


Chapter 8

Quality Assurance of Higher Education From the Glonacal Agency Heuristic: An Example From Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

In the era of globalization, higher education acts as a player in the game, presenting a vivid picture of how the system manifests the globalizing process of a nation. This chapter takes a critical look at quality assurance of higher education in a country, Vietnam, under the impacts of international organizations. Drawing on Marginson and Rhoades's glonacal agency heuristic, the chapter aims to argue that quality assurance has been prioritized as one of the core stepping stones for Vietnam to participate in international and regional educational space. It further explains while international organizations as global actors have set the foundation for quality assurance in Vietnam and introduced neoliberal ideas into the system including institutional autonomy, decentralization and social accountability, the national tradition of state-eccentric power, and the discrepancies among local institutions divert the quality assurance system away from such neoliberal ideas. The organizations that are the focus of the chapter include the World Bank, ASEAN, and ASEAN University Network.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, higher education has transformed from a preserve of elites, an exclusive right of the most wealthy and privileged groups, to a global industry which hosts millions of students. Globalization has long been a contested and multifaceted concept which refers to the idea that explains how the world involves the “widening, deepening and speeding” of interconnectedness (Held et al., 1999, p. 2) with “increasingly integrated systems and relationships beyond the nation” (Marginson & Rhoades,

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2002, p. 288). In other words, the world is getting more and more interdependent in not only economic convergence, socio-political development, liberalization of trade and labour markets, but also education, including higher education (Luu, 2006; van der Wende, 2011). In the report of SEAMEO RIHED (2012), it is noted that quality assurance has risen to be the key concern of higher education because of the internationalization and interconnectivity among higher education institutions (HEIs) everywhere. This means globalization is a remarkable pushing factor for the widespread implementation of quality assurance in many education systems all over the world.

However, joining the global market does not mean that HEIs elsewhere or in Vietnam, a case study of this chapter, become independent global players. Still they act as “agents of national policies” who expectedly provide a satisfactory response to the nation-state agenda as well as the demands of other stakeholders positioned at the national level (van der Wende, 2011, p. 105). Glonacal agency heuristic for comparative higher education research, hence, offers a helpful analytical tool for the chapter. It is proposed by Marginson and Rhoades (2002), indicating the global, national and local dimensions to understand globalization and higher education, together with the intersections, interactions and mutual determinations of the agency of collectivities at the three above-mentioned levels. This glonacal agency heuristic will serve as an important analytical point based on which this chapter argues that Vietnam has held a dual standing between neoliberal agenda introduced by international organizations and the state’s commitment to socialism with the hierarchical governance imposed on the higher education system. This should be noted that taking Vietnam, particularly quality assurance in Vietnam, as a case does not mean that this dual stance applies to Vietnam only. Other countries of similar economic size and scale can notice similarities in the quality assurance establishment and implementation process.

This chapter is built upon a wide range of policy documents and literature concerning the development of quality assurance in Vietnamese higher education. With an aim to pinpoint the main values underlying the quality assurance policy development strategies shaped by the international and regional organizations, the chapter looks closely into the impacts of the World Bank (WB), The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and a sub-regional organization, ASEAN University Network (AUN). Legislation, planning and implementation documents from Government of Vietnam (GoV), Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), and programme documents from capacity building initiatives sponsored by the WB, ASEAN and AUN were also collected. All the areas where quality assurance was mentioned in the documents were searched and analyzed in order to understand the definitions, rationales and references used. In what follows, the chapter lays out a brief account of the development of the Vietnamese higher education system and the rising importance of quality assurance in this sector. The main part of the chapter will analyze and critically discuss the impacts of international organizations and those at the national and local level on the quality assurance system of Vietnam. The chapter will conclude with a summary of what has been discussed and a reflection on the practical implications of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW: VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM ON THE JOURNEY OF GLOBALIZATION

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