

# Higher Education Quality Auditor Training in Vietnam

**Rewel Jiminez Santural Jose**

Saigon International University, Vietnam

**Duong Thi Anh**

Saigon International University, Vietnam

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**Abstract:** This article studies the issues related to training, qualifying and certification of higher education quality auditors in Vietnam. Following the generic two-tier model of training and development of auditors, however Vietnam's methods of implementation are very different from the rest of the world and the ways of conducting are also very different in different regions of the country. The article analyzes and compares policies, experience, content and implementation of the auditor training programs in Vietnam compared with those of other countries in the world, thereby drawing suggestions for improvement solutions for autonomous auditing and accrediting agencies based auditors training centers and recommending policy changes to Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training and related agencies such as the National Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

**Keywords:** Auditor training, higher education quality, accreditation, Vietnam.

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## 1. Introduction

The business sector has universally recognized the importance of quality in their products and services for achieving and sustaining high competitiveness. The quality assurance in higher education has also been of a great attention across the world during the past few decades. However, over the past time, the higher education industry has been too slow to act accordingly (Natarajan, 2000). The major developments in quality control and assurance have taken place in the context of the manufacturing sector. However, these concepts have been made applicable to the servicesector which includes also higher education industry where stakeholders are many and varied, so are perceptions and concepts of quality (Bikas, 1994). Quality of higher education is determined by the relevance (fitness of purpose) of its mission and objectives for the stakeholders and the extent to which the education institution or the study program fulfils the mission and objectives (fitness for purpose). The quality of an education institution or the study program is also judged by the extent to which it satisfies the minimum standard set for inputs, processes and outcomes of its (institution or program) functioning (Martin & Antony, 2006). A variety of quality assurance approaches have been implemented, including modern quality assurance (Botezatu et al., 2019), total quality management (TQM) (Hawi & Alzyadat, 2019), formative assessment (Adnan et al., 2019; Ngoc & Tien, 2021; Tien et al, 2021b; Tien et al, 2020c), and finally, the audit/accreditation (Evers et al., 2017).

Accreditation as the key quality assurance approach was officially established in Vietnam in 2003. By law, all Vietnamese higher education institutions and teaching programs must undergo accreditation procedure. As of the end of August 2019, 122 (out of 236) universities and 19 (among over 5000) programs were accredited (VEQMA, 2019a; VEQMA, 2019b). Obviously, the issues of quality control and quality assurance of Vietnamese higher education institutions in general and teaching programs in particular need to be significantly paid attention to. There are several research studies undertaken to investigate the implementation of quality assurance and accreditation for higher education institutions in Vietnam. However, observations show that little

research studies have been focused on quality assurance, auditing and accrediting of teaching programs, especially on the issue of training and qualifying auditor for the boost of quality of auditing process taking place in all higher education institutions in Vietnam. Consequently, this paper looks into the quality assurance and auditing issues in Vietnamese higher education institutions, specifically their teaching programs through analyzing the current situation, obtained research results and the future of university education quality auditor training to partly fill this research gap.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### *a) The Role of Accreditation in Assuring Quality of University Education*

Accreditation for an education institution, teaching program or training course means an official recognition, a guarantee of quality and general public and social acceptance (Natarajan, 2000). The primary purpose of accreditation is to ensure quality control and assurance, commonly with reference to a certification system in the field of education and training. In some countries, this function is performed by an agency of the Ministry of Education, while in industrialized countries it is undertaken by a confederation of voluntary agencies or professional bodies. Accreditation in education is both a process and a status. It is the process of auditing education institutions and teaching programs to judge their quality on how well they serve the students and society. The result of this process, if successful, is the award of accredited status (CHEA, 2010). In fact, auditing and accreditation in education is the process by which an association or agency evaluates an institution or teaching program and formally recognizes it as having met and satisfied, or exceeded certain requirements and criteria or standards of educational quality. Apart from ensuring quality for education institutions, auditing and accreditation also provides public confidence and accountability (Ibrahim, 2014).

Accreditation's major features include establishment of standards, institutional self-review and external agency's peer audit, determination of so far achievement, and award of accredited status. Based on the key values of mission, institutional autonomy and academic freedom, auditing and accreditation is currently challenged to sustain and strengthen its quality affirming practices and effectively address major changes in higher education such as the continual expansion and internationalization of universities, demands for heightened public accountability (Eaton, 2010). The basic element inherent in auditing and accreditation process is the non-governmental and voluntary assessment of subsystems and component processes of the functioning education institution, teaching program or training course. As a role model, American higher education institutions have relied on auditing and accreditation as a key mechanism to assure and improve their academic quality. The use of above mentioned internal critical self-assessment and external peer audit to establish standards and apply them to institutions is of widespread interest around the globe (ACE, 2012). Internal quality assurance ensures that an education institution or teaching program has policies and mechanisms in place to make sure of meeting its own objectives and standards. External quality audit is performed by an auditing and accrediting agency external to the institution. The auditing and accrediting agency assesses the operation of education institutions or their teaching programs in order to determine whether they meet agreed-upon or predetermined standards. The higher education quality audit involves a variety of practices, among which three mechanisms can be distinguished. Quality auditing and accrediting agencies often use more than one mechanism in different levels of analysis (institutions, programs or training courses). As of principles, the auditing process will ensure: (a) quality control (minimum standards) in higher education; (b) accountability and transparency; (c)

quality enhancement; and (d) the facilitation of student mobility. Quality control assures that higher education is in linewith minimum quality requirements in terms of inputs,processes and outcomes. Massive expansion ofhigher education and strong diversification ofhigher education institutions hasraised questions regarding quality of the education and training service they offer. The minimumprogram requirements urgently need to be checked in order to protect the interests of stakeholders and safeguard nationaldevelopment objectives.

Auditing and accrediting is commissioned by a suitable and recognized external agency and encouraged by stakeholders to ensurethe accountability of education institutions through evidence of results. The auditing process provides transparency of the functioning of the whole higher education system and each of its institutions.The weaknesses identified byauditing process allow to adopt corrective measures and improve education quality. The competitive spirit resultingfrom auditing and accreditation also helps enhance education quality.In a globalized economy, auditing and accreditation isimportant for the mutual recognition of credentials whichallows institutional, national and internationalmobility among students, depending upon the scope of auditing and accreditation. However, auditing and accreditation also has some downsides, if not carried out properly: it has usually but not always produced or improved education quality; by strict procedures and measures it may inhibit innovation and competition;therecognition of accreditation can be both political and bureaucratic; auditing and accreditation in almost cases can be costly, burdensome and inefficient.

#### ***b) Requirements for University Education Quality Auditor***

The requirements set for quality auditors at higher education institutions and of training programs around the world relate to: (1) the scope of professional knowledge; (2) capacity, skills and experience; (3) inherent qualities and professional attitudes (in terms of independence,autonomy and responsibility) (Duc et al, 2019; Tien et al, 2019a). These requirements are becoming more and more stringent due to the increasingly fierce competition taking place in this professional field, the increasing requirements related to the quality of auditing service and trustworthiness of accreditation forhigher education institutions and the labor market beingincreasingly difficult due to undergoinga deep integration.

The auditing and accreditation at higher education institutions aims to ensure and improve teaching and training quality of developing countries to be able to approach the level of advanced countries in the region and the world. In order for the auditing process to go smoothly and achieve the highest efficiency, the quality and qualifications of the auditors play an extremely important role. Auditors must satisfy the input standards of knowledge, skills and attitudes relevant to their current position and scope of work and continuously improve their qualifications through training, retraining and self-training to be able to fit the new or even unknown requirements and standards in the future. The profession of auditor is necessary inmany different fields such as industrial engineering systems, accounting systems, educational systems at all levels, etc.Comparing with the standards set for these systems, from there auditors point out the points that need to be critically improved to boost the functional quality to help the system operate more efficiently. Auditors need to possessadequate professional knowledge and acquire diverse experiences related to the field they audit as examples mentioned above. To execute the audit for the purpose of accreditingthe higher education institutions and / or training programs, accreditors do not need to demonstrate specialized knowledge related to the professional field of the training program. Instead, accreditors should be well-equipped with knowledge of higher education management, quality assurance, understanding of legal andpolicy issues, and a firm grasp of principles, regulations and procedures,participate in training

courses and perform practical works related to quality audit and accreditation at higher education institutions and / or training programs. After many years of accrediting works at higher education institutions, in addition to consolidating relevant knowledge and adequate skills, auditors will gradually improve their independence and self-control (autonomy) and self-reflection at work, sense of responsibility and professional ethics to be able to take on even more complex tasks such as accrediting educational institutions and training programs on a larger scale, with international reach and higher integration or holding the role of chief auditor, participating in training, organizing, managing the training process and testing the working performance of novice auditors. There are two factors, the most important qualities for higher education quality auditors: compliance with professional ethical standards and independence in auditing work to ensure transparency, objectiveness and fairness for higher education institutions and training programs in the process of being audited and accredited.

### ***c) University Education Quality Auditor Training System***

As it is well known, the training and education of higher education quality auditors is extremely important for a smooth and effective auditing process of higher education institutions and teaching programs being subjects of accreditation. In all countries around the world, there are generally two levels of professional training for higher education quality auditors:

- (1) Training at the central level (Ministry of Education and associated bodies);
- (2) training at the level of institutions (autonomous auditing and accrediting agencies).

Depending on the characteristics of each country, the role, importance and contribution of these two levels to the improvement of higher education quality auditors' qualifications may be different. Actual observations show that in highly developed countries with advanced science and technology development and long standing tradition of higher education, higher education quality auditors' training offered by autonomous auditing and accrediting agencies will play a more important role than training at central level offered by Ministry of Education and associated bodies for the quality of higher education system and academic reputation of each institution within through accreditation process. Autonomous auditing and accrediting agencies are also more independent and less bound and governed by Ministry of Education and associated bodies. In contrast, in developing countries, the state, and specifically, the Ministry of Education and Training or peer agencies must play more active role due to prestige, role, capacity and professionalism of higher education quality auditors training service offered by autonomous auditing and accrediting agencies have not been asserted by the society and the academic community. In these countries, the autonomous auditing and accrediting agencies have not yet fully demonstrated their roles and contributions for the university quality development. As consequence, they are not highly autonomous, and still heavily depend on state agencies, specifically, the Ministry of Education and associated bodies in terms of development strategies, guidelines and policies, even in matters related to training and qualifying higher education quality auditors (such as program content, training methods, certification and practice cards).

## **3. Research Design**

### ***a) Object and Subject of Research***

The object of research in this article is the Vietnam universities' education quality auditor training and qualifying system. The subject of research is the higher education quality auditor training and qualifying process, mechanism and policy. The article's research study was conducted at two levels. The first centralized level is focused on the university education quality auditor training system executed by the MOET (Ministry of Education and Training). The

second decentralized level is focused on the university education quality auditor training system executed by national auditing and accrediting agencies for higher education quality. Regarding the subject of research, we focus on question whether and how the auditor training and qualifying system at two different levels impact the effectiveness of auditing and accrediting process and influence the quality of education in Vietnamese universities.

#### ***b) Research Methodology***

The research in this article collected documents regarding centralized and decentralized level of university education quality auditor training and qualifying system based on information available at the websites of MOET, EQMA (Education Quality Management Agency) and 05 Education Accreditation Agencies in Vietnam (Vietnam National University Hanoi Centre for Education Accreditation; Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City Centre for Education Accreditation; University of Danang Centre for Education Accreditation; Vinh University Centre for Education Accreditation; Association of Vietnamese Universities and Colleges Centre for Education Accreditation).

In the second stage, the research conducted 30 minute interviews with representatives of MOET, EQMA and heads of 05 Centers for Education Accreditation. They were asked on the so far achievements and limitations as well as the orientations of mechanism and policy for higher education quality auditor training and qualifying system to boost the effectiveness of auditing and accrediting process and influence the quality of education in Vietnamese universities.

### **4. Research Results Presentation**

#### ***a) Requirements for Education Quality Auditor in Vietnam***

One major government reform is the establishment of a National Accreditation Council, under the umbrella of MOET (Ministry of Education and Training), which oversees the auditing and accreditation process that all higher education institutions must undergo after internal quality inspection done by quality assurance department. The latter is based on an extensive institutional self-assessment with clearly spelt out criteria provided by MOET. The external quality audit done or controlled by the MOET will lead to the accreditation valid for five years. The accreditation is compulsory for all higher education institutions in Vietnam and it is also mandatory for them to have their own internal quality assurance unit in the organizational structure. It has only been in the past couple of years that an eight-level National Qualifications Framework (NQF) developed by MOET has been implemented, bringing Vietnam in line with many other countries that have had such a framework in place for many years. The NQF provides guidance to higher education about the expected standard of student learning outcomes at different levels of education, from certificate (Levels 1-3) through to doctorate (Level 8). The NQF is aimed, amongst other things, at standardizing the level and quality of education program and process offered to students and at improving international recognition and transferability of Vietnamese qualifications for student educational mobility.

According to Circular No. 60 /2012/TT-BGDĐT promulgating regulations on auditors/ accreditors for auditing and accrediting higher education quality, the standards for auditors/ accreditors are prescribed as follows (CEAHN, CEAHCM, 2021):

- ✓ Have good moral character, be healthy enough to meet the job requirements.
- ✓ Professional qualifications: Having a master's degree or higher.
- ✓ Working seniority: Being a lecturer, educational manager or having worked as a lecturer, educational manager; having taught or worked as an educational manager in higher education for 10 years or more.

- ✓ Understanding the laws, regimes and policies on education.
- ✓ Having a certificate of completion of a training and retraining program for inspectors according to regulations of the Ministry of Education and Training.
- ✓ Have a B certificate of Information Technology proficiency or higher and a foreign language certificate equivalent to B1 (level 3/6) or higher according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Foreign Languages.

Additionally, an auditor/accreditor is a person who is selected, has completed the training and retraining program for auditors in accordance with regulations, is granted an auditor's identity card, and performs the task of accrediting higher education quality at the request of the higher education institutions, other competent agencies and organizations. Higher education auditors/accreditors are requested to (CEAVINH, CEADN, 2021):

- ✓ Comply with the principles and regulations on higher education quality accreditation.
- ✓ Strictly comply with the terms of the education quality accreditation contract.
- ✓ In the course of performing their duties, do not obstruct or interfere with the operation of the higher education institution.
- ✓ Carry out objective and honest inspection.
- ✓ Ensure the confidentiality of the test results before publication.
- ✓ Take responsibility before the law and the higher education quality accrediting agency for the evaluation results and their comments in the external audit report.
- ✓ Maintain documents on the part of the higher education quality auditing and accrediting work performed by them.
- ✓ Perform other obligations as prescribed by law.

#### ***b) Auditor Training and Qualifying System in Vietnam***

Higher education quality auditors' training and qualifying system aims to equip the useful knowledge, skills and quality to carry out well the responsibilities and duties of auditors working in the field of higher education and vocational training accreditation at educational institutions in Vietnam. Aiming at strengthening practical capacity for auditors in the assessment, evaluation and inspection processes, higher education quality auditors' training offered by autonomous auditing and accrediting agencies across Vietnam focuses on boosting practical exercises. Specifically, they often organize many site visits at different universities for the course's participants, the future certified higher education quality to gather real quality proofs of these universities. The obligatory training course named "Testing and auditing quality of higher education and vocational college" has showed considerable initial success of higher education quality auditors' training and qualifying system. This is also a huge contribution of all autonomous auditing and accrediting agencies in the whole higher education quality auditors' training and qualifying system to improve the competencies of higher education quality auditors through training process and qualifying procedure. MOET always recognizes and highly appreciates the training and qualifying role of each of autonomous auditing and accrediting agencies within the system. On the other hand, with many activities relating and complementing to the training process and qualifying procedure, all of the auditing and accrediting agencies has increasingly demonstrated the unique contribution, determination and leading role in boosting capacities and competencies of higher education quality auditors.

#### ***c) Comparison between Auditors' Training in Vietnam and in the World***

In developed countries of the world, to assure the quality of the auditing and accreditation process of higher education institutions, auditors need to be independent and have an enhanced autonomy in carrying out the auditing work. Auditors training and qualifying centers associated

with autonomous auditing and accrediting agencies require candidates to have a number of years of practical experience as prescribed, have certain achievements at work to be able to become a professional certified auditors with issued practice card. Meanwhile, the Vietnam Ministry of Education requires candidates to have a certain period (at least 10 years) of teaching in higher education institutions. This is not really necessary because the job of university lecturers and the jobs of higher education quality auditors are completely different. Vietnam also sets requirements for computer and foreign language skills certificates for auditors, which is really unnecessary. In terms of the content of the auditor training program, developed countries in the world are more inclined towards knowledge related to output standards mandatory in the university education process, while Vietnamese candidates for auditors are more obliged to understand the relevant regulations, policies and legal framework of the Ministry of Education and Training. Developed countries often emphasize issues related to professional ethics of auditors, while Vietnam higher education authorities still overlook and have not paid adequate attention to this category of issues. Research shows that there is a lack of consistency and synchronization in the promulgation and implementation of auditing and accreditation policies, including also auditors training, especially among different regions of the country such as the North, the Central and the South. However, experts in higher education management and higher education audit and accreditation can see similarities between the orientation of education policy and that of education quality audit and accreditation policy of the universities in all three regions mentioned above. The universities in the Northern provinces are more inclined towards academic training, placing heavy emphasis on methodological issues and scientific research in teaching and educating students. Universities in the Southern provinces are focused on labor market demands and future career needs of students. Therefore, the policy orientation in higher education quality auditing, accreditation and in auditors training of autonomous auditing and accrediting agencies also focuses with different accent on different issues of the local higher education management.

## 5. Research Results Discussion

### *a) Towards Auditor Requirements Change in Vietnam*

After many in-depth discussions with different expert, leaders of autonomous auditing and accrediting agencies, representatives of Ministry of Education and relevant bodies, some changes toward the requirements for candidates for higher education quality auditors are proposed as follows:

- Remove the requirements of foreign language proficiency and IT skills as they can be checked during the interview of candidates and entrance testing or trial period.
- Check the sense of responsibility of candidates and their knowledge of professional ethics and whether they how to apply it practically in the daily auditing work.
- Check how can candidates be flexible, independent and autonomous at work and how they can acquire adequate professional knowledge and update necessary information, develop new relations with people and institutions at work instead of what kind of professional knowledge they have actually at the moment.

### *b) Towards Auditor Training and Qualifying System Change in Vietnam*

After many in-depth discussions with different expert, leaders of autonomous auditing and accrediting agencies, representatives of Ministry of Education and relevant bodies, some changes toward the higher education quality auditors training and qualifying system are proposed as follows:

- Auditor training should be less focused of on administrative issues related with rules and regulations, procedures and policy promulgated by the MOET and peer agencies. Instead, auditor training must engaged international knowledge transfer on the issues of higher education teaching, researching and community service standards and their constant updates.

- Auditor training should be provided in both local language and English to involve the cooperation of international experts as trainers from the field of higher education management, quality assurance, auditing and accreditation.

- Align the domestic auditor training and qualifying system with that of the developed countries in a compliance to and conforming with international standards.

- Align auditor training and qualifying systems of all local auditing and accrediting agencies to be consistent with each other and towards more autonomy and freedom, more market competition to respond to social demands and less administrative bureaucracy.

- Involve more participations from business world, especially large enterprises operating in the field being relevant with higher education, to the auditor training and qualifying process, i.e. to consult on the issues of form, content, methods of training, to guarantee more social consensus, practicality and objectivity.

## 6. Conclusion

### a) *Achievements and limitations*

In this article, we have analyzed the current state of higher education quality auditors' training in Vietnam in a comparison with that of the world. We have taken under consideration two levels of training: Ministry of Education (and associated bodies), autonomous auditing and accrediting agencies; differences and interdependencies between them in Vietnamese educational and socio-economic context. Secondly, this article also examines how different are training and qualifying policies of different auditing and accrediting agencies across Vietnam to boost the capacity and competency of higher education quality auditors and, as a result, to enhance the quality of auditing service.

The research involved all the currently 05 functioning auditing and accrediting agencies located in different parts of Vietnam. As analyzing the higher education quality auditing and accreditation policy of these agencies spreading different areas of the countries, from the North, via the Central part throughout the Southern Vietnam, this study could discover in-depth the detailed reasons behind their differences in terms of auditing and accrediting policies and practices, including training and qualifying auditors and accreditors. The detailed statistics of operations of all higher education quality auditing and accrediting agencies was not conducted to give a specific picture of the current state of auditing and accrediting services within the whole higher education system in Vietnam.

### c) *Recommendations*

The university based autonomous auditing and accrediting agencies need to be independent from the central level of governance (Ministry of Education and associated bodies) to deliver high quality higher education auditing and accrediting services in line with market needs and social expectations and to train auditing and accrediting staff (auditors and accreditors' training services) to attain these goals. For the above mentioned auditing and accrediting agencies, adjusting the quality of their professional activities adequately, boosting the quality of auditors and accreditors' training and qualifying system accordingly are to remain highly competitive in the education quality auditing service market monopolized so far by university based agencies. However, the situation is going to change and the market will soon



become competitive by the presence of more foreign auditing and accrediting agencies competent in offering training services and in auditing and accrediting international teaching programs in accordance with world standards of higher education. Those international teaching programs are very popular among students in recent time (Dana et al, 2020).

#### **d) Implications for Further Research**

The further research should engage a third group of research objects, that are foreign auditing and accrediting agencies which could offer both auditing and training services in line with the international standards obligatory in developed world. Obviously, they are utmost independent, objective and transparent as they have nothing in common with Vietnamese Ministry of Education and related bodies. Their credibility and professionalism in delivering auditing, accrediting services and auditors' training services are absolutely unquestionable (Tien et al, 2020a). However, until now, these foreign auditing and auditors' training entities are not allowed to function in the Vietnamese higher education landscape. As such, they have to find other ways to enter Vietnamese market and that probably means reduction in their independence, objectivity and transparency of the services offered. That is similar to the FDI companies operated by foreign entities in addition to private and state owned enterprises in the current Vietnam's business environment (Tien & Anh, 2019). The future research should concentrate on the spill-over effect of the rich experience and professionalism of auditing and training services of these foreign auditing and accrediting agencies run by foreign bodies and on how the currently functioning double level auditing, accrediting and auditors' training and qualifying system can take advantage of it in terms structural and strategic change to compete and cooperate with them in all aspects of quality assurance and inspection, quality auditing and accrediting, auditors training and consulting services to improve the overall quality of higher education in Vietnam.

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Ở Việt Nam muốn trở thành kiểm định viên (accreditor) thì phải đáp ứng các tiêu chuẩn cụ thể (có đầy đủ văn bản) về trình độ, thâm niên,... và phải hoàn thành khóa đào tạo o kiểm định viên. Ngoài ra, phải tham gia kỳ thi do MOET tổ chức và được cấp thẻ hành nghề. Các quốc gia khác không có (ngay cả ở các nước Đông Nam Á). Có thể đối sánh với QAA của châu Âu hoặc AUN của Đông Nam Á.