developing of evaluation systems**

These conditions are aimed at addressing the compliance and resistance of academic staff, as well as to contribute to the overall effectiveness of a quality teaching evaluation system. Studies showed that beside factors independent from context (top-down and compulsory), there are other factors dependent on context (bottom-up and flexible), to justify a multidimensional model in higher education quality assessment (Ghedin and Aquario, 2008).

However, it is necessary to involve the main actors of the didactic scene - teachers and students - during the period of developing teaching evaluation programs (Giles et al. 2004, Scriven 2003, Cousins 2003, Lecouter & Del Fabbro 2001, Kember & Wong 2000). If teachers and students are not the ones who design the evaluation criteria from scratch, it is crucial that they are thoroughly consulted about the evaluation instruments at some stages, prior to evaluation. In other words, they, especially teachers, need to have the right to investigate, give comments on, or adjust the composition of quality system by which they will be evaluated. This condition is to ensure the agreement, among stakeholders (teachers, students, managers), on what means '*good teaching*' according to specific contexts of teaching and learning. This condition also makes it certain that they have a comprehensive understanding of the criteria, prove the active roles of all participants, and engage them with their own responsibility in the system function.

Secondly, it is necessary to differentiate various disciplinary contexts to determine which aspects depend on contexts (specific to each faculty), and which are independent from contexts (transversal to faculties). Palmer and Marra (2004), as well as Ylijoki (2005), shared this viewpoint by outlining that different academic cultures have different aims, values, norms and beliefs. Therefore, it is wise to keep in mind the disciplinary differences when quality is evaluated, since each academic discipline has different themes, objectives and goals, perspectives, social values and behavior models (Kekale, 2000). That is to say, the risk of forcing the same evaluation criteria to all disciplinary fields should be avoided.

Finally, a variety of measurement techniques should be used in quality teaching evaluation to have a thorough view and a variety of data. Some instruments that could be deployed for teachers' evaluation include: teaching journals, self-evaluation portfolios, peer observation, evaluation by a supervisor, video coaching, materials review, and teachers' self-evaluation. Besides, students' evaluation is crucial as they are the most important aspect of teaching. Students' evaluation can be in the form of a pre-course survey, mid-term evaluation, end-of course evaluation, and fast feedback techniques could also be used anytime in between. Moreover, students' views may be collected in different ways including informal discussions or conversations, formal qualitative sessions, such as focus groups, facilitated discussions or suggestion boxes, representative or consultative committees, and types of questionnaires.

### **Conditions for the introduction of effective evaluation systems**

These conditions will help prepare teachers and students, for the teaching and learning evaluation process, by providing them with the knowledge they need to take part effectively in a quality evaluation system. The first step should be the commitment of senior management of the university to create a '*transparent environment*' for quality teaching evaluation systems. The commitment should be shared by all members of management in the hierarchy (Maisuradze, 2008), and key members of the educational evaluation (teachers and students) should ensure that they all master the characteristics and process of systems (Fullan, 2001).

Second, establishing a clear understanding of effective, competent or excellent teaching means to ensure clarity and transparency, and frame the institutional understanding and culture of quality teaching. Such an approach will help ensure that individuals involved in assessing teaching are not applying their own definitions (Trigwell, 2001).

Thirdly would be the clear identification and delegation of responsibilities for actions. We need to ensure proper human and material resources, within the faculties and institution, for the whole evaluating systems are allocated with detailed tasks, expectation and time frame. Students should be well informed in advance about the system and carefully guided how to conduct evaluations of teaching in an appropriate and responsible manner.

### **Conditions for the implementation of evaluation systems**

These conditions are to contribute to the effectiveness of the whole quality evaluating system. Here the question of administering the students' surveys arises. It is important that students are well informed about the process while doing a course or lecturer evaluation. It is normally effective to ask students to complete and return questionnaires during the usual contact time and questionnaires should begin with an introduction, explaining the purpose of it and how it should be filled out (Maisuradze, 2008). In addition, the ones who collect data from students should not be teachers, but administrative personnel of the institution. It is to ensure the objectiveness of feedback results and free students from anxiety when filling the form.

Then, to be effective in quality improvement, feedback data must be transformed into information that can be used within an institution. Department heads and faculty deans need to have an overview of the data collected in their department to retain discipline relevance, to compare reference data for courses, and to see what actions might need to be taken to support teachers. The middle managers should play their key roles in listening to comments expressed by teachers and students on the evaluation process, react with supportive solutions, and report to upper levels if things are over their heads. Overall, academic staff are interested in improving their teaching and are looking for prompt and specific feedback immediately after

a course, and they also would like to have anonymous comparisons to their colleagues. Students need to be taken seriously and need to see that they are a part of the process, and that their views will make a difference to present and future provision. Hence, the summaries of their feedback, as well as responses, should be made available to them.

Lastly, it is important that actual and evidence driven actions are taken following the data analysis phase. These actions may relate to quality teaching or course experience improvement in aiming at developing teachers' profession and students' learning. The subjects of these actions must centrally be the heads, deans and academic staff.

### **Fundamental condition: effective professional learning communities**

This condition is underpinned through out all stages of the quality evaluation system and it is a primary component that supports teachers' professional improvement. One implication of the use of collegial networks as a source of teachers' ongoing learning is that professional learning take place on-the-job as teachers collectively find solutions to problems and challenges, and use these situations as opportunities for learning (Retallick, 1997). In addition, the practical knowledge for teaching is highly personal and contextualised (Mayer, 2002), and based on engaging with colleagues (Tripp, 1993). In fact, networks of colleagues are a critical means of knowledge transmission (Nowlen, 1988) that allow practitioner knowledge to be built into a trustworthy knowledge base, that can be accessed and shared widely in the profession (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002). Whether formal or informal, professional networking is about making contacts; developing relationships; exchanging information; asking questions; sharing resources; and linking with colleagues inside or outside one's individual school context.

Further, when teachers participate in professional networks outside their schools and share their newly acquired knowledge within their own school contexts, the impact of professional learning is multiplied (Morris, Chrispeels, & Burke, 2003). Professional learning communities are able to affect the culture of a school by constructing a collective efficacy (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy A., 2000), where teachers believe that they can work collaboratively to bring about change. Additionally, when teachers have opportunities for collaborative inquiry and the learning related to it, they are able to develop and share a body of wisdom gleaned from their experience (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). This perspective assumes that teachers share their individual learning, resulting in more widespread learning or change within organisations.

In summary, any activities of teachers should be well-supported by effective professional communities at departmental, institutional, and national level.

### **Conclusion**

Quality teaching evaluation processes can prompt resistance and disruption if they are developed without taking into account the reasonable concerns of the parties involved. This paper has presented a number of key issues as well as their underlying reasons as existing within the Vietnamese higher education quality evaluation context. The core conditions which are necessary for different stages of developing, introducing and implementing quality teaching evaluation systems have been presented and explained in terms of this context and of the literature. However, this paper can not address all the problems of quality assurance systems in Vietnamese higher education. Those problems need more action and research.

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