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**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON**

FACULTY OF SOCIAL, HUMAN & MATHEMATICAL SCIENCES

Southampton Education School

**COMPLIANCE VS. IMPROVEMENT: PERCEPTIONS OF QUALITY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
EDUCATION IN VIETNAMESE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS – CASE STUDIES OF A PUBLIC  
AND A PRIVATE UNIVERSITY**

by

**Phuong Truong**

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education

April 2019



**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON**

**Abstract**

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Quality in English language education provided by higher learning institutions is significant in today's rapid expansion of higher education and the growing demand worldwide of non-English speakers with sufficient proficiency in English language, Vietnam being no exception. Nevertheless, there is scarcity of literature regarding quality in the provision of English language modules/courses/programmes, particularly at university level. Quality initiatives and measures have been developed, applied, and transferred from context to context but without adequate investigation into the underlying quality notions and assumptions. The aim of this research was to explore not only the conceptualisations of quality but assumptions about purposes and impact of quality activities on English language classroom practices.

Differing from the few predominantly survey-based studies in the field, a case study approach was applied to examine quality issues at national, institutional, and individual levels. The cases were one public and one private university in Vietnam, subcases including the Vice Chancellors, managers and staff in education management and quality practices, teachers, and students. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, and review of public policy and institutional documents, and analysed through a constant-comparative method.

Outcomes-, objectives-, and accountability-oriented quality management at the national level promoted a compliance culture and accountable quality at the institutional level. Institutions responded to public policies by implementing outcomes-based education model and standards-based quality methods relevant to organisational culture, institutional structure, quality capacity, and other QA conditions of the institution. Thinking and actions at institutional and individual levels were influenced by messages from written policies concerning quality in tertiary-level English language education. Importance was attached to learners' attainment of institutionally pre-defined learning outcomes, and quality as threshold standards. Quality in learning outcomes did not lessen but was closely linked to quality in inputs and processes. Outcomes focus was presented in curriculum/syllabuses and materials reconstruction; teaching and learning arrangements, and test design and testing procedures. Standards orientation helped to assure immediate outcomes rather than continuous improvement in English language learning. Likewise, customer-focused/accountability-oriented quality measures had little connection with enhanced professionalism of English language teachers and did not always ensure contributing roles of the learners/employers in educational processes.



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## Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name:	Phuong Truong
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Title of thesis:	Compliance vs. Improvement: Perceptions of quality in English language education in Vietnamese higher education institutions – Case studies of a public and a private university
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I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission

Signature:		Date:	
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## Abbreviations and Acronyms

**ASEAN** Association of Southeast Asian Nations

**CDIO** Conceive, Design, Implement, Operate

**CEFR** Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment

**CPD** Continuous Professional Development

**ECS** English as a compulsory subject

**EFL** English as a foreign language

**EMI** English as a medium of instruction

**ELT** English language teaching

**ELTL** English language teaching and learning

**ESL** English as a second language

**ESP** English for specific purposes

**ETM** Education and training management

**ETMU** Education and training management unit

**HE** Higher education

**HEIs** Higher education institutions

**L1** Source language

**L2** Target language

**MOET** Ministry of Education and Training

**MOIA** Ministry of Internal Affairs

**MOFA** Ministry of Foreign Affairs

**NAO** (UK) National Audit Office

**PIS** Participant information sheet

## Abbreviations and Acronyms

**QA** Quality assurance

**QAA** Quality assurance and accreditation

**QAAU** Quality assurance and accreditation unit

**QE** Quality enhancement

**QM** Quality management

**SLA** Second language acquisition

**SPC** Statistical Process Control

**TQM** Total Quality Management

**USSR** Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

**VHE** Vietnamese higher education

**VHEIs** Vietnamese higher education institutions

# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Motivation for the study

I was triggered to examine quality issues in English language teaching and learning (ELTL) after I read the title of an article: 'Students graduate English deaf and dumb after 16 years of study' (VietnamNet, 2011). It shocked but also resonated with my experiences in a dual role of a learner and a teacher of English in Vietnam's educational system. University-level ELTL faced complaints about low quality in media and academic research reports (e.g., V. V. Hoang, 2008) despite numerous quality initiatives being introduced at departmental, institutional, and national level, which involved innovation in curriculum design and delivery, assessment, professional training development. Regarding quality management (QM), Vietnamese higher education institutions (VHEIs) at that time set it high-priority a task to set up institutional mechanisms of quality assurance and accreditation (QAA). Teachers and students were required to attain certain language competency levels. Thus, I was inspired to learn about what people meant by 'quality', what was going on in VHEIs (VHEIs), what was the rationale for the so-called standardisation of ELTL in VHEIs, and how far quality initiatives/mechanisms had impacted on the process of higher education (HE) ELTL.

Having delved into relevant issues I realised that quality in ELTL in VHEIs should be attributed to more than just classroom practices. I wanted to investigate the relationship between QAA and ELTL, which was expected to help build quality mechanisms that would be well-rooted in and well-connected with theoretical and practical issues in ELTL arrangements in VHEIs. I hoped that the findings could contribute to enhancing both quality mechanisms and ELTL practices based on analysis of underlying issues involved for the purpose of improving quality in English language education in VHEIs.

Quality literature shows that every QAA scheme entails certain definitions of quality (Thomas, 2003): the notion of quality is a conceptual tool (Harvey, 2006) having important strategic consequences behind quality measures that defines the purposes and content of QAA mechanisms, the actors and stakeholders involved and the role of quality in public steering of the HE system (Van Damm, 2000). If it remains vague as to understanding of the nature of quality it will be impossible to accurately and efficiently measure and improve quality in education (Taylor & Hill, 1993b).

Quality measures are adopted and introduced into educational systems on a global scale sometimes with certain degree of uncertainty among universities as to why QAA procedures are

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thought to be necessary (Billing & Thomas, 2000). Quality has come to mean the processes by which quality is assured rather than the essential quality of the provision of education (Harvey, 2016). Scepticism is raised surrounding the problem of time devoted to quality assessment of teaching at the expense of time devoted to actual teaching processes (Brennan & Shah, 2000). There is also danger of the concept being misused to standardise/homogenise academic content and curricula (Van Damme, 2002). Another worrying trend is the reduction of quality interests in a globalised HE market to mere consumer satisfaction concern (Van Damme, 2002) while there are at least four quality values underpinning different approaches to QAA, namely academic, managerial, pedagogic, and employment-related/consumerist values (Brennan & Shah, 2000).

Harvey and Williams (2010) argue the discourse of quality offers not only description of developments in HE, QM in HE but also perceptions of relevant policies and the motivating forces behind them. This explains why three decades of QAA development has resulted in more diversity in the definition of the concept than ever before (Van Damm, 2002). Although a plethora of conceptual and pragmatic enquiries have been made into the nature of quality (Harvey, 2016), a conception of quality is needed that could explain and keep up with recent quality issues in the sector (Harvey & Williams, 2010). In pursuit of compatibility/convertibility value some may call for a convergence in the conceptualisation of quality, for example, academic quality being defined in relation to academic learning, the core meaning of which needs broad international recognition so that it can survive the global educational market (Van Damme, 2002). By contrast, others argue that global definitions are not particularly helpful, rather it must be articulated in terms of which individuals can relate (Taylor & Hill, 1993b).

Under no circumstances, should the analysis of quality be detached from purpose and context (Harvey & Williams, 2010); quality definitions and measures must be individualised so that they become compatible with general and unique national and institutional contexts while upholding international norms of quality (Billing, 2004). At an operational level, to maximise the chance for workable quality schemes and mechanisms, attention must be paid to actors and stakeholders' 'subjectivities and how this influences how they "cope" with, "shape", or even "subvert" quality policy' (Newton, 2002, p. 48).

In this research I set out to contribute to understanding the nature of quality in HE and articulation between quality monitoring and teaching and learning. My purpose was to examine how conceptions of quality originating in northwest Europe and the US had been the basis of developments in Vietnam with a focus on English language education in VHEIs. The government may claim several reasons for the transplantation of the notion of quality and QAA measures across the HE system. I wanted to gain insights into recent developments in policy and practice in association with quality in ELTL in VHEIs, the theoretical and practical underpinnings and the

rationale for QAA schemes for ETL in VHEIs, and how international norms in quality practice were reflected in the field in the context of Vietnam. More importantly, I focused on identifying evidence of the growth within the system of QAA schemes for ETL in the attitudes and understandings of the value of QAA schemes by actors and stakeholders involved in both of the relevant processes, taking into account situational and contextual influences at national, institutional, and individual level.

## 1.2 Background to the study

### 1.2.1 Higher education in Vietnam

Education Law (National Assembly, 2005), Education Law Modifications (National Assembly, 2009) stipulate that HE is an optional final stage of formal learning following upper secondary education in Vietnam's national education system. The term refers to both undergraduate and postgraduate education. VHEIs are stratified into three layers based on the objectives and orientation of the training programmes, which can be research intensive, applied sciences oriented, or profession oriented, according to Law on Higher Education (National Assembly, 2012), Decision 37/2013/QĐ-TTg (Central Government, 2013), Decree 73/2015/NĐ-CP (Central Government, 2015). Table 1 summarises such stratification of VHEIs with focuses, degrees/programmes they offer and corresponding course duration.

Institution	Focus	Degree/Program
Research-intensive	New abstract conceptual knowledge; basic theories and principles in broader scientific fields and source technologies	PhD (2-4 years) Master (1-2 years) Bachelor (4-6 years)
Applied sciences	Less abstract and academic knowledge, focusing on applied sciences and technologies	Professional master Professional bachelor (a few academic master and PhD)
Profession-oriented	Train highly-skilled and ready-to-work graduates equipped with both practical skills and theoretical expertise	Professional bachelor

**Table 1 VHEIs stratification**

In practice, it could be challenging to establish research-intensive HEIs in Vietnam as the country has been strongly influenced by the former Soviet model of HE which was adopted in 1954 (Bui, 2009) and characterised by the emphasis on academic training rather than research functions. Meanwhile, the focus of traditional HE programmes on abstract academic knowledge in contrast with little importance placed on professional and practical aspects leads to high rates of graduate

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unemployment and their skills and capacities poorly prepared for work. Consequently, a group of national and international experts in a master plan for further reform of VHE proposed keeping the proportion of courses/programmes provided by research-intensive universities at 5% and increasing followers of applied sciences and profession-focused programmes (Hayden, 2014; T. L. Pham, 2014). The government has emphasised market relevance of VHE and the interaction between VHEIs and enterprises in various fields, including tourism and hospitality, construction, agro-forestry, electronics and information communication and technology. Nearly 50 piloted professionally-oriented programmes have been constructed and implemented at target universities since 2005 within the framework of the Vietnam Netherlands HE Project (Tienphong.vn, 2016).

VHEIs currently are grouped into two major sectors: public and private, both operating under the governance of the government authorised agencies, according to Education Law and Law on Higher Education. HEIs in the public sector are state-owned, granted with state funding for the establishment of their infrastructure and facilities, and operational expenditures. Private institutions depend for their foundation and operations on communities and professional organisations/individuals. By 2013 there were 207 VHEIs, including 153 public and 54 private institutions (MOET, 2013a); 16 public institutions were designated as 'key' universities (Decision 1269/2004/CP-KG (Central Government, 2004); Correspondence 177/2008/TTg-KG (Central Government, 2008a); Correspondence 1136/2011/TTg-KGXV (Central Government, 2011)). These key universities are located across Vietnam mostly in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City and accommodate two-thirds of all university enrolments (Dao, 2015).

### **Vietnamese higher education – key developments and trends**

Throughout history, Vietnam's education system has absorbed with adaptations external influences. Nearly one thousand years (111BC – 938AD) under Chinese domination in feudalism profoundly influenced Vietnam's culture, language and educational philosophy (T. A. Le 2013; Fry 2009; L. H. Pham & Fry, 2004). Along with other Asian countries like China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, Vietnam is a part of the Confucian world (Fry, 2009; Marginson, 2011), with an educational ideology emphasising morality. Hence, Vietnamese students have traits such as having respect for teachers, mentors, and scholars, being eager to learn (Fry 2009; L. H. Pham & Fry 2004), yet reluctant to speak out their thoughts during class time.

A crucial landmark is the creation of the Vietnamese national language (*Quoc ngu*) along with the religious propaganda of Western priests and scholars in the seventeenth century. This is a writing system composed of Latin alphabet with additional diacritics for Vietnamese tones and certain letters. This writing system became an accessible and favoured language of the Vietnamese and

gradually replaced Chinese characters and 'Nom' in the early twentieth century (Fry, 2009; L. H. Pham & Fry, 2004). Vietnamese was announced the national language after Vietnam declared its independence following the successful August Revolution in 1945. The language has also been the official medium of instruction in Vietnam's entire education system since then.

VHE was founded in 1076 with its first university, Van Mieu Quoc Tu Giam (The Royal College, Temple of Literature) which provided moral education and training to the sons of dignitaries (Fry, 2009). In the late nineteenth century during the French colonial period, contemporary VHE started. Between 1945 and 1954, there were only 3 Hanoi-based universities, offering fields of study such as medicine, pharmacy and pedagogy (Fry, 2009) and the total student enrolments were 834, of which 628 were Vietnamese (Q. K. Nguyen & Q. C. Nguyen, 2008). After reunification in 1975 Vietnam witnessed a remarkable HE expansion. By 1975, there were 51 former Soviet-modelled universities with 56,000 students in the North and 18 universities in the South with 116,500 students, following the French and American education models (Fry, 2009; L. H. Pham & Fry, 2002; T. A. Le, 2013). Subsequently, all the American-affiliated HEIs in the South were abolished (T. A. Le, 2013), leaving 50 universities left, all public in 1977-1978 (Fry, 2009). During the next 11 years, the entire country's HE followed the former Soviet model of highly centralised education (T. A. Le, 2013).

Under the Economic Reform policy (Doi Moi) since the end of 1986 the Vietnamese government made a historically significant decision to shift Vietnam from a centrally planned to a market-oriented economy. This started the open-door era as Vietnam intended to establish relationship with countries and territories all around the world. The country also encouraged the establishment of private businesses, foreign owned enterprises and foreign investment. Education, particularly HE, was regarded as having an essential role in transforming its economy.

Before the adoption of the market mechanism, all universities in Vietnam had followed the former Soviet model of HE which was characterized by mono-disciplinary institutions. HEIs during this time were small and specialised, offering narrowly focused training programmes. Later, a new model of multi-disciplinary institution was introduced and developed. National and regional universities, e.g., Viet Nam National University in Hanoi (VNU-H), Thai Nguyen University were formed by merging mono-disciplinary HEIs.

VHE has grown dramatically: the last 30 years has seen a surge in the number of HEIs (Sheridan, 2010), rising to 207 in 2012/13 from only 63 universities in 1987 (Do & Ho, 2011). Similarly, there has been a 14-fold increase in student number from just 100,000 (T. T. Tran, 2014) to 1,454,000 between 1987 and 2012/13 (MOET, 2013a). The public policy has been to increase HE accessibility to meet the increasing market demand for highly educated graduates. Tuition fee deductions and

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exemptions have been offered to students from poor and minor ethnic backgrounds; a student loan scheme was introduced through Decision 157/2007/QĐ-TTg (Hayden, 2014). Additionally, public expenditures for HE are increased every year (T. T. Tran, 2014). For example, the government increased expenditures for HE in proportion to those for the whole education system from 9% in 2001/02 to 11.7% in 2008/09 (World Bank, 2010).

The centralised educational system has become extensive (T. T. Tran, 2014), affecting the funding available for the accelerating needs for HE. To reduce the pressure on state budgets and to concomitantly facilitate wider HE access, a call was recognised for the contribution to the total cost of the sector of all segments of society, or what is referred to as ‘socialisation’ (xa hoi hoa) policy in Vietnam (Hayden, 2014; London, 2010). The term is somewhat equal in meaning to privatisation normally used outside Vietnam (H. Le, 2014). The government realised that to develop only public HEIs was not enough (L. H. Pham & Fry, 2002) while the socialisation/privatisation of HE would enable several actors to be financially involved in the sector (H. Le, 2014). Accordingly, sources of investment for HE would be diversified (H. Le, 2014) by a combination of government subsidies, tuition fees, and funds from individuals and organisations and other international funding sources (L. H. Pham & Fry, 2002).

The burden on state budgets led the Vietnamese government in 1988 to cautiously adopt a pilot project for the development of a first non-public HEI – Thang Long Learning Centre (presently Thang Long University) (T. L. P. Pham, 2012). The institution was established and owned by an intellectual group in Hanoi and was allowed to charge tuition fees (L. H. Pham & Fry, 2002; T. L. P. Pham, 2012). Those features of ownership and funding made Thang Long Centre substantially characterised as a private institution. Nonetheless, it was originally known as a ‘people-founded’ rather than as a private university since the word ‘private’ was not accepted by the society at that time (X. S. Hoang, 2008). Another testing move taken by the government in the early 1990s was to allow tuition fee collection at several public universities of students who did not reach the entering grades required for an admission offer and the subsidies eligible (T. L. P. Pham, 2012). Classes of tuition fee paying students within public universities were called semi-public ones. In brief, the beginning of a socialisation/privatisation agenda for VHE was marked by the trial of non-state provision of HE, the charging of tuition fees and the creation of different payment schemes for different classes within public HEIs (London, 2010).

After years of experimentation, VHE came to a turning point with the release of Resolution 04/NQ-HNTW (Central Government, 1993), officially promoting the development of new forms of HE in addition to the traditional public institutions and permission granted to HEIs for tuition fee collection. Consequently, a multitude of people-founded HEIs were established which depended entirely upon tuition fee incomes and were owned by community or professional associations

(Hayden & Lam, 2007). Additionally, a number of semi-public HEIs were formed either from the conversion of public HEIs or by being newly built. These institutions were state-owned, yet student tuitions provided a significant source of their revenue (Fry, 2009). However, semi-public form of HEIs ceased to exist, either by becoming fully public or private, together with the circulation of Resolution 05/2005/NQ-CP (Central Government, 2005a) and Education Law (National Assembly, 2005). Likewise, all 19 people-founded HEIs were transferred to private universities according to Decision 122/2006/QĐ-TTg (Central Government, 2006b). In sum, VHEIs were from then on either public or private.

The promotion of private sector HEIs gave rise to a drastic expansion of this type of institution. Since the establishment of the first non-public university in 1988 with only 150 students, HEIs in this sector accounted for 26% of HEIs and 12% of HE enrolments after 30 years (MOET, 2013a). This contributes greatly to the diversification of the whole HE system, without exclusion to that in funding resources.

The adoption of tuition fees means the penetration of the market forces into the provision of VHE and the expansion of the education system (London, 2010; T. L. P. Pham, 2012). That also means Vietnam has moved its policies on HE toward a more market-based form of governance and that marketisation plays an increasingly important role in coordinating and ordering educational activities (London, 2010). Consequently, a user-pays system has been developed, which means learners and the state share costs of HE (Hayden, 2014). Resolution 14/2005/NQ-CP (Central Government, 2005b) (also known as the Higher Education Reform Agenda, or HERA) states that public HEIs are encouraged to adopt more client-centred, yet less bureaucratic approach to service delivery (Hayden & Lam, 2010). Furthermore, under financial pressures, VHEIs appear to be treated as corporations as the government indicates higher level of autonomy, at least at present in formal policies, to be granted to them in exchange for a cut down on state expenses (T. L. P. Pham, 2012).

The whole education system including HE has been centrally governed. According to Education Law (National Assembly, 2005) and Law on Higher Education (National Assembly, 2012), the Cabinet is responsible for the governance of the two national universities, all the other universities are under direct management of MOET. In cases of institutions specialized in certain areas such as medicine, pharmacy or environment, other ministries and governmental organisations also take the responsibility of co-supervision, or line-ministry management. Additionally, some provincial people's committees may take certain parts in managing local HEIs.

Efforts of transforming HE governance are evident in several formal state policies, including Resolution 14/2005/NQ-CP (Central Government, 2005b) (HERA) on the fundamental and

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comprehensive renovation of HE for period 2006-2020, Decree 43/2006/NĐ-CP (Central Government, 2006a) on institutional autonomy, and Circular 07/2009/TTLT-BGDĐT-BNV (MOET & MOIA, 2009) on instructions for implementing institutional autonomy (T. L. P. Pham, 2012).

Examples of relevant targets involve decentralising decision-making to HEIs, strengthening autonomy and accountability of HEIs, turning public HEIs into fully legal entities with autonomy in all aspects particularly in being more self-reliant financially.

The implementation of those policies has meant a slight shift from state control to state supervision or a partial independence of public HEIs from the state owing to their adoption of income-generating activities (D. D. Ngo, 2006; T. L. P. Pham, 2012). However, there are big gaps between policy and practice and a tension between the desire for decentralisation and the political desire for retaining control of the sector. Despite claims of decentralisation, governance of VHE is strongly centralised with MOET at the centre of almost all aspects (Hayden & Lam, 2007; T. T. Tran, 2014). Moreover, state authority is exercised not only in public but private sectors. A system-wide responsibility of MOET is the prescription, compilation, approval, and imposition of curriculum frameworks for all programmes of study. This is for substantiating quality across HE sector yet assuming that the end-product of teaching and learning is identical regardless of institutional missions and scopes (N. D. Tran, T. T. Nguyen, & M. T. N. Nguyen, 2011). MOET also assumes regulatory responsibility for allocating enrolment quotas (Hayden & Lam, 2007, 2010; T. T. Tran, 2014). This is to serve a supply-led mechanism of VHE market (N. D. Tran et al., 2011).

VHEIs generally do not have much institutional autonomy regarding organisation, finance, staffing, and academic functioning (Hayden, 2014; Hayden & Lam, 2007). The two national universities have more academic and financial autonomy than the other public sector institutions (Hayden & Lam, 2007, 2014; T. T. Tran, 2014). Private institutions have access to a much broader range of freedom than do public institutions (Hayden, 2014). The former is accountable to the state through their own governing boards, members of which are appointed by the shareholders responsible for the establishment of the institution (Hayden & Lam, 2010). They also have a high level of financial autonomy when it comes to tuition fees and expenditures (Hayden & Lam, 2007, 2010). By contrast, MOET presents control over significant decisions of each public HEI concerning issues such as capped tuition fees, expenditure norms, staff recruitment and senior staff appointment (Hayden & Lam, 2007, 2010; T. T. Tran, 2014).

Vu (2012a) argues three major approaches to quality have emerged throughout the development of VHE. Accordingly, prior to 1986 quality control was exercised through monitoring MOET's determined minimum standards, strict university entrance examinations, regulations on learning assessment, degree standards, and degree awards. From 1986-2003, the sector experienced quality as sufficient resources within which the state paid much attention to searching for

adequate financial sources to accommodate its dramatic expansion yet lacked focus on developing QAA capacities. Since the production of a set of accreditation standards in 2004, quality as fulfilment of QAA standards has been in place.

QAA in HE has attracted substantial social attention in Vietnam since the late 1990s (H. V. Le & K. D. Nguyen, 2009; H. T. Pham & Starkey, 2016) in the context of dramatic expansion of the sector, movement of HEIs toward greater autonomy and accountability, and a need for global engagement in scholarly exchange and mutual recognition of credentials (Madden, 2014). The government has been active concerning QAA, both in legislation and practice, in ultimately driving effective and efficient VHE. Legal documents have been released and implemented with the help of international and national education experts. Examples of key policies in sequence of release include Decision 38/2004/QĐ-BGDĐT (MOET, 2004b) on provisional regulation of quality accreditation of HEIs, Decision 65/2007/QĐ-BGDĐT (MOET, 2007b) on standards for accreditation of HEIs, Correspondence 1276/2008/BGDĐT-NG (MOET & MOFA, 2008) on instructions of student evaluation of teaching, Report 760/2009/BC-BGDĐT (MOET, 2009a) on solutions to ensure and enhance educational quality, Directive 296/2010/CT-TTg (Central Government, 2010a) on renovating HE management for the period 2010-2012, and Decree 115/2010/NĐ-CP (Central Government, 2010b) on prescription of responsibility for state management of education (T. L. P. Pham, 2012), and Correspondence 527/2013/ KTKĐCLGD-KĐĐH (MOET, 2013b) on a guide for using evaluation criteria of HEI quality.

Those policy documents show that, firstly, MOET is the central manager of QAA who monitors and assures HE provision and QA processes (Madden, 2014; N. D. Tran et al., 2011). The agency centrally regulates quality conditions and exercises centralised quality control via evaluative tools of examinations and financial audits (Oliver, K. D. Nguyen, & T. T. P. Nguyen, 2006). Additionally, the centric state control of QAA process is practiced through MOET's standards-based approach to measuring quality while leaving little space for the development of institutional missions (Madden, 2014). Secondly, Vietnam is building and implementing an accreditation system that follows the US accreditation model to assure and accredit educational quality (K. D. Nguyen, Oliver, & Priddy, 2009; H. T. Pham & Starkey, 2016). However, relevant evaluation is lacking (K. D. Nguyen et al., 2009). Thirdly, although instructions have been in place for how to get student feedback on teaching effectiveness, more commonly practiced is traditional QAA mechanisms through controlling of curricula, teachers' course design (T. L. P. Pham, 2012), self-evaluation of academic staff and peer evaluation within a discipline (Oliver et al., 2006). Fourthly, there is still a lack of systematic approach to evaluation of student learning, of programmes, and of institutional effectiveness (Oliver et al., 2006). Fifthly, VHE system is focused on not only input but output and process, which is clearly shown in the set of standards for accreditation of HEIs presented in

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Decision 65/2007/QĐ-BGDĐT (MOET, 2007b). Lastly, VHE competition is less driven by reputation than by available university seats (Madden, 2014). This probably is rooted in Confucian heritage societies wherein families are willing to share with the state financial responsibilities and to send their children to university, private or public, if they are accepted regardless of quality (Madden, 2014).

When it comes to QAA practices, Vietnam has accomplished certain achievements. Most noteworthy is the development of a nationwide QAA system. A national agency – MOET’s General Department of Education for Testing and Accreditation – responsible for monitoring quality across the education system was established in 2003. However, little positive feedback has been shown by both HE academics and QAA experts regarding the effectiveness of this body within MOET (K. D. Nguyen et al., 2009). Also, HEIs have established their own quality centres for internal QAA, yet their role has not been well-defined. Another significant achievement is a few external quality projects, e.g., 20 universities (18 public and 2 private) were involved in a pilot national project on accreditation to test the provisional standards of institutional quality which started in 2004-2007 (T. L. P. Pham, 2012, N. D. Tran et al., 2011). The two national universities have initially integrated into regional and international quality practices by employing the standards of the ASEAN University Network to conduct programme reviews (2004-2006) (Oliver et al., 2006) and adopting curriculum designed by prestigious foreign universities (T. L. P. Pham, 2012). Vietnam, however, still lacks experts in QAA mechanisms, hence much reliance is placed on foreign experience (K. D. Nguyen et al., 2009). Consequently, some QAA experience and methods may have been adopted without careful consideration given to their appropriateness for the context of the nation (Oliver et al., 2006). Moreover, the process is still slow regarding the implementation of proper QM (T. L. P. Pham, 2012).

### **1.2.2 English language teaching and learning in VHEIs**

Vietnam’s foreign language policies, like elsewhere, reflect an active link to its political history (Hayden, 1992). English, together with Chinese, French and Russian, is currently recognised among four official foreign languages to be taught in Vietnam’s formal education system (V. V. Hoang, 2013). These foreign languages gained their predominant position corresponding to certain historical periods of the nation: Chinese during the 1000 years of China’s domination, French from the beginning of the French colonisation in the late 19th century until 1954, Russian between 1975 and the early 1990s with Vietnam’s close connection to the USSR, and English since 1986 along with the time of Vietnam’s economic reforms (Denham, 1992), particularly after the normalisation in its diplomatic relation with the US (N. Nguyen, 2012).

English began to be taught in Vietnam during French times (V. V. Hoang, 2010). Between 1954 and 1975, although the language was a more prominent choice among students in the South than in the North it was offered as a subject in selected tertiary institutions (Denham, 1992) and as a discipline in two foreign language institutions in northern Vietnam (V. V. Hoang, 2010). The practice of the language was limited to the classroom until the late 1980s when Vietnam started the open-door policy and a dynamic foreign diplomacy. Such policies brought foreign business and tourists to Vietnam, unprecedentedly raising the demand for English (Denham, 1992). The language was from then on the first and nearly only foreign language being studied in schools, universities, and hundreds of foreign languages centres established outside the formal education system (V. V. Hoang, 2010; Kirkpatrick, 2012).

English as a discipline and English as a subject available prior to 1986 continue to be offered in VHEIs. The former means English being the medium of instruction (EMI) and studied for attainment of bachelor, master, and doctoral degrees. Regarding the latter, English is a compulsory subject for the majority of HE students which was 94% for undergraduates and 92% for graduates in 2008 (V. V. Hoang, 2010). It is studied in the first two or three years of study (of 4-6 years) with class contacts of no more than 3 or 4 periods (each equivalent to 50 minutes) per week (V. V. Hoang, 2013; T. T. Tran, 2013). Additionally, VHEIs particularly those listed as key universities, e.g., Hanoi Foreign Trade University and National Economics University, are encouraged to offer EMI programmes (V. V. Hoang, 2010; H. T. Le, 2013).

In functional and acquisitional terms, Vietnam is an Expanding Circle country in Kachru's (1985) three Concentric Circle model where English is principally learnt and used in an EFL context (Denham, 1992; Kirkpatrick, 2012). Differing from the Inner Circle - English speaking countries and the Outer Circle - mostly once colonies of English-speaking nations where English respectively is a primary language in all functions and has a(n) (co)-official status in institutional settings, in an Expanding country like Vietnam the language is marginally used in some educational settings whereby a minority of HE courses are provided in English. In line with the distinction proposed by Broughton, Brumfit, Flavell, Hill, and Pincas (1978) regarding motivation for language learning, few VHE learners have integrative orientation or pure and genuine interest in English language and its culture, rather they largely show instrumental motivation toward English learning, attaching practical values and advantages to the command of the language (Broughton et al., 1978; Coleman, 1995). They recognise the beneficial importance of English for their desired future career particularly in an international working environment, for opportunities to study abroad, or as a major international language for access to research and development in all areas of scientific, technological and commercial endeavour (Denham, 1992). English language embraces a variety of practical values in the nation's attempts for integration into the global HE. Some of the benefits

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include creating course equivalence and course transfers, conducting joint education and research programmes, and facilitating student exchange programmes (V. V. Hoang, 2013). Another significant motivation for Vietnamese learners of English is a greater need of the language for regional and international integration and cooperation, particularly since Vietnam joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1995 (Kirkpatrick, 2012) and the World Trade Organisation in 2006 (N. T. Nguyen, 2017).

A viewpoint pervasively expressed in literature (e.g., Kam, 1998; H. T. Le, 2013; V. T. Le, 2015; H. T. Nguyen, Warren & Fehring, 2014) is that ELTL at tertiary level in Vietnam has been for a long time predominantly focused on grammar or structural patterns and reading comprehension skills rather than the development of practical communication skills as stressed by MOET. Traditional approaches like grammar-translation method absolutely dominate communicative and interactive approaches. Moreover, English classes are teacher-dominated rather than learning and learner-centred with hierarchy relationship between teachers and students (V. V. Hoang, 2013; T. T. Tran, 2013). Most of class time is devoted to one-sided teacher talk aiming at transmitting grammar-centred and exam-focused knowledge to students (T. T. Tran, 2013), the result of which is students' passiveness in English classes although they may be willing to present their ideas and to participate in communicative activities (V. C. Le, 2004; H. T. Nguyen et al., 2014).

The grammar-translation method dominates as it does not require much effort, time for preparation and imagination from teachers busy with their teaching schedules and workload or taking part-time jobs elsewhere to compensate their low-paid salaries and to meet a high demand for English teachers (Denham, 1992; H. T. Nguyen et al., 2014). All that teachers need to do is to tightly stick to the textbooks page-by-page, exercise-by-exercise (V. T. Le, 2015; H. T. Nguyen et al., 2014). Since no formal policy has been formulated on the medium of instruction in English language classrooms (N. T. Nguyen, 2017), teachers tend to bilingually use source language (L1) and target language (L2) to present and explain content knowledge (V. T. Le, 2015). This results in little students' exposure to L2 and inhibits their commitment to and motivation to use L2. Short contact hours (2-4 periods/week) and large class size (normally 50-70 students/class) with students' unequal English proficiency levels means it is impractical to design and employ communication-focused tasks (V. V. Hoang, 2013; H. T. Nguyen et al., 2014). Most of the materials used in HEIs are imported from English speaking countries with little consideration given to students' preferred learning styles or the cultural knowledge of teachers and learners (V. T. Le, 2015; T. T. Tran, 2013). Materials may be irrelevant to Vietnam's EFL context (V. T. Le, 2015) and hard to access (V. V. Hoang, 2010, 2013; H. T. Nguyen et al., 2014). Near-authentic materials such as posters, flashcards, or magazines and newspapers are rarely used and technological teaching aids limited (H. T. Nguyen et al., 2014).

Despite VHEIs having invested in professional development, teaching methods, language resources, curriculum design, and foreign supports, the sector faces criticisms (T. T. Tran, 2013). Student participants in a study conducted by T. T. Tran (2013) suggested that ELTL at VHEIs was ineffective, disappointing, and demotivating and that it made them lose hope in improving their English language competence. Moreover, MOET's targets of language proficiency level for graduates of lower secondary (grades 6-9) and upper secondary schools (grades 10-12) are intermediate and upper-intermediate respectively (H. T. Le, 2013), yet after 4-5 years sitting at universities, HE graduates appear to not be confident in English and many of them cannot communicate in simple English interactions (V. V. Hoang, 2010; T. T. Tran, 2013). Concerns about quality in English language education have led to quality initiatives at state, institutional, and classroom level. One of the recent major solutions to quality issues in the field is the proposal of the National Foreign Languages Project 2020 for the 2008-2020 period (Project 2020) which was approved in 2008 by the Prime Minister through Decision 1400-QĐ-TTg, and started to be realised in the same year. The project involves the development of a national foreign language proficiency framework – assumingly a Vietnamised version of the Common Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment (CEFR). The redesign of the national foreign language education curriculum was referred to those frameworks. Target learning outcomes were also established for each educational level including tertiary level (H. T. Le, 2013).

In order to answer questions from critics about quality, I wanted to examine how people in VHEIs viewed and thought about quality and quality mechanisms, and what quality in ELTL was pursued in Vietnamese universities.

### **1.3 Prior research on quality issue**

Numerous attempts have been made to understand the concept of quality. In-depth and exhaustive discussions about approaches to defining quality, hence most influential and widely cited sources to date, can be found in Burrow, Harvey, and Green (1992), Green (1994), Harvey and Green (1993), Harvey and Knight (1996), and Harvey (2006). These show the diversity and complexity involved in the way quality is defined and as Harvey and Green (1993) and Green (1994) conclude, HE quality can never be talked of as a unitary concept. Likewise, in a UNESCO report, Vlăsceanu, Grünberg, and Pârlea (2007) define quality in HE as a multi-dimensional, multi-level, and dynamic concept. Conceptualising HE quality also entails clarification of such issues as who the customer of HE is and what the purpose of HE is. The diversity and complexity as such in defining quality leads to the question as to when to use which meaning or which definition. A more practical question that is relevant to this study is: What meaning(s) could be constructed into the concept of quality in the context of ELTL in Vietnamese universities?

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There are as many approaches to quality process as conceptualisations of quality. Quality audit, quality accreditation, external quality monitoring, and peer review are but a few. These processes are supposed to bring about quality enhancement and/or accountability (Cheng, 2003; Nicholson, 2011). Nevertheless, there have always been debates around the compatibility between enhancement and accountability purposes of these strategies. For some, quality measures focus on monitoring and maintaining quality but pay little attention to transformation in teaching and learning (Harvey & Knight, 1996). For others, the two purposes are inseparable (Woodhouse, 1999). Some suggests ideas to accommodate dual purposes within a quality method (Bogue, 1998), some introduces a system of guarantees to build QM into classroom (Lawrence & McCollough, 2001). The validity of those ideas and guarantees are, nonetheless, in doubt due to lack of empirical evidence. Whether these management processes help in improving quality in teaching and learning is also questionable.

Consequently, several studies were conducted to examine the impact that the arrangements of quality processes and procedures have on a range of aspects, for example, student learning experience (e.g., Horsburgh, 1999), and teaching-learning processes (e.g., Cruz, Gálvez & Santaolalla, 2016). Of those impact studies, Newton (2002) offers an interesting distinction between the dominant formal meanings of quality which were prevalent in the early 1990s and what he calls the 'situated' perceptions of quality revealed through focus group interviews with academics working with quality systems of their own institution on a daily basis. Newton also suggests quality research be contextualised and aimed for alternative understandings of quality and quality processes.

Another significant issue of concern in HE quality research is the relevance and applicability of quality concept and quality methods in HE environment other than business settings from which they migrated and were imported (Downey, 2000; Pounder, 1999; Taylor & Hill, 1993a, 1993b). There are concerns about the adoption, often without contextual regard, of ideas and models of quality from country to country, region to region, education system to education system (Blanco-Ramírez & Berger, 2014; Van Ginkel & Rodrigues Dias, 2007; Sanyal, 1992; Yorke, 1999).

A number of quality measures have been in place for monitoring quality in language education. Some measures include mission statements, client survey, client charters, and quality guidelines (Heyworth, 2013). A notable recent method is the use of the CEFR which was originally developed for the achievement of greater unity in modern language teaching and learning among members of the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2001). The framework has been claimed as a key measure for the assurance of quality in language education (Heyworth, 2013; Widdowson, 2004) as it provides a basis for the elaborative standardisation of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. (Council of Europe, 2001). However, what happens to

general education also applies to language education in that it is questionable as to the transferability of principles and practices of quality measures from context to context (Brown & Heyworth, 1999; Heyworth, 1999, 2013; Widdowson, 2004). Moreover, literature is rare with regard to quality and QAA practices in ELTL (Dawood, 2013; Thomas, 2003). Walker (2001, 2003), Thomas (2003), and Piccardo (2014) are among few studies discussing the relevant issues in English as native language contexts. White (1998) distinguishes difference between the focus of QA and that of quality enhancement process. The former appears to be outcomes and accountability whereas White argues a focus on processes should be prioritised for sustainable improvement and effectiveness. Another crucial contribution is made by Rossner (2008) who develops a quality accreditation scheme targeting both the educational experience and outcomes. The assurance vs. enhancement controversies, however, need further examining in empirical research.

To gain insight into the matter of what HE quality is, a multitude of studies have been carried out with the involvement of different stakeholders including students, teachers, academics, employers, and graduates (e.g., M. Joseph & B. Joseph, 1997; Mbabazi, 2013; Rodman, Biloslavo & Bratoz, 2013; Sha, Grebennikov & Nair, 2015; Simpson, 2012; Srestha, 2013). Student voices receive most attention, including student experience that goes beyond academic aspects to include other services such as financial services, health services, accommodation, opportunities for social activities, and development of employability (Aldridge & Rowley, 1998; J. Douglas, A. Douglas & Barnes, 2006; Hill, 1995; Hill, Lomas & MacGregor, 2003; Kandiko & Mawer, 2013). Most empirical research evidence has been generated through questionnaire surveys for the importance/performance of aspects that contribute to the quality of the overall HE services. Those studies were largely focused on the distinction between perceptions of service performance obtained – or satisfaction and expectations which means desires or wants of customers (Aldridge & Rowley, 1998; J. Douglas et al., 2006; Rasli, Shekarchizadeh & Iqbal, 2012; Sumaedi, Bakti & Metasari, 2012).

Two studies have recently addressed the quality of VHE (e.g., Oliver et al., 2006; H. T. Pham & Starkey, 2016). Some explored factors that affected quality in ELTL in VHEIs (e.g., H. T. Nguyen et al., 2014; T. T. Tran, 2013). A most recent study (X. M. Ngo, 2017) investigated how the CEFR was perceived by teachers at a foreign language specialising university in northern Vietnam and how it was implemented in practice. However, the focus of those studies does not include nor examine quality measures and the application of the CEFR as a factor that has impact on ELTL quality.

## 1.4 Statement of the study

My study was a response to the pressing need for empirical research on quality in VHE language education. I sought to address the lack of clarity as to what was implied by quality in ELTL, what quality VHEIs were pursuing, the worrying lack of empirical research on whether or not foreign ideas and experiences had worked in the context of Vietnam, and the relationship between quality mechanisms and ELTL quality. I decided to focus on how VHE stakeholders received, thought, responded, and talked about quality concept and quality measures being applied in the field of ELTL in VHEIs and how they influenced classroom practices - or contextualised perceptions of ELTL quality and quality mechanisms.

The research was conducted in the context of increasingly autonomous Vietnamese universities, the involvement of market-oriented elements in the steering of HE, the establishment of new quality systems and processes and their roles across VHEIs, and the emphasis of VHE on practical values of the English language. I expected that the study would make theoretical and practical contributions to the field, offering benefits to practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. It would help practitioners in ELT in enhancing course relevance and creating proper and inspiring learning environment for students. Education managers would be enabled to choose and set feasible, appropriate quality targets and models for ELTL of VHEIs, which would mitigate chances of misuse of constrained public budgets. Similarly, it would inform policymakers in building national and institutional systems of quality mechanisms and quality models relevant to VHE.

Also, I expected the study would add further empirical evidence in the relationship between QA schemes and improvement in ELTL in an EFL context. This may keep away blind adherence to QA procedures or compliance culture which could be harmful to quality in teaching and learning (Bottery, 1992; Fourie & Alt, 2000; Taylor & Hill, 1993b). The search for a quality concept which was well rooted in classroom and institutional practices and focused on curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment would help sort out a choice of appropriate quality models/frameworks that may have impact on student learning. Furthermore, it would keep educative process from being reduced to merely the production of saleable commodities (Sayed, 1993), or HE being turned to just business practices following the application of industrial concepts, formulae and techniques to the management of higher learning establishments (Pounder, 1999) while there were no few conflicting values between HE and business settings, or between professionalism and managerialism.

To realise those potential contributions, I sought to explore the conceptualisations of quality in ELTL in Vietnamese universities and how they were influenced and shaped by contextual circumstances. As regards ELTL, my focus would be English as a compulsory subject (ECS) as it was

the subject provided to the majority of undergraduate students across VHEIs. My study was also aimed at securing insights into the motivation for using quality schemes for ELTL practices in VHEIs and whether they were complementary processes when it came to addressing the issue of quality. It looked into such conceptualising processes from perspectives of education and training management (ETM) and QAA people and of key actors participating in ELTL processes. Attempts were made for exploring and understanding stakeholders' processes of sense-making and interpreting of ELTL quality and quality measures and how their understandings influenced their decisions and actions on ELTL within the context of VHE.

To meet my purposes the research question was '**How is quality in ELTL conceptualised in VHE public and private sector context?**' Within this the sub-questions were: a) 'How is quality in ELTL perceived from managerial, administrative, and pedagogical perspectives in public and private sectors?' and b) 'What are the motives and impact of the implementation of quality measures on ELTL as perceived from managerial, administrative, and pedagogical perspectives in public and private sectors?'

A multiple case study design was employed for an instrumental purpose of understanding quality in ELTL in VHEIs. The study involved investigating one public and one private university, with the participation of campus leaders, those working in ETM and QAA, teachers, and students. A case study approach would facilitate the construction of contextualised perceptions and understandings of quality in ELTL in VHEIs. The involvement of universities in the two sectors and participants in multiple roles would offer new multi-faceted insights into quality in VHE ELTL.

The data were generated by means of document analysis, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, observation, and fieldnotes. Documentary sources included public policy documents and institutional documents. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Vice Chancellors, managers and staff in ETM and QAA practices, managers and staff of English language units. Students raised their voices through focus group interviews. Observations were conducted in ELTL classrooms. Notes were taken along with the conduct of interviews and focus groups. A constant-comparative method was applied for data analysis.

## **1.5 Outline of the thesis**

This thesis comprises eight chapters. The background context of the study has been introduced in the first chapter together with its rationales, focuses, objectives and potential contributions with expected outcomes. The second chapter offers an examination into quality perceptions, QAA processes, and existing schemes for ELTL discussed and debated in the literature. This is the basis for the construction of a conceptual framework presented toward the end of the chapter. Chapter

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3 explicates the researcher positionality, case study approach, data collection methods, and data analysis processes. The research findings are presented in three chapters: Chapter 4 depicts messages conveyed in policy documents concerning quality and quality measures with a particular focus on the field of university-level ETLT, Chapters 5 and 6 are descriptions of the two case studies and individuals' thinking and understandings of the related issues. The most significant findings are discussed in Chapter 7 with regard to answering the research questions. The concluding chapter begins with a summary of the research before presenting the research contributions, limitations, and implications.

## Chapter 2 Literature review

In this chapter I review literature on the origin of the concept of quality in HE, why quality is an issue of concern in the provision of HE around the globe, and why it is not a simple job to define the quality concept. I explore diverse conceptualisations of quality and issues concerning QAA mechanisms and methods including ideas on quality and quality measures that have been developed in northwest Europe and the US in association with relevant HE systems and developments. The discussion provides a basis for linking and comparison between Western ideas on quality and those developed in the context of VHE. I also bring up viewpoints revolving around current theoretical and practical situations in the application of QA schemes and mechanisms in ELTL. Specifically, I examine variations in objectives and aims of institutions offering English language education, quality schemes applied in the area, and the connection between QA mechanisms and ELTL. This gives further explanations for why I conducted my study and how I narrowed down my research focus. Theoretical and practical issues examined in quality literature with respect to both HE in general and English language education form the groundwork for the construction of the conceptual framework of the study which is presented and explained in the last section of the chapter.

### 2.1 The origin of the concept quality

The concept of quality historically came into existence as early as the Stone Age together with contemporary appreciation of fine stone tools, evolving throughout thousands of years via different civilizations such as those of ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome and other cultures (Elshennawy, 2004). The Industrial Revolution accompanied by mass production and division of labour marked an important point in quality movement. Individual workers no longer were responsible for making whole products, their responsibility for quality self-checking was also lost. Quality control and inspection were engendered as necessary management tools under mass production, originally serving the purpose of detection to ensure products met pre-determined specifications before they left the factory (Mishra, 2007; Sallis, 2002).

However, until the first half of the 20th century did the modern era of quality start (Elshennawy, 2004; Mishra, 2007) together with W. Edwards Deming's dissemination and advancement of Walter A. Shewhart's ideas about Statistical Process Control (Elshennawy, 2004; Mishra, 2007; Sallis, 2002). Deming brought industrial techniques from industrialised countries to Japan (Rossiter, 2007) which successfully applied them and became 'a symbol for low priced and high quality goods' (Elshennawy, 2004, p. 606), hence its dominance in the global market in a wide

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range of manufactured products in the 1970s/-80s (Sallis, 2002). The Japanese success resulted in wider recognition of the value of the quality message in the US, the UK and Western Europe in the mid-1980s (Elshennawy, 2004; Sallis, 2002).

Statistical Quality Control was primarily concerned with product testing. Contemporary leading pioneers in quality emphasises prevention objectives. It was essential that any source of defects be anticipated and eliminated before and during the manufacturing process. They also stressed the role of the customer in the search for quality of the product. This issue was initially raised by Deming in his lectures to the Japanese (Rossiter, 2007) in 1950 and onward (Deming, 2000). Accordingly, the most decisive factor to the failure or success of a manufacturer was understanding and satisfying customers' needs and expectations which would be translated into measurable quality-characteristics or specifications and designed into the product (Deming, 2000). Moreover, the involvement of everyone's responsibility for quality during the production process was more widespread recognized. Quality culture must be established into the whole organization from top management to employees at production floor. In his fourteen points, Deming (2000, p. 87) said 'every activity, every job is part of a process' for the transformation. Pall and Robustelli (1999) suggested quality training effort be developed organization-wide. Such an endeavour for quality culture would give rise to a permanent change of work, hence continuous improvement in quality of the organization. All those principles embody philosophical underpinnings of Total Quality Control and Company-wide Quality Control – the precursors of Total Quality Management (TQM) (Elshennawy, 2004) in the later stages of the quality revolution.

Looking back at the very beginning of the history of quality, I could see that the quality notion has always been with human beings yet quality ideas only travelled the world and became an epidemic during the time of commercialisation and technology transfer. This shares similarities with and is the antecedent to the global 'travelling', to use Ozga and Jones's (2006) words, of quality policy in another worldspread epidemic – mass education and knowledge transfer – which also reached Vietnam. It could further my understanding of Vietnam's borrowing of quality policy and practice in my study.

Originating in industrial and commercial world, the concept of quality spread to HE vocabulary (Doherty, 2008; Newton, 2002; Nicholson, 2011) and has been at the centre of attention of many HE systems starting in the US, Britain, and other European countries since the mid 1980s (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993). In 1984, the National Institute of Education in the US issued the monograph *Involvement in Learning*, recommending that to enhance excellence in HE, an assessment initiative should be in position to demonstrate transformations in graduates compared to entry students (Bogue & Saunders, 1992). In the same year, 'quality and value for money' were declared focal purposes of English HE (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993). One year

later, Comité National d'Évaluation was brought into being in France and the policy paper entitled 'Higher education: Autonomy and quality' was in publication in The Netherlands, initiating the expansion of national evaluation systems in Europe (Bernhard, 2011; Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993).

Industrial concepts, formulae and techniques have been applied to the management of higher learning establishments (Pounder, 1999). HE has turned to business practices for much of its management theory (Bottery, 1992). Educative process was converted into the production of saleable commodities (Sayed, 1993), HEIs world-wide were seen as typical service organizations operating in a complex and unstable market environment (Taylor & Hill, 1993a) in the early 1990s and the notion of quality became critical to performance assessment initiatives in HE (Pounder, 1999). In the quest for quality many HEIs looked to TQM – a customer-focused management model (Koslowski, 2006; Taylor & Hill, 1993a). The customer dimension in the 1990s' quality literature evolved from meeting customer requirements to achieving customer satisfaction, then to anticipating and exceeding customer needs and expectations (Taylor & Hill, 1993a). Some HEIs, like Fox Valley Technical College, even implemented a money back guarantee on its programmes which meant free instruction offered to those who could not get a job at the end of their first training with the college and a guarantee to employers regarding quality/productivity skills and technical competences of their graduates (Spanbauer, 1995). Lawrence and McCollough (2001) suggested introducing TQM principles into the classroom as a means to guarantee quality programmes aimed at three primary constituent groups – students, faculty, and employers.

Demonstrably derived from industrial and commercial applications, QA methods are faced with criticisms concerning whether they are relevant or can be readily transferred to educational establishments as the two settings are dissimilar in many ways. Business purposes are few and simple (Bottery, 1992), being the sale and circulation of goods in order to make and maximise possible profits (Sayed, 1993), thus key indicators of quality can be more easily quantified, measured and controlled (Roffe, 1998). Meanwhile, educational purposes are hardly single, identifiable (Bottery, 1992; Doherty, 1997), even without clarity/priority (Idrus, 1996) due to the participation of multiple actors/stakeholders who are active and conscious agents in the production process (Sayed, 1993) and whose needs and expectations may be overlapping in some respects yet are different in many (Doherty, 1997).

Therefore, Sayed (1993) argues objectivist/instrumentalist/relativist approaches to quality do not sit comfortably with the practice of education. Techniques drawn from the business world fail to capture the dynamic and interactional character of the educative process, particularly when quality is associated with simple technical issues of QAA such as use-value, efficiency, cost-effectiveness, fitness for purpose, and accurate and objective evaluation of performance (Sayed,

1993). Moreover, educational operations involve missions and functions that require them to be other than isolated from the wider social, political and economic context (Sayed, 1993). It is thus almost impossible to say what causes or determines changes in HEIs (Kajaste, Prades, & Scheuthle, 2015) and it is extremely hard to control all influential factors (Harvey & Newton, 2004). Even in case of a complex range of performance indicators identified (Roffe, 1998), they can hardly include and reflect the interaction between actors/stakeholders involved and between academic and non-academic matters. Additionally, the 'consumerism of students' (Downey, 2000) – students being treated as clients, may lead to changes in the nature and value of HE (Birnbau, 2001).

Bureaucratic processes such as rules, control, compliance have certain uses (Bottery, 1992) like clear role definitions and hierarchy, yet concerns arise with regard to an unnecessary increase in governmental interference in the affairs of educational institutions wherein the professionals need more space to exercise autonomy (Billing & Thomas, 2000; Doherty, 2008). Bureaucratic controls run the higher risk of intensifying preoccupation with QA, resulting in blind adherence to rules, hence a compliance culture rather than a genuine desire for improvement/innovation (Bottery, 1992; Taylor & Hill, 1993b). Often too much emphasis is placed on 'the control of changes to course regulations, with the administrative system concentrating on consistency of format and avoidance of precedent', while little concentration is on 'the appropriateness of learning objectives,' 'methods of delivery,' or 'methods for assessing their effectiveness' (Taylor & Hill, 1993b, p. 14). Thus, it is possible that one same curriculum design does not come along with the same quality delivery methods or learning experiences (Doherty, 2008; Taylor & Hill, 1993b). With a focus on teaching, learning, curriculum, and assessment, I expected that my research could contribute to addressing such worries about the applicability of QAA measures in educational settings.

## 2.2 Why quality concerns

Firstly, quality concerns arise from mass education and HE expansion. The massive student participation puts financial pressure on the state budgets, which means educational institutions face a reduction in public funding resources (Harman, 1998; Van Damme, 2000). The drastic growth of HE results in worries about institutional performance as it has not brought prosperity as promised (Frazer, 1994). Increased entry into HE may lead to a lower standard of knowledge and no real increase in the transferable skills (Green, 1994). Many developing countries saw a large number of unemployed, underemployed, or misemployed graduates during HE massification; similarly, employers in many countries are dissatisfied with the employable skills of graduates (Frazer, 1994). The expansion of HEIs in size and type (Harvey, 2004) to serve students from

diverse academic backgrounds, with various career destinations (Fukahori, 2014), raises the need for reliable information about the quality of institutions and their programmes (Harvey, 2004). HEIs can 'no longer be a "secret garden" in which the academic oligarchy can hide from the rest of society' (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993, p. 6). Instead, they are challenged by customers and sponsoring agencies to bring to light what they are doing, how well they are doing based on which these stakeholders can make appropriate decisions regarding the value for money of what they are offered (Mishra, 2007). HEIs need to be more responsive to the needs of their customers, and accountable to the taxpayer (Green, 1994) in pursuit of successful competition for students and funds.

Secondly, the increased concern with quality lies in the rising mobility of students (Martin & Stella, 2007). Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley (2009) reported 2.5 million overseas students studying outside their home countries in 2007 and that the number was expected to rise in the following years. They added that the majority of mobile students were moving either from Asian countries to North America, Western Europe and Australia or within European Union. This trend of student mobility has expanded the need for quality practices and procedures that facilitate the comparability and transferability of credits in the provision of HE (Altbach et al., 2009; Martin & Stella, 2007). The transparency and comparability of qualifications are also sought after by global companies hunting for international graduate-employees (Fukahori, 2014).

The international intensified interest in quality and quality practices indicates an overwhelming predominance of extrinsic values of HE. That means the pre-eminence of the capabilities of this sector to respond to the changing needs of societies and the economic demands (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993; Friend-Pereira, Lutz, & Heerenz, 2002). The focus on extrinsic values as such could result from market-oriented elements in the steering of HE and customer-focused QA (McCulloch, 1993) borrowed from business and industry sectors. HE, consequently, has been treated as a large-scale service industry (Doherty, 1997) wherein satisfying students-as-customers by offering them what they want instead of what educators think they should have seems to be a trend among HE providers. Principles and processes to manage quality of products of service businesses and assembly lines are applied to the management of educational products (Downey, 2000), intended for continuous quality improvement in teaching and learning of which life-long learning and intrinsic motivation for learning are underpinnings.

### **2.3 Difficulty in defining quality**

Quality literature shows perennial controversial debates around the question: 'What is quality?' (Ball, 1985; Cheng & Tam 1997; Elassy, 2015). When it comes to HE, quality can never be talked of

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as a unitary concept (Harvey & Green, 1993; Green, 1994). The complexity in defining quality is rooted in the dependence on who defines it and how HE is understood and interpreted concerning its contexts and purposes (Clifford, Miller, Stasz, Sam, & Kumar, 2012; Elassy, 2015). There are too many users of or those having interests in or impact on HE which may vary in different societies and it is hard to identify their values and priorities in their understanding and interpretation of HE and its quality. For example, students might be more concerned with quality as fitness for purpose, and quality as value for money is the emphasis of the government and the public (Nicholson, 2011) while employers are interested in graduates' competences (Owlia & Aspinwall, 1996).

Another factor hindering consensus in defining quality is its benchmark relativism (Harvey & Green, 1993). Quality can be used as an absolute concept which means 'the highest possible standard that cannot be surpassed' (Sallis, 2002, p. 12). In this sense it is 'synonymous with high quality or top quality' and 'in nature similar to goodness, beauty, and truth' (Sallis, 2002, p. 12), the assessment of which is made subjectively and personally (Doherty, 2008). Equally, quality may be judged based on whether a number of absolute thresholds or pre-defined standards are exceeded (Harvey & Green, 1993; Sallis, 2002). Alternatively, the presence of quality may be recognized through the consistency in fulfilling a set of stated objectives, or missions, irrespective of any pre-set absolutes (Harvey & Green, 1993).

Quality is a multifaceted notion (Frazer, 1994; Harvey 2006; Vlăsceanu et al., 2007) involving dimensions which may vary greatly. Frazer (1994) posits quality is composed of three aspects: goals, the process deployed for achieving goals, and how far goals are achieved. Owlia and Aspinwall (1996) introduce 30 attributes of quality in their conceptual framework, taking into account their relevance and applicability to three groups of HE customers – students, academic staff, and employers. Blanco-Ramírez and Berger's (2014) build a model focusing on the organizational aspects and behaviours of quality rather than defining quality in terms of a specific commodity. Accordingly, quality is constituted by five dimensions: bureaucratic, political, symbolic, systemic and collegiality. The bureaucratic dimension refers to formal structures and regulations that guide the pursuit of quality. The political dimension concerns stakeholders' interests and the influence of quality activities on the distribution of power and the decision-making in an institution. The symbolic dimension pays attention to cultural, interpretive and performative aspects of quality practices. At the core of systemic dimension is changes of HE in response to the external environment. The concern of the last dimension is who is involved in and what voices are invited in peer-review processes. In their 3P model, consisting of 'presage', 'process' and 'product', Gibbs (2010) depicts education as a complex business which embraces interacting dimensions of quality in many varied contexts, ranging from the context before

students start learning, what goes on as students learn, to the outcomes of the educational processes.

Quality is a highly contested and also dynamic concept that is evolving and adapting to changing context and exigencies (Altbach et al., 2009). For example, at the 1998 World Conference on HE, UNESCO brought forward quality as a multidimensional concept of which the variables to be evaluated included 'teaching and academic programmes, research and scholarship, staffing, students, buildings, facilities, equipment, services to the communities, and academic environment' (Van Ginkel & Rodrigues Dias, 2007, p. 39). The definition of quality proposed in a UNESCO-CEPES report a decade later differed, reflecting the increasing complexity of the HE environment:

Quality in higher education is a multi-dimensional, multi-level, and dynamic concept that relates to the contextual settings of an educational model, to the institutional mission and objectives, and to the specific standards within a given system, institution, programme, or discipline (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007, p. 70)

## **2.4 Approaches to defining 'quality'**

There are various attempts to examine the nature of quality and there are as such widely differing conceptualisations of quality. The most commonly cited definitions of quality are those raised in works with either Harvey and/or Green playing the part of co-author(s) or main single author, e.g., Green (1994); Harvey (2006); Harvey and Green (1993), and Harvey and Knight (1996). Their five approaches to defining quality include: Quality as exceptional or as excellence; Quality as perfection or consistency; Quality as fitness for purpose; Quality as value for money; Quality as transformation. Green acknowledged those conceptualisations of quality originated in a study undertaken by Burrows and Harvey as part of a UK project on Assessing Quality in HE launched in 1991.

In Burrow et al. (1992), and Green (1994) three approaches are discussed: the traditional concept of quality, conformance to specification or standards, and quality as fitness for purpose which is subcategorised into quality as effectiveness in achieving institutional goals and quality as meeting customers stated or implied needs. These approaches respectively match the notion of exceptional as distinctiveness, quality as perfection or consistency, and quality as fitness for purpose in Harvey (2006), Harvey and Green (1993), and Harvey and Knight (1996). What is further developed in these three works is an additional and more detailed analysis into the exceptional notion of quality. Accordingly, they see the traditional view of quality as one version of quality as exceptional, entailing distinctive and exclusive denotations but offering no benchmarks against which to measure quality. The other two added notions appertaining to

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exceptional quality are connected with standards, one being high standards which are 'only possibly attainable in limited circumstances' and one being minimum standards established 'based on attainable criteria that are designed to reject defective items' (Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 12). Another development is they put forward the notion of quality as value for money. This approach coincides with concerns about the share of public expenditures on HE considering the pressure on government budgets at the time of massive expansion of this sector. More importantly, they inaugurate the notion of quality as transformative. It is a reflection of a more learner-focused approach to quality, the prominence of which is the enhancement and empowerment of the student. It raises questions about the relevance of a product-based approach to quality like quality as fitness for purpose and the role of periodic assessments with performance indicators in transformative learning as well.

In the following section I explore the five notions of quality as proposed by those authors mentioned above in connection with other quality authors. I look into the origins and applicability of each approach in the context of HE, how each notion serves as a conceptual basis for a variety of QA mechanisms in this field.

The notion of exceptional quality, which implies something distinctive or special, is accompanied by a traditional view of HE that quality is an innate attribute of universities, thus there is no need to demonstrate it via any process of validation or evaluation (Church, 1988). This conception is without relation to a single definable means of determining quality, which means a rejection to any valid assessment of quality. In this sense it meets at some point with the mystical view labelled by Astin (1980) who argues quality in HE cannot be defined or measured as it involves the complexity, diversity, and ambiguity of colleges and universities in terms of inputs, outcomes, and mission. Such a conception of quality that indicates a denial toward evaluation of quality in HE is unrealistic. HE establishments are always faced with questions and judgements about quality, be they from an insider or an outsider (Astin, 1980). What needs to be done is to select appropriate criteria for a certain purpose of quality judgements (Ball, 1985) and make quality tangible through processes and procedures of assessment that may serve clearly defined purposes considering available resources and other contextual factors.

Quality as excellence (gold standards) embodies an emphasis on reputation and internal resources, both human and physical. Reputation may refer to the prestige that an institution gains on enrolment size, selectivity in undergraduate admissions, and programme diversity (Astin, 1980; Bogue, 1998). Harvey (2006) argues the reputation of an institution lies in its history, exclusivity, wealth, and research profile. Reputation functions as a significant indicator in building league tables such as the Times Higher Education Supplement (Harvey, 2006). Nonetheless, the criteria of reputation give advantages to well-established elite institutions while leaving out immediate

and/or new establishments. Reputation and resources are inextricably related (Harvey & Green, 1993), and the reputational view goes hand in hand with resources view (Astin, 1980) through which quality is determined by such operational measures as the number of volumes in the library, the number of faculty with terminal degrees, size of the endowment (Koslowski, 2006; Nicholson, 2011). The resources view sees collegiate quality as 'limited supply' (Bogue, 1998, p. 8) which is supposed to be achievable in limited circumstances (Harvey & Green, 1993). Additionally, as pointed out in Astin (1980) and Harvey (2006), the maintenance of excellence is guaranteed by nature as long as the right students are admitted selectively to an institution and the best resources for learning are provided, irrespective of the functioning of the institution or the quality of its programme. The notion of excellence with input and output at the centre manifests itself in the yearly rankings and ratings of America's 'best colleges' according to U.S. News and World Report (Bogue, 1998). In the UK, it has been evident in the Research Councils' criteria for long-term funding of research centres (Harvey & Green, 1993).

The weaker notion of excellence depicted as passing a set of basic standards or thresholds signifies a dynamic relation between quality and standards, that is, the maintenance or improvement of standards shows whether quality is reached or enhanced. Standards refer to required characteristics of a product or service (Burrows et al., 1992; Green, 1994), which are usually used as measurable and quantifiable outcome indicators for comparative purposes (Harvey, 2006). Those standards are set up based on attainable operationalised criteria so that products free of fault or defect are to result (Harvey & Green, 1993). Any items may thus be claimed quality if they fulfil the standards set internally or externally. Quality defined in this way offers educational institutions opportunities to pursue quality in their own way as different standards are required of different types of institution (Burrows et al., 1992; Green, 1994). If a standards-based approach is followed, detailed standards are produced and employed as an absolute measure of quality of an institution or a programme (Van Ginkel & Rodrigues Dias, 2007). Accordingly, the quality of an institution or a specific programme is evaluated through a process named accreditation by which it may be formally recognised as meeting minimum acceptable standards (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007). The practice of accreditation is not only common in the US (Van Ginkel & Rodrigues Dias, 2007) which has even become an international exporter of this type of QA (Blanco-Ramírez & Berger, 2013), but has gained significance worldwide as a method used for achieving quality (Van Ginkel & Rodrigues Dias, 2007).

A problem with the standards-based approach is the ambiguity of criteria used to set standards: one criterion may be significant for one person but insignificant for another. This may lead to disagreement about attested quality despite the satisfaction of the pre-set standards (Burrows et

al., 1992; Green, 1994). Moreover, standards may have several meanings. Doherty (1997, p. 240) identifies five definitions of standards:

(1) Comparison over time – is the standard required of a degree in a subject X at university Y higher or lower than it used to be? (2) Comparison between institutions – is the standard required for a degree in subject X at university Y higher or lower than at university Z? (3) Identification of intent – the level of educational attainment required for the award of a degree in subject X and what is expected of students. (4) Output standards – what are the nature and levels of student attainment required for a degree? (5) The ‘appropriateness’ of the standard required for the award of a degree – does the degree meet some (vague? unstated?) generally agreed norm?

Standards refer to both the expectations set for an institution or an educational programme and the level of performance attained by the institution or the student (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007; Yorke, 1999). The variation in standards is further shown by the division of areas in which they may be set and assessed. Harvey (2006) identifies four areas where standards are set. First, academic standards, which relate to intellectual abilities of students, or the capability to meet a specified level of academic attainment. Second is standards of competence, the technical abilities of students, transferable skills, higher level academic skills etc. Third is standards of service that the organisation provides students, including advice, tuition, assessment and guidance (Sallis, 2002). Fourth is organisational standards concerning principles and procedures developed and implemented by the institution to assure the provision of an appropriate learning and research environment.

Another criticism of defining quality in terms of standards is that it is no different than measuring human outcomes using crude statistical performance indicators, which could mean reducing complex human experiences to mere numbers (Doherty, 1997). Additionally, due to the concept of minimum standards, the variation in institutional quality may diminish at the expense of comforting the public with the tyranny of numerical data concerning the differences in institutions with adequate quality and those without (Bogue & Saunders, 1992). Similarly, Van Ginkel and Rodrigues Dias (2007) argue conformity to a standard is not applicable to determining quality in HE because ‘the process of education is anything but uniform’ (Sallis, 2002, p. 19). Nevertheless, this approach continues due to competition in HE, stakeholders’ demand for greater transparency in performance data, and a quest for comparability of educational qualifications as well. Therefore, what is important in evaluating quality in relation to HE via standards is to, firstly, formulate clearly and explicitly criteria against which standards are set, then be clear which meaning of standards is used in which circumstance to serve which purpose.

Quality as perfection or consistency is linked to the concept of Zero Defects which means ‘getting everyone to do it right the first time, every time’ with ‘it’ being the requirements to be met (Crosby, 1984, p. 59). Stemming from corporate management, these ideas emphasise preventive

actions and eliminating any opportunities for errors. If there is no chance for any imperfection at any stage of the process, then there would be no need for final output inspection. This is similar to one of the fourteen points developed for management by Deming (2000): quality is the result of improvement of the production process, not of inspection. TQM in education, likewise, is more concerned with the learning process and a systematic curriculum review than with the curriculum content (Taylor & Hill, 1993a). Yorke (1999) also maintains that excellence in quality of the educational process maximises the chances of student success. Regarding error prevention, in assembly and production operations, although it may be helped with the technique Statistical Quality Control (Crosby, 1984), it is still without no difficulty. Peters and Waterman (2004, p. 248) though argue, 'an environment which calls for perfection is not likely to be easy' and a substantial tolerance for failure is a special characteristics of a success-oriented, positive, and innovative organisation. The operationalisation of Zero Defects and right first time standard is much harder in a service industry like education where human errors are likely (Sallis, 2002). Despite such weaknesses, Zero Defects is of great significance as it entails the idea of quality culture. Quality has to do with more than just conforming to specification, it necessitates a devolution of responsibility for quality (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey, 2006). Quality is assured at each stage that is involved.

Another aspect in perfection/consistency approach to quality is consistency. The concept is about the homogeneity of a product or service, aiming to shrink variation (Deming, 2000). Yet the purpose of HE is not to produce identical graduates or research outcomes (Harvey, 2006), rather it is where creativity and innovation are nurtured and developed (Van Ginkel, 1994). Although consistency is less relevant to academic standards, it needs to be assured in service and organisational standards. Post hoc measurements based on feedback from students and staff are used to evaluate service provision whilst mechanisms such as ISO9000 are in place for the assurance of consistency of organisational standards (Harvey, 2006).

Fitness for purpose is a phrase primarily adopted in 1985 by British scholar – Christopher Ball – in seeking a 'secure basis' (Ball, 1985, p. ix) for evaluating HE and its components. Ball argues that to create sufficient conditions for real quality work, HEIs should be prepared to define and redefine their purposes and demonstrate fitness for purpose. This definition fits the theory of quality within mission proposed by Bogue (1998) who sees the potential of quality being present in an institution through its missions. Likewise, Bogue and Saunders (1992, p. 20) define educational quality as 'conformance to mission specification and goal achievement – within publicly accepted standards of accountability and integrity.' The practice of accreditation of collegiate quality in the US illustrates how quality is evaluated via mission integrity and performance improvement (Bogue, 1998).

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The fitness for purpose definition is the key to questions and debates about the meaning of quality (Woodhouse, 2012) and has been the most widely favoured interpretation of the concept (Van Ginkel & Rodrigues Dias, 2007; Woodhouse, 1999). It acknowledges and encourages variation among institutions in terms of mission, historical development, culture, and wider national circumstances that they are in (Bogue & Saunders, 1992; Woodhouse, 1999). Functions and objectives may change over time (Van Ginkel, 1994; Yorke, 1999) and vary from country to country (Job & Sriraman, 2013; Sanyal, 1992) contingent upon social developments and societal demands (Van Ginkel, 1994). Therefore, it is essential that the nature and purposes of a specific HE system be identified before the application of any QA system (Yorke, 1993) and that quality mechanisms be developed with sufficient regard to the roles and nature of HE in respective societies (Van Ginkel & Rodrigues Dias, 2007). This is of particular concern when concepts, values, and models in quality practices are transferred from context to context neglecting differences in historical, social, cultural, educational, and economic circumstances (Blanco-Ramírez & Berger, 2014; Kells, 1999; Sanyal, 1992). Such a transplantation of evaluation systems should not be treated as a 'quick, magical solution' in the face of quality issues (Kells, 1999, p. 210).

Alternatively, each country and institution needs to be aware of the need to build a relevant system of evaluation that works for them (Kells, 1999; Van Ginkel & Rodrigues Dias, 2007) and fits into their national HE traditions and cultures and specific national circumstances (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993).

Another variation of quality as fitness for purpose prioritises the role of the customer in specifying the purpose of HE (Harvey, 2006; Green, 1994). Quality is determined in terms of meeting customers' needs or requirements, which means 'the customer specifying in advance what is required, and judging quality on the extent to which this is fulfilled' (Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 17). Despite customers focus in quality theories by such gurus as W. Edwards Deming (Deming, 2000; Sallis, 2002), Joseph Juran (Sallis, 2002), Tom Peters and Robert H. Waterman (Peters & Waterman, 2000), seldom are their original requirements specified and translated into features of a product or service in practice (Harvey, 2006; Harvey & Green, 1993). Instead, the production of an item or provision of a service is just consumer-targeted based on market research, marketing strategies, and the capability of the producers or providers (Harvey, 2006; Harvey & Green, 1993). This is also the case in HE whereby no customer standards are directly involved. Students' choices of a specific course or institution are made under the influence of HE marketisation and limited to entry requirements, availability of places on course, and other personal circumstances (Harvey, 2006; Harvey & Green, 1993). Also, the customer is not in a good position to dictate what they need in a way ahead product or service (Deming, 2000). Likewise, students in the role of the customer of HE do not always have adequate knowledge and experience to state what they can

expect from a specific course or an educational establishment, let alone to influence the content of the course (Idrus, 1996).

In the value for money approach, what matters is 'clearly definable societal benefits' (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993, p. 7) in return for the volume of investment (Harvey, 2006). Now that education is prevalently seen as a commodity, educational establishments are described as providers of services (Sallis, 2002) operating in an open and complex market environment who are facing increasing pressure to show evidence of value to gain competitive advantage (Prasad & Jha, 2013; Taylor & Hill, 1993a). Taylor and Hill (1993a) argue the provision of such value is embodied in the lower cost or superiority in their performance, which indicates a distinction in their product or service. The UK's National Audit Office (NAO) sees the value for money of government spending involves optimal use of resources to achieve the intended outcomes: Economy – spending less, Efficiency – spending well, and Effectiveness – spending wisely (NAO, nd). It is aimed at moving resources away from poor provision (Harvey & Green, 1993) and encouraging the achievement of desired outcomes while considering the cost of resources used or required to serve stated purposes or mission of an institution and using acquired resources with maximum possible efficiency and effectiveness (NAO, nd).

The value for money strategy has appealed to stakeholders, from the government, sponsoring agencies to students, and parents who bear increased expenditure of HE. These stakeholders underscore the requirements for quality of colleges and universities in return for the money, time and efforts they spend and insist on getting 'real quality' which is equated to value for money (Idrus, 1996, p. 39). Educational establishments, in receipt of public funds and students' tuition fees, need to demonstrate transparency and accountability in their use of these monies and assure the acquisition of maximum benefit from the funds allocated and the tuition fees charged. As such, it is essential that those institutions be able to offer tangible value for money, for example, delivering qualified and competent graduates at a specified cost. It is possible for colleges and universities to demonstrate and assure such value for money through institutional performance indicators, graduate feedback on the value of the programme, or customer charters (Harvey, 2006; Harvey & Green, 1993).

Value for money mechanisms, however, risk effectiveness being outweighed by efficiency, e.g., low-standard goals being set up and well accomplished at low cost (Frazer, 1994). Likewise, what is of value may be regarded as the same as what can be measured, putting aside what is unmeasurable (Bogue & Saunders, 1992). Meanwhile, McCulloch (1993) argues measurable and achievable standards and performance indicators may not fully reflect all aspects or attributes that make quality of a course or programme. These are not to exclude constituent variables of quality that are not under institutional control, for example, funding levels, licensure standards,

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and employment opportunities (Bogue & Saunders, 1992). Additionally, those in favour of the reputational approach may contend that outcome measures have little to do with institutional impact or effectiveness (Astin, 1980). This is because in most cases the quality of outputs depends far more on student inputs than on the function of the institution or the quality of its programme (Astin, 1980). Reputational institutions such as Oxbridge may serve as a case whereby the schools recruit excellent students and produce brilliant first-class graduates but without adding much value to the students (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996). Therefore, the validity of outcome measures needs to be considered in relation to the students' potential at college entry (Astin, 1980).

The transformative approach is associated with, but not limited to, qualitative transformation of physical matters. It involves cognitive transcendence in the dialectical process which is well established in both Western and Eastern transcendental philosophies (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996). The notion of transformation is a response to the controversies around the applicability of principles in corporate management in educational settings. Being neither product-based nor financially-driven it is more learner-focused. Transformation refers to the 'enhancement and empowerment of the participant' of HE (Harvey & Knight, 1996, p. 18) not just in the educational process but for life (Harvey & Knight, 1996). Transformative quality in education means enhancing the learner by effecting changes in them (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996) or, as added by Harvey (2006), enhancing the service provided to the learner. The enhancement aspect of transformation is closely linked to value added approach to quality and philosophy proposed by Astin (1980) and Bogue (1998) respectively. Hence, quality is assessed against the capacity of the institution to make a positive difference in students by adding value to their knowledge, personality, and career development. It is significant to encourage and assist students in formulating and developing a critical approach to acquiring knowledge and skills and relating them to a wider context (Harvey & Knight, 1996).

Empowerment entails participants having the power of influence in their own transformation (Harvey, 2006; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996). The learners are enabled to not only proactively be engaged with but to make decisions in both the learning process and quality assessment process. If critical thinking skills are well built in learners, what can be accomplished is not just the development of knowledge but the transformation of conceptual ability and self-awareness of the learners (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996). They would be intellectual performers (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996) who acquire knowledge, challenge the knowledge acquired with justifications and assessments, and apply what they have learnt analytically during and after the learning process.

Despite interest in transformative quality it is hard to assess quality in terms of enhancement and empowerment. This requires massive longitudinal data collected across institutions but the value-added measures may not be easily applied to individual institutions (Astin, 1980); additionally, they do not necessarily reflect the nature of what is counted as the difference in learners' intellectual and personal development (Harvey, 2006). Furthermore, enhancing and empowering learners necessitates delegated responsibility for quality (Harvey, 2006; Harvey & Green, 1993): everybody's responsibility, including learners', is needed for a transformation in the quality culture of an institution, hence empowerment of learners (Harvey, 2006).

## 2.5 Quality assurance in higher education

Quality assurance (QA) refers to the adoption and implementation of management and assessment processes and procedures to 'ensure achievement of specified quality or improved quality, and to enable key stakeholders to have confidence in the management of quality and the outcomes achieved' (Harman, 1998, p. 346). It is a management tool for maintaining and improving performance at the institutional, subject or departmental level (Doherty, 2008).

Since the introduction of the first QA agencies in the 1980s (Van Damme, 2002) in the US and Western Europe, QA policies and mechanisms have expanded in many countries which are characterised by an immense diversity in national circumstances and developments and nature of national HE systems (Harman, 1998; Kells, 1999). Accordingly, various QA approaches have been developed and adopted in proportion to the diverse conditions of HE settings such as maturity, size, complexity, state-HEIs relationship, and other historical, political and economic backgrounds (Kells, 1999; Van Damme, 2002).

Great concerns have been shown toward the appropriateness of quality models being transplanted across contexts (Billing, 2004; Harman, 1998; Harvey & Williams, 2010; Kells, 1999). They should not be expected as some relatively quick and magical ready-made solution, rather careful consideration needs to be taken into national circumstances and local characteristics of the system being evaluated (Harman, 1998; Kells, 1999). Quality evaluation systems and procedures must be individualised and internalised by importing parties, particularly by the academic community so that they are compatible with specific cultural and national factors and the characteristics of the particular HE system (Billing & Thomas, 2000). Otherwise, failure would be experienced as with the Netherlands and Denmark's adoption of an unnecessarily cumbersome and unworkable programme accreditation (Faber & Huisman, 2003); or the copying by some countries of totally irrelevant, hence ineffective and wasteful evaluation activities from a well-known European country in Kells (1999).

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Hopkin (2004) proposes three categories of HE systems: mature, evolving, and embryonic. A mature HE system accommodates a notably diverse range of, and normally highly specialised, institutions which have the political capacity to generate and pursue their own agenda no matter if the system is moving toward devolution of state authority (e.g., the US) or greater state control (e.g., the UK). An evolving and an embryonic system are similar in the major role of the government in the provision of HE yet the former is larger in size and type of HEIs than the latter. Hopkin's classification indicates that countries at an embryonic stage seek lessons and guidelines in QA from the other systems (Hopkin, 2004), considering the maturity between the importing and exporting systems if applicability is concerned (Kells, 1999).

Kells (1999) suggests choices of potentially workable QA schemes be made to fit well into national cultures. For example, a relatively elitist society featuring highly valued distinctions between people and institutions is inclined toward more open and public accountability-oriented QA mechanisms. By contrast, confidentiality and privacy are preferred concerns in very egalitarian systems where equal status and treatment between individuals are of great significance. He advocates a critical analysis into Geert Hofstede's work on four key common national cultural dimensions: Power distance – how roles and authoritarian values are distributed and accepted among members of institutions and organisations; Uncertainty avoidance – the relative level of intolerance in society concerning uncertainty; Masculinity/femininity – the distinction in gender roles; and individualism/collectivism – the weak/strong ties between individuals and their loyalty to the group. Those attributes are significantly related to organisational life, classroom behaviour, and societal views of institutions, professionals and leaders in the HE world. Kells recommends the Hofstede national cultural scheme as a useful tool and a potential help in the development of national evaluation schemes when being coupled with a wise and informed analysis of the local circumstances.

An important issue in discussions about QA is the balance between state control and institutional autonomy. Both QA practices and autonomy of HEIs regarding e.g., curriculum design, financing and recruitment policy are principally determined by national legislation (Van Damme, 2000) which is not the same in every country. QA in most parts of the world is part of a general compromise in which there is an exchange between deregulation and institutional autonomy on the one hand and QA and accountability on the other hand (Van Damme, 2000, 2002). In countries where there is traditionally strong institutional autonomy, explicit accountability is increasingly required (Harvey & Newton, 2004) and QA growingly functions as a political vehicle to ensure compliance and control of a system (Harvey, 2016). Conversely, in countries where autonomy of HEIs was formerly limited yet is becoming increased (e.g. mainland Europe and Asian countries like Vietnam) and where there is a switch in role between state- and market-oriented

elements in the steering of HE systems, accountability is the price of increased autonomy (Harvey & Newton, 2004) and central control is being lessened through the use of QA systems (Brennan & Shah, 2000; Harvey, 2016). Hence, accountability-focused QA mechanisms and a more self-regulation approach to state-HEIs are adopted (Billing, 2004; Van Damme, 2002). Accompanied with that is a rising focus on the use of performance measures, or output-oriented approach to quality of the HE systems at the expense of detailed and close state control (Billing, 2004; Harman, 1998; Van Damme, 2002).

Consequently, it becomes obviously an important and sensitive issue that QA mechanisms and QA agencies are a tool in the power struggle between the government and HEIs in many countries (Harman, 1998; Van Damme, 2002). Kells (1999) distinguishes between three patterns of ownership-governance balance (Woodhouse, 1999) which are equally followed among countries around the world: high level of government control, independent of but financed by government, and without either government sponsorship or control. The closeness to government makes the first two patterns appear to match what Woodhouse (1999) calls a statutory body answerable to the government and an arm of the government. Without direct involvement of state authority in the operation of QA agencies, especially in the form of accreditation, the third pattern seems to be more favoured in parts of the world, take the US, where state control is traditionally weaker and institutional autonomy stronger (Van Damme, 2002; Woodhouse, 1999).

Besides the political roles of governance and regulation of HEIs, QA processes and procedures may serve a variety of purposes. Those functions of QA form ‘a spectrum from the “softer” (developmental) improvement/information functions to the “harder” (judgemental) legal/financial/planning functions’ (Billing, 2004, p. 115). More specifically, they range from improvement of teaching and learning, public accountability, client information and market transparency, legitimation of certification of students (accreditation), to HE sector planning including HEIs’ financial viability (Billing & Thomas, 2000; Van Damme, 2000; Woodhouse, 1999).

Improvement and accountability are the two debatable QA objectives. In terms of accountability, QA processes are to monitor and maintain quality (Nicholson, 2011), to ensure value for both private and public monies and to encourage or force compliance to emerging or existing government policy (Harvey & Newton, 2004). Accountability also means assuring that proper programmes are organised and run, aiming at delivering to students appropriate educational experience as promised (Harvey & Newton, 2004). Another aspect of accountability is the provision for both funders and users information about the quality of institutions and programmes (Harvey & Newton, 2004). Meanwhile, improvement is articulated as enhancing quality of research and directly transforming student learning experience (Harvey & Newton,

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2004; Nicholson, 2011) with an emphasis on either pedagogic aspects or on employment values (Billing, 2004).

A commonly held criticism of QA is that accountability has overwhelmed improvement (Harvey, 2016; Harvey & Newton, 2004; Nicholson, 2011). Accountability has been the dominant underlying rationale for QA in HE whereas improvement and enhancement has only been a secondary feature and paid little attention of most QA systems, even just incidental (Nicholson, 2011). Some authors, e.g., Harvey and Williams (2010), Nicholson (2011), argue the two purposes are philosophically opposed and mutually exclusive goals of evaluation. Some rare attempts have been claimed to strike the uneasy balance between improvement and accountability, for example, the QA Framework implemented by the Ontario's Council of Graduate Studies (Nicholson, 2011) or the external QA in the Nordic countries (Harvey & Williams, 2010). However, it was questionable whether an institutional culture was created concerning continuous improvement (Nicholson, 2011) or whether the balance has been managed to remain over time (Harvey & Williams, 2010).

In discussing the relationship between QA and pedagogic development, Harvey (2016) contends QA processes, especially external QA, are rarely linked to any improvements in student learning. Moreover, they likely inhibit innovation in teaching and learning rather than advance it (Nicholson, 2011). Harvey adds that improvement at the teaching interface is more likely the result of internal processes. The success of a system is dependent less on rigour of application than on its contingent use by actors and interest groups, and on how the system is viewed and interpreted by them (Harvey & Newton, 2004). Too much emphasis on building and conforming to formal QA procedures may divert attention from teaching and research and is harmful to quality in HE (Fourie & Alt, 2000). Melrose (1998) argues there is a link between different concepts of quality and the paradigms of curriculum evaluation that influence the evaluative operations of academics. As Horsburgh (1999) highlights, QA needs to focus on curriculum, learning, teaching, and assessment to have any impact on student learning.

To facilitate an improvement-led approach to academic and pedagogic values, students and teachers need encouraging to be actively engaged in the process of teaching, learning, and research rather than being preoccupied by the compliance game. This is reachable only when a mutually-agreed understanding of the quality concept emerges between external monitors, senior managers, academics, and students (Harvey, 2016). Van Damme (2002) contends there was a need for a broad international consensus on what actually the core standards of academic quality should be. Meanwhile, the concept of quality behind QA is still immensely vague despite innumerable conceptual and pragmatic enquiries into the nature of quality in HE through explorations of QA systems and the impact they have on student learning (Harvey, 2016; Harvey

& Williams, 2010). Additionally, articulation is rare regarding the relationship between quality monitoring and innovation/improvement in teaching and learning (Harvey & Newton, 2004). Harvey and Newton add that to avoid policy implementation gap, attention should be paid to situational factors and context in quality development. Therefore, I expected my study could contribute to the international attempts concerning understanding of quality in HE. More specifically, I focused on how relevant stakeholders in VHE context construed and constructed quality in HE or a quality system and the impact of QA on academic and pedagogic enhancement with respect to the area of ELTL.

Each QA function entails a specific focus which may be on aspects that cut across the whole institution, such as teaching and learning, research, and administration/management (Billing, 2004; Kells, 1999; Woodhouse, 1999). The focus of QA schemes may be evaluation, which may be of the sector, institution, faculty/department, subject/programme, or individual staff (Billing, 2004; Brennan & Shah, 2000). It seems to be generally agreed that improvement at the teacher-learner interface, improvement of research outputs, and that of individual administrative service systems can only be encouraged through internal or self-evaluations (Harvey, 2016; Van Damme, 2000) which may be initiated by the institution or department (Billing, 2004). The results of self-evaluation provide the basis for external reviews (Billing, 2004) which centre around all the other functions (Brennan & Shah, 2000; Van Damme, 2000). Additionally, external processes act as a powerful initial role of a catalyst and a necessary prerequisite of internal improvement, or internal-led processes (Brennan & Shah, 2000; Harvey, 2016). However, the effect seems just limited to better use of, and investment in, infrastructure while it is hard for external reviews to touch upon, not least to engage with the teaching and learning interface (Harvey & Newton, 2004).

Because not all functions and focuses of QA schemes are compatible (Van Damme, 2000; Woodhouse, 1999), different methods and approaches are required (Harvey & Newton, 2004). Some key methods include self-studies/-evaluations/-reviews, peer review, audit, accreditation, and use of statistical information and performance indicators resulting from survey of key stakeholders with increasing involvement of external scrutiny via participants such as graduates and employers (Harman, 1998).

Self-evaluations are cost-effective processes mainly done internally and entail the participation of key staff, which is expected to raise chances of substantial improvement (Harman, 1998; Van Damme, 2000). They are often used in combination with site-visits and external peer review, which enhances incentive for the staff to take evaluation process more seriously (Harman, 1998; Van Damme, 2000). External review may act like the groundwork for comparisons and benchmarking with surrounding institutions (Van Damme, 2000). The panel of external reviewers

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may include disciplinary experts, pedagogic experts, managers, external peers, experts from industry/commerce, and students (Billing, 2004; Woodhouse, 1999). Harvey and Newton (2004) suggest that an external evaluation team should include pedagogic expertise, professional experience of quality evaluation, and appropriate expertise in the area of research-informed approaches to learning and teaching.

Quality audit refers to a meta-review of the functioning of internal quality control mechanisms (Harvey & Newton, 2004; Stanley & Patrick, 1998, Van Damme, 2000), exploring internal processes, which is followed by comments/reports by an audit team on what has happened and what will or may happen (Woodhouse, 1999). The audit reports are based on briefing material which consists of a concise description of QA arrangements at all levels in the institution, a brief analytical self-study of how these arrangements are seen to be working, and selected illustrative material (Stanley & Patrick, 1998). Woodhouse posits audits are the least intrusive and encourage the institution to be self-critical rather than provoke defensiveness and inwardness. Dill (2000) asserts academic audit is a form of accountability mechanism intended for HEI's capacity enhancement to independently assure the quality of their academic degrees and student learning. According to Dill, an improvement in QA processes will eventually lead to an improvement in academic outcomes.

Another increasing mechanism for quality monitoring (Van Damme, 2002), is accreditation – a method resulting in a decision that warrants an institution or programme (Harvey & Newton, 2004). Haakstad (2001) argues that accreditation is a wise choice if it is implemented at the institutional not programme level, based on a flexible, but reinforced, audit method. The failure to learn from such an analysis by, for example the Netherlands and Denmark, led to the imposition on HE sector, primarily by politicians, of costly yet unnecessary and unworkable programme accreditation schemes (Faber & Huisman, 2003; Harvey & Williams, 2010). The process is conducted by external expert teams to verify the fulfilment by an institution or a programme of the minimum, threshold standards and criteria set forth by an accrediting agency (Van Damme, 2002). Starting in the US with a voluntary and independent nature concerning the functioning of accrediting bodies, the American model of accreditation has been copied in many countries of Latin America, Europe, and Asia but the method becomes a state-run activity, operated by dependent or quasi-autonomous bodies (Van Damme, 2002). At present Vietnam is exercising a quasi-governmental model (Njie, 2015) of accreditation.

Quality assessment, usually carried out at programme level (Woodhouse, 1999), is an investigation to determine whether quality activities comply with planned arrangements and whether the educational process is implemented effectively and is suitable for achieving objectives (Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993). It results in grading on dimensions such as

teaching or research (Harvey & Newton, 2004; Woodhouse, 1999) which lends itself to the production of a ranking with the associated results and problems (Woodhouse, 1999). Rankings do not provide prospective students with the critical information needed to make an informed choice of where to study though (Bowden, 2000).

Quality schemes, both external and internal, are complemented by statistical information and/or performance indicators produced by HEIs themselves or external agencies (Harman, 1998; Van Damme 2000). They include retention rates, graduation rates, the level of final award, graduate employment, and course entry requirements (Harvey, 2016). Harvey and Williams (2010) suggest student survey measures be used with care for informing curriculum and teaching improvement because the survey responses may be based on opinion rather than evidence. Besides, statistical measures put too much emphasis on accountability purposes and on measuring the easily measurable rather than evaluating the underlying issues (Harvey & Williams, 2010).

## **2.6 Managerialism and quality in English language education**

ELTL institutions are strikingly diverse in contexts and organisations (Impey & Underhill, 1994; White, Hockley, Jansen, & Laughner, 2008) which define how they are managed (Impey & Underhill, 1994). They could be located in native or non-native English-speaking countries with or without the participation of native speakers of English in the role of teachers/lecturers. They may run as a single institution or part of a university or college, being privately-owned or state-funded, where English language, partly or entirely, could or could not serve as a medium of instruction. The function of ELTL ranges from a pre-sessional or in-sessional language support programme or a part of requirements among other campus activities for the achievement of their academic or vocational qualifications to one among other major programmes of study the completion of which is the granting of a degree of Bachelor of English language (White, Martin, Stimson, & Hodge, 1991).

All those differences in contexts and organisations lead to variations in institutional aims and objectives with priority being given more or less to certain areas. Each institution needs to be highly aware of the importance of building an appropriate QA system (White Paper, 2014) considering challenges and rewards in management that are typical to its own unique scale, scope, and context (Impey & Underhill, 1994) if it is targeted at commitment to quality and becoming an effective ELTL institution.

White et al. (2008) argue one of the most significant changes in ELTL since 1991 is the injection of such notions as 'service provider' and 'consumer' into the traditional teacher-student relationship. Consequently, ELT institutions play a dual role: provider of education and that of a

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market-led service industry (Walker, 2001, 2010; White et al., 2008). ELT providers, whatever their size and scope, whether they be separate entities or subsumed within colleges and universities in both private and public sectors, bear features of educational establishments and service characteristics due to a market-driven competitive environment in response to globally increasing demand for English language proficiency in which they operate (Walker, 2001, 2010).

The development of the service industry approach to ELT institutions centres around the interaction between ELT service providers and their clients, which as Walker (2001) argues, plays a greater role in determining the success of the service activity and the creation of quality. The focus on quality and service coincides with the increased significance of management and administration, or the expansion of the application of management principles and practices in service industries to ELTL operations with an emphasis on consumer satisfaction (Brown & Heyworth, 1999; White et al., 2008). That feature of managerialism with such priorities in managerialist perspectives may be contrasted with professionalism in ELT and what ELT professionals emphasise (White et al., 2008). White (1998) earlier noted a worrying trend of quality in English language teacher education being associated with bureaucracy rather than professionalism within which an individual practitioner was given the maximum space to exercise his/her skills and judgement (Lacey, 1985). That tendency was influenced by managerial concept of teaching quality which faced criticisms for being oriented to the provision of products and limited to those aspects of the concept that could be managed at a bureaucratic level (Slater, 1985).

Criticisms against ELT practitioners include their occupational monopoly over the practice of a discipline which is defined as a body of intellectualised knowledge and skill and that there is much likelihood of informational asymmetry in professional activities resulting from the professions being the only ones judging the quality of practitioners' work (Farmer, 2006). Additionally, a service industry approach to ELTL underlines the importance of identifiable actions and measurable results while it is not always clear what ELTL professionals promise to do for their clients (Farmer, 2006). The lack of congruence between managerialism in a service ELTL and professionalism in ELT leads to a proposal of a complete and accountable professional ELTL service with the involvement of clients' perspectives (Farmer, 2006).

In such emerging managerialism, Walker (2000) argues ELT practitioners need to see themselves not only as linguists and educators but as service providers. They must know who their clients are and what their clients' needs are, based on which they have an understanding of what they must know and be competent to do so that professionalism could be embodied in completeness of service (Farmer, 2006), or the accountable delivery of expert services (Farmer & Nucamendi, 2008).

Although numerous QAA schemes have been in place to enhance and ensure quality in mainstream education, little attention has been paid to those applied to ELTL. As acknowledged by Thomas (2003), Walker (2001), White (1998), there is a limited literature on quality and QAA practices in ELTL. Of the very few studies, Thomas (2003) discusses quality definitions underlying QA processes applied to English language education in the UK. Walker (2001) examines features of service of English language schools in New Zealand that influence clients' satisfaction and Walker (2003) investigates client satisfaction of service performance of commercial English language centres in New Zealand.

Other studies, e.g., Brown and Heyworth (1999), Heyworth (1999, 2013), look at principles in applying QA processes in ELTL. Accordingly, language teaching activities are analogous to a production cycle involving three phases: designing components of language learning process, implementing the teaching and learning processes, and assessing the results of the language learning production process – the outcomes. Yet, language teaching and learning is a creative and relational process, not an industrial production line, the success of which calls for interactions between the teacher and the learners and among the learners themselves (Brown & Heyworth, 1999; Heyworth; 1999). Therefore, applying QAA processes to a service ELTL may not be reduced to a purely mechanical set of procedures (Heyworth, 1999). Rather, more emphasis should be placed on human aspects of the quality processes, or functional quality as Walker (2000) puts it, i.e., how members of the team communicate and are motivated to work together for the delivery of a quality service. It is the functional quality and how quality is enhanced humanly rather than technical quality that truly differentiates one ELTL competitor from another (Walker, 2000).

Brown and Heyworth (1999) posit some of the industrial elements may not work in modern language teaching and learning, e.g., the notion of 'zero defects' sounds counter-productive to language learning as errors and errors correction could be exploited as a beneficial tool for rapid language improvement. They also point out that concepts such as customers' needs and expectations may have influenced language teaching programmes design and delivery, yet the idea of meeting or exceeding customers' expectations is quite complex in the context of language teaching particularly in the case of state institutions where learners almost have no choice of teacher, method or content. However, Brown and Heyworth believe in a rationale for QAA in language education and that improvement is the result in most language teaching activities if management principles are applied in a systematic and disciplined way. Again, specific contexts should be considered concerning the legitimacy and applicability of those principles and more importantly, the validity of the claim needs examining in empirical research, which gives rise to my research.

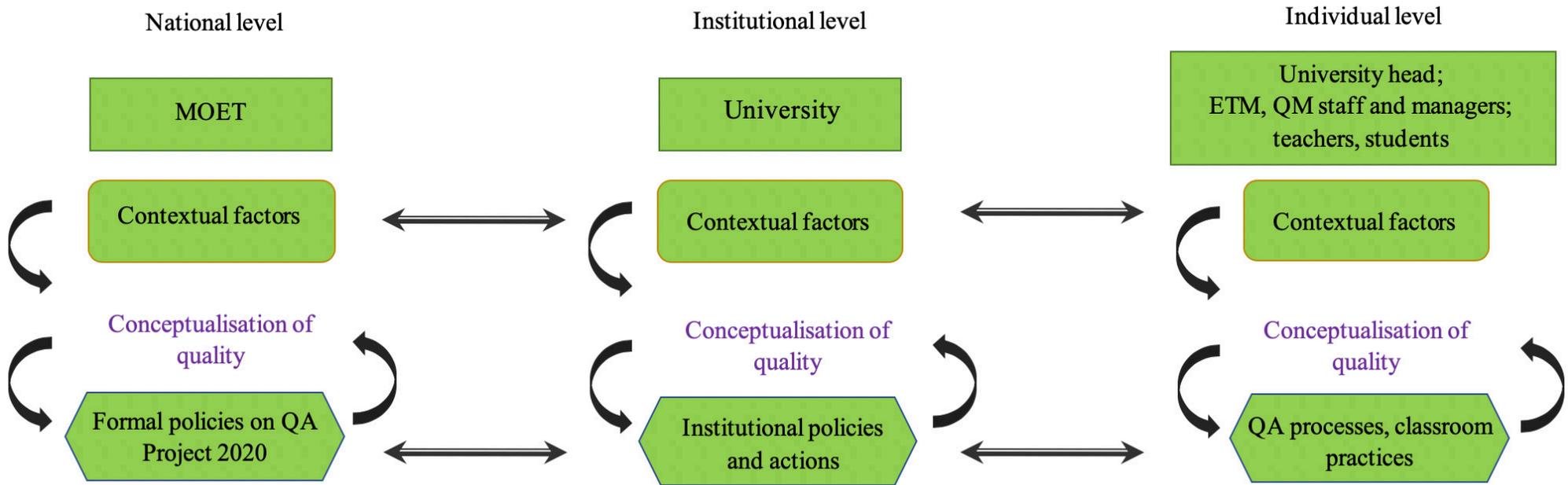
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Market-oriented management in the provision of English language education had been adopted in VHEIs like elsewhere regardless of institutional types and sizes. Western- and also industry-originated QA methods had been introduced for standardising teaching, learning, curriculum, and assessment in English language education at tertiary level. The process led to VHEIs operating more or less as English language service providers to their student-clients who needed to achieve certain predetermined threshold levels to continue or finish their study programmes. Yet little research had been conducted to understand why managerial strategies and instruments were applied and to what extent they had caused impact to quality in the sector. My study responded to this issue, looking into motives of QAA practices and the relationship between QAA measures and pedagogical development.

### **2.7 The conceptual framework**

My study developed on the basis of previous research, both theoretical and empirical, in quality in HE and in English language education, and of knowledge of Vietnam's quality mechanisms including its legal and organising systems that had been in operation for quality in HE, of which ELTL quality was a part. The conceptual framework depicted in this section explains how the foundational sources of knowledge and theories informed the study and key informants, processes, and constructs studied and the presumed relationships among them (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework



As can be seen from Figure 1, the research was an examination into ELTL quality at national, institutional, and individual level. At national level was ELTL quality initiatives and schemes presented in policies and projects produced and/or promoted by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). The institutional level involved institutions' policies and actions in response to public policies regarding QA in ELTL. Individuals that formed the third level comprised actors in ETM and QAA and those in ELTL. ETM and QAA people included heads of universities, and ETM and QAA staff and managers who adopted and implemented national ELTL quality initiatives through quality processes and procedures within institutional contexts and conditions. Teachers and students were the key actors of the ELTL process, realising quality initiatives via classroom practices. The teachers developed curriculum and delivered lectures with principles and procedures essentially informed by their beliefs about language and language teaching; the learners played the roles of both participants and customers of the educational process.

The research was designed so that I could look at the contextualised perceptions of quality in ELTL both ways: how actors/stakeholders understood and interpreted the quality concept and measures, and how their thinking was turned into actions/reactions. Within each level, I would consider how quality in ELTL was conceptualised in context. Moreover, the study would explore the embodiment and development of such a conceptual basis in quality mechanisms/schemes and ELTL practices being employed in Vietnamese universities. This would mean probing into how quality as perceived, understood, and interpreted by actors/stakeholders involved manifested itself in various actions/reactions/processes encompassing the promotion of formal policies and national initiatives for improvements in language teaching and learning (i.e., Project 2020), the adoption/implementation of quality measures in educational establishments, and the adoption/exploitation of certain language teaching methods in the classroom. For this aim, the conceptualisations of quality discussed in previous sections would be treated as the groundwork for the scrutiny into ELTL quality in the context of VHE.

The presupposition was that the way people looked at ELTL quality was determined by typical and direct context and situation in which people lived and worked. Despite being interrelated, some contextual factors may affect this group of people more pivotally than the others and vice versa, hence different perceptions and expectations of quality at each level. At national level, factors that tended to have predominant influence were the global trends of internationalisation and marketisation of HE, the history and development of national culture, economy, and education and the national policies on English language education. Similarly, public policies practiced at institutional level must take into account institutional culture, institutional autonomy, structural and functional features, and quality capacity of the institution, resources in human, infrastructure, and finance. Institutional staff directly involved in the implementation of ETM and QAA methods

may pay more attention to institutional processes and procedures for managing human resources, curriculum design and delivery, and institutional goals and mission. Teachers and students were likely to be more concerned about factors directly influencing classroom practices such as professional autonomy, learners' needs, learning objectives, and learning styles, and the availability of materials and other teaching and learning resources.

The Project 2020 as a national quality initiative for the national foreign language education was brought into reality at institutional level through various channels of quality mechanisms including institution missions, institutional inspection, institutional curriculum framework, and learners' feedback. I wanted to explore to what extent teachers may claim their autonomy as language teaching professionals and how they made their own decisions on what to teach and how to teach at the presence of initiatives and mechanisms for ELTL quality improvements. I was also interested in the relationship between ideas and methods of quality and classroom teaching and learning from the other end. This would mean examining classroom context boundaries for conflict or compatibility between what was expected or targeted in the national and institutional quality initiatives and the contexts in which ELTL occurred. The way I reached that purpose was looking into teachers' and learners' perceptions and expectations concerning quality in ELTL and contextual factors relating to language teaching and learning processes.



## Chapter 3 Methodology

In this chapter I spell out my positionality and explicate how my identity and perceptions shaped the research design and process. I explain my choice for case study design together with explicating case study type, case bounding, and case selection processes. Also, I discuss in detail data collection methods, data analysis, and case report method along with consideration of ethical issues.

### 3.1 Researcher positionality

My research did not fall within a pure kind of any particular theoretical and philosophical tradition or paradigm but rather, the approach that I adopted was drawn from different traditions. The first school of thought in which the study could be situated was pragmatism. I believed that more importance should be attached to choosing whatever research design and research method appropriate to address the research problem than to commitment to certain philosophical paradigm (Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, & Snape, 2014). This was explicable by my consideration and decision on the applicability and usefulness of case study research design and research tools for the aims and context of the study before I articulated research positions, yet as a point of reference rather than a matter of privilege (Robson & McCartan, 2016). It was not the abstract issue of philosophy that dictated the direction of my research or my research questions.

Nonetheless, subconscious thinking and beliefs influenced the design process of my study which I can be reflexive about. More importantly, my study involved investigating human subjects' ideas, meanings, and motivations because of the underlying premise that people are conscious and purposive actors who hold beliefs and ideas about their world and attach meanings to what is going on around them, hence their inner world crucially determines their behaviour (Robson & McCartan, 2016) and studying such a world would give rise to useful implications for practical actions.

Ontologically, my research was seated somewhat in the middle of the two extremes of realism and nominalism, either being what is presented in Ormston et al. (2014) as critical realism or subtle realism or in Neuman (2014) as moderate nominalism. Accordingly, an external reality does exist but not independently of human minds, instead is knowable and accessible through the perceptions and interpretations of individuals (Ormston et al., 2014). Consequently, there is no single, universal, and lasting truth but multiple complex and multi-faceted realities (Charmaz, 2000; Robson & McCartan, 2016). The reason is subjects construct their own meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon (Gray, 2009). What people see and experience is greatly influenced and shaped by subjective-cultural factors which cannot be entirely removed

(Neuman, 2014), hence there is nothing as complete objectivity or value-free science.

Understandings of the real world, of social meaning and action cannot be isolated from the context in which it occurs (Neuman, 2014). Reality and meaning do not exist in their own right but are constructed by human beings as they interact and engage in interpretation (Ormston et al., 2014; Robson & McCartan, 2016) – Constructivist approach. As an illustration, in case bounding I followed a more nominalist or constructivist approach (Wells, Hirshberg, Lipton, & Oakes, 2002). Certain theoretical perspectives, e.g., familiarity with quality literature, were taken as the first step in choosing cases for study, research questions being used as a guide to deciding which setting to go to, whom to interview, and what to observe but once the fieldwork had started, the respondents and I socially constructed and co-constructed cases (Wells et al., 2002). More specifically, my selection of interview participants, say, people involving in QM mechanisms and ELTL process, was decided based on the research aim of gaining insights into the relationship between the two processes but what the interviewees and I would be discussing at sites may lead me to participants or settings that I may have not thought of.

In consonance with realism and interpretivism, the central purpose of research is understanding, seeking to provide explanations or answers to 'how' or 'why' questions and is conducted in natural settings and uncontrolled situations (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Scientists in these camps thus aim at both explanation and understanding of human behaviour, but it is worth noting 'that 'the task of "causal explanation" is undertaken with reference to the "interpretive understanding of social action" rather than to external forces that have no meaning for those involved in that social action' (Bryman, 2012, p. 30). Capturing people's subjective sense of reality to really understand social life is crucial (Neuman, 2014). Of similar significance is the research objective to consider individual decision-making processes, discerning what actions mean to the people who engage in them and the reasons or motives that people use for their actions (Neuman, 2014). Meanwhile, true meaning is rarely obvious on the surface, so it is required that the researcher conduct a detailed examination, gathering mountains of highly detailed qualitative data, seeking the connections among different bits so that s/he can acquire an in-depth understanding of how people construct meaning in uninterventionist social situations (Neuman, 2014). To illustrate, my exploratory and explanatory case study of quality in ELTL was conducted in the setting of Vietnamese universities without the involvement of any control measure. For the purpose of securing a deep and holistic understanding of the issue under investigation, I used a variety of instruments particularly those bearing open-ended and flexible features (e.g., semi-structured interviews), allowing for the exploration into not only facts but personal experiences, opinions, and thoughts arising from individuals' circumstances.

When it comes to epistemology, or ways of knowing and learning about reality (Ormston et al., 2002) and what kind of knowledge are legitimate and adequate (Robson & McCartan, 2016), I

believed in Neuman's (2014) statement that researchers produce social science knowledge mostly, but not necessarily always, by inductively observing, interpreting, and reflecting on what other people are saying and doing in specific social contexts while simultaneously reflecting on their own experiences and interpretations. There are three points to be clarified in this statement. The first point is, as Ormston et al. (2014) argue, there is no such thing as 'pure' induction or 'pure' deduction because an inductive researcher cannot generate and interpret their data with a blank mind, instead the process would be influenced by assumptions deductively derived either from background reading or from previous fieldwork. Nonetheless, it is critically required that interpretation is heavily grounded in and supported by the data no matter what existing theories and research are brought to the study (Ormston et al., 2014). In my research, my experience as an English language learner and an ELT teacher and familiarity with relevant literature in the subject area would help me recognise issues of significance and stay focused on the topic of interest. Therefore, subjectivities were embedded in data collection and data analysis as well (Charmaz, 2008), yet the analysis ensued through interaction with the viewed (Charmaz, 2000), or I would constantly interact with the data, aiming for an interpretive understanding of the studied phenomenon taking account of the context (Charmaz, 2008).

The second point is, the importance of both observation and interpretation is stressed in understanding the social world, which is a major feature of interpretivism (Ormston et al., 2014) and my research. Taking interpretivist (or hermeneutic) stance, social reality is socially constructed, thus too complex to be understood through the process of observation (Gray, 2009). Consequently, interpretation should be given strong standing in order to achieve deeper levels of knowledge and also self-understanding (Gray, 2009). Therefore, interpretivist researchers aim at grasping the subjective meaning of purposeful social action and studying people's visible, external behaviour (Neuman, 2014). However, the idea of value-neutral observations is rejected while emphasis is placed on understanding live experience from different viewpoint holders and the interrelatedness of different aspects of people's lives (Ormston et al., 2014). The researcher must take into account the social actor's reasons and the social context of action (Neuman, 2014). In explaining interpretivism, Bryman (2008) distinguishes three levels of interpretation: participants' interpretation, the researcher's interpretation of participants', and the researcher's further interpretation of his or her own interpretation. At the first two levels, individuals, through interaction, interpret the symbolic meaning of his/her environment, including the actions of others and 'it is the job of the social scientist to gain access to people's common-sense thinking and hence to interpret their actions and their social world from their point of view' (Bryman, 2008, p. 16). The third level of interpretation, towards the end of analysis, happens when it moves beyond the explicit descriptions and accounts provided by individual participants and research findings are put back to the context of other theories or existing knowledge/concepts (Bryman,

2008; Ormston et al., 2014). In doing so, differences and similarities will be noted between concepts and theories locally generated in specific contexts and events and those developed in other studies. That means establishing cross-study inter-connections, or connecting concrete and context-specific knowledge across many diverse settings (Neuman, 2014). The triple-levelled interpretation process in my research would be as follows: A double interpretation would be undertaken through interpreting participants' understandings and interpretation of quality concepts and measures; to lay a firm foundation to the applicability of the research findings beyond the original context, the resulting concepts and possibly an explanatory model for the phenomenon of interest would subsequently be connected and compared with relevant concepts and theories discussed in the literature review chapter.

The third point is concerned with the relationship between the researcher and researched. Values of the researcher and others are assumed to exist and subjective interpretation or subjectivity is an integral part of the research (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Moreover, all meanings, beliefs, and viewpoints are equally valid, no one set of values being better or worse (Neuman, 2014). The scientist's conceptualisation of reality does not directly reflect that reality but just simply is a way of knowing that reality (Bryman, 2008). Therefore, findings are from value-mediated observation and negotiated and agreed between the researcher and research participants (Ormston et al., 2014). However, I advocated the position that a researcher should be prepared to recognise and acknowledge potential sources of assumptions, biases, and values and how these may influence the subsequent findings (Bryman, 2008) while striving as far as possible to be neutral and non-judgemental (Ormston et al., 2014) in my approach.

In terms of what may count as valid knowledge, what is of interest to be pursued is truthfulness and authenticity rather than a single version of absolute truth, which means offering a fair, honest, and balanced account of social life from the viewpoint of the people who live it every day (Neuman, 2014). Neuman (2014, p. 107) simply puts, 'a theory is true if it makes sense to those being studied and if it allows others to enter the reality of those being studied.' He additionally states that truth claims are accepted valid and accurate if three conditions are satisfied. First, they are inter-subjectively good enough, or understandable by many others. Second, they are supported by numerous pieces of empirical data. And third, a dense connectivity is recognised in disparate details of diverse data.

## 3.2 Case study design

### Case study approach

I decided to take case study as an appropriate design for my study because it would help address the 'how' and 'why' questions of my research about quality mechanisms in ELTL in VHEIs which tended to be exploratory and explanatory, dealing with operational links that needed to be explored in-depth (Yin, 2014). The inquiry would be of particular benefit to my research because its goal was not only to describe but to explain what was going on (Denscombe, 2014; Gray, 2009) in VHEIs with regard to quality in ELTL. Specifically, it would be an attempt for extensively exploring and understanding rather than confirming and quantifying (Kumar, 2011) how people made sense of the quality concept and QAA processes, how they received, interpreted and reacted to quality processes and procedures in ELTL, how their understandings influenced their decisions and actions on ELTL within VHEIs, and what they thought was the rationale for and the impact of QAA measures on ELTL.

There has been much confusion and variation as to what case study means (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Simons, 2009), its nature or what constitutes a case study and when it is appropriate to use (Berg & Lune, 2012; Merriam, 1998; Verschuren, 2003). Different authors may emphasise certain features which they believe set the approach from other types of inquiry, including unit of study, research methods, use/building of theory, research purposes, and how inferences are made. For example, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stresses delimiting the object of study and its end product being an intensive description of a bounded system. Thomas (2011, 2013) sees it as an umbrella or a design frame that covers a range of approaches and methods for the purpose of examining the singular, the one thing. MacDonald and Walker (2006, p. 111) define case study as 'an examination of an instance in action' a purpose of which is to uncover the features of a larger class of cases (Gerring, 2007). Ragin (1999) argues case studies are focused on a relatively small number of cases for their substantive or theoretical significance, seeking to understand complex units (Porta, 2008).

A common feature of case studies as indicated in those definitions is the studying of the particular in-depth (Simons, 2009). Case study is 'the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances' (Stake 1995, p. xi). The choice of a case to be studied – 'a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context' (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 28) is what sets case study from other qualitative inquiries, not the topic of investigation (Merriam, 1998; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) or the methodological choice (Stake, 2008). The single most defining feature of case study is the boundary of the case,

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the commitment to studying the complexity in real situations and a design to optimise understanding of the case with all its particularity and ordinariness (Stake, 2008). It is an inquiry into one or a few cases in considerable depth (Thomas, 2011), targeting for a large amount of information about each case, across a wide range of dimensions whereas the information attained in, say, social surveys is a little bit about each of the many cases (with cases usually being people responding to a set of questionnaire) (Hammersley & Gomm, 2000).

Case study need not always be confined to qualitative techniques, rather it can be based substantially on quantitative evidence, e.g., *Middletown, Yankee City*, or utilise any mix of qualitative and quantitative empirical tools (Yin, 1984, 1994; Gerring, 2007), e.g., *Block (1986), Hosenfeld (1984)*. Case study claims no particular methods for data collection or data analysis; all methods can be used although some certain techniques may be used more often than others (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Merriam, 1988; Thomas, 2013), depending on the nature of the research problems, whether they facilitate the understanding of what is going on in a particular situation (Thomas, 2013), and their availability. However, to achieve deeper and better understanding of a situation, particularly when there is a need for capturing the nuances and subtleties in meaning (Woodside, 2010) or when a complex social phenomenon is involved, the investigation calls for some original fieldwork as part of multiple sources of evidence to provide insight into the situation (Yin, 2012); merely quantitative data or close-ended survey responses cannot easily reveal the truths (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Zainal, 2007). Yin (2012) argues that case study favours the collection of data from multiple sources in natural settings for the exploration of real-life events/processes or causal relationships (Creswell, 2007, 2013; Denscombe, 2014). It is aimed at understanding a real-world case that is constructed out of naturally occurring social situations (Hammersley & Gomm, 2000).

Case studies would be the best choice for my study as I had neither control over the institutional/classroom settings nor manipulation of the research participants' thinking or behaviours. Rather, the purpose of my research was to collect up-to-date information concerning with investigating VHEIs' quality policy and practice, to secure individuals' understandings and actions, and relevant causal relationships as they naturally occurred. Because contextual conditions are significant to the understanding of the case(s) (Yin, 2012, 2014) case study involves a deep and detailed investigation into contextual characteristics highly pertinent to the phenomenon, looking into different perspectives. This is extremely difficult to do in statistical studies, often many contextual and intervening variables are left out in this type of study (George & Bennett, 2005). Hence, case study would fit the purpose of my research – seeking meanings and understandings of quality in university-level ELTL which are context- and stakeholders-dependent. Insights into quality mechanisms and individual understandings would be secured in connection

with the conditions surrounding the operation of Vietnamese universities and ELTL in there. Additionally, context-specific indicators would make it possible for conceptual refinements with a higher level of validity over a small number of cases (Blatter & Haverland, 2012; George & Bennett, 2005).

Yin (2014) contends case study approach is appropriate when a phenomenon under investigation, i.e., a case, and its pertinent context are not always distinguishable in real-world situations—its complexity makes it impossible to separate the phenomenon's variables from its context. While survey researchers select a few isolated variables for investigation from a theory or conceptual model prior to the study, it is impossible for researchers of case studies to identify all important variables ahead of time (Merriam, 1988) as they are too embedded in the phenomenon to be extracted for study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I selected case study approach because of the nature of HE systems, quality mechanisms and quality conceptualisations. My study involved studying VHEIs and their quality mechanisms as complex social units consisting of numerous variables potentially important for understanding the institutions investigated. Furthermore, educational quality is a multifaceted notion (Harvey, 2006; Vlăsceanu et al., 2007) the meaning of which depends on who defines it and in what context. Examining one or a few cases in natural settings utilising multiple methods, my case study design would facilitate the disclosure of contextualised quality perceptions, the motives and impact of quality procedures on ELTL practices – causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for survey or experimental strategies (Yin, 1994).

Case study allows for an in-depth focus on the case(s) while retaining a holistic and real-world perspective (Yin, 2012, 2014) since a case is studied as a whole, in its entirety (Denscombe, 2014), concentrating on many, if not all, the variables present in a single unit (Merriam, 1988, 1998). It is intended for a rich, thick description of the case studied, including as many variables as possible and to offer a portrayal of the dynamic interactions among significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon (Merriam, 1988, 1998). The inquiry would enable a holistic view of VHEIs' quality mechanisms with regard to ELTL in a non-interventionistic situation instead of dealing with isolated factors which were too many and complex to be listed for a thorough examination and understanding of the research issues. Because any suitable method can be applied in studying a small number of cases (Blatter & Haverland, 2012), each one in-depth as a whole, case study would best suit my study which was aimed for a holistic, rich and intensive picture with many insights coming from different angles of the participating universities and their quality practices as regards ELTL. It would help to document multiple perspectives, explore contested viewpoints (Denscombe, 2014; Simons, 2009), and demonstrate how various facets of the educational settings, i.e., QAA processes and ELTL classroom practices, were linked together.

Moreover, case studies give more space to difficult-to-observe cognitive aspects of individual actors (Blatter & Haverland, 2012), for example, their perceptions and judgements in the description and construction of understanding (Simons, 2006). The approach would be useful for my study the primary focus of which was on meaning and sensemaking, capturing subtleties and the dynamic interaction between thoughts and actions within and between individuals (Woodside, 2010) with respect to quality mechanisms for ELTL at each university. Case study would be relevant to my research, casting light onto the experience and insights of quality and classroom practices, the complexities of such systems/notions, and causal associations which may not have become apparent through more superficial research of which scope and scale would be an advantage (Denscombe, 2014; Simons, 2015) or through a purely experimental or survey approach (Zainal, 2007).

### **Potential limitations of case study approach for my study**

What makes most researchers, particularly novices, nervous about case study is the generalisability of the findings (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Many proponents of case study (e.g., Hammersley & Gomm, 2000; Stake, 1995; Thomas, 2011) conclude without hesitation that case studies are aimed neither at forming a good or strong basis for wider generalisation nor for theoretical inference of some kind due to the involvement of a limited number of cases and the absence of probability sampling. However, Kennedy (2006) suggests that generalisation is tentative with or without the involvement of statistics and that what is significant to achieve generalisation is not to increase sample size but the range of characteristics included in a sample group. The strategic selection of cases may increase the generalisability of case studies (Flyvbjerg, 2011). To raise the chance for exploring variation in dimensions and attributes of quality conceptualisations, I chose to study two VHEIs in both public and private sectors which I anticipated would have commonalities and differences in their responses to public policies on ELTL quality due to different institutional cultures and mission and goals. Likewise, I aimed to reach research participants in diverse roles and positions, ranging from senior managers to middle managers and staff in QAA and ELT areas, and students. In doing so I would be able to examine and understand different leadership styles, how they may influence quality culture of the institution. Also, I would be able to gain insightful and diverse perspectives on quality and quality measures and suggestions of sources of corroboratory evidence and accessibility to such sources (Yin, 1984), how university people in different institutions and roles/positions understood and acted/reacted upon public/institutional policies regarding quality in ELTL.

What is also important is how to make inferences or generalisations from a case or cases that are applicable to other contexts (Simons, 2009). Case studies do not follow a statistical logic, hence do

not produce formal propositions or generalisations which connect the sample to a broader population (Kennedy, 2006; Simon, 2009; Yin, 2014) and which may be mistakenly understood as the only way of generalising findings (Yin, 2012) or the only legitimate method of scientific inquiry (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Rather, generalisations in case studies may take different forms for different purposes (Simons, 2015). They could be generalisation about a particular case, generalisation to a similar case (Stake, 2006), generalisation across multiple cases under study (Simons, 2009), or generalisation to other situations outside the completed case study on the basis of a match to carefully constructed analytic claims (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2012, 2014). Whatever form is pursued, case study generalisations are firmly grounded in and connected with the original case(s) for their link to other cases and settings where similar concepts, constructs, or sequences are potentially applicable (Simons, 2009; Yin, 2012). Thus, case-based knowledge certainly is transferable, having its value and usability beyond the specific case, which is independent of formal generalisation (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Simons, 2009). In my study, I would make both within-case and cross-case inferences, giving elaborate narrative accounts to describe and explain similarities and differences in understandings of quality in ETL based on detailed analysis into political, social, economic, and institutional circumstances in Vietnam – an EFL country in the Expanding Circle (Kachru, 1985) and in an embryonic stage of QAA and HE development. They could be applicable to similar contexts and interest groups, which, nevertheless, is an advisable practice in educational quality.

### **Selecting case study type**

Case study can be classified as intrinsic, instrumental and multiple/collective (Stake, 1995, 2008; Thomas, 2011). A multiple case study design for an instrumental purpose suited my research. Differing from intrinsic case study within which the case, being given or pre-selected, is itself of interest to the researcher because of its all particularity/uniqueness and ordinariness (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2000, 2008, Thomas, 2011), my instrumental case study included several cases, being studied to get insights into quality conceptualisations other than understanding the case(s) per se. Specifically, it would involve two universities of different institutional types (public and private) and individuals in differing roles and positions for exploring and understanding quality notions and assumptions as perceived from managerial/administrative and pedagogical perspectives. Thomas (2011, p. 141) posits if more than one case is selected, 'each individual case is less important in itself than the comparison each offers with the others'; the researcher is aiming at undertaking more searching analysis of the cultures of the cases involved and identifying the nature of differences between them (Thomas, 2011). The involvement in my study of a wide range of cases with variation in institutional types and circumstances and individual roles would help to demonstrate different aspects of quality issues and maximise the chance to examine

different properties and dimensions of quality conceptualisations. Such variation would also give rise to identifying commonalities and differences in how institutions and individuals in different circumstances received and responded to quality policies and practices. Moreover, because of the dependence on context and stakeholders of quality conceptualisations, the greater variation across cases and subcases attained by the inclusion of multiple universities and individuals would likely result in more compelling evidence, and greater precision, validity, stability, and confidence of findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles & Huberman, 1994), hence more robust the overall study (Yin, 1994, 2014). Multiple cases would offer greater opportunities for a deeper understanding of VHEIs' quality mechanisms and conceptualisations, and a good picture of locally grounded causation (Miles et al., 2014). My choice for a multiple case study was not intended for generalisability in a statistical sense, so neither sampling logic nor formal sampling strategies would be necessary or appropriate. I did not choose cases in a manner that would guarantee their representativeness for the entire population or within a stratified population but on the basis of appropriateness for the research questions and issues in relevant literature.

With respect to theory, case study is an approach appropriate for both purposes of theory-testing and theory-building (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Merriam, 1998; Simons, 2009, 2014). A case study may be undertaken to illustrate, support, modify or challenge (Merriam, 1988, 1998; Yin, 2014) an existing specific theory (Simons, 2014) or explanatory framework for a phenomenon (Thomas, 2011) or some theoretical statements developed prior to data collection which could be plain and simple rather than grand social theory (Yin, 2014). Case study is also well suited for theory development, which may range from establishing relationships among a particular set of theoretical concepts, constructing new concepts (Yin, 2012), to building a model that explains the subject being researched (Thomas, 2011). I chose case study approach to explore thinking and understanding about quality measures, differences in thinking and actions/reactions between and within individuals across the two universities, and to give context-specific explanations to the nature of such differences in form of narrative accounts (Thomas, 2011) of what had happened in there.

### **Selecting and defining the case**

Case selection is a crucial process and should be given care and forethought at the outset (Yin, 2004). This is to avoid a waste of time and resources in doing cases that may not work. If cases are not carefully selected, the case studies may turn out to be unrealistic and uninformative, thus the researcher may not be able to collect required research evidence. By contrast, choice of appropriate cases allows for securing rich sources of data (Yin, 2004), controls extraneous variation, and helps determine the limits for generalising the findings (Eisenhardt, 2002). Careful

case selection out of potential cases 'minimise[s] the chances of misinterpretation and ... maximise[s] the access needed to collect the case study evidence' (Yin, 2014, p. 53).

In my research, case selection process took place at two levels, one being of research sites, the other participants, as guided by Bryman (2012). I selected universities as cases and individuals as subcases for study in connection with the research goals of gaining insights into how people understood and thought about the quality concept and quality measures implemented in their institution as regards ELTL. Be it research sites or participants, Eisenhardt (2002) argues the choice for case study will be made for theoretical, not statistical reasons, ensuring variety but not necessarily representativeness (Stake, 2008). Another significant criterion is the opportunity to learn which means not only favourable conditions for data collection within a case, for example, convenient location, accessibility, and hospitality of informants (Stake, 1995) but the conditions under which the phenomenon of interest is likely to be found (Eisenhardt, 2002; Wells et al., 2002). I needed to approach VHEIs which had been practicing for some while measures for QA and enhancement in ELTL including processes like quality evaluation. Therefore, universities in large cities were most preferable because they were more likely to have been chosen to undergo newly developed quality processes. Moreover, the institutions needed to be familiar with the use of the national foreign language proficiency framework as the basis for curriculum design, materials production, and assessment. Another consideration was institutions' commitment to quality in ELTL evidenced in the institution's mission statement and university prospectus. As regards individual participants, the study involved key actors of two functional areas in universities: ETM and QAA and ELTL. ETM and QAA people included heads of universities, managers and staff working in ETM and QAA units of the institution. ELTL people comprised ELT teachers and managers and students.

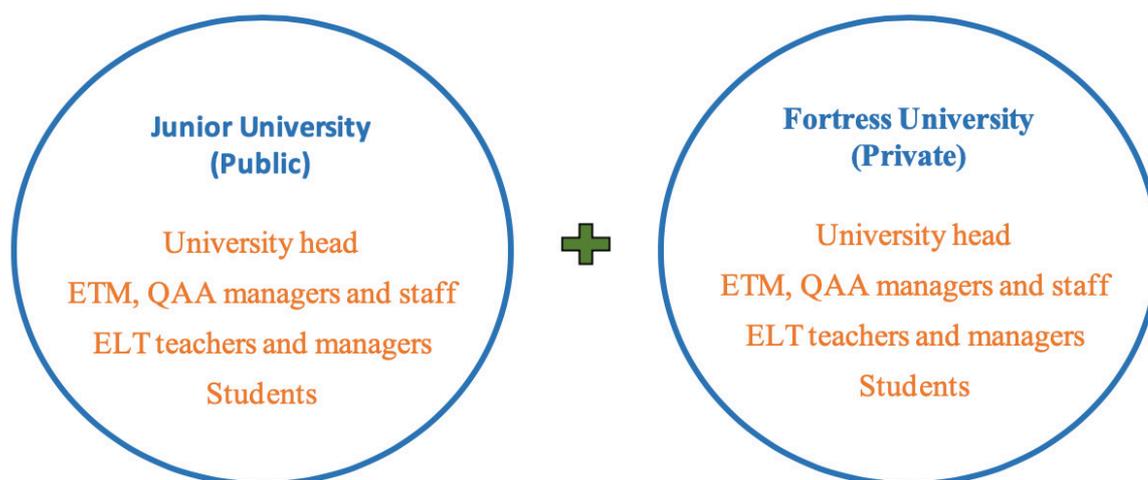
Defining and bounding cases – casing – are two fundamental steps in delineating the unit of analysis in case study research (Yin, 1994, 2014) that bring together theory, methodology, and analysis (Wells et al., 2002). Yin (2012, 2014) suggests defining cases by developing a tentative definition of the case in relation to preliminary research questions and/or generating some statement that represents some key issues identified in the research literature or practical matters. Because it would be impossible to cover everything about the case investigated (Miles et al., 2014; Yin, 2014), it must be, practically or theoretically, bounded enough so that there is an indication and guidance of the extent or direction of the data gathering and later analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2014; Thomas, 2011; Yin, 2014). Case bounding entails the limit to the number of interviews or observations (Merriam, 1998; Lichtman, 2014) or the limits on the conclusions drawn and their confidence (Miles et al., 2014). Thus, bounding the case

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determines the scope of the study (Yin, 2014) and what it will be about (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 2000).

I defined cases in my study in association with literature as regards case study research and quality in general education and in language education. Opportunities to explore quality in differing situations and conditions resided in different types of institutions, namely public and private. Choosing to include one public and one private university reflected the idea in quality literature that universities in private and public sectors have similar overall aims of providing evidence of quality to the public and relevant stakeholders but the underlying motivation and the quality processes they undergo may be dissimilar (Thomas, 2003). Thomas (2003) maintains that for those institutions (normally public ones) of which their educational quality is assumed for them being elite and prestigious, quality processes tend to be of formality and to prove accountability. Meanwhile quality mechanisms in private institutions tend to be for more economic objectives and to guarantee the survival of their business (Thomas, 2003). Institutional cultures vary between public and private universities in terms of the nature of quality schemes implemented (Heyworth, 1999), which meant it made sense to include one of each. Therefore, I designed a multiple case study comprising one public and one private university for the instrumental purpose of illuminating perceptions of quality. To make them comparable cases, the universities needed to share some common features pertaining to size, year of establishment, and internal resources. I sought institutions that shared a similar range of disciplines, accommodating a wide variety of students coming from different geographical areas. This would make it possible to investigate ELTL quality in relation to variations in learners' needs and objectives in English language learning. Furthermore, it would be useful for the two institutions to be either long-established or newly-founded.

As shown in Figure 2 the two universities were selected and studied intensively to explore the commonalities and potential differences in the way people thought about and acted upon the issue of quality in ELTL and the nature of such variations in quality mechanisms for ELTL between the two sectors. The selected case study sites are labelled as follows: Junior University (public) and Fortress University (private)



**Figure 2 Case selection procedures**

### **Case selection procedures**

Firstly, I searched the internet for lists of VHEIs according to institutional type. Two separate lists of public and private universities were created as soon as further exploration of university websites was conducted for additional information about academic courses/programmes they provided, number of students enrolled, year of establishment, and contact information such as email address, telephone/mobile number and physical/postal address. All the information about prospective universities was brought into tables. The screening of potential research sites was carried out on the basis of comparability in student enrolments, programme diversity, and closeness in year of establishment.

In preparation for contacting university people, I composed an invitation of research participation and translated all PIS and consent forms. The invitation was sent to email addresses, in most cases, of admin people who would decide to forward it to their Vice Chancellors. I also made contact with them via telephone and paid visits in person firstly to talk to a secretary to a vice chancellor before a meeting with the vice chancellor would be arranged. Besides, personal and academic networks were made use of not only to reach university heads for permission for the conduct of the research and the use of research instruments but to approach and recruit research participants.

I tried to connect with HEIs of both public and private types simultaneously. However, the first successful attempt with a public university – Junior University – influenced my selection of and persistence in securing the agreement over the engagement in the current research project of Fortress University – a HEI in the private sector. That was because of the openness and friendliness of people at Junior University, which would mean great opportunities to learn the

phenomenon under investigation partly through the study of that case. Meanwhile, Fortress University was one among a few early established private universities with stable and moderate number of students. Therefore, their involvement would satisfy the criteria of similar size and close years of foundation in addition to that of academic programmes offered.

### 3.3 Data collection

#### 3.3.1 Data collection instruments

My study utilised a variety of research methods including document review, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, observations, and field notes. Table 2 shows the use of these methods at each university. I anticipated that the triangulation of data would enable the corroboration and augmentation of evidence from various sources, methods or perspectives (Simons, 2009; Yin, 2014) and checking divergence and offset bias arising from any one source, method or perspective (Simons, 2009).

<b>Document review</b>	<b>Types of documents:</b> - Public documents about the participating university - Organisational documents on ELTL quality mechanisms - Public policies related to ELTL quality mechanisms		
<b>Semi-structured interviews</b>	<b>Categories of people</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Focus</b>
	University head	1	- Experience in his/her role - Information about the institution - Experience and understanding of QAA practices - Understanding and interpretation of quality in ELTL
	ETM, QAA people	4	- Experience in his/her role - Experience and understanding of QAA practices - Staffing issues in ETMU and QAAU - Understanding/interpretation of quality in ELTL
	ELT teachers and managers	5	- Experience in his/her role - Staff and resources of the department/section - Quality mechanisms at departmental level - Experience and understanding of QAA practices - Understanding/interpretation of quality in ELTL
<b>Focus groups</b>	<b>Categories of people</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Focus</b>
	Students	1 (5-6 students per group)	- Experience in English language learning - Motivation and objectives in English language learning - How their English language learning needs were addressed - Experience and understanding of QAA practices - Understanding/interpretation of quality in ELTL
<b>Observation</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Focus</b>
	ELTL class	2-3	- Major teaching and learning objectives - How stated objectives were obtained - Classroom settings and environment/interactions
<b>Field notes</b>	e.g., physical working conditions of the institution, non-verbal communication of interviewees.		

**Table 2 Summary of research methods at each university**

### **Document review**

Universities being investigated and their pertaining contexts were unfamiliar to me, so document analysis would be significant for me to seek an overall understanding of the participating universities and their contextual conditions, hence a contribution to contextualised analysis and interpretation of issues of concern (Simons, 2009). It would also serve the purpose of generating ideas about issues and topic areas to explore in the cases. It would be a helpful precursor to obtaining interview and observational data. To assess the quality of any documentary evidence available for analysis and to select materials containing information that would be most likely central to the inquiry (Yin, 2014), the criteria of credibility and authenticity as proposed by Scott (2006) would be followed.

Documents under review were ECS and QAA-related public policy and institutional documents. The former encompassed educational laws issued by the National Assembly, resolutions, directives and decisions released by the Vietnamese central government, and resolutions, decisions, and regulations by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) with respect to QAA in ELTL. The latter consisted of regulations in the field concerned at institutional level, university prospectuses, and syllabuses. In examining public policy documents, I focused on paragraphs or passages that depicted educational philosophy, HE purposes, state governance, academic programme management, and quality assessment and management. I looked into underlying principles and theories of the state policies on quality in HE ELTL. Meanwhile, the analysis of institutional documents was aimed at exploring historical development and organisational structure, institutional missions, educational goals, educational philosophy, and QAA policies and measures.

### **Semi-structured interviews**

I aimed to secure understanding of participants' viewpoints of the nature of quality mechanisms in HE ELTL by using semi-structured interviews and focus groups as the primary source of data. These instruments were open-ended and flexible by nature, allowing responses in the form of facts about ELTL and quality mechanisms in ELTL and personal experiences, opinions, and thoughts on the concept of quality and the implementation of quality measures.

I prepared an open and adaptive guide for semi-structured interviews and focus groups consisting of lists of topic areas for discussion (See Appendices A-D for these lists). These were derived from my experience and familiarity with literature in ELTL and quality in HE and in ELTL but allowed for new insights from participants on topics of importance to them. Discussions about the topic of quality in teaching and learning could involve some issues seen as sensitive and private, so flexible

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and open-ended interviews with friendly rather than threatening questions were needed to pave the way for the disclosure of their own sense of reality – their understandings, interpretations, explanations, judgements related to quality in ELTL, even their subconscious thinking and difficult-to-observe feelings about such issues. To prepare for comparisons between individuals and across universities, some structure in interviews was built in (as suggested by Bryman, 2012). Semi-structured interviews would be conducted individually on the following key actors: university heads, ETM and QAA managers and staff, and ELT teachers and managers. Each interview would last one to two hours. The questions/topics used for individual interviews are in Appendices A-C.

### **Focus groups**

It would be neither possible nor necessary to interview in-depth with all students of any single university. Moreover, students were far more numerous than institutional staff, so to be economical and time-saving I set up focus groups rather than one-to-one interviews for students. During focus groups I would act as a facilitator or moderator, guiding and stimulating, without being too intrusive, discussion among students over the topic of quality teaching and quality learning (outcomes) in ELTL. The aim of administering focused interviews to student groups was eliciting a wide variety of different ways of understanding, interpreting, and thinking about quality and QAA measures and processes in ELTL. Moreover, group discussion would give chances to discern any systematic variation (Bryman, 2012) in the way in which different groups of students discussed a matter in relation to ELTL quality. To ensure their active contribution in focus groups, they must be reassured about the confidentiality of the interview, their anonymity, how the data would be used and that the interview would not be reported to their teachers (as suggested by Simons, 2009).

I was concerned with understanding the diversity in students' needs, motivation and objectives in English language learning and how these issues were addressed. Thus, the grouping of students must satisfy the criteria of contextual variation which involved variety in discipline, year of study, and English language programmes that they followed in high school. I aimed for one focus group of 5-6 students at each research site. This was not for statistical representativeness but to maximise variations in each group, hence chances to explore diversity and identify commonalities and patterns of variation. To recruit student participants, I would ask for lists of students with relevant information from lecturers or administrative staff. The questions/topics brought to focus groups with students are in Appendix D.

### **Observation**

One of my research goals was to examine the interaction dynamics in action and thinking within and between persons involved in the processes of QAA and ELTL. While document analysis and

interviews helped disclose understandings and meanings constructed by participants, I employed observations to study their actual behaviour and actions in quality mechanisms for ELTL. The use of this instrument as a companion to other methods (as advised by Simons, 2009) would make it possible to further and more deeply explore what was going on, what was being said and done and by whom there at the site and if there was any gap between what people said they (were likely to) do and their actual behaviour relating to issues of concern. Furthermore, it would be a useful tool in capturing the subtleties of what went on in interactions within and between individuals (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This was because observations would provide insights into context, for example of time and space, of the action whereby I could see what was going on while it was normally the case that people were not consciously aware of such subtleties (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) or just simply they were not very articulate (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Simons, 2009). I would ask for permission and arrangement to observe a minimum of one English language class at each participating university. See Appendix E for the focus of observation events/processes.

In using observational data, my purpose was to develop thick descriptions of the classroom settings wherein QAA policies and practices were supposed to have impact on the behaviours, actions and interactions of the teachers and students. The data was a supplementary source that provided a context to the understanding of the findings from interview and documentary sources. It was beneficial to understanding some of the problems and classroom experiences that teachers and students underwent in the process of turning certain objectives into reality, which was in connection with certain QAA mechanisms. The examination into classroom settings and experiences was aimed at understanding how quality initiatives at national and institutional level were dealt with in specific classroom circumstances which entailed the involvement of such key actors as teachers and students without whom whatever was said about educational quality was void of meaning. More accurately, observational data would add another perspective on the conceptualisation of educational quality in the specific field of concern and the association between participants' thinking and understanding and their classroom behaviours and realities.

#### **Field notes**

I would keep field notes to record informal observation of the case, starting from the moment I entered the field. I would take notes of what I would see, hear and feel there, marking down what I may find interesting, significant, odd, or puzzling and how different pieces of information relate to each other (Simons, 2009). For example, to learn about the culture of a university, I would take notes of its immediate working environment and work spaces within the whole institution. I would also collect note-form evidence concerning location or furnishings of an interviewee's office, the attitude and other non-verbal communication of a participant at an interview or an

event of classroom observation, e.g. matters of emphasis, pronunciation, pauses, tones, etc. All these notes would not only be material for analysis but aid the handling and analysis/interpretation of documentary, interview, and observational data (Simons, 2009).

### **3.3.2 Data collection procedures**

I secured permission for accessing the sites by contacting heads of potential universities via email or physical visit, providing a project overview, requesting basic information and permission to study the institution's quality mechanisms in ELTL. The way I approached the research participants and the research procedures differed in the two research sites. In Junior University, the recruitment techniques were personal and via academic networks and snowballing. The gatekeeper approach was the only choice to reach people at all levels of Fortress University, from top positions to front-line staff due to the close nature in its institutional culture; I needed assistance from senior/middle managers to make connection with participants there. Through the recruitment process I learnt about the interconnectedness of individuals in the networks (Bryman, 2012) and the nature of within-case interaction or networking in quality mechanisms. There was interpersonal influence caused by snowball sampling and gatekeeper technique, so I always cross-checked and corroborated data provided by key informants in order to pick out any likely contrary evidence and I compared within and across data sources to recognise and avoid interviewees' simply repeating their institution's mantra (as advised by Yin, 1984, 2014).

At each research site, I conducted ten individual in-depth interviews with people in different roles and positions that involved institutional management, academic programme management, QAA, and ELT (See Appendices F-G for sample interviews). Specifically, I conducted one interview with the campus leader, four with ETM and QAA managers and staff, five with ELT teachers and managers at each university. Student participants for focus groups were introduced by their subject teachers. Each focus group entailed the participation of students in different years of study doing different subjects: six male students from the first-third year of study, from Computer Science and Social Sciences for Junior University; five male and female students from Hospitality, Business, and Banking, being in the course of doing their university degrees or having finished their studies for Fortress University. Focus group participants were chosen on the basis of maximising the opportunity to learn student experiences and perceptions arising from diverse contexts. Each interview and focus group lasted one to two hours.

Also, I observed one class hour of every two/three teacher interviewees at each university. The appointment for the classroom observations was made two or three days before the events. At the start of each observation, I introduced myself to the whole class and the purpose of the observation and then moved to sit down at a row one table away from the whole class, hoping

that my presence would make the least interference into the classroom climate. The two ECS classes delivered by Junior lecturers that I observed were in their first phase toward their outcome standard of B1 according to the CEFR. Those three ECS classes under observation in Fortress were either at a starting point or close to a final stage in their ECS studies, the expected learning outcome of which was A2-oriented/equivalent.

In the initial stage of data collection, the two universities were investigated almost in parallel. Within a week or even a day I had interviews with people at both sites. I believed parallel case studies would be good for instant comparisons of emerging issues between the two HEIs. Nonetheless, the exploration of the research issues at Fortress University was brought to suspension after a few first interviews due to unexpected misunderstanding in personal communication. The study of this institution continued by the time nearly everything had come to an end in the other institution only after connection was re-established where it had been previously broken down. Recurring themes identified in Junior University were fetched into interview questions for cross-case comparison where appropriate and possible though.

The collection and selection of documents had begun before I went out for the field trip. I had articles about the historical development of QAA in Vietnam, educational laws, a few documents concerning institutional accreditation procedures and assessment criteria, and Decision 1400/2008/QĐ-TTg (Central Government, 2008b) on the implementation of the Project 2020 – a quality initiative in the teaching and learning of foreign languages in the national education system 2008-2020. However, it was not until I was at the research sites that I developed my understanding of what specific QAA measures were actually being practised, what procedures were followed, how those measures and procedures were managed and by whom, the progression of the Project 2020 and its feasibility, how ECS was associated with the project, and what measures had been in place for the assurance and improvement of quality in the field.

In discussion with interview respondents of the two universities, I was informed about not just the processes in which they had been involved but the documents which were the basis for their actions. Those documents could be the ones they received from governing bodies like MOET or the central government or those they developed themselves based on public policies. In each document, the previous document(s) it was grounded in was/were referred to, and I just followed it to get to the document wherein original initiatives were stated and set as the basis for the specification or modification of procedures and actions to be conducted in HEIs. Talks with the research participants, hence, were a means to identify documentary sources that I would need to work further on for an in-depth and systematic understanding of the QAA processes and procedures that university people were engaging in.

I also obtained documentary evidence in searching institutional websites for further learning about each institution. Reading those documents resulted in additional questions to be put forward to interview participants for clarification. Examples of documents as such included Guidelines X that gave instructions on how Junior University should be in charge of quality in ECS teaching and learning and annual transparency reports of Fortress University whereby the institution stated quality commitments and QAA conditions of the institution concerning ECS. The exploration of institutional websites also brought about the most up-to-date relevant public policies that a HEI had received and posted for internal circulation and to inform institutional staff of QAA processes in progress and QAA procedures being followed.

In comparing participants' talk about the way the two universities established and recognised ECS learning outcomes for their students I discovered differences and conflicting ideas in what they said about the imposition from MOET of certain required outcomes and a HEI's autonomy regarding the issue. Therefore, I was urged to search for official documents that could be the ground for the realisation of ECS outcome standardisation. I was also aware of the application of the national foreign language proficiency framework in ELTL in educational establishments (developed and issued by MOET, with reference to the CEFR) which meant the standardisation of learning outcomes, so I was wondering if and how outcome standards of such a specific subject as ECS were integrated into institutional programmes and curriculum. Being led by such questions, I found documents related to the Project 2020 and relevant action plans/instructions and MOET's regulations on outcomes-based programme development and implementation. In almost all cases document sources, both public policies and institutional documents, were accessible from web search. Besides, I was provided with some institutional QAA plans, student feedback forms, evaluation forms of classroom observation, and ECS syllabuses.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

#### **3.4.1 Preliminary analysis and data preparation**

A preliminary analysis of the data collected was performed during the process of data collection, but I was not engaged in the coding process until data preparation had finished. After each interview session, I listened again and again to the recorded audio to get an idea and a feel of what the interviewee said and the flow of the discussion. I took more notes and added them to those I had made during the interview which were kept in a notebook and a research diary. Based on the information that the interview participants provided I would need to locate relevant documents. I compared interview data to related documents to identify consistency and disparity. Likewise, I made comparisons within and between interview data sources. The results of such

constant comparisons were brought forward in subsequent interviews for further verification. To illustrate, constant comparisons made me notice differing ECS outcome standards that were discussed between interviewees working for the same institution, e.g., Quang-F-L (B1 of the CEFR) and Uyen-F-L (A2 of the CEFR). Using the same analysis approach, I discovered what people talked about ECS learning outcomes differed from what was presented in the newest annual transparency report of Fortress University (up to the point of data collection). Consequently, relevant questions were added or modified to put toward the next interview respondents for clearer and richer understanding of the stories behind different learning outcomes required of ECS learners.

The preliminary round of data analysis, hence, allowed for the refinement of research instruments for more focused and thorough scrutiny of the research problems. Moreover, it helped to determine whether it would be necessary to extend the research to people or places other than those identified in the earlier research process as key elements to be involved in the project. For example, participants of both HEIs brought up the involvement of MOET and a foreign language centre in quality issues in their discussions but listening to audio recordings with meticulous attention and analytical reading of relevant documents during the time of data collection I decided to not include those outside agencies in the research. The decision, more precisely, resulted from the findings that MOET managed QAA-related issues at a macro level via its resolutions, decisions, and official documents and similarly, students' joining an English language course offered by a foreign language centre external to HEIs was on a voluntary basis.

Next, I transcribed individual interviews and focus groups, removed identifiable information and anonymised the two universities and all participants. I also converted video content of classroom observations into texts under observation guide sheets. To facilitate such conversion, I concurrently looked at the teaching and learning resources and teaching schedules of each HEI. I used a computer-assisted tool – NVivo 12 for management, manipulation, and retrieval of data. Empirical evidence of each university was imported to this software, each data source being assigned notations which included pseudonym, location (which university), and functional role/area (QAA/Lecturer/Student). For example, the interview with X – a lecturer of Junior University was coded X-J-L. The dataset comprised: public policy documents and organisational documents; interview transcripts; observation sheets; and extensive analytical fieldnotes taken of thoughts, actions, and feelings arisen when I was working at the sites.

### **3.4.2 Within-case and cross-case data analysis**

I chose interview and focus group sources as a starting point of the analysis process as the study was focused on exploring perceptions of quality in ECS education at VHEIs. An understanding of

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how university people made sense of the issues investigated was useful for examining (inter)actions, behaviours, and responses to certain QAA policies and measures of key actors in classroom settings when I analysed semi-structured observational data. Also interview analysis gave rise to selecting and examining documentary materials relevant to themes/issues raised by interview/focus group participants to uncover political messages of educational quality in ECS education from written public policy documents and how public policies were localised and institutionalised as presented in institutional materials.

I looked at the data in many divergent ways, the Constant Comparative Method being at the heart of the analysis process (as advocated by Boeije, 2002). This involved comparison between actors, processes, and settings within a single university, between universities, and between groups of participants across universities. I began with comparison within data sources: Firstly, I developed codes from the research questions, the conceptual framework, and data collection instruments to help focus exploration and development of codes and to make analysis centre around the research questions and research concern (as suggested by Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2011) and Saldaña (2016)). I then searched the data for texts related to these codes, developing more codes. Following recommendations given by Charmaz (2014) and Simons, Lathlean, and Squire (2008), I read and reread texts carefully before applying pre-developed codes to selected texts or creating new codes, making sure that they reflected and fitted the data rather than imposing preconceived codes to the data. In essence, I developed codes both deductively and inductively (See Appendix H for illustrations of code development). This open/initial coding allowed as many new ideas, hence codes and subcodes, to emerge as necessary to encapsulate the data (Bryman, 2012). With the assistance of NVivo 12 these codes were represented as parent/child nodes, participants being classified with case attributes, which facilitated discussion and comparison. Segments labelled with the same code were compared to check for the consistency, addition or repetition of the information about that category (Boeije, 2002). The comparison was linked to the context/condition under which the information was given. I created memos to record the analysis process. I made comparisons utilising the Analyse, Query, Explore functions in NVivo and saved the results of these internal comparisons under Query Results folders.

Next, I made comparisons between data sources: Comparing segments of different pieces/types of data that dealt with the same theme and that had been given the same code (axial coding). The comparison on the basis of selected themes/codes was made with regard to within-group and intergroup similarities/differences (Boeije, 2002; Eisenhardt, 2002). This helped to identify not only the components of the ELTL quality conceptualisation that transcended all groups of people in differing roles and functional areas but also those aspects of such conceptualisation that were particular to each group of role or function. This meant obtaining differing perspectives on quality

and quality measures. Moreover, I could spot negative and corroborated evidence by comparing data across sources.

I compared different data sources to examine the interaction and the subtle nuances in thinking and doing within and between individuals concerning quality in HE ELTL. I conducted the comparisons on 'dyads' (as recommended by Boeije (2002)). The first 'dyad' was thoughts and actions of the same individuals or the same functional groups. Comparing this dyad was aimed at discerning what was being said and done and if there was any discrepancy between thinking and action within individuals and between individuals of the same functional areas. To reach this aim, I made comparisons between what was presented in documents and interviews and what was actually going on via observations. Next came the 'dyad' of ETM, QAA people and English language teachers. This dyadic comparison helped disclose the interaction between these two groups and what each group's members said about each other and about their networking. Aspects of interaction could be the degree of consensus on certain issues, the collaboration and communication between the two groups, and the compatibility or applicability of certain quality measures in ELTL. I analysed interview and observational data for this purpose. The last 'dyad' was students' needs and quality measures. I examined all sources of evidence with respect to what was thought, said, and done about students' needs and objectives in ELT. Subsequently, I compared this with what students thought and said.

Based on the list of parent/child nodes in NVivo, I examined whether similar themes emerged in multiples settings (as suggested by Graebner (2004)), by comparing nodes sharing the classification attributes representing the two universities studied. The most common and significant codes/themes/categories identified throughout the whole process of comparative analysis that revealed the most about the data (Bryman, 2012; Charmaz, 2014) was then used to 'sort, synthesize, integrate, and organise large amounts of data' (selective/focused coding) (Charmaz, 2014, p. 113). This meant the analytic process was proceeding to theoretical integration (Charmaz, 2014). This stage of analysis involved refining all categories and the relationships between them (Timonen, Foley, & Conlon, 2018) that formed context-specific explanations about quality mechanisms, contextualised perceptions of quality and quality measures from different perspectives.

The analytic process comprised within-case, followed by cross-case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994), linked to the research purposes. Within-case analysis involved developing constructs concerning ELTL quality mechanisms and producing a detailed description of each university and its setting, which focused on the integrity, particularity, and complexity in ELTL quality mechanisms of the individual university. Subsequently, cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2014) was systematically performed to look for similarities and differences between the two universities and

the link between variations in ETL quality mechanisms and the characterised contextual conditions of the participating universities, hence deepening the understanding and explanation of the universities investigated. This followed two major steps. Firstly, an exploratory analysis was aimed at examining ETL quality mechanisms in each university. Secondly an explanatory analysis offered an insightful account of how ETL quality mechanisms were influenced by and differed under different contextual conditions in these universities.

### **3.4.3 Developing the case study reports**

To help readers get an overarching view of each institution with its typical features and/or issues arising from the analysis of semi-structured interviews, I employed pen-portraits. Pen-portraits, according to Campbell, McNamara, and Gilroy (2004), report research data in the form of a thumbnail sketch in respect to individual roles (– were employed. The first step towards creating such pen-portraits was to read analytically the whole set of verbatim interviews with senior managers, middle managers, ETM and QAA staff, and lecturers at both of the HEIs, the result of which was a list of emerging issues, activities, and experiences accompanied by attitude, feelings and thinking. Interview transcripts were carefully read set by set according to HEI, notes being taken on the margins and memos created in NVivo to keep track of the thinking development of the research. The process was intermingled with examining selectively relevant details in documentary sources such as university prospectus and institutional regulations on education and training. After the open coding stage, a range of recurring issues were highlighted, as indicated by Campbell et al. (2004). These were central to the understanding of QAA mechanisms and quality in English language education in a specific HEI and were exemplified with evidence from data collected. Those issues were identified in connection with contextual features ranging from institutional culture, functional processes to personal duties and experiences concerning QA/enhancement in English language education.

To present the plurality of voices while preserving the anonymity of individuals (Winter, 1986), the next step involved creating fictionalised characters through the amalgamation of experiences, perceptions, feelings, and attitudes expressed by participants within an institution during their interviews (Campbell (2000); Campbell et al. (2004); Hustler, McNamara, Jarvis, Londra, and Campbell (2003)). The pen-portrait materials were generated from empirical data yet anonymised and fictionalised by the inclusion of various voices, views, and opinions within each character (Campbell et al., 2004; Hustler et al., 2003; Winter, 1986). In that way, each fictionalised pen-portrait would cover recurring issues (Hustler et al., 2003) across a specific educational setting as raised by a particular group of interview respondents. To illustrate, in discussing measures to assure quality of programmes, the interview participants of Junior, depending on their differing

roles and working areas, e.g., ETM, QAA, ELT teaching, talked about different (and common) aspects that they believed would contribute to quality programme (management). I created a code labelled 'programme management' to store and organise facts and opinions raised by Junior people regarding procedures for management of programme development and implementation. To compare and contrast, for example, what ELT teachers of Junior said about the same theme, i.e., programme management, I explored the code 'programme management' with content matching Coding Query Criteria of case attributes as Junior University, and Teaching. The result of this query in NVivo allowed me to read each quote carefully, figure out the sequence of the process, the institutional units/people involved at each stage, and personal thinking/feeling about the process. I then organised ideas, made connections between disparate bits of information and necessary edits to interviewees' phrasing for readability. Gradually, I built up a meaningful description of the programme management procedures from the lens of the teacher participants, leaving space to insert their opinions and feelings, e.g., "... I feel confident, I feel I'm doing something right and to a standard." The themes/issues related to programme development and implementation as discussed by the teaching staff were brought together in paragraph 1, p. 94 under the character named Giao. The table that follows shows in detail how real quotes produced by the teacher participants of the Junior University were turned into fictionalised texts regarding programme management.

**Table 3 Illustration of how fictionalised accounts were created**

Teacher participants	Quotes related to programme management	Fictionalised text (Paragraph 1, p. 94)
Lanh-J-F	<p>When a new academic year begins ... the institution, the unit sends us syllabuses ... everyone needs to comply with those syllabuses ...</p> <p>... each group of the teaching staff in our unit is assigned with tasks, each group is responsible for designing and developing certain syllabuses, e.g., General English 1 ... once those syllabuses are reviewed and approved at departmental or institutional level, they are implemented across the unit</p> <p>I ... I think ... we follow instructions provided at the institutional level ... [in developing and implementing] programmes ... the instructions come</p>	

Teacher participants	Quotes related to programme management	Fictionalised text (Paragraph 1, p. 94)
	<p>from the institutional level ... then departmental level and we – the teaching staff – design and develop ... curriculum and syllabuses ... based on those instructions</p> <p>... the Education and Training Management Unit (ETMU) ... the institution ... they have groups of specialists who are in charge of [establishing targets] and ... .. I think those regulations are passed on to academic units, and it is the staff of academic units that develop the syllabuses and schedules</p> <p>because once a programme or syllabus is assessed ... as good and we carry out an approved programme or syllabus I think ... we feel more confident ... .. it's assured that ... we are doing something right, something ... to a standard ...</p> <p>... before a semester starts we are all assigned ... with certain tasks, e.g. to be responsible for this or that syllabus. With those syllabuses, I think they have been reviewed and approved, and we just follow what is stated in there. Of course, there is certain flexibility in programme/syllabus implementation, as long as the objectives that have been set up can be reached</p>	<p><i>The institution, the ETMU establish targets and give directions and instructions to our units. Our managers will ask teachers to design and develop programmes/syllabuses based on those directions and instructions. Those programmes/syllabuses are reviewed within our unit before being submitted to ETMU for further review and approval. Carrying out approved programmes/syllabuses as such I feel confident, I feel I'm doing something right and to a standard. Of course, certain flexibility is allowed as long as we bear in mind stated teaching and learning objectives.</i></p>
Loc-J-L	<p>... the Big University has a common curriculum which is followed across all relevant units ... .. and we can make certain adaptations ... .. probably the curriculum differs across member universities yet the targets ... need be assured, that is, to assure a certain outcome standard</p> <p>for instance, the head/deputy heads of a unit must be directly involved in curriculum development, and the staff members need relevant training</p> <p>... as regards our group, after we finish developing a syllabus we need to get it reviewed, firstly within our group, then it is submitted to a</p>	

Teacher participants	Quotes related to programme management	Fictionalised text (Paragraph 1, p. 94)
	higher level ... the head/deputy heads who will review and approve or disapprove it	
Mai-J-L	<p>... the entire syllabuses and schedules needed adjusting to suit the training needs in certain periods of time ... the [head/deputy heads of the] academic units, the head/deputy heads of each group need to assign tasks to their unit/group members who are capable. They then need to monitor those processes and make sure that all the teaching staff of all groups comply with approved syllabuses and schedules</p> <p>... We have a core framework, that is, the syllabuses that are approved by the Big University and we must abide by those syllabuses, like what knowledge and skills the students must achieve at what level, surely we must follow along for such objectives. And then, the syllabuses are specified in schedules with certain adaptations to suit each unit/group, ... yet the core framework must be assured</p> <p>... Yet all that is added/adjusted, e.g., you can choose relevant supplementary materials to aid students' development of certain knowledge or skills as stated in the syllabuses, but it doesn't mean they can include materials just to their personal preferences. So, freedom, yes, there is some ... but it is ... freedom within a framework</p>	

I adopted a fictionalised form in reporting the data because the approach would enable me to present research issues in an interesting, creative, and accessible way. While unusual and without being very well-established (Hustler et al., 2003), this kind of approach has been used in qualitative research as shown in Clough's (2002) book *Narratives and Fictions in Educational Research*. It would give voice to the research participants, allowing for securing insights into their experiences, opinions, and feelings concerning QAA mechanisms and quality in English language education in a fresh way. The research data were fictionalised in the way I attributed them to a composite character, but they were based on real data collected from the research participants. Using this method, different aspects and dimensions of an issue/theme as discussed by people of the same group in the same institutional setting could be brought into one place, connections could be shown, and I could create an account of each issue/theme that was as complete as the data allowed. The fictionalising of data in the mixing of voices offered a way of looking into different perspectives on key issues central to the understanding and practice of quality of each institution that could guarantee maximum confidentiality of the research participants. This was of particular concern in the case study approach where anonymisation can be difficult (Rowland, Rowland, & Winter, 1990). Moreover, such a narrative not only comprises of factual information but communicates the thoughts and feelings of individuals and subtleties and nuances, which could be challenging to do in more standard and conventional forms of data presentation (Rowland et al., 1990). A further significant benefit is that fictionalised characters would help the readers approach the reported research issues more readably, engagingly, and interactively, reading and simultaneously developing their own way of exploring, understanding, and interpreting issues, ideas, and values brought up in each account (Bolton, 1994; Winter, 1991).

The pen-portraits of individual characters were intended to stimulate discussion and analysis of an initial set of topics/aspects raised in there and complexity of the dynamic relationship between them (Campbell et al., 2004; Winter, 1991). The discussion made under the sections of commentaries was like an interactive process (Bolton, 1994; Winter, 1986) in which I – the writer – reacted to fictionalised texts and co-interpreted the contextualised nature of quality in English language education and related quality mechanisms.

Similar steps were applied for the analysis of focus group data which was fictionalised for the creation of accounts of student voices. Each focus group that was conducted with students of each HEI was turned into pen-portraits of individual students. These pen-portraits were a combination of student experiences, viewpoints, and feelings about quality and quality mechanisms in ELTL in association with contextual circumstances. The analysis of classroom observations centred around physical classroom settings, how classroom activities were or were

not connected with institutional goals, and how and to what extent students' needs were satisfied. Observational data would be presented in classroom vignettes.

### **3.5 Ethical issues**

Ethical issues pertain to fieldwork, data analysis and dissemination of research results (Creswell, 2007). Those issues relate to responsibilities towards participants, sponsor of research, the community of education researchers and educational professionals, publication and dissemination, and researchers (British Educational Research Association, 2018).

#### **3.5.1 Research subjectivity**

Because for many years I had been in the position of an English language learner and a member of ELT professionals, the data collection and analysis could be influenced by my professional perspectives, experience and values. I also brought to the field my perspectives, assumptions, beliefs, and experience concerning educational quality developed through engaging with the literature. Sensitivity to existing quality conceptualisations made my research focused, being built upon the work of others. Such theoretical sensitivity helped inform my research in multiple ways, even if unconsciously. For example, I was capable of recognising and picking up on issues, events, meanings that were relevant, interesting, or significant to the study.

There was the possibility that I could accept without question the research participants' world-views, as warned by Charmaz (2014), particularly those of ELTL teachers and students. Thus, I was careful and critical throughout the whole procedures of collecting, examining, and analysing data. I tried to keep an 'open mind' (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, 2015), being open to seeing what I could learn, to spark my thinking, and to allow new ideas to emerge. Rather than imposing prior conceptualisations on the data, I consciously used experience as a strategy to help myself think differently and more broadly about data, as suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2008, 2015). For example, 'learners' communicative competence' – a dimension of learner development in quality conceptualisation – sounded familiar to me as a teacher but it may not mean the same thing to everyone, so I took interviews as opportunities to look for variation in interpretations of the phrase.

#### **3.5.2 Confidentiality**

Confidentiality was an important issue when doing interviews or observations and when writing up the case study reports. I took as many precautions as I could to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of any single university/individual participating in the study and data sources about

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them. No personal details would be released and that pseudonyms would be used instead. The data was safely stored on a password protected personal computer and accessible to the researcher only. In reporting cases, I used fictionalised accounts to present research issues raised from multiple voices while preserving individuals' anonymity.

I anticipated that discussions over the topic of quality in teaching and learning may include issues that could be taken as sensitive or in confidence. I would ask the research participants to give them their consent both verbally and in written form before an interview or observation began. I would remove identifiable information in case study write-ups. This potential issue was mentioned in the ethics protocol (see Appendix I) which had been approved before I started fieldwork. More importantly, I paid attention to establishing good field relationships should something unexpected happen so that all parties would be open to apologies or negotiation upon an alternative to what may have gone wrong. For example, during an interview I always put myself in the position of a learner, eager to learn new things and experiences from the respondent. That was not just to treat the research participants respectfully but to examine issues emerging in their context, keeping away preconceptions.

## Chapter 4 Messages from written policies

As shown in the conceptual framework (p. 43) my study examined the conceptualisation of quality in English language education in VHEIs at three levels – state, institution, and individual. This chapter reports the findings of my analysis of the policy documents produced by the National Assembly, Central Government, and MOET. It offers insights into the lens of policymakers as presented in documentary materials concerning HE governance and operations, and quality measures/initiatives for VHEIs with a special focus on those applied in ECS education. I present those written messages from policymakers together with depicting the contextual conditions wherein VHEIs operated and carried out QAA measures with particular respect to ECS education. Such contextualised understandings of public policies provide a basis for detailed exploration of relevant actions/interactions at institutional/individual level (presented in the next chapters). I also add some commentaries, highlighting Fortress key issues put forward in those public policy documents.

### 4.1 Higher education purposes and state governance of VHEIs

As stated in Higher Education Law (National Assembly, 2012), VHE is primarily focused on training well-educated and highly skilled human resources for socio-economic development and international integration. The learners should be prepared for work with knowledge and skills in their fields of study relevant to the educational level they have been trained at and appropriate personalities such as creativity and work ethic. Also, Educational Law (National Assembly, 2005) emphasises learning theories in conjunction with learning practical skills. Multiple articles in both Educational Law and Higher Education Law repeatedly stress that education or educational goals must be associated with production or socio-economic development and that academic training should be connected with graduate employability. Furthermore, the educational approach should nurture learners' self-consciousness, independent learning ability, motivation, and passion for learning.

Educational Law (National Assembly, 2005) states that the entire national education system is under state governance encompassing educational policies, plans, and legal documents, educational goals, the organisation and operation of educational establishments, academic programmes, testing and assessment, academic qualifications and certificates, and QAA. The National Assembly is the highest state body to govern educational issues, followed by the central government to whom MOET is accountable, taking the responsibility of educational administration in collaboration with the other ministries and ministerial-level agencies. The

government has aimed to mark the boundaries in the function of HEI management between MOET and other governmental authorities while simultaneously increasing HEIs' autonomy and accountability, as presented in Educational Law (National Assembly, 2005); Higher Education Law (National Assembly, 2012), Resolution 14/2005/NQ-CP (Central Government, 2005b), and Resolution 44/2014/NQ-CP (Central Government, 2014). In essence, the state plan has been to gradually change from central governance to decentralisation.

That national goal is once again emphasised in Directive 296/CT-TTg (Central Government, 2010a) and Resolution 05/NQ-BCSĐ (MOET, 2010c) on comprehensive and substantial reforms in HE management (which were spread out as a continued effort in HE reforms as proposed in Resolution 14/2005/NQ-CP (Central Government, 2005b). MOET (2010a) in Resolution 05/NQ-BCSĐ straightforwardly acknowledged that state management had been still of a centralisation model toward HEIs; there had been not just a lack of mechanisms for collaboration between MOET and the other ministerial and local agencies in managing HEIs but inadequate conditions for HEIs to perform their rights and responsibilities when it came to institutional autonomy. They added that HEIs' operation and legal observance had been far from being accurately evaluated and that it had been impossible to assess educational quality of the whole system. It became essential that governmental endeavours be focused on augmenting management in educational quality.

### **4.2 QAA policies, QAA measures, and quality initiatives**

In Resolution 05/NQ-BCSĐ, MOET (2010a) raised a question for sector-wide and public discussions over the issue of what to do to assure and enhance educational quality. I discovered that the launching of such discussions was aimed at consolidating sensibility to the need for tightened QM in HEIs expansion. Transformation in HE management was emphatically relied on as a breakthrough in assuring and enhancing educational quality. The document also highlighted shared responsibilities for educational quality of stakeholders such as state management bodies, institutional managers, lecturers, learners, employers, and the general public.

To cause fundamental change in HE management, as shown in Directive 7823 (MOET, 2009b) and Resolution 05 (MOET, 2010b), MOET stressed the construction, completion, and implementation of legal documents concerning HE especially those related to state governance in education, regulations on HEIs' operations, academic programmes, and QAA. The legalisation of HEIs' operation and management provided a legal basis for the promotion of HEI institutional autonomy and self-monitoring of their operations. Also, it facilitated public accountability of HEIs and favoured state supervision and public monitoring over HEIs.

MOET required that all HEIs comply with transparency policy – they must produce annual reports, publicising their quality commitments, actual training achievements, QAA conditions, and financial activities, otherwise they would not be eligible for consideration of offer of student enrolment quotas. The transparency requirements were established in 2009 and came into effect a year after. Information transparency, according to MOET, would enable the supervision and assessment of HEIs by the learners, institutional staff, and the public. Moreover, the transparency policy was aimed for the growth in institutional autonomy and accountability in resources management and QA.

A part of the transparency requirements was the disclosure of outcome standards including minimum outcomes required of ECS learners. The establishment of minimum ECS learning outcomes meant an institution's commitment towards the learners' achievement of predefined learning outcomes on the basis of their self-assessment of their QAA conditions which included the quantity and capacity of lecturers, learning resources, academic programmes, teaching approaches, testing and assessment methods, and the learners' entry levels. The development and announcement of outcome standards engendered unveiling the training capacity and QAA conditions of a HEI, which was intended for its co-supervision of the learners, parents, and employers. Statement of quality commitments necessitated greater efforts by managers, lecturers, and learners. Undertaking quality commitments entailed identifying responsibilities of lecturers, managers, and training support staff in enhancing learners' classroom engagement and independent learning for their achievement of pre-set outcomes. Enhancing output control, hence, represented change in state governance (Resolution 44/NQ-CP (Central Government, 2014)).

Another finding of my analysis into public policy documents was that the implementation of targets-oriented/outcomes-based academic programmes and outcome standardisation germinated in 2004-5, being referred to in Directive 25/CT-BGDĐT (MOET, 2004a) and Educational Law (National Assembly, 2005) as one quality measure in HE. However, outcomes-based programmes had not started until the dissemination of Directive 7823 (MOET, 2009b) and Correspondence 2196 (MOET, 2010a) in 2009 and 2010 respectively wherein MOET introduced guidelines in outcomes-based programme construction. Every HEI from then on had to reconstruct and construct their programmes and curriculum based on a curriculum framework that MOET had developed, following an outcomes-based approach and the procedures as stipulated by MOET. The inauguration of an outcomes-based approach to academic programme implementation and management was aligned and coincided with the application of output control measure in foreign language teaching and learning proposed in the Project 2020 (described later). Accordingly, it had been mandatory since the second term of the academic year 2009-2010 that all HEIs develop outcomes-based programmes and spell out minimum learning

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outcomes for ECS learners in their curriculum and annual transparency reports. The most recent attempt of the government in connection with QAA through output control was the approval in 2016 of the Vietnamese Qualifications Framework and the National Education Framework which presented stages and modes of education and the classification of qualification levels in the national education system. The two frameworks were intended for facilitating the standardisation of learners' capabilities, the construction of outcome standards for training programmes in all fields of study, and the continuity between levels of study. They also served as the frameworks of reference in case of transferability and mutual recognition of qualifications regionally and internationally.

HEIs were requested to produce their own regulations on academic programmes based on the regulations stipulated by MOET in Decision 43/QĐ-BGDĐT (MOET, 2007a), Circular 57/TT-BGDĐT (MOET, 2012c), Decision 17/VBHN-BGDĐT (MOET, 2014b) – the combination of Decision 43 and Circular 57, and Circular 07 (MOET, 2015). University-level academic programmes ought to be designed oriented towards the accomplishment of certain required capabilities. Outcome standards were defined as minimum requirements of knowledge and skills for the learners on the completion of a programme that an educational establishment committed to the learners and society along with its statement of QAA conditions. It was MOET that specified minimum requirements for knowledge and skills of undergraduate programme followers.

The Project 2020 was proposed and approved in 2008 for transformation in foreign language proficiency level of graduates – the workforce. Its objective was to generate confident and independent users of at least a foreign language who could use effectively that language at work or to study in international and multi-culture environments. Foreign language education started to be introduced at grade 3 in some schools in 2009. Required learning outcomes were set out for foreign language learners in accordance with stages and levels of education. The minimum target intended for undergraduates doing ECS was originally level 3 out of 6 according to the national 6-level foreign language proficiency framework, or B1 of the CEFR (but a foreign language proficiency level framework was only produced in detail in correspondence with the CEFR in 2014). The first task was to re-examine the language competency of teachers of English in all levels and educational establishments, starting in November 2012. Furthermore, the whole education system including HEIs was called for a range of actions, with an emphasis on the construction of outcomes-based programmes, the development and selection of level-specific materials, and the conduct of intensive training courses (Correspondence 7274 (MOET, 2012a) and Plan 808 (MOET, 2012b). However, I found it noticeable that in Correspondence 5957 (MOET, 2014a) MOET accepted adjustments and flexibility regarding ECS outcome standards to be applied to undergraduate programmes, saying that learners' entry levels varied and generally did not satisfy a required input threshold. The agency provided HEIs with further instructions on offering

intensive courses to learners for the facilitation of their achievement of required learning outcomes as originally planned in the Project 2020. MOET decided that ECS learning outcomes in HEIs be raised course by course, programme by programme provided that the original target set out for undergraduate programmes should soon be reached. In Circular 07/2015/TT-BGDĐT (MOET, 2015), I noticed that the minimum requirements concerning foreign language learning in HEIs were stated in general terms as follows: ‘to be capable of understanding main ideas of a report or speech on familiar topics at work that is associated with one’s field of study; to be capable of using the language as a means of expression to deal with social situations at work; to be capable of writing simple reports on the jobs undertaken.’ Therefore, HEIs could self-determine outcome standards for ECS takers, taking into account the feasibility, the conditions and capacity of the institution.

I also found that alongside using output control as a measure to intensify QM over HEIs, the government pushed the establishment and operation of QAA units (QAAUs) in all HEIs and external quality accreditation organisations. MOET referred to that plan as early as 2004 in Directive 25/2004/CT-BGDĐT (MOET, 2004a), expecting that the operation of the QAA system would gradually foster quality improvement. MOET had been setting up procedures and assessment criteria to be applied by HEIs and accreditation organisations for institutional and programme evaluation. It was HEIs’ choice to register with an accreditation body authorised by MOET. Nonetheless, MOET advocated HEIs’ registration for institutional and programme accreditation with prestigious regional and international accreditation organisations. Quality accreditation was a process that a HEI ought to conduct on request by a state governance agency through which they demonstrated to what extent they met educational objectives in certain periods. A HEI’s engagement in QAA showed its autonomy and accountability, undertaking functions and responsibilities assigned and relevant to goals and missions that it had identified. HEIs ought to publicise results of QAA processes on MOET’s and their websites which may be used as evidence of quality and to determine the prestige and position of HEIs. This, in turn, was the basis for adjustment in allocation of state budgets to state HEIs and assistance to private HEIs concerning issues such as land and staff training.

In 2004, MOET pronounced the first and temporary regulations on institutional accreditation, which were then modified several times in 2007 and 2012 before the release of its most updated version under Circular 12 (MOET, 2017b). Depending on fields or modes of study, HEIs could use one or more than one set of assessment criteria for programme evaluation which was attached to Decision 72/2007/QĐ-BGDĐT (MOET, 2007c), Circular 23/2011/TT-BGDĐT (MOET, 2011), Circular 49/2012/TT-BGDĐT (MOET, 2012d), Circular 33/2014/TT-BGDĐT (MOET, 2014d), and Circular 04/2016/TT-BGDĐT (MOET, 2016). HEIs ought to set up and carry out institutional plans for self-assessment and registration for quality accreditation at institutional and programme levels. MOET

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(2017a) in Plan 118/KH-BGDĐT informed HEIs of the schemes for their QAA processes and procedures. Accordingly, HEIs were urged to complete institutional self-assessment and to progressively register for programme accreditation and external evaluation at institutional level with authorised accreditation bodies across Vietnam.

MOET claimed their requirement for institutional evaluation promoted internal QA and nurtured quality culture of an institution. According to MOET's (2018a/b/c/d) latest instructions in Correspondences 766, 767, 768, 769, HEIs ought to follow a procedure of Plan-Do-Check-Act and use criteria for institutional assessment provided by MOET to assess and grade a range of areas, for example, institutional missions, leadership, human resources management, training and research activities, and achievements in training and research activities. Basically, it was the assessment of effectiveness and efficiency in academic training, research activities, human resources, infrastructure, and other relevant areas so that the institution could change their use of resources and process implementation to enhance quality and to meet standards. It was a prerequisite for external evaluation which may or may not result in the granting of a certificate of institutional accreditation by an authoritative accreditation body that verified the institution had satisfied a certain level of compliance and standards in all areas set out by MOET.

MOET described programme evaluation as a process in which a HEI abided by MOET's guidelines in procedures and criteria for programme assessment to evaluate and make a report of the effectiveness and efficiency in training and research activities, in using resources and in other relevant areas. Based on the evaluation report it made necessary changes in resources use and relevant processes for quality improvement and standards satisfaction. Areas to be assessed included educational goals and outcome standards set out for a programme, its descriptions, its organisation and content, teaching and learning approaches, learning assessment methods, teaching staff, learners and learning supporting activities, infrastructures, outcome achievements. Programme evaluation may be followed by programme accreditation which was conducted by an independent accreditation body for a certificate of programme accreditation.

To assure quality in academic activities, MOET also requested that stakeholders like students and employers have opportunities to raise their voices through, for example, feedback survey channels, and that HEIs be under supervision of wider society. Students could give feedback on lecturers and specific subjects or training courses that they had finished. Students' feedback added a channel to lecturer assessment, helping lecturers improve their teaching and satisfy the learners' needs. Employers could be invited to provide opinions on training courses/programmes. The government expected employers' involvement in programme development would increase the chance of graduates' meeting requirements at work.

Prior to specifying procedures, criteria, standards, and grade levels for institutional and programme evaluation/accreditation, MOET explained what was meant by quality of the two subjects of assessment: Quality of an educational establishment was the satisfaction of its pre-set educational goals which met requirements in HE purposes as presented in HE Law and fulfilled the need in workforce training for local and national socio-economic development; Quality of an academic programme was the achievement of predetermined educational goals and outcome standards, the satisfaction of requirements set out in HE Law and the National Qualifications Framework for a programme/qualification at a specific level, and meeting societal demand for human resources.

### **4.3 Commentaries**

Looking at public policies I saw that the government's employment of QAA measures was aimed at facilitating state management of HEIs in a way that ensured a balance between HEI autonomy and public accountability. Institutional autonomy entailed not just the right of a HEI in establishing and stating its institutional goals and course/subject targets within reach of the institution but the obligation to lead all institutional activities towards meeting its quality commitment concerning predetermined goals and targets in its conditions and capacity. In transferring central authority to HEIs, MOET signalled a demand that HEIs lent their eligibility for independence and self-determination in their operation to QAA. Providing HEIs with a legal framework for standards-based QAA and boosting internal and external evaluation of HEIs at institutional and programme level, the government had been moving towards targets/outcomes/accountability-oriented management. Also, the state paved the way for the participation of both insiders and outsiders in the educational process by introducing guidance on how to collect and make use of stakeholder feedback and opinions for programme design and delivery. HEI's operations, thus, were put under wider supervision and HEIs ought to act in response to internal and external stakeholders.

Compliance with public policies and regulations on QAA meant HEIs built QAAUs into their organisational structure and implemented QAA processes and procedures as guided and stipulated by MOET. Such compliance and observance was a means to assure and enhance quality in HE. In turn, educational quality was what the government said determined the rearrangement in state financial plans for HEIs. The plans included sharing out state budgets to public universities and offering universities in private sector support in issues such as land, tax, or staff training. Transparency in quality commitment and QAA conditions had also become a principle for MOET's decision about HE enrolment quotas which was a matter of death and life for HEIs. QAA was relied on both as a means for governmental authorities to govern HEIs' operations and an instrument for state resources management.

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The government's efforts in developing capable workforce for national development necessitated greater accessibility to HEIs, which, to certain extent, influenced input quality. The situation, as shown in the findings of public policy analysis, resulted in the use of output control as an inescapable measure to ensure quality of educational products, which could be understood as the learners' achievement of pre-defined outcome standards and/or capabilities and employability of graduates. In the specific case of ECS provision, national quality initiatives and measures had been intended for the learners' satisfaction of minimum required learning outcomes which were built into HEIs' curriculum, being a condition for undergraduates' completion of their chosen courses/programmes. Outcomes attainment denoted requirements being met concerning predefined English language proficiency levels/band scores. Moreover, ECS learners were expected to be capable of using English efficiently, verbally and in written form, at work in a multi-culture working environment and in a specific professional field that they had trained. Nevertheless, MOET realised great variation in entry level of ECS learners and that output standardisation needed to follow longer and multi-task procedures that called for actions at education levels lower than HE. Although MOET had shown persistence in improving at least learners' ECS outcome achievements, the question was, did all the learners need English for their work or would all the graduates get jobs or work in an environment that required the use of English? This was a question regarding the fitness of purpose and one-size-fits-all goal of ECS teaching and learning in VHEIs.

## Chapter 5      Case study 1: Junior University

I start this chapter with a pen-portrait of Junior University derived from a mix of what the interviewees say about their institution, fieldnotes, and materials on the university websites and provided by university people. Junior is then depicted in further detail through the eyes of five fictionalised characters who raise their voices over topics/issues regarding quality in English language education and current quality mechanisms. These individual pen-portraits represent perspectives of senior managers, middle managers and staff in Education and Training Management (ETM) and QAA, lecturers, and students. In the next section I describe two ECS class visits which entail the implementation of some ECS syllabuses in the classroom settings as part of endeavours toward meeting the institution's stated goals. Finally, I comment on the viewpoints, attitudes, and feelings amalgamated in fictionalised characters and what I observed in the classrooms, hoping to make explicit central issues.

### 5.1      Junior's pen-portrait

Every time when entering the university premises, I feel like I am escaping the hustle and bustle of a crowded city. This is thanks to the greenness of the trees and large spaces at its edges that stop the noise of vehicles on surrounding busy streets from reaching lecture halls and working areas. Situated in the middle of the establishment is an ornament with little ponds mirroring buildings and green trees and several benches make it an ideal area for students to take a break between class hours or to meet up for group projects. Nearby is a sports complex where staff and students may have physical activities and classes.

Junior University is a well-established public university and a member of an affiliated university – Big University. It is legally autonomous like any independent HEI and accountable to its mother university which functions as an administrative manager – giving directions, providing support and overseeing all operations within the entire organisation. It has a very good reputation in providing English language studies courses and English language teacher education. As stated in Guidelines X (2017), produced by Big University, its English Language Department comprising around 100 English language teachers is responsible for the development, delivery, and quality in the provision of English as a compulsory subject (ECS) to students of the other member universities of Big University.

Junior has a target of growing as a research-oriented HEI, aspiring to become a prestigious academic training and research provider in languages, international studies, and human sciences. Its mission is to contribute to the national development through high quality education and

research and provision of educational products and services that meet societal demand at international standards. As claimed in its prospectus, Junior has been playing a leading role in satisfying the need for human resources with English language competence in a wide variety of industry sectors. The core values that it emphasises and pledges to cultivate in learners are creativity, integrity, responsibility, adaptability, and the ability to live and work in competitive and multi-culture environments. A HEI should be a place whereby everybody together creates opportunities and the learners can develop capabilities, intellectuality, skills and personalities to live in the contemporary world. This tenet in the university's prospectus appeared everywhere around its premises as a slogan on ribbons and posters during freshers' fair weeks when I was there. As a member university of Big University, it has always been striving for assuring and enhancing quality in the provision of English language education to learners across affiliated universities and an ambition of reaching out to learners in the region and the world.

To realise those missions and goals, Junior University has developed QAA plans and strategies for assuring quality in a multitude of areas, aspiring to steadily form quality culture and enhance its brand of quality education provider. All QAA processes and procedures are under the monitoring and supervision of its own QAA unit (QAAU) and other authorised QAA bodies. The Inspectorate collaborates with QAAU in monitoring and supervising the observance of the other units with respect to QAA regulations and plans pertaining to lecturer quality, input quality, teaching quality, training support service quality, output quality as satisfaction of outcome standards, output quality as satisfaction of societal demand, and programme quality.

The institution receives guidelines and instructions in QAA from Big University which are in line with MOET's regulations. To assure and enhance teaching quality and quality of academic programmes, an emphasis is put on utilising stakeholders' feedback. Junior employs feedback forms constructed by Big University with different stakeholders like managers, lecturers, students, former students, and employers. Stakeholders' feedback is said to be used for necessary adjustments in course/programme/lecture content, teaching approaches, testing and assessment methods, and other training support services. To assure output quality as satisfaction of predefined outcome standards, the university pays special attention to the validity and reliability of English language proficiency testing examinations and test results.

Moreover, to carry out institutional and programme evaluation Junior not only uses its mother university's regulations but develops its own regulations and instructions which are compiled in booklets. It conforms to MOET's procedures and criteria for institutional assessment in the conduct of institutional evaluation (the application of regional and international procedures and criteria is encouraged but by the time of data collection only the local ones have been in practice). Academic programmes are assessed according to standards criteria developed by Big University

which are regional/international oriented (previously MOET's standards criteria were also used). The assessment is carried out at Big University level with the involvement of its managing board and QAA experts working at a QAA institute. Its programmes or institution are peer reviewed by the other member universities. As publicised on its website, until 2016-17, Junior had two programmes evaluated and granted certificates of programme accreditation by a regional accreditation agency. It was also awarded MOET's certificate of institutional accreditation.

Junior University develops and delivers academic programmes in compliance with Big University's regulations on education and training which are the localisation of MOET's set of regulations and Higher Education Law. The regulations booklet features principles for QA and educational effectiveness, for example, QAA is mandatory in academic training and QAA conditions are prioritised in all member universities of Big University. Another QAA principle that Junior and the other affiliated universities of Big University emphasises is the requirement for the appropriateness and orientation towards outcome standards of course/programme content, teaching approaches, and learning assessment methods. Moreover, Junior statutes specify that the construction and implementation of academic programmes ought to take into account the principles of social needs satisfaction, applicability, and institutional mission.

In observance of Big University's regulations and instructions on programme development and implementation, which are in accordance with those of MOET, Junior lecturers take the responsibility of constructing and delivering outcomes-based ECS syllabuses. The syllabuses are designed for the learners who meet an input requirement of A2 of the CEFR. Students ought to undertake between 14-24 credits for the accomplishment of ECS outcome standards from level 3-5 or equivalents with reference to the national foreign language proficiency framework (developed based on the CEFR), contingent upon the standards of the academic programmes undertaken. A target outcome is set out for each phase of the outcomes-oriented ECS scheme which is spelled out on the title line of each teaching and learning schedule. ECS is scheduled for two sessions per week, typically in the first two years of a study course; each session comprises 3-4 credit hours and lasts 50 minutes. Coursebooks for the first two phases in ECS are level-specific, selected from those available on the market. Coursebooks for phase 3 onward are test-oriented and IELTS-based. Recommended teaching approaches are listed whereby students' needs and learning engagement are emphasised. The teaching schedules also include assessment methods and components. ECS is a conditional/compulsory subject: the awarding of qualifications is conditional on the successful completion of all ECS component units of study. ECS assessment results do not count towards final GPAs but are evidence of ECS completion. ECS outcomes attainment is validated through standardised tests.

## 5.2 Staff and managers' perspectives

### 5.2.1 Hoang

Hoang, in his early 50s, had been an experienced lecturer before being promoted to a senior management position. He is an expert in ETM and confident in understanding QA.

*I've been working here for so long in several positions, so I've been through a lot of changes to the institution and to myself as well during that time. After finishing my degree in English I became a teacher teaching English language for more than ten years. I then moved to work as a manager in ETM area and subsequently stepped up to take a position in the institution's Managing Board, in charge of issues in management of academic programmes. I've been really interested in QA issues, and I was trained as a quality assessor.*

*QA has been there for ages but concepts like QA or accreditation are of recently increased concern. We've set up a QAAU, a QA board, and we've been implementing a great deal of QAA processes and procedures. We collect and use student feedback and other stakeholders' feedback in programme development. We're looking to student satisfaction as an impetus for changes in both teaching and services areas. But I don't think we should rely on just QAAU and its operations. I don't believe that quality can be enhanced only by conducting internal or external quality assessment. Quality culture must be soaked up in every individual teacher and across all units. To make that happen, all QAA procedures must be institutionalised, tasks/duties specified in institutional documents and assigned to particular units and the implementation inspected.*

*To assure quality, I'm firstly concerned with the development of academic programmes. We've had our curriculum frameworks for sixty years but I want to emphasise procedures for programme development. Such procedures must be followed with consistency across all units. Once regulations in education and training have been established for uniformity and consistency, lecturers must comply with them. I know there could be some limitations in there though.*

*Quality is a matter of life and death particularly in Vietnam when there's been growing competition between HEIs. It determines whether we can attract teaching and teaching support staff – including management. It's quite tough when it comes to human resources. But having teaching staff who can carry out delivery and assessment methods in alignment with programmes and curriculum developed is not an end in itself. It must be total quality culture, it must be total QA. Everyone must be involved, from teaching staff to teaching support staff, to students. And it entails changes in all areas and units, from teaching to teaching support services, to QAA services. When I was in a teaching position, I was more concerned about improving quality of teaching staff, for instance, through continuous professional development. But then I realised that teacher*

*and teaching quality must be accompanied by a whole load of units and processes. Plus, there are still other factors to take into account, like lecturers' financial wellbeing or managing staff's personalities, which may influence their performance and attitude at work, particularly in the public sector.*

*That's difficult. When we talk about quality, I think we should see what our educational products can do, whether they will be accepted into society and once accepted how they will later develop further. There may be different tools to measure quality. Our institution has created our own. But not all aspects of quality can be measured, and we can only feel them. Teaching knowledge to students is not enough. We must help them form manners and develop personalities. We must teach them how to stay optimistic, to maintain self-belief, and to lead a happy life.*

### **5.2.2 Bien**

Bien is a QAA manager and a lecturer, being in a middle stage of her career development; she has been working in Junior University for more than fifteen years; she is more enthusiastic about teaching than QAA.

*I was transferred to do this QAA job from a teaching position, so at the beginning I literally didn't know anything about QAA or QAAU. When I was a teacher, all I got was student feedback results once every year. But then I started to gain hands-on experience like reading quality reports or preparing reports for quality assessment and got more familiarised with my responsibilities through official training courses such as quality assessor training. I now know pretty well about QAA and that it covers so many things and it touches all people and units.*

*As a member of Big University, we can get training from its QAA institute but we don't do that often. What we appreciate is quality assessor training courses that they offer and we primarily aim those courses for staff of QAAU and ETMU. Big University places great emphasis on QAA. They establish policies on QAA for the entire organisation, but we have our own QAAU and regulations on QAA based on their general rules and regulations. Plus, within our institution, whichever academic unit features students, two people in that unit are assigned to provide help with QAA duties. QAAU is just a lead in the network, providing guidance and support. Being a member of Big University means you have someone who tells you what to do and you don't have to bother thinking about things which you may not be allowed to do, but its downside is you become passive and lack creativity.*

*QAAU is like a counter-balance to the development and provision of a large number of academic programmes in this integration era. We've done several programme accreditations. We gather stakeholders' feedback data to be used in constructing new programmes, or to check the*

*effectiveness of an existing course/programme once it's been carried out. Academic units do things, claiming to reach this or that purpose, and QAAU is like a mid-point wherein we check whether teaching and assessment are genuinely moving towards such predefined purposes. We may not monitor the teaching process at a micro level, or to see what specific things lecturers do in the classroom but we have common procedures and syllabuses for that. As lecturers, we feel restrained, we don't like them but we have no choice other than to comply with regulations, of course, with certain accepted flexibility. QAAU was also set up as required by MOET. Nonetheless, it's lucky that the Managing Board see the need for a connection between QAA processes and training processes. I think QAA processes contribute to our institution's branding.*

*The success of a QAA mechanism depends on the human factor. It was so hard initially to do QAA tasks when institutional staff had no idea about QAA procedures and so questioned their objectives and usefulness. Younger staff may receive those procedures more positively than senior lecturers who even showed their objection with the Managing Board. But things started to go smoother when QAA culture was formed gradually. Staff and students are now well engaged in feedback surveys and documentation processes. They know when to do what. Those changes happened mainly due to the Managing Board's great support and promotion of QAA processes. Our institution has been remarkably emphasising operations in this area over the past few years. Institutional staff meetings/briefings always end with QAA tasks being specified in the VC's conclusions to be realised by relevant units under inspection. We've even built a QAA action plan for up to 2030.*

*Major realms of QA firstly involve assuring input quality via admissions processes. We currently can do little with input control as student intake of HEIs across Vietnam must be based on students' results in high school exit examinations. During the training process, quality is assured through the development, review, and implementation of outcomes-based academic programmes. Academic units design programmes/syllabuses and develop materials orienting towards predetermined standards which are then reviewed and approved by ETMU. Lecturers must deliver each lesson following syllabuses and procedures that have been developed and approved so that students can succeed in their exams. And we are making great efforts in assuring teacher and teaching quality, for example, encouraging continuous professional development which could mean doing mentoring or higher university degrees, or using student feedback surveys as a way to monitor the teaching process, or requesting lecturers to do self-assessment. Moreover, to assure output quality, we require that students achieve pre-set outcomes to be eligible to graduate.*

*QAA processes are administrative by nature. What it has greatly changed is lecturers' awareness. When you receive students' negative feedback you feel depressed. You may get managers' warnings, or your class may be inspected. Those eager to learn will change for improvement, those*

*inert may ignore the results. We haven't imposed strong sanctions yet on lecturers who do not change. I'm not sure how people working in other professional fields may feel about getting warned, but for those doing teaching jobs that's something upsetting already. I believe once their awareness gets better they'll turn it into actions, changing their teaching methods, their classroom behaviours, and their attitude to students. Actually, they've done so. But one sad thing is that lecturers still have little sense of target setting and acting toward targets set. They lack a panoramic view. They just teach the way they were taught. They are not aware that any activity occurring in the institution is aimed at assuring quality. They think that QA is the responsibility of QAAU.*

*To my thinking, assuring quality in teaching is different to QA via feedback surveys. It is something to do with teacher quality, reviewed and approved programmes/curriculum, sufficient teaching hours, and assessment methods that are valid and reliable. This sort of QA is more closely linked to teachers and materials. Thus, to assure quality in teaching English to students of the other member universities of Big University, we normally send out teachers with prestige. Additionally, all syllabuses are adjusted, reviewed, and approved within each academic unit then submitted to ETMU at the start of each semester before they are rigidly and consistently realised into the classroom. Nevertheless, we cannot get student feedback on our teaching staff as they're students of the other member universities, not ours.*

*I've always thought, for many years engaging in teaching, that once we satisfy all students' needs, it's called quality. Besides getting good grades, students must feel interested in your subject. I often learn about their learning targets and expectations when we start a module, then try to link teaching content with what they can do in real life. This in turn can help motivate students in their learning. What's also necessary is to associate testing and assessment with such real life related educational goals. A teacher should learn about not just students' needs but their personalities so as to offer them teaching methods and content that best suit them. We need to understand that without learners we would be unemployed.*

### **5.2.3      Giao**

Being a veteran lecturer in her mid-30s, Giao is devoted to teaching and proud to be a lecturer of Junior University; she has concerns about testing and assessment in VHEIs.

*My degree was English language teacher education. I love it that I can use what I learnt to help my students step towards their desired career paths. I'm so happy that I'm part of Junior University – a leading institution in foreign language education. A focus of my further study was testing and assessment, which deeply changed my understanding of the area and how it is connected with learning. I think in a near future, people in Vietnam will also change the way they regularly think*

*about testing and assessment. Assessment methods may negatively influence the quality of learners as they may focus on improving testing skills instead of truly learning English language. We've been applying output standardisation, different outcomes being required for followers of different programmes. Standardisation means students are under certain pressure to achieve predefined outcomes to graduate; programmes/curriculum and materials have been changed toward that policy. Additional units of study are even designed to just prepare students for their accomplishment of English language proficiency certificates with scores as required. In that way, testing and assessment is closely linked to academic programmes. Output standardisation is a good public policy as it forces students to learn for standard achievement, hence it positively influences quality in English language education in general while quality improvement in this field is significant for national economic development. However, not everyone needs English. Similarly, not everyone can learn English no matter how hard they try. A major problem is that standardisation may keep learners from learning beyond the threshold, which would mean a waste of talents and also a waste of human resources because teachers would not have students to teach. Therefore, besides pre-threshold courses that support students' achievement of standards, there should be post-standard courses. Another problem is learning for standard achievement may impede learning for real communication. Exam-oriented/test-based teaching and learning is unavoidable. Students may have attained required scores yet are not good at using English to communicate at work.*

*Before anything gets started, we need to know students' input competency. They will be exempted from a unit of study if they can submit their proof of English language competence that is above or equivalent to target proficiency level prescribed for that unit of study. The proof could be certificates granted by our testing centre or international certificates such as IELTS, TOEFL, or TOEIC. Those satisfying requirements for input level will study the designed modules until they reach standard outcomes. Assessment results of those units of study will not count toward their final GPA scores. For those whose proficiency is below required input level they have to study themselves or optionally attend additional courses that the institution offers. All students have to show proof of standard achievement provided by authorised examination and certification services providers by the time of graduation.*

*I don't feel pressured about whether my students reach or do not reach required outcomes by the end of a unit of study. Of course, I always try my best to help my students, I make sure that I do all duties and take all responsibilities of a lecturer, but students have their own duties. Their motivation, efforts and capacities are important. When students lack motivation and do not engage in classroom learning nor self-study, they may not be able to reach institutional goals.*

*I may not care much about policies. We've a unit in charge of QAA but I don't know much about its operations and responsibilities. They gather student feedback then return the results to the teachers so that they can make necessary adjustments to their teaching. But what is missing is the recognition of lecturers' efforts in teaching. Other units like the Human Resources Unit contribute to assuring quality by taking good care of recruiting and properly allocating teaching staff to academic units. Qualified teachers better assure quality of learners. Another good QA measure that the institution is doing quite well is mentoring which, I think, is not for QA but for sharing teaching experience or best practices. Likewise, sharing experience and enhancing research in foreign language education, I think, is an activity that is not to assure but to improve quality. Lecturers are expected to engage well in doing research, so the institution's just raised the requirement for research performance in our criteria set for lecturers' self-assessment. Nonetheless, it's not simple to write for publications and it takes time to produce a quality research product. Therefore, they may do something else to lessen the pressure. You know, we're not always 100% enthusiastic, we sometimes feel tired, we sometimes need time for family care. Students feel best educational quality and what they practically need for their lives. But managers need to consider subjectivity or bias in their assessment as they have different personal tastes or personalities. They may give good comments on teachers delivering exciting speaking lessons whereas teachers giving quieter writing lessons may not receive equally good comments although they've spent a great deal of time on careful preparation and marking. Student feedback forms may not help see such invisible things. Vietnamese lecturers in general do not willingly welcome students' assessment of themselves. Students have little knowledge of a teaching job. Also, they may not give critical comments on a study subject that is not of as much importance as those related to their fields of study.*

*As a teacher, I'd like to help my students learn what is usable – to make money. We must tell students why we teach this or that. I always connect classroom activities and teaching content with students' career prospects. If students are well aware of the importance of English and how they can use English in their future jobs, they will be motivated to study English. What's toughest is to make students believe that they can learn English. They need to overcome their fear of English to study it.*

*We provide both training and examination services. We have an authorised testing and certification services centre. Everything occurs in a self-contained process. We develop programmes and deliver lectures according to common and approved syllabuses. We design our standardised tests and offer examination and certification services. Teachers are all trained in all stages and areas of the operation. We offer training in testing and examination services to teachers from other institutions all over Vietnam as well.*

*The institution, the ETMU establish targets and give directions and instructions to our units. Our managers will ask teachers to design and develop programmes/syllabuses based on those directions and instructions. Those programmes/syllabuses are reviewed within our unit before being submitted to ETMU for further review and approval. Carrying out approved programmes/syllabuses as such I feel confident, I feel I'm doing something right and to a standard. Of course, certain flexibility is allowed as long as we bear in mind stated teaching and learning objectives.*

*Once we know what we study a foreign language for, we can define what quality is. People used to talk about ELT as teaching its elements such as vocabulary, grammar, or pronunciation. Nowadays it's taken as teaching learners to use the language for communication in real-life situations. Quality means achieving certain pre-set targets. For me, it is helping students be well-prepared to survive in their working environment with knowledge and skills learnt. It was different when there was still ESP thanks to which students could be equipped with certain vocabularies related to their fields of study. However, standards-oriented programmes and the use of materials currently available on the market would not straightforwardly lead to such application. Lecturers need to take a further step to tailor their lectures to situations that individual students possibly get involved at work. But standards-oriented and exam-based teaching keeps creativity and personalisation from teachers' lecturing. Moreover, I think, lecturers may not have reasonably invested time to learn what students or recruiters' needs are. Lesson preparation takes time, anyway, if we want to create interesting class hours for our students. Generally speaking, language teaching is presently aimed at preparing students for communicating in social situations rather than using English in specific professional fields.*

#### **5.2.4 Commentaries**

My analysis of institutional documents, interviews, and focus groups showed QAA was a priority in the institutional policy of Junior University, for example, in efforts of its Managing Board to fully respond to and localise policies and regulations in respect of QAA circulated by Big University among its member universities. The weight that Junior placed on quality came from the direction of Big University, culminating in its own QAA network, including QAAU as an operating unit and a QAA centre governed by Big University and directing tasks.

At Junior University the VC advocated and institutionalised QAA procedures, seeking to develop a well-functioning QAA system. Despite initial resistance to newly-adopted QA methods (such as student feedback surveys and quality documentation), particularly among senior staff, QAA tasks had become embedded. This included action plans approved by the VC, implemented and monitored by QAAU, and inspected by the Inspectorate. I found common between the senior and

middle managers that were directly involved in QAA processes the expectation that QAA culture would be gradually built – understanding of QAA processes was raised and QAA routines were formed among individual staff both in teaching and teaching support areas. Moreover, the university stressed the involvement of everyone and every process in QAA. Lecturers were aware of procedures to assess their classroom performance and, increasingly, the students' role in assessing their quality.

Junior raised emphasis in standards satisfaction through assuring the alignment between course content, assessment methods, and learning outcomes stated and specified in programme descriptions. It had started monitoring such an alignment in programme review. Output standardisation involved programme development, implementation, and management, which required collaboration across units, including academic units, ETMU and QAAU. The university also had paid more attention to market relevance of learning outcomes by looking into social demand in programme development. Target outcomes attainment was only feasible for those students satisfying an input threshold. Therefore, output standardisation necessitated additional processes such as input classification exams and pre-threshold classes. ECS learning outcomes differed between programmes of different standards and proof of outcomes achievement must be provided by an authorised examination and certification organisation.

ELT professionals were under several levels of inspection, including the Inspectorate, ETMU, Home Teacher Office, and students. Additionally, they had to carry out self-assessment, the result of which could be rewards or punishments. I noticed both QAA and teaching staff expressed concerns about subjectivity in students' assessment of lecturers' classroom performance. They may have personal view and thinking of quality lecturers and quality teaching. Furthermore, they may not be able to give critical thoughts on things like teaching methods or testing and assessment methods as they have little knowledge in such fields. Additionally, it was a matter of investing thinking in a subject which was conditional but subsidiary to their degrees.

Although much emphasis was put on QAA activities, there was a differentiation between newly-established QAA measures and traditional quality mechanisms. From the VC's perspective, Junior had always had a system for QA since its foundation, which led to it having become a top HEI in foreign language and foreign studies education. This explained why he said newly-developed QAA measures such as internal/external evaluation alone may not generate quality. The distinction was also brought forward by frontline QAA actors who drew a line between stakeholders' contribution to quality and QA measures like assuring teacher quality or using appropriate materials or assessment methods. Likewise, the teaching staff distinguished between QA from quality enhancement: stakeholder feedback survey or inspection of class hours were methods aimed at monitoring the educational process; quality enhancement initiatives involved mentoring

and research activities, which were intended for sharing teaching and research experience and best practices among peers/colleagues.

Junior's aims in its provision of ECS education was to help the learners reach institutionally defined learning outcomes and to progress learners' development in communication skills. However, it was questionable whether outcomes achievement would help students use English to communicate in social situations or at work. What I found noticeable in interview analysis was worries among institutional staff, particularly lecturers, about the influence of output standardisation. Firstly, students may master testing skills for test score achievement instead of learning English language. Second, standards-based QAA encouraged thresholds attainment, not wider ranges of learning achievements or continuous improvement. The students may not continue learning English once they had attained required outcomes, which may cause them difficulty in maintaining and developing English language capacity. Additionally, they were encouraged to attain ECS outcomes in the early stage of their undergraduate studies while the validity of the certificates was subject to the acceptance of employer users, which was in line with ordinances regarding foreign language proficiency testing in Circular 23 (MOET, 2017c).

I also discovered a common viewpoint among the institutional staff that learners and their learning played a role in output standardisation and output standardisation policy was a great force for student learning. Students may not be able to obtain subject objectives and pre-set learning outcomes without certain learning ability as regards ECS, albeit being motivated, for example, to earn a well-paid job that required English language competence. However, from lecturers' perspectives, learning English language beyond a standard point was more important. Learners needed to keep learning English unless they did not need to use the language for communication in real life after graduation. For this reason, in most cases the lecturers often motivated students to learn English by linking learning objectives with their career prospects. Nevertheless, giving students instrumental motivation for their study was far from teaching them how to use English in wider contexts, i.e., personalising lectures to fit with real situational communication.

### **5.3 Students' perspectives**

#### **5.3.1 Nam**

Nam, aged 19, is proud of being a student doing his undergraduate degree at X University, Big University – a dream for many students. He started learning English at primary school but he had not been engaged in serious learning of the subject until high school. He is not very confident in his English but loves learning the language.

*Before I started my degree, I learnt all English language skills but nothing was really good, I couldn't practically use English except saying some rubbish greetings. I didn't have much time and space to learn English for communication. I heard a lot about the importance of English but I hadn't really learnt it seriously until I started Grade 10. English is now a compulsory subject at all educational level in the national curriculum. But it doesn't mean everyone has to learn English well. More time and efforts are typically spent on subjects related to a chosen university course. Studying English is your priority only if English test results in the National High School Graduation Examinations are part of university entry requirements. I had to take the English exam in my high school exit examinations, and all I learnt centred around vocabulary, grammatical structures, reading and writing, and practice tests. It was grammar-focused and exam-oriented – I learnt it just to pass exams, and to get a place in university.*

*In Big University English is like a default option of foreign languages. We all learn English with Junior. We have to get a required outcome of B1 for ECS before we can be awarded a degree. The learning schedules and materials we are provided with are all aimed at that target. The teacher may get us to engage in learning via classroom interaction such as pair or group work or talking to the teacher or in front of the whole class. Sometimes we're involved more in speaking and writing, sometimes more with listening or reading. But learning English in the classroom is primarily exam-oriented – the teacher teaches us what we need for exam success. I know it could be communication skills-based in other classes though. It's also understandable that there might be little interaction in some class where the teacher teaches and the learners learn – the students are not very confident to speak English with their teacher or peers.*

*As far as I know B1 is the outcome required for regular standard programmes of which 14 credits – one tenth of the total credits – are assigned to ECS modules. It's B2 or higher for those undertaking international standard/advance-level programmes or programmes of which tuition fees are charged against educational quality – programmes as such can be partly or completely delivered using English as a medium of instruction (EMI), of course they have to do more credits in total and in ECS. My programme is of regular standard level. I'm not too good at English. I didn't take English learning as a priority prior to my HE journey. So B1 is suitable and relevant to my capability. That standard is neither too much nor little. But it's a form of learning assessment, a goal to direct our learning at.*

*When it comes to personal goals in English learning, some may just want to get English literacy, some learn to be prepared for further or later stages of studies. For me, English is just a tool, not a profession. I don't need English as much as those doing English Language Studies. Anyway, I set my short-term target to be learning English for satisfaction of the condition for graduation; yet accomplishing a target score is not as much important as being able to apply knowledge and skills*

*learnt into doing jobs – my long-term target. My goal is not just a targeted score, or to graduate, but to be capable of communicating with foreign business partners. Also, I want to be able to use English as much as I can in my professional field, like reading relevant documents or learning materials in English, so that I can have opportunities for the best jobs and career promotion. I believe my long-term target embraces my short-term one, not the other way round. If you want to use English in a wider context in the long run, achieving B1 or higher levels is an antecedent as that means becoming an English independent user.*

*Nonetheless, to learn a foreign language well and to be able to use it outside the classroom, the completion of ECS modules and achievement of outcome standards alone would not help. Real-life communicative situations are different than simulated classroom situations. You need to study more than that. You may look to extensive learning materials – materials other than coursebooks. You need to learn and to use English frequently in real situations so as to not lose acquired knowledge or learnt responses. Learning and practice must always go together if you aim to use English for work. For instance, regularly read and translate some documents. You may also look for or create opportunities to practise using English for communication and to better English day-by-day by talking to some foreigners on the internet or at some tourism destinations. An English club could be a good place to go to. Our club's members sometimes together join a presentation given by native English speakers for exposure to authentic English and to give real responses in real situations. English lecturers sometimes join us.*

*After completing all ECS modules I'll study English with an external English language centre. I think learners are offered better quality there. We get what we pay for. The more you pay, the more motivated you are to study. You can also learn English with native teachers there and an international certificate is more valid and widely accepted than a local one.*

*Overall, our learning resources are good enough to serve our learning goals concerning standards achievement. Classroom facilities are generally good. But sometimes there is problem with the quality of the CD-player, which makes it hard for us to do listening sessions. It's not too bad for learners' satisfaction of institutional goals, but I wish we could have classrooms with smart equipment that can facilitate classroom interaction and help us easily and conveniently access sources of knowledge.*

*I'm not worried about the quality of our teachers. They are well-qualified, they all have master's degrees and most of them graduated from Junior University. Anyway, we are now given the right to assess our teachers' performance through student feedback surveys. Teacher assessment is for improving quality in teaching and learning but sadly, it's treated just as a matter of formality. Nothing has changed. We just complete the surveys in a perfunctory manner. We've no interest in giving feedback to a unit of study that we've completed. I understand if senior students give real*

*feedback and comments which receive responses or reactions the next cohorts could benefit. The process would be useless otherwise. But our voice is not that powerful. We need changes but it's not an easy feeling to be judging our teachers. I think what we ourselves do matters most. Teachers' performance should not be an issue if we do our part well.*

*To my thinking, quality teaching simply means students can use what they've learnt. We should be provided with usable knowledge, not something impractical. The understandability of a lecture matters. It could be a success if the learner can understand and maintain half of what has been taught, not necessarily 100%. Quality teaching partly depends on the learner and this in turn is influenced by whether the teacher can make them feel inspired and interested with their lectures. Teaching just to fulfil a teaching schedule or learning just to satisfy pre-determined targets will just make us feel constrained/controlled and bored, which may decrease quality in learning. Quality teaching should inspire learning spirit. It requires teaching skills of the teacher who should be a facilitator of the learning process, being able to create a friendly, comfortable, supportive, and interactive learning environment in which learners can practise using English and learn from both the teacher and peers. Some teachers use social media like Facebook to manage and boost learner independent learning. Some of them accompany their students to famous tourist attractions so that they can interview foreigners over a prepared topic but this is limited to advance level programmes with field trips.*

*The teacher should never stop learning to improve their professional and subject matter knowledge and skills. If they let us know the learning objectives of a unit of study and how we can practically use acquired subject matter knowledge in our potential professional fields, our interest in English learning will grow. It's important to teach the learner how to apply what they've learnt in real life situations, in doing their jobs. Educational quality is what students can attain after completing a unit of study and it is reflected in the improvement, if any, in their capabilities. You should learn more than what you can receive from your institution or teachers. You may set your own targets which may mean more than just the achievement of a range of scores like B1 or B2. If you cannot use English as much as you wish in the classroom, you can look for more opportunities elsewhere. Only through practice in real situations can you memorise and maintain what you've learnt and improve your response. And only continuous learning and practice can drive you beyond institutional goals toward the aim of using English for work and for social communication.*

### **5.3.2 Commentaries**

Analysing the group discussion among students receiving Junior's ECS education I saw that they had a positive attitude towards output standardisation. They thought that outcome standards strengthened their sense of direction in learning English and that standards attainment could

facilitate their desire of being efficient English users in wider contexts. Nevertheless, they were concerned about mediatory courses of action between outcome standards achievement and the capability to turn an attained band score into usable skills in contexts broader than academic settings. Their practical purposes of mastering the language as an efficient means of communication and a tool to explore and acquire knowledge particularly in their professional fields may not be simply reached by completing all assigned ECS credits. Although they could join some extra-curricular activities, e.g., English clubs and field trips, for English language practice, they needed more opportunities to demonstrate language use ability and to maintain an active bank of knowledge and skills and learned responses for situational English.

Regarding student feedback surveys the students thought they were more like bureaucratic procedures than helping quality enhancement. This was because they saw no change or improvement in what was happening in the classroom and they received little response from the institutional staff. Therefore, they may pay little care when giving their feedback. Also, they were aware of possible partiality when judging their lecturers while the teacher was not always the cause of a problem.

The students understood that teaching and learning was a two-way process involving responsibilities of both teacher and learners. They knew they played a great part in their learning, yet they expected to be inspired and motivated by their subject teachers. Although they cared about outcome standards achievement, they were far from supporting teaching approaches that were heavily led by subject objectives. I particularly noticed it was the practicality and applicability of the lectures that the students thought made quality English language education in HEIs. They wanted a class in which the teacher did not just cover the teaching content or objectives of a class session as set out in their lesson plans but inspired them to learn and to stay away from the feeling of being forced to study.

## **5.4 Class visits**

### *5.4.1 Lanh-J-L's class*

*The stairs lead me up to the sixth floor where the classroom is based. I am waiting for a short break between class hours in the corridor where spare desks and chairs are heaped up. However, when the time comes, there is no signal that the class is having such a break, so I unveil myself at the classroom entrance which is opposite the teacher's desk and leads to the corridor. Lanh approaches the doors and opens them for me when she sees me.*

*Inside it is bright and it feels cool and pleasant thanks to a big, new-looking air conditioner and four ceiling fans that are working. Four loudspeakers are hung in the four corners and another two*

*just above the windows in the middle of the room. Those windows look outside on one side, letting in natural light, and to the corridor on the other. An operative projector is fixed above where the central aisle meets the front space leading to the entrance. The room is large enough to accommodate up to 50-60 students although the class size is 25 and only 20 are present. Students all face the sliding chalkboard and teacher desk on which a quite new CD player is laid. Two to five students are seated in three first rows on each side along an aisle at the centre. The tables are rectangular and immobile with seats attached of the same shape which are designed to seat two people. In front of each student is a black and white copy of the coursebook.*

*The class is in the middle of a unit in the coursebook. Each unit comprises four sections and is supposed to be delivered in six class hours. At the start, the students are working on a reading passage about problems with teenage children. They have just finished reordering paragraphs to make a whole meaningful passage and the teacher asks her students to continue to read the passage in its correct order and choose a summary statement from three given options. Each individual is invited to read out loud each paragraph. The teacher sometimes corrects students' pronunciation. She then asks the class as a whole to give the answer to the summary reading task. Some students respond in chorus and she confirms the correct answers. Next she plays the audio recordings and asks the students to do a follow-up listening task in the book. Only a few students sitting close to me can catch up with the audio track and give choral responses to what their teacher is saying.*

*In the next ten minutes the teacher gets students engaged in a mini competitive word game. They are divided into two groups within which they are asked to work with a partner to make a list of as many adjectives as they can. Some students turn to a person sitting next to them as instructed, some do not. When the preparation time is over, the students are excited to take turn to get to the board and each writes down an adjective and gives the chalk to the next person in their teams. No verbal interaction occurs during team work.*

*The lecture is now focused on grammar content - using comparative structures to compare things/people. The teacher shows slides of adjectives, explaining how to differentiate between short and long adjectives and to turn them into comparative adjectives for comparison with examples. In subsequence, individuals are asked to make similar sentences using comparatives as they have learnt. The class then turn to a coursebook-based task with connection to comparatives. They are asked to work in pairs to make sentences but few turns to their partners, most of them work individually. The lecture is continued until the teacher notices that some students start to flop on the table and lose concentration, so she says "you'll have a short break soon."*

*Almost all the time the teacher uses English as the medium of instruction. L1 is used for grammar teaching. When a student cannot make a sentence using double comparison structure, she gives*

*an example in L1 and asks the student to translate into English. In another situation, the teacher similarly speaks in L1 with a student (after her first attempts to interact in English have resulted in the student's confusion), asking for translation of a sentence. She interacts with her students in different ways, e.g., as a whole class, with individual students. She tries to get broad and equal student participation but the interaction is largely focused on those she can physically approach with gestures, particularly those sitting one or two columns close to the aisle. She also assigns tasks to students individually/in pairs/in groups but the students are not always engaged in pair/group work as required, rather they choose to fulfil pair/group tasks on their own. When verbal exchanges are involved, students' voices are soft and low, so the teacher sometimes asks them to speak louder.*

#### 5.4.2 Thanh-J-L's class

Thanh agreed without hesitation for me to visit her class and on the day of the event, she picked me up outside of the lecture building and walked me to her class on the seventh floor.

*The room is at the end of the corridor, the curtains cover the windows, stopping strong afternoon sunlight from getting through and heating it up. Some students are still coming, so Thanh stands by her desk waiting patiently. The last student finally enters the room and all the other rows are occupied by three to four students.*

*The room is designed for class size of 30-40 students but only 18 out of 25 come to the class. The seating layout is fixed with long non-wheeled tables and chairs all looking to the chalkboard in the front. The air-conditioner is not working. It feels a bit hot despite the two fast-running ceiling fans. The classroom is also equipped with loudspeakers fixed high up in the corners and a projector above the chalkboard but they are not in use.*

*The teacher asks the whole class several times if they are ready to get started but receives no response. Nevertheless, she continues to ask lead-in questions about Zara but again the students are unresponsive. One of them says "Chưa ạ [never]" when his teacher eventually explains that she is talking about a shop and asks in L1 if anyone has bought a Zara product. The topic of the reading session - clothes - is then introduced. Having realised little student participation, the teacher changes her interaction strategy. She says "I have a question for you" and this time she simultaneously approaches a student at the outer rear of the table next to the last row and signals with her hand she is asking her "where do you often buy your clothes?" She also makes use of different questioning techniques. She asks the open-ended questions repeatedly then changes to alternative questions to give some prompts and waits for a moment before the student can produce an answer "I often buy clothes in the market." She continues to keep eye contact with her, asking a closed-ended question twice in English followed by a translation into L1, a moment of*

*waiting in silence, modified versions of the question, a moment of silence again, and translation of modified questions. The moment the student says “yes” the teacher asks her open-ended questions to which she replies with short answers “in X street” or “twice a week.” Just one or two students turn around to watch their conversation while most of the class are looking down to their books.*

*In subsequent steps, the teacher asks her students to open the book at a specific page and introduces the title of a reading passage. She writes it down onto the board and asks how they understand it, which is accompanied by a translation. Again, there is no response. Consequently, she explains the meaning of individual words then of the entire title in L1. She asks the students to read the passage and answer the questions in the coursebook. L1 is used for a brief instruction on some scanning techniques with examples. At a point she notices a student at the front row is not following along, so she asks him to turn to the page where the class is at and do the reading tasks.*

*The teacher checks the answers with the students after a short while. When a student takes a complete sentence from the text as an answer, she tells the class that they need to convert textual information into an answer. She translates all the questions into L1. When a student gives an answer that does not fit the answer key, she just says “not really” without further comments or explanation. In case the students make some unsuccessful attempts, the teacher directs them to the exact sentence(s) where needed information is located and then translates the sentence bit by bit into L1 as a way to explain an answer to a question.*

*In another situation, a student seated next to where the teacher is standing in the first row shows confusion and that he cannot follow her even after she tells him the location of the information in L1. The classroom procedures continue the same way wherein the teacher translates the questions and some texts from the passage that are relevant to the questions and answers, she even asks a student to translate an answer into L1. Some students give answers only when the teacher invites them. The teacher’s voice is loud and clear as she is using a microphone while the students’ are low and hard to hear.*

*The class continues to explore clothes related vocabulary in the reading passage. The teacher reads aloud the words/phrases and provides students with L1 equivalents. The class is then asked to turn to another vocabulary task in the coursebook. They are asked to discuss with partners to complete a word-picture matching exercise. A couple of students turn around or to a person next to them but the rest just do the task individually. The teacher always offers instructions bilingually either in the order of L1-L2 or L2-L1. When being addressed individual students give their word-picture matches, which is followed by the teacher’s explanation of the word meanings in L1.*

*The focus then shifts to pronunciation practice. The teacher reads each word and the students read after her. Some individual students are invited to read aloud five words each. The teacher*

*checks and corrects students' pronunciation sometimes. The students then learn verb phrases that go with clothes. After that they are asked to describe their classmates' clothes using the structure "He/She is wearing ...". The teacher also asks them to add colour adjectives before clothes nouns. This is the only time the students are involved in using the knowledge learnt for a task that is not taken from the book. The class continue with another pronunciation practice before they have a break.*

### **5.4.3 Commentaries**

The classroom observations showed that the lecturers desperately devoted their teaching to keeping up with the common teaching syllabuses and teaching and learning objectives set out for each class hour/session or unit of study. I found they followed rigidly the teaching schedules in terms of both the teaching content and scheduling. This was to help the learners complete textbook-based tasks and to cover all the knowledge areas that were needed for students' success in common end-of-unit exams. They largely complied with their institution's regulations on syllabus/programme development and delivery. Nonetheless, I noticed lecture objectives were not explicitly told to the students nor connected with wider contexts. The lecturing procedures typically revolved around presenting one or multiple language items followed by examples or prompting structures that were aimed at facilitating the learners' production of the language learnt. The teachers did not present or illustratively link target structures with their communicative purposes. The students were given little opportunity to practise using learned structures in more meaningful situations and to truly communicate in target language.

Another important finding from my analysis of observational data was that classroom interaction tended to be mostly teacher-whole class. The teachers talked to the whole class, teaching grammar and vocabulary content, or giving instructions on a task. This one-way lecturing model was favoured by teacher-centred classroom layout whereby all attention was paid to the teacher's stage at the front as students-audiences were seated facing it and backs to one another. Some learning tasks, e.g., word-picture matching, may to some extent lend themselves to pair/group work but they did not necessitate verbal discussions, particularly in target language. It was highly unlikely that students needed to use target language to communicate ideas and discuss with their peers in fulfilling those tasks. The aim of giving the learners more speaking opportunities with pair/group tasks was left out. Moreover, most of the time the learners did not have chance to mix with anyone else other than the one sitting next to their left or right, which may deteriorate their momentum for joining pair/group work. This was associated with fixed seating layout of the classroom that was furnished with heavy and hard-to-move desks, preventing rearrangement of seating. Despite never refusing classroom tasks students showed

little willingness to respond to the teachers' instructions. Many did not join pair/group work when being asked, preferring to work individually. They tended to either remain silent or chorally responded to teacher talk until the teachers specifically targeted them. They lacked confidence in verbally interacting with their peers and teachers.

The teachers spoke both mother tongue and English. Vietnamese was used for a range of purposes, including delivering grammar content or explaining English word meanings. Often teachers offered students translation of what they said. They did so for different reasons such as to help elicit responses and to help struggling students. I particularly noticed that a reading session was treated more like a translation class than a reading comprehension one. Translation was employed to increase lecture understandability. The comprehension questions and texts surrounding details related to the answers were translated. A student was even asked to translate his answer.

This chapter has looked into thinking and actions of managers, staff and students regarding quality concept and Junior's quality mechanisms in ECS education. Thanks to the emphasis on QAA and the determination in leadership of the VC, QAA measures had been embedded in the institutional processes of Junior, involving everyone in establishing institutional quality culture. Managers and administrative staff looked to QAA measures for procedural conformity and observance to regulations in programme design and delivery while lecturers needed more space to practise autonomy in the classroom. Students may not be well aware of QAA procedures, yet they had become part of QAA mechanisms besides being participants of classroom practices.



## Chapter 6 Case study 2: Fortress University

As with Junior University, I sketch out Fortress in an institutional pen-portrait based on data sources ranging from fieldnotes and interviews to internet-based and paper-based institutional documents. Following that broad view is a richer and more vivid picture of the institution drawn from pen-portraits of four fictionalised characters who represent viewpoints of senior managers, middle managers and staff in QAA and ETM, lecturers, and students. Those pen-portraits are constructed using interview and focus group data to portray how people, in certain roles and positions, think, feel, make sense, and interpret quality concept and quality mechanisms with particular respect to ECS education in Fortress University. I then give descriptions of three ECS class visits based on classroom observation data. Important issues are separately flagged under corresponding commentaries sections.

### 6.1 Fortress's pen-portrait

Fortress is among a few universities that founded the development of privatisation in VHE, more widely referred to as 'socialisation in education.' While totally relying on private sources of revenue for its entire operations, it remains subject to state governance, being accountable to MOET for academic issues, and exercising administrative and financial autonomy within a legal frame. The university is multi-disciplinary with a focus on equipping the learner with knowledge and skills relevant to human resources demand for national development. Good graduate employment statistics are emphasised in its never-ending endeavour for prestige-seeking to sustain its place in an increasingly competitive HE industry. Fortress has housed a foreign languages unit since its inception. Here an English Language Section is a key constituent in charge of the delivery of English language modules as disciplinary components of English Language Studies and as a compulsory element of other study courses (ECS). The English language teaching staff comprises around 20 lecturers, one-third being teachers of General English accountable for ECS provision to approximately 4,500 undergraduate students from the other academic units of the university.

The main campus of Fortress University is situated in a convenient location alongside a pretty large street with an array of buildings, shops, and amenities, and which connects three most densely populated districts of a centrally-governed city. A big name panel on the top of its main building next to the main entrance captures attention of passers-by. To get through the gate for the first few times I had to stop at an adjacent small building to seek access from a security officer and to get directions. The only way to get to the parking area at a far end across from the entrance is to cross the cemented ground in front of the main building. The whole university

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premises seem very busy almost all the time, particularly in the breaks between class hours as everything is happening in a modestly sized space inside or outside its only working building. The quietest moments come after the bell rings, signalling the start of a new class session. The other campus with adjoining student halls is not very conveniently accessed as it is located far down a narrow alley in a distant district from the main campus.

The prospectus highlights the institution's independent growth based on its own internal resources. That feature is in keeping with the state plan of privatisation of education and the socio-economic development. The university target is to become one of the nation's top universities close to the position of regional and international standard universities. Educational quality is seen as a core issue in its academic training activities. It is first and foremost represented in the adaptability and creativity in thinking of the learner after graduation. Special attention is also paid to the learners' social needs and employability. The institutional missions introduced in its student recruitment plan for 2018-2019 include to provide quality human resources, to prepare learners with capabilities to learn in diverse communities and practical skills that can help them adapt quickly to situations at the workplace.

According to the institution's report to MOET on its implementation of QAA processes and procedures up to 2016, it has conducted institutional self-assessment since 2008. The university follows the procedures and uses standards and criteria for institutional self-assessment provided by MOET. It completed two self-evaluation reports in 2009 and 2015 but has not been engaged in external evaluation. Regarding programme evaluation, it has not been involved in the process. The report shows the university's positive attitude toward the expenditure on QAA activities, although lack of confidence is indicated when it comes to staff and managers' concern and interest in the area and whether it can help enhance quality in teaching and learning. The institution develops its own student feedback forms (which have been changed three times since the first time the measure was carried out) to get feedback and comments on lecturers' performance, teaching content, and assessment methods on the completion of a range of subjects by the end of each semester. They build their student feedback forms based on Correspondence 2754 (MOET, 2010b) concerning instructions on collecting student feedback.

In line with MOET's regulations on programme development and implementation and transparency policy, Fortress University changed its curriculum to be outcomes-based in 2009-10 and since then has publicised outcomes required of the learners on its website annually. Statements of required ECS outcomes change in those reports and without consistency across programmes. It is the accomplishment of B certificate when the first report was produced in 2009. In 2011 report the outcome standards are stated to be 350 TOEIC or 4.0 IELTS and the learners are expected to understand and communicate well in English and to be capable of using English in

specific professional fields. Additionally, the outcome standards for the subject are included under hard skills in some programmes but under soft skills in some others. The ECS outcome standard is A2 (according to the CEFR) and presented under the commitment of learners' foreign language competency level in the institution's latest transparency report. However, in some separate programme descriptions (produced in the same year with the latest transparency report) publicly available on individual academic units' websites, the outcome standards are found to be A2-B1 and competently reading and writing documents in specific professional fields.

The same eighteen credits are allotted to ECS across fields of study and undergraduate programmes of only one type. A common learning outcome required of every ECS learner is standards-oriented, that is, the standards achievement needs further validation through an independent proficiency testing examination. The subject is taught two sessions per week in the first four terms of each course of study. Each session of face-to-face classroom instructions is made up of three credit hours which is equal to 150 minutes in total. The first unit of study is assigned with six credits whereas four credits are evenly distributed to the other three units of study. In the syllabuses I saw the expected learning outcomes presented as A1-0, A1-1 or A2-0, A2-1. The coursebooks are selected from outcomes-based books on the market. The learning assessment comprises attendance grading, formative assessment, and a final test which account for 5%, 25%, and 70% respectively. Lecturers can use a variety of methods of in-process evaluation to assess student learning. The format of the final tests is close to a standardised test format but test input is taken from the coursebooks. ECS is a compulsory subject and its successful completion is the condition for the learners to be awarded diplomas. The learning assessment results are components to be accumulated toward final GPAs.

## 6.2 Staff and managers' perspectives

### 6.2.1 Lam

Lam, in his late 60s, had experienced working in a public university before moving to a private HEI where he now holds an acting senior managing position. He was previously a lecturer and a middle manager.

*I'd been teaching and playing the role of a middle manager for many years in a top-ranking public university for economics. After my retirement I started to work for Fortress University taking the same positions before becoming a member of the Institution's Managing Board. From a lecturer's perspective, my concern is how to offer my students quality teaching. To make that possible, a teacher must master not just subject matter knowledge but practical experience in his or her field.*

*It's important to teach learners usable knowledge. Learning must be accompanied by practice. A learner should learn to be and learn to live before learning to do.*

*QAAUs have been established and operating in all HEIs. The establishment of such a unit in our institution is inevitable. From a manager's perspective, it's crucial to judge the effectiveness of a decision in ETM. QAAU is an important consultancy unit among other units that provide the Managing Board with consultancy in accordance with their functioning areas. It enhances management capacity of educational managers. It evaluates and measures the effectiveness of the decisions made by the Institution's Managing Board and that in operation of all units. All individual units in our institution have been carrying out self-assessment using MOET's assessment criteria. And we need to join external assessment soon. Quality accreditation or external assessment is not just a significant tool for state governance but a good means to raise the institution's prestige and ranking.*

*Activities in a HEI cover four areas: academic training, research, lecturers' continuous professional development, and management. Quality must be ensured in all those areas. But you cannot say what you do is good yourself; there must be an external unit that objectively assesses your doings. To do an assessment job, QAA staff must have experience in education and training and related issues. Only with such experience can they establish insightful/perceptive assessment criteria to be used in those areas in the institution based on MOET's or international sets of assessment criteria.*

*To assure the validity and objectivity in quality assessment, what you say about your quality must go with evidence. In research it's the number of research products; in teaching it's lesson plans, teaching schedules, teaching materials, and learning resources. An academic unit must produce and present syllabuses and teaching schedules, which are verified by ETMU. The academic unit must ensure their staff follow syllabuses and schedules. Moreover, a lecture needs students' acceptance and satisfaction. A teacher needs to fulfil their teaching hours, teach well, and continuously improve their professional knowledge and skills. They need good judgements from students for grade A or B. They would be in trouble if students gave them bad or too bad comments as that would mean they got grade C in lecturer assessment.*

*English is a popular language, hence a significant tool for a manager in the era of international integration. Different learning objectives apply to different programmes of study. Those undertaking English Language Studies need to know theories of linguistics in general and of English linguistics, to be competent in all language skills, or to be able to use English as a means of communication. Followers of the other study courses just need to be able to read materials in English related to their fields of study, they can study further after their graduation if they wish though. Alternatively, they can do a dual degree, one of which is in English Language Studies. For specific outcome standards you should ask the manager of the Foreign Languages Unit. They are*

*assigned to design, develop, and deliver standards-oriented academic programmes as required by MOET and specify what capabilities our graduates can attain and the equivalent outcome standards when they finish their studies.*

*We offer a student a place based on their high school grade transcripts or their scores in the National High School Exit Examinations in a group of subjects. Students' input levels may vary but they must reach the institution's required outcomes in all component modules/subjects to be eligible for graduation. It's no exception with ECS modules. We're responsible for providing them with standards-oriented educational programmes. We don't offer certification services. Students have to go to an authorised provider of certification services to take an examination for their English language proficiency certificates if they wish to prove their competences to, for instance, their employers. Students with high GPAs may not be able to achieve a target band score while those with lower GPAs can. There are two different things here: a HEI's training responsibilities and social recognition – or validation of students' learning outcomes.*

*To assure the achievement of training goals as publicly stated I'm concerned with three factors. The most decisive issue is teaching staff – their capabilities and their work ethics matter. We must have policies to attract and retain capable and devoted teachers. But teaching staff alone won't do. We need infrastructure that can serve teaching and learning purposes. And we must have financial sources to cover expenses for infrastructure and to pay lecturers. The three factors are dependent upon one another. Differing from public HEIs whose funding sources come from the state purse, as a private HEI we depend on student enrolments for our only source of revenue – tuition fees. The better educational quality and institution's prestige the more students we can attract. But students generally prefer public HEIs for their prestige and lower tuition fees and employers tend to recruit just graduates of public HEIs. So here comes the role of marketing – enhancing your reputation through ads, enrolment consultancy services or job fairs. Student attraction and retention policies are essential for stable and/or increasing tuition revenues which are needed for infrastructure expenditures and lecturers' payments.*

*Quality in any field of study should be judged looking at the learner. Quality assessment first of all means assessing quality in teaching and quality in ETM. Quality is the result of the effectiveness of those processes. It's student performance, which must be evaluated against publicly stated outcome standards. It's hard when it comes to assessing quality of educational products which are humans though. It's good if we can assure 100% of graduate employability and that they have good jobs, but that's hard. They may be classified as educational products of Type 1 or Type 2 but their usability/employability is questionable. The ultimate quality standard for educational products is the acceptance of the labour market. The only way to measure and classify student performance is grades – a measure commonly used around the world.*

### 6.2.2 Nguyen

Nguyen, in her 40s, is an enthusiastic, well-trained and experienced manager, faithful to Fortress University. Having done training courses in education management and QAA, she has a strong belief in the significance of QAA and emphasises leadership in doing QAA.

*I've been working in this QAAU since it was founded. I've had further training in QAA. I'm determined to pursue this career path even though I've had several promotion opportunities in other areas. Our unit's responsibilities currently involve testing and QAA. It was originally established for quality assessment - to monitor institutional practices and processes. It's an independent unit that is external to, and needed for, reviewing the training processes, hence assuring internal quality.*

*Lecturer assessment via student feedback surveys is a QAA method that can help reflect and improve quality in teaching in tune with student needs. It adds student perspectives/voices to lecturer assessment which has long been typically done via classroom observation or inspection – a way to look at lecturer performance from colleagues' or managers' perspectives. Nonetheless, there is subjectivity in student feedback. Students, due to their capacity, may be unable to understand and absorb a lecture delivered by an allegedly knowledgeable professor. Our duty is to collect and return feedback to managers of academic and other functional units. We cannot have any intervention. They are the ones that decide within their own units if and how they will respond to the feedback, and then report their actions/reactions, if any, to the Managing Board who, in turn, may or may not have further actions/reactions. Academic unit managers may send people out for classroom observation/inspection of "problematic" lecturers. If student feedback is accurate and reasonable, which means lecturer performance doesn't satisfy certain criteria, the lecturer's working contract will come to an end. But this happens more often to long-term contract lecturers than to short-term ones.*

*We've conducted institutional self-assessment twice and have been trying to tackle shortcomings as pointed out in our self-assessment reports. All units reviewed their practices and activities in groups each of which works on a group of assessment criteria developed by MOET. Based on their reports, we made an overall plan, setting a time for them to fix existing problems. If they couldn't meet the deadlines we just sent them a reminder to urge them without being able to do anything further as there is no sanction regarding such an issue. We feel powerless; there are criteria we can never satisfy. Currently we're practicing QAA at our pace as MOET only plays a role of macro management – they can't closely supervise all HEIs. We'll register for quality accreditation just when we feel ready for it. We need to be well-prepared for external assessment as it influences the institution's ranking and prestige. I've been a member of external review teams, and I believe the process will help direct an institution towards quality standards.*

*When I started, I found it hard to do QAA jobs and to get people to work in this area. We sent out people for QAA training but they refused to move to this unit after finishing their training; they just wanted to remain in their functional areas. We then recruited our own staff, some being taken from academic units, some just having done their university degree in education management. They have to do their jobs and gain hands-on experience. We regularly send our QAA staff to relevant QAA training courses or conferences organised by MOET to develop QAA capacity. In turn, we provide QAA training to those in charge of QAA duties in the other units. We promote QAA information across all units but we're not sure how they receive, respond to, or disseminate the information. We call out for engagement in QAA processes but people, including lecturers, haven't shown much care or interest. They don't think QAA is important or that QAA can make quality. If you ask them, they may say it's important but actually they aren't clear how important it is. Another big issue here is that the institution's leaders lack determination, support, and supervision with respect to QAA policy and practice. This is our weak point. We're just one among the other units that provide consultancy to the Managing Board, which means we're equal in power to them, so we cannot ask them to do this or that. If the institution's leaders are resolved on QAA issues, demanding that the other units collaborate with QAA unit, QAA practices will get improved.*

*Teaching staff is a core issue in assuring quality in our institution. As a non-public university with financial autonomy, we can pay to hire doctoral certificate holders or retired professors, the only problem is their age. But it's more of an issue when it comes to keeping younger lecturers when they've obtained a doctorate degree. They may leave when they're offered better opportunities. In ELT we've been determined to end the situation of "undergraduates teach undergraduates", all lecturers must have master's degrees. They have to undergo rigorous recruitment processes which includes pilot/micro teaching. Additionally, they all participate in training courses as MOET requires for standard satisfaction, which is in line with the Project 2020 and all of them have satisfied the requirement for English language proficiency. Nevertheless, we cannot compare to public universities in terms of reputation to retain qualified teaching staff although we're a prestigious private HEI. What we're concerned about is staff loyalty and commitment while what they want is job stability. The thing is our operation depends on tuition revenues, so there is a likelihood of staff reduction in case of a continuous decreasing trend in student enrolments. Besides human resources issues, other influencing and requisite factors for quality are infrastructure and finance; we can't do anything without money.*

*We haven't done any programme evaluation. We differ from public universities in labour division – each unit is assigned with a complete work package, so each takes responsibility for a whole functional area. Of course, there's certain collaboration between us. The ETMU used to be in charge of a package load of functions, including managing academic programmes and testing and assessment. Its current responsibilities are limited to managing procedures for programme*

*development and delivery. Our institution established the Inspectorate to inspect institutional processes and activities. Similarly, the institution makes quality commitment to society but academic units are accountable to the institution for programme development and delivery – they're the one that turns commitment into reality. They're just administratively managed at a macro level. They produce outcomes-based programmes, stating the institution's commitment of outcome standards – the threshold level, or more exactly an equivalent to a standard that the learners will reach by the time they will have completed the assigned number of credits or units of study. We don't ask our students to submit English language proficiency certificates. Academic units used to be responsible for both training and testing and assessment. Recently we've taken testing and assessment responsibilities. Lecturers now must design and mark tests, following the procedures we have established, and we organise all examination services.*

*Quality means satisfying pre-defined targets. It concerns three processes – input, process, and outcome. Students should be placed in classes to study English at a level that suits them best. ECS programmes should be developed and delivered relevant to students' input levels so that they can reach a predetermined outcome. What's significant is students learn to be able to use subject knowledge gained rather than learning just to satisfy a required outcome for graduation.*

*Undergraduates should be self-conscious in their learning. We have our own right to set a minimum ECS outcome standard and we've made several changes since we established the first one so that it fits our students' input level. The reason was around 70% of our students couldn't reach an input threshold for the feasibility of pre-set outcome attainment when we conducted an input classification examination a couple of years ago. We even assigned an additional unit of study to ECS to increase that possibility but it didn't work. Meanwhile, raising course duration means going the opposite direction to public policy. Therefore, the original pre-set outcome was lowered to a minimum threshold in MOET's range of standards, then an equivalent to that minimum threshold. We no longer do any input classification as we did.*

*Actually, our unit has nothing to do with output standardisation. We don't conduct any process to assure outcome standards. Everything lies with ETMU and Foreign Languages Unit. I think it would be best to require students for submission of an official English language proficiency certificate, like TOEIC or IELTS, which is granted by an international authorised organisation. But there is nothing like that in our institution. ECS assessment results are accumulated towards final GPAs. English is a compulsory but subsidiary subject, and it's not an emphasis in a multidisciplinary university like us. Currently, student performance is assessed using internal tests which involve all language skills. The completion of four units of study – 18 credits is assumed to be equivalent to a threshold level achievement. But assumed standards are different than validated standards. In reality many students cannot achieve a true standard as assumed.*

### 6.2.3 Thuong

Thuong is a middle-aged dedicated, caring, and veteran lecturer and manager who has been working in Fortress University for more than fifteen years. She is proud to be a part of the establishment.

*I'd done a couple of jobs before becoming an English language lecturer in Fortress University since its early days. Were it not for my love of teaching and students I'd have quit it as it is an arduous but not highly paid job. Teacher quality is a key factor in our institution's quality mechanisms for English language education. Student recruitment must be based on training capacity which is shown in the number of qualified teachers. I believe I went through the most rigorous and thorough recruitment processes to be its lecturer. The processes didn't just involve qualifications but teaching skills and English language competency of potential candidates. Apart from pilot/micro teaching I had to do a short training course together with the other candidates, then sitting an IELTS-like exam designed and organised by native English teachers who were hired by Fortress University. Our main lecturer resources used to be those who had done full-time courses in English Language Studies or English Language Teacher Education in public universities. Now we've got lecturers who undertook our English Language Studies programmes. In response to MOET's Project 2020 regarding the standardisation of teacher English language competency levels, all of our English language lecturers had to prove our competency levels with a required band score which could be results of an international or local standardised exam organised by an authorised body. As lecturers, we should expect to once in a while experience English language competency re-evaluation as such since we must never stop improving our professional skills and subject matter knowledge. Some may feel stressed, but if they're self-confident in their capacity and they love the teaching job they must get over it.*

*I tend to keep to my own duties and I don't care much about management issues. As far as I know, QAAU conducts lecturer assessment via student feedback surveys. I think the measure is quite good as students can raise their voices. We receive feedback privately, I don't care about the results though. In case students make recommendations for changes to a lecturer, our line manager may have a private talk with that lecturer in a constructive manner. That measure is better than classroom observation as the pressure of being observed influences both the lecturer and learners' performance and behaviours. I haven't heard or seen any classroom observation recently in our unit. We're not forced to fulfil tasks like producing a quantity of research products although they could be evidence of the institution's research capacity – a factor influencing our student enrolment quotas. But I'm aware how significant it is to have innovative teaching methods or strategies to motivate student learning. What we do on a regular basis is design interactive tasks, interesting lessons, and grade student participation to increase student involvement. Also,*

*we discuss pedagogical issues, share our teaching experience or understandings of students' characteristics and capabilities with our colleagues. Such formal and informal talks help us understand our students and their capabilities and needs and review what we've been doing and see if that's effective and appropriate. Whatever adaptation we make, we do it for our students' benefit.*

*We've got quite flexible working hours. Apart from participating in staff meetings/briefings for discussion over teaching/testing issues, we only come in when we have class hours. Previously we did everything within our own unit under the inspection and monitoring of ETMU, from teaching, designing and marking tests, to organising exams. But recently the inspection of all the procedures related to testing and assessment have been set apart from ETMU's functions and handed down to the QAAU. There's been more rigour in testing issues from then on. Nonetheless, it's always been just bureaucracies, or administrative management. ETMU establishes procedures for programme development and implementation. QAAU is responsible for procedures in testing and assessment. The Inspectorate check our teaching hours and teaching schedules. We and the other academic units must follow those procedures. But they cannot make any intervention with respect to our subject matter knowledge or pedagogical issues. They don't have knowledge and skills in our field for intervention as such.*

*Our students aren't asked to achieve a score on an official standardised test. But we do everything we can to get our students prepared for such an exam in case our students may wish to take it, at least in terms of self-confidence in testing skills and familiarity with test design. At the beginning of each semester all teaching schedules must be submitted to the unit's manager for review and approval. They will then go to the ETMU for further review, approval and inspection. We have to ensure test validity and match between testing and teaching content. We have to teach following approved detailed syllabuses, getting the learners familiarised with test format and testing skills during their learning process. We design and cross-check tests in pair/group. Students are the best measuring tool for educational quality. They make their own evaluation, giving feedback and comments on our teaching and testing and assessment. Can we claim our quality if our students cannot earn a good job?*

*Largely we conform to all public rules and regulations in education and training in a way that best suits our institutional context. Our student recruitment is based on MOET's increasingly flexible regulations which means growing accessibility and a bigger gap in students' input levels.*

*Meanwhile, outcome control is imposed. Therefore, our institution makes our own decision on outcome standards for our students and the criteria for standards achievement. They have to finish all compulsory curricular components, get passes for all of them, but they have to make sure they have final GPAs that satisfy requirements for graduation. If students can get passes in all*

*units of study assigned to ECS, they will have achieved an equivalent standard of A2. That standard and standard recognition was brought forward after several proposals and changes. I think that assessment method in ECS is not challenging enough for students. If an official and real standard is applied, that would mean more work and effort required for both lecturers and students. But that would also mean students are more motivated to study for better learning outcomes.*

*What's significant in quality teaching is whether students gain certain subject matter knowledge. But there is an emotional aspect. And it's a two-way process – both the teacher and the learner feel and do. There could be stressful moments when students feel it's hard to understand a lecture and the lecturers need to put more effort to raise the understand-ability of their lecture. Many people may talk about assessment results when it comes to educational quality. But learning outcomes are far from fully reflecting a person's capabilities. At HE level, the achievement of learning outcomes doesn't always lead to career success as that depends on interpersonal skills, job skills in real situations, and the ability to learn further at the workplace. Assuring quality means assuring the achievement of the training objectives as depicted in programme descriptions. But it doesn't mean conforming to the syllabuses mechanically. Instead, the teacher should think about students' qualities and needs. They should not simply transfer knowledge but be diligent in their teaching, showing care to their students and inspiring them. Alternatively, the students could learn from sources like the internet. Besides assisting the learner in their cognitive development, the lecturer should help them to develop their manner and social behaviours. It's important that students can use what they've learnt in real life – for social communication, or to use English in specific professional fields. I understand that students may not have chances to use English in their work but they may use personal and/or thinking skills that they've developed during English language lessons. Achieving a pass or a high score alone doesn't suffice, students should learn to do and learn to be as well.*

*Educational quality requires efforts from both sides – the teacher and the learner. Teaching well doesn't necessarily lead to good learning. Learning hard doesn't always result in good learning achievements. Learners' capabilities matter. Learners' motivation and autonomy matter. My students may have chosen to study in Fortress because they'd failed to get a place in another university, or their parents made the choice for them, or they didn't know what else to do while all their friends were doing university courses. Those students do lack motivation. We don't expect to change them completely, but if we can help them change themselves a bit that already means certain success. Anyway, different techniques should be applied to different classes to motivate students. Applying a real outcome standard could be a good strategy.*

#### 6.2.4 Commentaries

Under MOET's directives, Fortress reconfigured its administrative apparatus to feature a QAAU in its organisational structure for monitoring and evaluating institutional activities, including the Managing Board's decision-making and the training processes. However, I noticed its QAAU was not granted with sufficient power for this. There was a lack of support and determination from senior managers with respect to QAA implementation. The QAAU instructed and inspected QAA processes and procedures within the institution which were under no further inspection nor assistance from higher level of management. There was little mechanism for collaboration between QAAU and the other institutional units or for integration of QAA processes into the remaining processes. Institutional units may follow QAAU's guidance to make self-evaluation of the processes they were accountable to, yet they were far from fully responding to self-evaluation reports. They carried out QAA tasks relevant to their functions to their own pace without showing much care or belief toward such duties, their deadlines, and potential positive impact of QAA processes on the other institutional activities. Similarly, the QAAU collected and returned feedback to academic unit managers, yet it may not interfere further in disciplines' functional areas. It was the authority of those units to decide over their actions and responses with respect to teachers' classroom performance, assessment methods and content. Moreover, no mechanism had been founded for a connection between QAA practices and programme development and delivery. The QAAU was not empowered to evaluate academic programmes – to monitor a match between teaching, assessment and learning outcomes. Quality in academic training was believed to result from programme management, development, and delivery for which ETMU and academic units were primarily responsible. The QAAU was barred from intervening in both specialist and QAA responsibilities of the other units as it was a functional unit equal in power to the other ones under the Managing Board, each of which was specialised in and responsible for a complete package of duties. No staff other than English language lecturers had the subject matter knowledge to interfere their professional field.

Also, I found that staff and managers of the institution were perturbed by prejudice against private HEIs concerning their quality in academic training and graduates' capabilities and qualities. Fortress staff spoke of lack of public trust in the products of private education providers. This was exemplified in the story shared by a middle manager (Quyet-F-A) about how a professional body was surprised by their students' performance at an international educational event. Educational quality was a core issue in their competition against other HEIs, especially public HEIs for growth, or at least, stability since Fortress - a private HEI - substantially depended on student enrolments for financial resources that were essentially required for its operation.

Fortress relied on teaching staff for the production of capable and skillful graduates. Training capacity also determined whether a HEI was allowed for student recruitment which was required by MOET to be shown through numerical data such as the number of qualified academic staff. However, staffing – particularly aging workforce was an issue of concern of Fortress University. It was challenging for the institution to attract and retain highly qualified young academics; it was not as appealing to work for a private institution as to be staff of a public HEI.

Being a private HEI, Fortress was accountable to MOET for academic issues. The institution had developed and implemented outcomes-based academic programmes as required by MOET, defining its own ECS outcome standards and the criteria for standards attainment. Despite inconsistency ECS learning outcomes as expressed in institutional documents and among the research participants, in localising public policy on ECS outcome standardisation, the university brought forward the so-called “standard equivalent” – standards were accomplished once all training procedures set up for outcomes-based programmes were complied with. Accordingly, lecturers must follow teaching schedules and syllabuses that had been reviewed and approved by their subject heads, line managers and the ETMU. Tests were designed based on a standardised English language proficiency test format with certain adaptations, considering students’ competency levels. Ensuring a match between teaching and testing meant test input being coursebook and teaching content.

A further noticeable finding in my analysis of interviews with the research participants at Fortress University was a differentiation between training responsibilities of an educational establishment and the function of validating learning outcomes of exam and certification providers. Another distinction was related to who should define the value of educational products: an education provider provided ECS knowledge and skills oriented towards institutionally predefined outcomes, yet professional bodies assessed its graduates’ English competences. A realistic and challenging pre-set outcome could be a source of motivation to the learners, particularly those who did not have clear learning objectives or future plans. The learners may have little opportunity for English language use after completing ECS modules/in their future jobs, yet English lectures may contribute to learners’ personal development that was important for their career success such as self-confidence, inter-personal skills through interactive and group tasks.

### **6.3 Students’ perspectives**

#### **6.3.1 Bao**

Bao is a 20 year old enthusiastic and sociable student; he regularly joins community activities. While doing his diploma in banking he has a part-time job with a travel company. He is aware of

the importance of English for better job opportunities and wishes to speak English fluently but he is now too busy to have time for it.

*In Fortress University, English is a compulsory but subsidiary subject – passes in all ECS units of study are enough to be eligible for graduation while more emphasis is put on specialist subjects. It's never been challenging for me to get a pass in ECS although I'd rarely learnt listening or speaking skills before I started my university programme. Both mid-terms and finals involve all language skills, but they're internally designed tests and I just have to get a 4 out of 10 or 1.0 out of 4.0 credit-based. But maybe it's not easy for those without foundational knowledge of English or interest in the subject.*

*ECS at HE level in some regard offers me nothing new as it is not a continuity of what I learnt before but rather, a repetition. I can't recall how many times at each education level I had to learn the same structures like introducing yourself, present simple/continuous tenses. There are certain differences though. I am exposed more to spoken English in listening and speaking sessions. I have opportunities to use English in the classroom in pair/group and with the teacher. Our participation is graded as a way to raise our motivation and interest. Our teachers always try to get everyone to speak so that they can satisfy the learning outcome requirements through formative assessments in the learning process. That way, our teachers can facilitate both ECS learning and learning assessments. They wouldn't fail us if we're well-engaged in learning in the classroom. Plus, interacting in the classroom develops our communication skills and makes us feel confident speaking in front of other people.*

*ECS learning goals vary among us. Some just want to get all passes. Some aim at speaking English fluently and getting a target IELTS score of, say, 6.0 as they have relatives and friends in a foreign country or that can help them earn a part-time teaching job. We're not forced to be competent or fluent users of English. If we were required to achieve a band score in an international English language proficiency examination, our attitude would change. We do need a more clearly defined and challenging learning goal. Another better solution is to set different outcomes to differentiate so some can graduate without concerning about learning English beyond a pass if that's what they want while others can be motivated to learn English to improve their competences and for nicer qualification categories as well. Currently, we have to self-manage our learning. I'm now doing a part-time job with a travel agent, I know how important English is. If you are good at English, you can work with international visitors instead of just domestic ones, which also means better pay. So, I have plan of doing a practical English course with English language homestay tutors that's focused on communication skills through socialisation but I haven't got time for it yet. Our seniors previously did one study unit of ESP through which they could be equipped with vocabulary in specific professional fields. But it was cut off the curriculum. We're now just doing general English.*

*If you can master basic communicative English, then you can learn ESP yourself, which is also good for getting a well-paid job.*

*Learning materials play a role in improving English but the materials that you want may not fit your classmates' competency levels and interest. That's a hurdle when you study with the ones who don't have the same expectations as you. It would be good if we can have some field trips to mingle with people and to practise using English. Learning English with a native teacher may make us feel more interested as we can learn standard English accents. But we don't have those things in our institution. They cost a lot of money. Plus, teaching skills are significant for delivering an effective lesson, particularly if you want knowledge-led lessons - to learn grammar and structures, or learn to get a target band score in a standardised exam. You may need a teacher with good teaching strategies to get you involved in multiple procedures or formula for testing skills – more formal instructions are involved. But if all you want is skills-led lessons, or to be able to use English to communicate in social situations, delivery skills are not as much important as having exposure to authentic English and real situations to listen and respond to what the opposite person says, so instructions are given in a more informal way. Whatever way you learn, the person that teaches you should meet minimum requirements. Teaching skills can be learnt in one or two months anyway. My teachers have the skills and enthusiasm to engage us but there is no projector in the classroom so they print out pictures as visual aids. They cope well with shortages in facilities, but we often speak Vietnamese instead of English in discussion tasks.*

*We can assess our lecturers' classroom performance but not everyone does those feedback surveys. Plus, some may give random ticks without even reading the feedback forms, leaving blank the space for additional comments. They may be concerned about anonymity issues as they have to log on the system using their student accounts to give their feedback. They also know that their teachers would be criticised in case of negative feedback. Whether we give critical feedback on lecturer performance or not, we could see no change. In some cases, they can't change, like it's nearly impossible to ask our teachers to change their accents. In other cases, they don't do anything to change. They don't respond to our feedback. But they get nothing other than reminders or warnings. There is no severe sanction to push changes. I heard about someone responsible for gathering student feedback but I'm not sure if there is a unit accountable for quality issues. I don't think many people know about it.*

*We may talk a lot about quality in English language education at HE level but it's not easy to define it. To my thinking it would be more motivating to learn practical English than to learn academic English. Every learner has their learning styles and personal needs. There should be a way to inspire them to learn. And a good way, I think, is connecting what a learner learns with their learning styles and personal needs.*

*A quality teaching hour should be the one that's inspiring and interesting. It requires efforts and preparation from both the teacher and the learner. What's important is the knowledge gained and maintained – this is influenced strongly by how everyone feels in the classroom. A classroom environment should be comforting. The teacher should be open and approachable, and the learners should show their desire to learn. Only then can we learn more productively. If the learners just want to learn for a pass, the teacher may design and deliver a lecture that fits that attitude to learning. It would be better if we could learn each topic in more depth and I'd prefer to learn language skills separately, like listening and speaking in two periods, writing and reading the other two, rather than learning integrated skills – all in one period as that feels like learning too little. But ECS programmes are not designed to be implemented that way. Our institution is multi-disciplinary, so the focuses differ between fields of study. We follow programmes that are not English Language Studies, so we're provided with just a basic English programme. It's not adequate in case someone wants to communicate in English with foreigners fluently and in confidence. That person needs to learn English beyond our institution's ECS programmes. Our teachers are very patient in getting us to talk and become more confident. But that's still not enough to communicate in real life situations. That's why some get to tourism destinations to talk to Westerners. Our institution's English club may be a good place to go to for informally practising English with our peers. Honestly, that's what I heard from my friends, I never joined those activities though.*

### **6.3.2 Commentaries**

As shown in the student talk, Fortress did not place as much emphasis on ECS learning as specialist subjects learning. ECS was a compulsory yet subsidiary subject. The minimum required ECS learning outcomes were inadequately challenging and the students believed they could almost satisfy the requirements only with grades for learning participation. Uncertainty towards English language proficiency as a job requirement for the graduates was also indicated in the inconsistency in statements of ECS learning outcomes as presented in the institutional documents. This may influence students' attitude and motivation in ECS learning in that they may choose to focus on specialist subjects for increased employability rather than learn English.

I found the students had various learning goals and needs which were not limited to just getting ECS minimum outcomes while ECS modules were restrictedly aimed at helping them build confidence in using English in the classroom as there was little opportunity for interactive situations outside the classroom. They may want to earn a high band score in an international English language proficiency examination or to learn English for social communication, but these would always be just intentional goals unless there was an adequate realistic force. They may be

worried about demanding learning outcomes, yet they needed sufficiently challenging outcome standards to be well motivated to learn English for better learning achievements. Also, they wanted a learning process that was well connected with their learning needs and learning styles. More importantly, they needed a class that was motivating, inspiring, and promoting learning with the collaboration between students and teachers.

Fortress students were concerned about variation in the learners' background of English language learning, and its influence on ECS teaching and learning. A mixed level class could mean support and assistance in English learning from more competent students given to less competent ones, yet the learning materials and classroom content may not equally meet learner needs while repeating and unchallenging lectures were demotivating.

Also, I noticed the student participants showed little interest in student feedback survey which they saw as having little impact. They did not see it as an effective QA measure that could help their voices be heard and responded for improvement in ECS teaching and learning. Nevertheless, there was a differentiation between what may not change and no change. They believed if the latter was the case the lecturers would change only when severe punishments were applied, which had not happened yet in their institution.

## 6.4 Class visits

### 6.4.1 Chieu-F-L's class

*I'm walking down the corridor which is fairly dark, passing rows of chairs next to the lift doors. After the bell rings I see Chieu coming out of the classroom and she takes me to her class. It is a small room at one end of the third floor of the main building of the university. It has natural light from outside and all the lights are on. The room is set up to fit around 30 students. The teacher desk and a conventional chalkboard are opposite the entrance. The only electronic device is a fairly new CD player on the teacher desk, the use of which requires registration with the classroom coordinators. The two ceiling fans are spinning steadily to keep it cool inside. Desks and seats which are fixed together seem to have been used for quite a long time but still in good condition. Student are seated in rows on two sides of the aisle in the middle, all looking to the teacher desk in the front. Nineteen of them are present. Both the teacher and students are using black and white copies of the coursebook.*

*The class is in the middle of a vocabulary section in the elementary-level coursebook learning about verb phrases that describe everyday activities. After announcing that the class will be engaged in a mini word game, the teacher rearranges student seating so that everyone will be sitting next to a classmate. Students on each side are asked to form one group to compete against*

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*the other in the production of verb phrases that can be used to describe daily activities. The preparation time is two minutes during which students in each group work in pair to make their lists of verb phrases. They then take turn in teams to get to the board, writing down one phrase each time. Once finished a student passes on the chalk to the next person. No verbal exchange is involved. It is hard for students seated far from the aisle column to get out of their desks to the board as there is no space between rows of desks. By the time the students are done with making lists of verb phrases the teacher checks them out with the whole class.*

*The teacher then tells the class to open a page in the coursebook for another vocabulary practice on the same topic. It is a word-picture matching exercise. Students are asked to fulfil the task in pairs which belong to the same two groups in the mini game that they have been involved. The teacher says the group with the first pair of students to get the matching task done correctly will be given a stamp. Some students turn to a partner next to them to do the task, some remain on their own. When they have finished the task, they ask their teacher to get to their desks, and check if they have all correct matches, which will be rewarded with a stamp onto the first page of their coursebook. Having done some individual checks, she then checks the answers to the activity with the whole class. Individual students are addressed to read aloud each verb phrase in a complete sentence of which the subject is third person pronouns. The teacher reminds students of the stamping rule which says a stamp will be awarded to anyone who voluntarily responds to teacher talk three times. The reminder effectively results in hand-raising of some students to read sentences that contain the verb phrases in the matching task. The teacher corrects students' errors in singular-formed verb use.*

*The teacher uses L1 as the main medium of instruction. She sometimes gives short statements of instruction/command like "stand up," "open your book, page ..." When she says longer sentences like "write a short paragraph to describe your daily activities," she translates them into L1 with additional details.*

*The class moves on with a listening task for pronunciation practice. They have to listen and write five short sentences with linking sounds. The teacher uses the stamp reward to encourage students to catch sentences in the first or second attempt. She writes down some (in)complete sentences on the board and read them to demonstrate what linking sounds are before playing the audio recorder. For the first time she plays five sentences continuously and asks if anyone can get anything. Some say no and the others remain silent. Hence, the teacher plays the CD track again, this time sentence by sentence, three to five times. She has problems stopping and starting at a point she wishes on the CD soundtrack. Only one or two students raise their hands to voluntarily write on the board what they hear from the recorder while the rest do not have a response. She encourages the others to give a try by telling them to be courageous and that it will be fine to give*

answers that might be incorrect. Consequently, she gets a couple more students in the first two rows raise their hands to have a go. The teacher puts stamps on to the books of the students who have caught a complete sentence in the listening/pronunciation task.

The next classroom activity is reading an article. By the time the teacher has just read and translated the instructions into L1 the bell rings, so she stops and assigns homework to the students.

#### 6.4.2 Hoai-F-L's class

Hoai's class is at the other end of the same floor as Chieu's. The classroom facilities and seating arrangement are similar. Fifteen students are present. This class is doing the third unit of study of ECS.

The topic of the lesson is fashion and shopping and ten nouns of clothes are written on the board. Before getting into the main content of the lecture – a reading session, the teacher starts with lead-in activities. She puts several questions related to the topic of the day to the whole class, for example, "Are you fashionable?" She also asks closed/alternative questions and makes an exemplar sentence "I like wearing ..." with a list of clothes items to remind students of clothes-related nouns that they have learnt and then gets back to an open-ended question "what do you like wearing?" Plus, she mentions the situations such as going to a party and asks about the type of clothes that should be appropriate for each event. The students do not respond until they get addressed.

The topic of lead-in questions then shifts to shopping. The teacher continues to administer questions to the whole class, waits for a moment before calling individual students. She uses different questioning strategies to elicit students' responses. She asks a yes/no question to get an affirmative answer then changes to open-ended/alternative questions for content word answers. In some situations, the students at which the teacher's questions are directed do not understand the meaning of an expression, e.g. "do the shopping" they ask her for an explanation before proceeding with their answers.

The teacher mainly uses English to deliver her lecture, but she makes use of translation on several occasions as the class seem to be confused and unable to catch up with what she is saying. She asks the class to turn to reading tasks. She reads the title of the reading passage and the instructions of the task. She also mentions some local fashion designers based on similar questions in the coursebook, but the students appear to be ignorant of people in the fashion industry. Nevertheless, the teacher continues to look at the lead-in questions in the book and read them

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*aloud without stopping for a response. She reads and answers them herself. Right after that, she asks individual students to read aloud the list of statements to be filled in the gaps in the passage.*

*The teacher moves to explaining new words, first in English or by referring to similar things in local settings like clothes shops in Vietnam, which is then followed by L1 equivalents. Not leaving time for the students to read the passage on their own, the teacher reads aloud the introductory paragraph and the first one of the passages. When it gets to a gap she asks for a statement from the list to fill it out but no student responds. She then translates a few sentences before the gap and asks for the answer again. A student says a letter that represents a statement but pronounces it wrongly, so she corrects her pronunciation before confirming the answer. She gives a long explanation in English to that answer but translates into L1 just one last word of that explanation. She then asks individual students to read aloud the passage along with fulfilling the gap-filling task. When a student gives a correct answer she just says “okay” without further explanation and moves on. When a student gives an answer that is not correct the teacher just says “no, not, not related to” and directs the class to the correct answer which she then translates into L1 as an explanation to the answer. The teacher sometimes corrects students’ pronunciation when they are reading aloud the passage.*

*The reading session continues that way wherein the students read aloud the passage and give answers whereas the teacher explains some new words and the answers by translating some sentences around the gaps and some of the statements used to fill in the gaps. At some point, she asks some follow-up questions after a gap has been filled out.*

*The class stops to have a short break when the bell rings.*

### 6.4.3 Thuy-F-L’s class

*Thuy’s class of 22 students is just opposite Hoai’s. There is no difference in the classroom setting and the class is in the same stage of ECS learning as Hoai’s class.*

*On the board written a bulleted list of the content that the class have gone about. It says vocabulary was the focus of the previous period(s) and the component items include -ed/-ing adjectives and indefinite articles and pronouns “some, any, no, somebody, nobody, something, nothing.” The teacher starts by introducing the topic of the current speaking session – weekend – which is coursebook-based without referring to the location of the section in the book. During this session, neither the teacher nor the students look at the books or pick them up at any time. Both English and L1 are used for lecture delivery.*

*The lecturer gives instructions to the whole class on the speaking tasks and how they should work and communicate to complete the tasks. She then divides the class into three groups, each of*

*which comprises 5-8 students seated in 2-3 rows. The first task is to produce lists of weekend activities in groups. Due to immovable desks, the students have to move around or those in the front rows have to turn around to interact with those in the back rows. Students in all groups speak L1 loudly in group discussions (e.g., “tập thể dục, đi picnic, ngủ dậy muộn, chơi video game, có phải nói mình làm gì không?”). They even respond in L1 when the teacher talks with their group. Basically, the first group discussion task is the time when the students prepare English translations of the verb phrases that can be used to talk about weekend activities.*

*A member of each group then is asked to get to the board and write down their lists of verb phrases within two minutes. During that time, the teacher moves around to ask group members about the most relaxing/favourite activities they can do on Friday/Saturday/Sunday. A student asks the teacher what the question means, so she translates it into L1. Students’ responses are phrases starting with bare infinitives or gerunds. The teacher then gets back to the board and checks the verb phrase lists with the whole class.*

*Now comes the main speaking task which is “chatting time” – the students are asked to discuss in group what they did last weekend. The teacher requires that group members take turn to talk non-stop within their groups in three minutes. She also reminds the students of using verbs in past tense. She adds that if one person in a group will not talk the group will be fined. She moves around to give the instructions to each group. With some groups, she translates the instructions into L1. With a bigger group of 8 students, she asks if they would like to work as one group or in two groups. Although the students in that group say one she decides that that group will be divided into two after having a look around probably to count the group members. L1 is spoken around the classroom.*

*The teacher moves around to monitor group work. When the time is up for group task, she tells the students to stop it. She then reminds the class of using past tense instead of bare infinitives while talking about last weekend activities. She asks the class to read after her past tense forms of the verbs and verb phrases listed on the board.*

*It is then time for presenting group work. She moves around to listen to each group member talking about the given topic. A student speaks softly, so she asks him to speak louder. Some groups continue with discussion, some just do nothing while one group are giving talks to their teacher. The first group finish their talks with three pauses for which they have to pay a tiny amount of money. The procedures go on. To transfer a speaking turn to the next person, some students simply stop or use gestures, some say “and you,” “how about you?” In a group, some students even give comments on their members’ weekend activities like “you should do more exercises in this weekend and take time to relax,” – it goes along more like a conversation between group members than just separate turn-taking (like what happens in the other groups). In*

*another group, a leader puts questions toward her group members, for example, “did you do anything in the house on Saturday morning?” or “did you work or study at all?” or “what activity did you find most relaxed on Saturday?” and the group members take turn to answer her questions.*

*When all the groups have given talks, the teacher says that she will grade group work and that she will give extra marks for a group that she thinks has given the best presentation. To summarise the lesson, she asks the class to say a sentence beginning with “I” and using past tense verbs. The bell rings signalling the break time, but she still goes ahead, giving an example before individual students take turn to say their sentences. To end the teaching hour, she assigns homework in the coursebook to the class, which she speaks in English first followed by a translation.*

#### **6.4.4 Commentaries**

I observed that students’ English language competency levels varied within a class and across classes at the same stage of ECS learning. This necessitated different classroom techniques to address diverse learning needs and monitor student participation – student talk could be dominated by more capable students. Since the learners were not obliged to surpass a minimum required outcome while their capacity and interest in English language varied, students’ learning engagement was a matter of great concern to the teacher. To improve student involvement, the teachers may use the institutional policy, grading student participation and using formative assessment, which accounted for 5% and 25% respectively of student assessment, during the teaching and learning process. Additionally, they made use of different classroom strategies such as questioning techniques, using games, or diversifying interaction/task types.

However, I noticed the lecturers held different views on student engagement. It was understood as improving learners’ motivation, interest, and enthusiasm which was aimed at increasing their response to teacher talk or compliance with teacher’s rules and directions in two of the three classes – Chieu’s and Hoai’s. They made every endeavour, which was effective in some cases but not in others, to motivate and encourage student involvement. Pair/group work or games may be utilised but did not result in verbal interaction between pairs or group members. Moreover, the students did not always show enthusiasm in responding to teacher talk, particularly when it was questions put to a whole class. The teacher needed to address individual students or use stamps as extrinsic rewards for student participation. Overall, the classroom was characterised by teacher-whole class and teacher-individual student interaction types. The teachers played an active and dominating role in the classroom who initiated talks while the student involvement meant individual responses to teacher instructions.

Meanwhile, in the other class – Thuy's, the lecturer played the role of a facilitator and moderator. Verbal exchanges occurred not only between teacher and students but between students. The students were offered the opportunity to use language knowledge learned in a reality-like situation that their teacher named "chatting time." To make it work better, the teacher introduced the topic in the coursebook but without asking the students to look at it and guided the students to recall the language required for group discussions. She just taught key language knowledge that she found needed for students' fulfilment of the assigned tasks while moving around to monitor group work. She also made sure for the participation of every student in group tasks by imposing tiny fines on any whole groups for their members' failure to talk. Consequently, the students were actively involved and collaborative in doing group tasks.

No matter what type of classroom interaction a teacher favoured, I saw that the classroom settings did not seem to support a student-centred approach. The teacher's stage was at the front, catching the class's attention while seating was fixed and desks being too heavy to be rearranged for activities that involved student-student interaction. The learners had to move around, which was hard due to little space between rows of seats, or turn around to form groups and talk to their peers in discomforting positions.

Although the teachers carried out the lecture schedules with flexibility, the teaching content in the three classes observed was largely coursebook-based, which was assumed to prepare for students' success in ECS finals. As there was no rule concerning language use in the classroom, the lecturers used both mother tongue and English in lecture delivery. English instructions may be shorter and simpler or longer and more complex probably depending on the learners' capacity, but I noticed that the teachers always translated their sayings. The translation was used as a way to help the learners understand and follow what the lecturers wanted their students to do, as was the case when they assigned homework to the class or when they saw a student's confusion over a repeatedly asked question that contained a possibly new but taught word, e.g. "fashionable." In a reading session, instead of teaching reading techniques and thinking skills, the teacher employed translation as an assisting tool to boost students' understanding of a text. The reading session, hence, was turned into a session for translation, vocabulary, and pronunciation practice wherein the students did not even have the chance to read the text for comprehension.

To summarise, in this chapter I have offered a pen-portrait of Fortress University, looking from different angles and perspectives the quality concept and quality issues as emerged from the institutional circumstances. Conforming to state statutes Fortress had been in the process of improving its QAA capacity and establishing a connection between QAA and educational processes. There had been changes in its organisational structures and institutional processes to accommodate newly-developed QAA mechanisms, yet time was needed to see more positive

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changes in thinking and actions regarding such mechanisms of the senior manager, QAA managers and staff, ELT teachers and managers, and students.

## Chapter 7 Discussion of findings

In this chapter I discuss the most significant findings in relation to answering the research questions. I separately address the question concerning notions of quality and the one regarding assumptions about motives and impact of quality measures in ELTL in VHE public and private sectors under two main discussion points. Nonetheless, the discussion of perceptions of quality (processes) is linked to quality measures and their rationales/influences and vice versa. This is to show the association between thinking and understanding of quality and actions intended for perceived quality which may (or may not) bring about expected results. More importantly, I look into understandings and assumptions of the quality concept and quality mechanisms at three levels - national, institutional, and individual, from managerial, administrative, and pedagogical perspectives. In this way, I expect to demonstrate the complexity, multi-dimension, multi-layer of the quality concept and understandings of quality (measures) as well.

### 7.1 Quality conceptualisations at national, institutional, and individual level

Although the participants expressed different understandings of quality in ECS education at VHEIs their conceptualisations were centred around the achievement of targets, being interpreted in relation to particular roles and positions and bear qualities showing their focal concerns. Targets at national level were generic, leaving space for details and specifications of institutional targets. Meanwhile, targets as discussed among individuals tended to be practical but did not exclude those set at institutional level. The explanations and interpretations of the quality concept at all levels featured measurable/unmeasurable aspects and fitness for/of purpose dimension regarding objectives set out for ECS education, but the weight they carried differed according to social and personal contexts bounding the persons who defined the concept.

#### 7.1.1 Quality conceptualisations at national level

Policymakers in Vietnam conceptualised quality as the satisfaction of programme or institutional objectives. This was manifest in the assessment frameworks which were used for evaluating a programme or an institution as a whole. What state authorities seemed to be most concerned with was standards of performance or the rating level at which certain assessment criteria were met for institutional or programme quality. Quality of an institution/programme was judged against the fulfilment of criteria/standards taking into account the appropriateness of the mission/objectives and priorities of a HEI. This is known as standards-based and objectives-oriented approach to quality in QAA literature (Jackson, 1998; Martin & Stella, 2007). QAA at

institutional and programme level, however, is not the central focus of this study but a starting point to look into QAA in a specific subject - ECS and quality issues concerning ECS education. QAA in ECS was not separated from but part of QAA of the institution and programmes. In monitoring subject specific quality, no definition of quality was put forth despite the promotion in the entire national education system of the Project 2020 since 2008 for quality improvement in foreign language teaching and learning of nation-wide education establishments. Some broad statements describing outcome standards for foreign language learners in VHEIs were available in public policy documents, e.g., Plan 808 (MOET, 2012b), Correspondence 5957 (MOET, 2014a), Circular 07 (MOET, 2015). The standards were referred to as minimum requirements of foreign language competence for undergraduate students, including ECS learners. Such statements were the basis for HEIs in both public and private sectors to establish and translate into reality their own ECS outcome standards for their students of relevance to their QAA conditions and institutional goals and mission as well. QAA conditions of HEIs mainly involved academic programmes, resources, teaching staff, teaching methods, testing and assessment methods, infrastructure, and HEI-business links. Moreover, a CEFR-originated national framework of reference was introduced to assist the standardisation of ECS learning outcome achievements in the entire HE system. The national framework was the foundation for conformity in the conduct of ECS programmes in VHEIs in all areas, ranging from syllabus and materials development, teaching and learning, testing and assessment. Also, it was used for benchmarking in ECS learning performance across VHEIs. The interest in educational results as what students could achieve after the completion of a module/programme/course is associated with outcomes-based education (OBE) (Tam, 2014). (Further details about OBE and standards-based QAA approaches are discussed later.)

Seemingly, the Vietnamese government believed that the adoption of an OBE model and standards-based quality approach would help guide and direct the work of HEIs the emphasis of which was the achievement of expected outcomes. Possibly governmental managers underscored learners' accomplishment of outcome standards which were subject to be specifically defined by HE providers. Quality in ECS training, in accordance, was taken as outcome standards achievement. Quality was signalled by learners' attainment of a minimum outcome required by the institution where they received ECS training. Also, standards being maintained/raised was recognised as quality assurance/improvement being accomplished. HEIs were legally entrusted to adjust outcome standards that worked for them and their students, but such adjustment should signal increased quality, or more exactly the improvement in learners' academic results as regards English language subject.

The statements of expected ECS learning outcomes in the national framework of minimum outcome requirements for undergraduates indicated a general importance laid on graduates' capabilities in understanding and using English language in common situations encountered at

work that are related to their field of specialisation. English for specific professional needs of undergraduate students was the principal focus; ECS training in VHEIs was assumed to primarily serve professional future of the learners who were supposed to be capable of not just using general English but English in specific professional fields. Besides satisfying learners' professional needs for English language, the state scheme for foreign language development was aimed at empowering them to confidently and effectively use a foreign language for their academic and social communication purposes. These aspects of learners' needs were all embedded in the descriptions of performance levels in the national foreign language proficiency framework. Compared to the other educational goals, again, the government gave prominence to English for professional purpose at tertiary level. The standards level descriptions showed that English language learners may not be able to employ the language as a useful communication tool in business settings for work related or technical issues until they at least had attained the title of independent or Intermediate/B1-level users who could deal in a general way with non-routine information. This explained why MOET initially set B1 as the minimum learning outcome requirement for ECS takers in VHEIs. Until this study was conducted, due to varying entry levels of English language proficiency of the learners, ECS targets as aforesaid had been being flexibly applied at institutional level. That meant targets lower than B1 would be acceptable provided that HEIs gradually brought into effect higher standards in their ECS programmes. There appeared not just the issue that Sadler (2017) raises of distinguishing between nominating desirable, often ambitious learning outcomes and determining acceptable adequate levels of English language proficiency for university graduates. ECS outcome standards should assume a minimum English competency level that is significant for graduates' success in later stages of academic and professional career. What also mattered in formulating learning outcomes was to examine thoroughly the feasibility of predefined targets and local circumstances prior to the implementation of any quality initiatives.

In contrast to the government's expectation of graduates' enhanced English language capacity in working environment, little assertiveness and positivity could be found among institutional staff and students regarding whether HE ECS courses could satisfy linguistic needs of the learners for professional advancement. To illustrate, managers at Fortress University such as Quyet-F-A, were far from being confident in a scenario wherein students could utilise English as an effective instrument for career success after they had finished A2-targeted ECS modules. Similarly, lecturers at Junior University such as Bi-J-L, were suspicious of the graduates' capability of using English other than in regular and familiar social situations by the time they had reached B1 level. No matter what ECS standard levels were applied, institutional staff held a common belief that graduates may not be able to do more than communicating in very basic English. According to them, the main reasons for such pessimistic scenarios were the learners' lack of opportunities to

use English outside the classroom, absence of continuity in English learning, and the use of level-based classroom materials without customising ECS lessons for English use in professional contexts or at workplace. Outcomes-focused ECS education was meant more for assuring standards achievement than for developing English language capacity of the learners that could enhance their career prospects. Also, both teaching and teaching-support staff posed the question of whether English language competence was always a job requirement or if all students needed English to get/do a job. Those issues of fitness of purpose and one-size-fits-all of ECS output standardisation were again echoed in voices of students in both participating universities who talked about little opportunity to demonstrate expected learning outcomes relating to language use ability during their learning process. Without such opportunities it would be hard for them to turn “theoretical” English language lessons into practical exchanges of business/technical issues that involved the language. Regular practice, both inside and outside the classroom, was required if one wanted to fruitfully engage in real life communicative situations.

That English language education is purely on instrumental grounds with a special focus on better career prospects of the learners is a characteristic of not just Vietnam but other ‘Expanding’ countries in Kachru’s (1985) Concentric Circle model, and English as a foreign language (EFL) territories in McArthur’s (1996) tripartite model, for example, Colombia, France, Monaco, Japan, China. Well-paid job opportunities and a successful career are a major drive for English language learning among EFL learners, e.g., learners of different linguistic backgrounds across Europe as discussed in Hoffmann (1996) or those in seven Latin American countries in British Council’s (2015) investigation. English was required as early as the 1990s as a necessary skill on the job market in the Nordic countries (Phillipson, 1992) and other European EFL countries (Viereck, 1996). Employment is also a (but not the only) motivation for English language learners in ESL contexts, e.g. non-English speaking students in Australia in Roshid and Chowdhury’s (2013) study. According to Hoffmann, mastery of knowledge of English language is crucial for access to literacy in English, for survival, engagement, and progress in society wherein English is the main language. Given the multiplicity of discourses in English and its power status as the most widely used language in the contemporary world, acquiring English is compared to accumulating social capital (Majhanovich, 2014) and being competent in the language enlarges literacy practices and insights into the world - a fundamental step for social advancement and sustainable development (Jordão, 2009; Majhanovich, 2014).

Like in other EFL countries, English is the first foreign language in Vietnam’s educational curriculum but has no official status in the nation. English plays little role outside the classroom and is mostly learnt through formal schooling in Vietnam, having only been introduced into primary curriculum as an obligatory subject as early as at Grade 3 since 2009, and a precondition for HE qualifications around 2012/13. In contrast with English language learners in ESL contexts,

e.g., Egypt, Singapore, who are widely and constantly exposed to English (Phillipson, 1992) as it is used there both as an intranational and international language (Kachru, 1985), the English learners in Vietnam, have quite limited exposure to (predominantly US) English. The student participants in my study only had access to English through audio and written materials used in the learning process, the classroom English language produced by their teachers, and through the Internet. They had little opportunity to use/practise English in authentic environments, which is also the situation in EFL countries in Southeast Asian region such as Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar (Kam, 1998), and exceptionally in ESL territories like Hong Kong (Majhanovich, 2014). They may merely talk to foreign tourists on the streets or via social media and PlayStation networks. Alternatively, they joined English clubs managed and organised by senior students or the English language teachers in their institutions to learn/use English with other students. This could be a hurdle for them to develop capacity and confidence in using English and to become fluent and habitual users of English.

ELT for the pragmatic usefulness of the language in the Expanding Circle centres around such notions as English as an instrument of communication, communicative competence, international language, and intercultural interaction (Kachru, 1985; Kuo, 2006; Melchers & Shaw, 2003). Given the role of English as an international lingua franca, the emphasis is laid on mutual intelligibility and cross-cultural communication strategies (Kuo, 2006; Melchers & Shaw, 2003). It is important that learners be familiar with diverse accents and varieties of English (Melchers & Shaw, 2003). Native speaker norms and standards could still be a desired target for the learners but not the only model to be learnt. Accuracy and fluency are needed to assure smooth flow of conversations, yet grammatical correctness and phonological preciseness apparently are not of central importance and the supreme objective of ELT though (Gorlach & Schroder, 1985).

Notwithstanding outcomes statements concerning developing learners' communicative competence in state quality initiatives and VHEIs' curriculum of English in my study, classroom activities were found to be largely exam-oriented and materials-dependent, focusing on transmission of tested and testable knowledge about language structures. Little class time was spent on either personalising English lessons for knowledge applications in wider contexts or conversational English/communicative practices. Reading sessions were mostly treated more like translation classes than the time to develop reading proficiency and critical thinking skills. Universities were under pressure of the government's requirement to document criteria/standards satisfaction regarding the proportion of students' completion of ECS modules. ELTL was still highly focused on accuracy and providing proficiency evidence. The stress on and the pressure of exam success and demand for English language proficiency could barely result in improvement in fluency, competence, and confidence of the learners. Such ELT policies also failed

to stop students struggling with holding a simple conversation, let alone securing fluency in speaking English in China and Japan (Clark, 2013; Schneider, 2014).

### **7.1.2 Quality conceptualisations at institutional level**

At the organisational level, quality was conceptualised in compliance with the public policy of transparency and output standardisation. The commitment was the announcement of a promised quality which was depicted as a specific English language proficiency level that an ECS learner should reach by the time they would have finished all relevant assigned units of instruction. Quality meant conformance to institutionally defined standards in English language learning performance which corresponded to certain levels of language use capability. The nomination of threshold standards in ECS learning at institutional level was referenced to the national foreign language proficiency framework, being consistent with national goals and institutional goals and mission. The setting of ECS outcome standards must also be relevant to quality conditions of each institution such as the number of qualified English language teachers, teacher/student ratios, ECS teaching and learning resources, and classroom facilities. Moreover, the nominated learning outcomes provided the basis for competences-based ECS curriculum design and delivery, and assessment methods and instruments. Learners' achievement of predetermined ECS outcome standards apparently was the answer to several issues such as demonstration of value for money/accountability, quality of learning, quality of teaching, and also quality of (targets) management. Outcome standards as embodiment of quality made an abstract concept a measurable and comparable matter. Quality appeared to be simplified for easier QM.

A standards-based approach is related to the New Public Management philosophy (Bugandwa & Akonkwa, 2009; Rönnerberg, 2011) that stemmed from the business and commercial sector. The expansion, diversification, and privatisation of VHE for economic reasons called for the penetration of market orientation into the national HE system (see Chapter 1). These emerging trends along with the need for regional and international integration made quality in HE in general and in tertiary-level ECS education in particular became an issue of prioritised concern to the government and society at large. The application of the new managerialism in Vietnam, like elsewhere, was to increase VHEIs' responsiveness to the labour market demand for well-rounded and professionally trained graduates. Student learning outcomes were a measure not only of institutional effectiveness and efficiency but of what students learnt, achieved, and became, and to what extent they could be ready for work and contribute to social and economic development (Kennedy, 2011; Lixun, 2011; Nusche, 2008; Tam, 2014). The concept of quality was viewed in terms of economic returns, limited to what worked for the economy (Abukari & Corner, 2010; Bendixen & Jacobsen, 2017; Ozga & Jones, 2006).

Nonetheless, numerical performance indicators cannot adequately portray educational quality as it involves too many dimensions/aspects to be included in even the most sophisticated outcome measures or standards (Doherty, 2008). Market orientation is criticised for placing far too much emphasis on market values, occupational competencies, and the alignment of knowledge and skills provided by HEIs with the requirements of the employment markets (Doherty, 2008; Nusche, 2008; Fukahori, 2014) whilst undervaluing other values of the learning outcomes. Meanwhile, HEIs differ from commercial enterprises, having to deal with diverse, sometimes conflicting needs from multiple stakeholders (Doherty, 1997). For example, the Vietnamese government was concerned about a minimum performance level in ECS learning of undergraduate students that could match the market needs. Being caught by the government's pressure the two study universities paid a lot of attention to keeping institutional quality commitments and showing evidence of quality through the percentages of students' satisfaction of institutionally defined ECS outcome standards. Compliance with standards played a key role in establishing and maintaining credibility of quality in ECS education of HEIs, also their prestige and reputation with the government, learners, and the public. Quality as fitness for purpose emerged as universities did what they said they were doing, which was a criterion of quality evaluation. However, voices from institutional managers, staff, and students showed that the purposes in ECS teaching and learning were not confined to satisfying predetermined English proficiency levels or teaching factual subject knowledge; it was also about teaching students how to apply knowledge in wider contexts, introducing different ways of being and knowing, cultivating students' autonomy and social maturation, nurturing positive attitudes towards English and English learning, and providing them with opportunities for in-depth study, lifelong learning and achievement of their full potential. Those aspects of learning outcomes are not necessarily attributed to merely classroom/university experiences (Nusche, 2008) and cannot easily be measured or observable in outcome measures like standardised tests. Often, outcome statements reduce the complex and holistic conceptions of outcomes to observable performance, focusing on specific and practical abilities that are directly applicable to the marketplace (Fukahori, 2014; Tam, 2014).

Standards in ECS differed by programme/course and institution due to variation in how much attention was paid to ECS in each VHEI and/or each programme/course, and QAA conditions for students' satisfaction of a realistic minimum learning outcome. This conformed with Correspondence 5957 (MOET, 2014a), saying each HEI could adjust ECS outcome standards programme by programme, course by course taking into account the challenge of the targets and the ultimate goals of the Project 2020 regarding the minimum competency level of university graduates. According to the training regulations of Big University (2014), ECS outcomes, ranging from Level 3 to Level 5, were required of non-English major students following regular-

advanced-, and international-standard programmes of its member universities and those outcomes must be validated in independent standardised English language examinations. Meanwhile, the annual transparency report of Fortress University (2017) showed that only one required outcome level was applied across courses/programmes and the outcomes were an embedded element in the overall course assessment. Differences were shown not only in standards level but the nature of standards and the way they were realised and recognised. Differences in standards led to different institutional processes needed for standard accomplishment. (Further details about those differences are discussed later). The presence of differing standards and processes towards standard achievement as such may cause complication to subject-level QAA methods in English language education at tertiary level. Those methods had not been introduced yet needed if not just numerical results but transformation in learners' language capacity was desired.

VHEIs could not stand outside the game of output standardisation and output control that the government had established but each player could use their own strategies for their survival. The provision of ECS education had to somehow be aimed at bringing the learners to a point scale in English evaluation schemes. Quality in ECS training in VHEIs, thus, seemed to be firmly bound by the need of the government as a HE stakeholder to see learners' achievement of pre-defined outcome standards. Students undertaking ECS modules provided by Junior University were pushed to earn and show English language proficiency certificates in the initial stage of their studies the validity of which, as favoured by Circular 23 (MOET, 2017c) on foreign language proficiency testing, were decided by employers. Whether students continued to learn English or would be able to practically use it in broader contexts seemed to be left aside. This was an issue without being peculiar to one particular HEI but the whole system as ECS was part of the Generic Knowledge area that students ought to undertake in the first two years of a typical four-year course/programme before they could do specialist subjects. This research raises the question of whether ECS courses need rescheduling to assure quality through the continuation in English learning so that the learners will be able to make use of what they learned in high school and what they learn in HEIs.

Likewise, Fortress University repudiated the responsibility to verify the match between students' ECS learning performance and the national reference point and between that and linguistic performance in situations outside classroom settings. The verification of academic performance and the applicability of acquired subject knowledge was passed to the hands of certification service providers, employers, and wider public. Expressions about graduates' ability to use English language for academic advancement or career development could be found here and there in programme/course descriptions but what was truly concerned was the learning performance that was visible and measurable. The question "How do you know if and how your students use English

at work?” could not be addressed by interviewees in either of the participating universities. For example, Lien-F-A – a QAA manager at Fortress said “so far we have not checked out whether or not our provision of ECS could satisfy graduates’ English language needs in specific jobs.”

Similarly, the response of Mai-J-L – a manager and an ECS teacher in Junior - was “we may know whether our students could read and understand English documents in particular fields when ESP was still included in the curriculum ... but without teaching ESP to students in their later stages of study it is hard now to say if they can apply ECS knowledge and skills in accessing developments in science and technology.”

Driven by the consumer paradigm and market-derived management strategies, curricular environments are expected to be responsive to the learning needs of contemporary society, the demand for explicitness and transparency in performance data and institutional QA mechanisms and processes, and for being open to external scrutiny (Doherty, 1997; Jackson, 1998, 2000). HEIs have to accept the influence of interest groups such as the government, employers, learners, and third party evaluation agencies on the formulation and assurance of standards (Jackson, 1998; Fukahori, 2014). Abiding by the state regulations, the two investigated universities were advised to establish ECS standards consulting appropriate external reference points, e.g., the national qualifications framework and the national foreign language proficiency framework, which may raise the validity of university practices beyond a teaching team and institution (Jackson, 2000). Besides, what students should know and be able to do on ECS course completion was determined with reference to economic demands, considering professional bodies’ views on acceptable quality/value of training (Abukari & Corner, 2010; Bendixen & Jacobsen, 2017; Fukahori, 2014). Classroom activities were open for considerably rising monitoring and surveillance that came from managers, and the public via the learner. Standards-/competencies-based QA as a management and accountability tool seemed a threat to institutions that traditionally enjoyed great institutional autonomy and academic freedom (Fukahori, 2014). In Vietnam, like other countries where autonomy of universities had been formerly limited, the government transferred power to the local level along with requesting accountability and institutional responsibility. Seemingly, there was a power tension between the government and universities in the game of quality. (Issues of power tension and delegated responsibility are discussed further later).

### **7.1.3 Quality conceptualisations at individual level**

Quality as target achievement was a recurrent theme among individual participants of the current research. Their perceptions of quality portrayed a connection between quality and educational goals regarding the provision of ECS in VHEIs. A range of goals were discussed among individuals who showed differing attitudes towards different targets and measures to assure target

realisation. Conflicting views of quality not just within subgroups of participants but within one individual were evident. Likewise, similarities in perceptions of quality were found across cases and within subcases.

The two senior managers of Junior University and Fortress University, Hoang-J-A and Danh-F-A respectively, represented quite broad views of educational purposes which involved not just academic success but career development, and even social growth of the learners. They communicated a learner-focused philosophy of education and an understanding of educational goals and learning outcomes that were not confined to academic performance. According to them, quality connoted what an education provider could do to strengthen students' futures, preparing for them potential to grow professionally and socially. Learners needed to be well-equipped to earn a job, to demonstrate skilful job performance, to be capable of gaining further job skills and accumulating professional experience, and to move up career ladder. Also, they saw the academic environment, be it the private or public sector, as a place for the cultivation of good manner in learners which enabled them to "work and live together with other people" (Danh-F-A) and to "be self-confident, optimistic and lead a happy life" (Hoang-J-A). Quality was viewed as transforming and empowering learners mentally, spiritually, and economically so that they could integrate well into society.

Such connotation of quality – learner enhancement and empowerment – fits well discussions by Harvey and Green (1993) and Harvey and Knight (1996), showing the complexity in the concept. Quality should not and cannot be simply disentangled to be seen through numerical academic achievements like required grades in exams. Rather, it is embodied in the capacity of a HEI to offer the students opportunities for personal and professional change and growth.

Transformation in learners takes time and the effectiveness of educational services provided cannot be simply measured or instantly seen when they have finished their courses. Also, it is required that the learners always take learning as a never-ceasing process to assure educational effectiveness and their development. That is why it is not simple to evaluate quality of educational products – the learners - although they could be the best measurement tool of educational quality.

For individuals and governments, learning outcomes are an indicator of quality of educational products which are thought of firstly as students' academic achievement. ECS learning performance was prevalently and apparently only seen through test results which were expected to represent a particular English language competency level. In no circumstances could test scores fully and accurately reflect learning capacity of students nor the possibility of their future success. A student may not perform well in a classroom setting but scored high on standardised tests and vice versa. English test results or language proficiency alone may not lead to successful social

communication or career advancement. It should be added that English for ECS learners was a subsidiary subject, so it was an optional choice that English language capacity development be taken as a strength that enhanced graduates' employability. That choice could be presented in an institution's ECS education policy or made by the learners themselves. Nevertheless, it was institutional language policy that gave rise to differences in target outcomes set out for ECS learners which may influence their motivation and attitude toward English language learning (discussed further below). Given that the emphasis put on ECS education may vary among VHEIs, English learner language proficiency was by no means taken as an indicator of institutional or programme quality. Despite ECS results being a condition for graduation much interest was shown to whether graduates got a job in accordance with their specialisation whilst apparently little attention was paid to what they could do with English in their career prospects or to what extent their English competency satisfied their job requirements. VHEIs may invest efforts in standardising ECS outcomes but that was probably not synonymous with boosting competitiveness of their educational products via English language proficiency. If English competence is seen as a desired professional skill of graduates, research is needed for understanding the demand for English in the employment market.

A transformative view of quality (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996), or the purpose of causing learners' development was also evident in staff's perceptions of quality in ECS education in VHEIs. That meaning of quality was interpreted in connection to standard attainment from administrative perspective but was closely linked to the delivery of ECS lessons as explained by the teaching staff. From the perspective of non-teaching staff, it was spelled out as the change between input and outcome which was expected to come along with the satisfaction of predefined outcome standards:

Quality bears within it both quantitative and qualitative change ... when a learner attains standard outcome this means the ability to demonstrate more than just language knowledge, it is if (s)he can use subject knowledge acquired for a purpose (An-J-A – a QAA manager of Junior University)

Quality in English language education at tertiary level refers to the language proficiency that the learner achieves after the completion of English language modules and it must reach a certain standard level (Tue-J-A – an ETM manager of Junior University)

QAA and ETM people in Junior believed that quality was manifested in the learners' accomplishment of a pre-set standard regardless of such QAA conditions as teaching staff, infrastructure, or teaching methods. The completion of ECS credits the result of which was the achievement of a standard ("quantitative change") represented a changing point in learner language proficiency ("qualitative change"). The change in language capacity of the learners was shown in the difference between input and output test results. Standards achievers at tertiary level were expected to be able to use English subject knowledge in a wider context. Standards

were benchmarks for comparison between entry level and the values that a HEI had added to the learners during educational processes and for comparing quality in ECS education between VHEIs. The participants in the same functional areas of Fortress showed similar thinking about standards achievement as the embodiment of quality but added concerns about distorted standards.

According to them, there should be mechanisms for the implementation of ECS outcome standards that brought about the capability of the learners to practically use subject knowledge learned. More accurately, they emphasised the robustness and reliability in assessing the intended learning outcomes. The standardisation process, particularly outcomes assessment needed be transparent and rigorous to assure standards satisfaction corresponded to the development of language use ability. Moreover, an outcome standard that a HEI specified for ECS learners could stand for quality only if its accomplishment fostered better job performance of graduates.

ECS teachers in both institutions conveyed their message of quality as improvement in language and communication skills of the learners through what to teach and how to teach. They were aware of the required outcomes that ECS learners needed to attain and that they ought to comply with the university statutes in realising institutional goals through ECS lectures. Nonetheless, for them it was more important to develop learners' capability in using English for communicative purpose in social situations or at work, to develop linguistic knowledge and skills and thinking skills and broaden socio-cultural knowledge. Quality from a pedagogical perspective was close in meaning to teaching effectiveness – promoting learning by stimulating interest in the subject, motivating students to learn so that the result was not only high rates of exam success but enhanced language skills for students. A common way in assessing teaching effectiveness was to look at learners' exam results, so the teachers tended to stick to lecture objectives specified in the syllabuses and vocabularies in the core coursebooks. To help students obtain expected learning outcomes, lecturers also aimed to give interesting and inspiring lessons as this meant increasing students' learning engagement and improving appraisal of their lectures with financial incentives.

I found distinctly different views of quality from the managerial and administrative perspective and from the pedagogical perspective. The emphasis in non-teaching staff's viewpoints was the students' achievement of predetermined learning outcomes and the measurement of learning performance:

I don't care how talented and skilful your teaching staff could be, what your up-to-date coursebooks are, or how well your infrastructure may satisfy the needs as they are just necessary and sufficient conditions. What matters most when talking about quality ... if you say you offer high quality English language education to your students, you must show your evidence which is presented in that your students, after graduation, are capable of using the language well at a certain proficiency level. (Tue-J-A - an ETM manager of Junior University)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the teaching staff believed at the heart of quality issues was classroom experience and delivery methods or more broadly the means provided to students to help them reach the expected learning outcomes. A productive classroom environment should make students skilled and simultaneously entertain them:

To me, quality means effective teaching. That is, a quality English class hour is the one in which the teacher teaches the students knowledge and skills that they need for success in their later life ... they [the teacher] need to understand students' and also employers' needs ... [to] tailor their lectures to the world of work. (Bi-J-L - a lecturer of Junior University)

The best quality is reached only when the teacher and the learner have mutual understanding in their regular articulations and the teacher should be able to inspire the students to not only master the subject knowledge in the classroom but to learn about the wider world ... to feel they are living the most meaningful college life. (Duyen-J-L - a lecturer of Fortress University)

Such a differentiation between non-teaching and teaching staff's viewpoints matches Sharp's (2017) distinction between academic standards and quality of learning opportunities. Accordingly, the guarantee of standards depends on the process of setting intended learning outcomes, benchmarking achievement standards against relevant referent points, close link between curriculum designed and learning outcomes, and a robust assessment regime. The quality of student experience refers to the learning environment including the teacher's performance, learning resources, classroom facilities, teacher-student interaction. QAA and ETM managers and staff reaffirmed the assertion made by Sadler (2017) and Sharp (2017) that it was the standards-based QA processes that mattered to the integrity of grade points/test scores earned and the English proficiency level claimed in ECS outcomes statements. This was not to discard the role of quality learning environments for learners' achievement of intended learning outcomes. On the contrary, an outcomes-based approach stresses the significance of positive classroom environments which are students-focused, engaging, supportive, and motivating (Lixun, 2011; Sadler, 2017), enabling the demonstration of the outcomes in the learning process (Jackson, 1998, 2000) and preparing the students for the assessment required for the outcome levels they seek (Jager & Nieuwenhuis, 2005; Sharp, 2017). The point was to assure the 'constructive alignment' (Biggs, 1999; Biggs & Tang, 2011) between clearly defined outcome standards, teaching and learning activities, and assessment tasks. Not only teacher participants but those in managing and administrative positions in my research argued that the staff that were directly involved in curriculum design and delivery and student assessment - the lecturers - played a central role in ensuring standards, echoing James (2003). Both Junior and Fortress followed the alignment principle in programme development and implementation as guided by MOET, but the checking process only started to be carried out by the QAAU in Junior during my field work process.

## Chapter 7

Staff in the two HEIs shared a common view about a practical target for the learners to apply the subject knowledge learnt in concrete situations. Teachers and ETM and QAA actors thought that ECS learners should be trained for development in linguistic performance, to be competent in receptive and productive skills for instrumental purposes such as social communication, business transactions or exchanges of technical issues in professional areas. Those purposes called for the use of different teaching and learning materials and the personalisation of the lectures for the fitness of purpose. Nevertheless, the resources for ECS which were level-specific coursebooks developed by native English speakers only served to equip the learners with basic communication skills. ESP materials or certain adaptations of ECS lessons to match local and professional contexts was necessary to meet professional purposes in language use of the learners and to increase their interest and motivation as well. This posed a question of the need for bringing back ESP into institutional curriculum. The subject was understood, particularly among lecturers and students, as the provision of profession-related vocabularies that were essential for successful business exchanges.

Student participants depicted quality as benefits of the subject knowledge that they gained: quality was shown in what ECS lessons could offer and whether they served certain practical purposes. Common between ECS learners was an interest in gaining usable knowledge for academic, social, and professional purposes. It was significant for them to understand the knowledge and to know what they would be able to do as a result of completing ECS modules. Their personal and instrumental purposes in ECS learning to some extent seemed to outweigh formal, institutional goals as it was more important to be able to apply subject knowledge attained, for example, to talk with business partners or to earn a well-paid job, than to get a grade point for the sake of satisfying a formal ECS learning goal.

The conceptualisations of quality from staff and students' perspectives coincided where employment market gained its hold. Market forces reinforced the view of utilitarian purposes of ELT in Vietnam. Staff and students could not withstand the influence of the notions of quality promulgated by policymakers and economists. Market relevance as a dimension of quality in tertiary-level English language education was a major concern of the research participants irrespective of their roles and positions in HEIs. Brown and Heyworth (1999), Heyworth (2013), and Thomas (2003) also argue for considering the fitness for/of purposes and appropriateness of what a language programme offers for the needs of the students and society in their discussions about quality and quality initiatives in English language education. Quality was defined in connection with market values, whether ECS education responded to and met industry needs of applicable knowledge or of the learners' ability to apply knowledge acquired appropriately and effectively in the profession and in social situations. VHEIs' operations relied on marketing strategies, selling knowledge and competencies that the learner hunted for success. The adoption

of outcomes-/competencies-based approach was a way to bridge the gap between HE and the economy (Jager & Nieuwenhuis, 2005), an entrepreneurial endeavour (Bugandwa & Akonkwa, 2009) of HEIs to raise their adaptability and competitiveness. Market orientation meant VHEIs ought to demonstrate their capacity to provide English competent graduates to the employers, particularly foreign joint ventures and those involved international components. Bendixen and Jacobsen (2017), however, argue that the provision of knowledge should be intended for not only some job categories but active citizenship and social progress.

Facing differing outcome standards and criteria for standards attainment, students' sense of purpose and attitude in English learning differ. Students receiving ECS training from Junior University must submit English language proficiency certificates provided by independent authorised bodies, which gave them a stronger sense of direction in learning English. Institutional ECS education for them may not bring about competent use of English but they believed fulfilling learning outcome requirements could be a springboard for the aim of learning English for social communication or professional development in future. ECS outcomes attainment at Fortress needs not validating in independent standardised tests, so its students may talk about the significance of the language and even intentions with English learning yet they needed an extrinsic motivation to direct their learning and to turn intentions into actions. To be eligible for the awarding of degrees, they may comply with institutional regulations, learning English to meet minimum required ECS outcomes; yet due to insufficiently challenging outcomes they were far from being reassured what they could do with the English knowledge they received from their institution or whether institutional ECS modules could help turn them into confident and competent English users. The allegedly low expectations for them in ECS learning made them suspicious of why they needed to learn English and the value added of ECS education at tertiary level.

## **7.2 Quality mechanisms for English language education in VHEIs – motives and impact**

### **7.2.1 Political thinking**

#### **Outcomes-based approach to ECS education and QA**

The Vietnamese government ten years ago introduced the Project 2020, calling for reforms in foreign language teaching and learning in the entire education system. The primary aim of the project was seeking to provide foreign language competent workforce for an enhanced knowledge economy and international integration. Quality initiatives for foreign language education including the provision of ECS of VHEIs was ostensibly led by market needs. The

government wanted to see if ECS learners could use English as an efficient linguistic tool in multi-lingual and multi-cultural environments that were featured in an integration era in socio-economic development. Policymakers seemingly were concerned about neither what VHEIs could provide students with nor the educational process; rather the stress shifted to what graduates could do, or their English language competence on the completion of ECS education. Quality as fitness for purpose manifested itself in the 'can-dos' of the graduates. This was affirmed in an educational philosophy in the national Education and Higher Education law (National Assembly, 2005, 2009) that HE needed to be closely linked to production and economic development. The instrumental and economic values of such an education were emphasised - it should enhance and empower the learners, enabling their contribution to the national development. There was quality as transformation (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996) which was largely focused on work skills and economic growth of the learner. The government relied for a resolution to their concern over the aforementioned dimensions of quality on the adoption of competencies-focused/outcomes-based education (OBE) and standards-based QAA mechanisms. Those mechanisms did not apply separately at subject level to ECS but were included in institutional and programme level to the national HE system, (only processes and procedures relevant to ECS are explicated within this document though).

As shown in Directive 7823 (MOET, 2009b), the government since 2009 had prioritised a national education tailored to societal and market demands. In 2010 and 2016, through Correspondence 2196 and 1074, MOET provided VHEIs with guidelines and detailed instructions for setting and stating outcome standards in programme/course reconstruction. OBE was adopted as a measure for raising market relevance of educational products. Policymakers wanted VHEIs to be transparent in their training capacity and QA conditions so that the learners, employers, and society at large could get involved in the training processes and assuring educational quality. The state representatives looked at HEIs' outcomes statements and how they executed and regulated outcome standards to see how university people including the learners would make endeavours to keep commitment to objectives in teaching and learning as stated. Statements of learning outcomes also made it clear to the students what knowledge and competencies they needed to and would achieve and possible career destinations after course/programme completion. Students' attainment of predefined learning outcomes would be evidence of student learning and of whether VHEIs conformed to specifications of institutional goals and mission, and the effectiveness and efficiency of the educational processes. As advised in state statutes, expected learning outcomes needed establishing not only based on institutional goals and mission but with reference to stakeholders' needs, being expressed in a way that should be observable, measurable, and testable. In applying OBE to ECS provision, the other reference points for the establishment of ECS learning outcomes included the national qualifications framework, national

foreign language proficiency framework, national statements on minimum levels of knowledge and competencies for university programmes (as specified in Decision 1982/2016/QĐ-TTg (Central Government, 2016), Circular 01/2014/TT-BGDĐT (MOET, 2014c), and Circular 07/2015/TT-BGDĐT (MOET, 2015) respectively).

An outcomes-oriented model appeared to be a quality mechanism that brought together pairs of issues that seem uneasy combinations: accountability and learning, value for money and learner empowerment, echoing Kennedy (2011). The government expected that VHEIs may produce ECS learning outcomes that could justify public and private monies on HE, hence their accountability. Learning outcomes also said a great deal about purposes of ECS education at tertiary level. VHEIs' ECS education centred around the pre-set learning outcomes and assisting the students in outcomes attainment. The government acted like the custodian of the interests of both the learners and the employers, saying that HEIs needed to improve quality of ECS learning outcomes for personal development of the learners and for their legitimate benefits. The value-addedness of HEIs or learner transformation was comparable to graduates' employability and their usability for the national economy. Those combinations implied a market-led education wherein educational purposes were prominently linked to the practical values as desired by those having interests in the provision of ECS of HEIs: personal career advancement, English competent employees for business owners, and national economic prosperity. Student learning outcomes had become a means through which the government required VHEIs maintain and demonstrate public confidence and institutional responsibility in their ECS education.

The outcomes-oriented approach is a world increasing trend in education and QA which has been commonly practised in cultures such as the USA, UK, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and some Asian territories like Hong Kong (Kennedy, 2011; Tam, 2014). The stress on outcomes/standards or an evidence-oriented culture in HE is a feature of a new regulative philosophy in the era of massification and marketisation of HE (Bendixen & Jacobsen, 2017; Goldfinch & Wallis, 2010; Levin, 1998; Rönnerberg, 2011; Ozga & Jones, 2006). HEIs employ standards-based QAA to demonstrate public accountability for state expenditures and in the striking growth of HE (Jackson, 1998). Another reason for the spread of QAA based on student assessment, as proposed by James (2003), is the inappropriateness of input or process-based QAA when HE is increasingly characterised by diverse entry pathways, and modes of student participation and engagement. OBE is learner empowerment-led (Jager & Nieuwenhuis, 2005) which is strongly believed to result in better outcomes (Levin, 1998). The model represents a paradigm shift in educational philosophy (Adamson et al, 2010; Tam, 2014), meaning the replacement of teacher-centred pedagogy by a student-focused approach. What is emphasised is not only the acquisition and understanding of knowledge in a specific discipline or subject matter but the development of skills and abilities for success of the learners.

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State statutes signified that the specification and regulation of ECS learning outcomes should entail responsibilities of both insiders and outsiders. ECS outcomes should be appropriate and associated with the goals and missions that VHEIs communicated with the learners and wider society. In both of the participating universities a decision upon workable ECS outcomes was made at the managerial level on the basis of self-evaluation of internal resources and institutional contexts. Also, Correspondence 2196 (MOET, 2010a) and Correspondence 1074 (MOET, 2016) read that the formulation and moderation of learning outcome standards for an academic programme should involve representatives of business establishments and professional bodies to ensure that the knowledge, skills, and competencies expressed in expected outcomes were what the employers wanted. They should be part of the committee for academic programme development and adjustment to ensure market relevance of that programme. The decision was then sent out to academic units that accommodated ECS teachers. It was the teachers in an OBE model that were both curriculum developers and deliverers. They needed to design and carry out classroom activities that facilitated the learners' demonstration and attainment of the ECS outcomes that the institution brought forward at the outset. The learners needed to engage in the learning process to obtain the required outcomes they were informed of before an ECS module started. Their learning outcome attainment was recognised in the satisfaction of requirements in testing and assessment of which the methods were also advised to them from the beginning of ECS modules. It was the employers that determined the validity and value of English proficiency certificates/ECS results, according to Circular 23 (MOET, 2017c).

The establishment of intended learning outcomes alone would not bring about the outcomes as expected. The OBE model necessitated the 'constructive alignment' (Biggs, 1999; Biggs & Tang, 2011) between three elements: intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning arrangements, and learning assessment. Teaching and learning activities ought to promote the attainment of intended learning outcomes; assessment tasks ought to reflect how well intended learning outcomes had been achieved. There needed to be a process to ensure the occurrence and success of such a model. This led to the employment of a standards-based approach to QAA as a companion of the OBE model. The approach was referred to as procedures for ensuring that VHEIs set up appropriate standards (expected levels of academic attainment), the criteria (requirements for academic attainment) against which standards were recognised to be achieved, the methods to measure the level of achievement, and that the institutional processes were oriented towards the accomplishment of standards. The mechanisms for the implementation of ECS standardisation were embedded in standards-based QAA at institutional and programme level. More specifically, OBE procedures were merged into MOET's assessment criteria for institution and programme evaluation. In conducting techniques for assuring quality of the institution and its programmes as

guided by MOET a HEI ought to satisfy criteria as regards the practice of OBE which was applicable to ECS.

In political thinking, market forces should have superiority as definers of outcomes, aims and values of ECS education. However, there was neither a consumers' definition of ECS learning outcomes nor an ECS curriculum that accommodated consumers' expectations of learning outcomes. Moreover, little understanding was obtained regarding learners' need for English learning and the market demand for English competent graduates. What was put forth was only a political definition of ECS outcome standards, and a national foreign language proficiency framework. As I have pointed out, the former sounded like job requirements regarding English language competency for graduates whereas the latter was a standards reference framework to be used as benchmarks in ELTL in VHEIs. It may be that effective involvement of educational consumers requires training, as Levin (1998) suggested, and more open communication between educational establishments and the industry. The likelihood, anyway, was that policymakers encouraged HEIs to develop student learning outcomes relevant to internal resources and domestic and foreign market needs while taking into account nationally-defined educational objectives.

No matter who had superior authority over defining ECS learning outcomes and the value of ECS education, what is important, as Pring (1992, p.18) argues, is 'values are not simply what people choose to value.' Outcomes should not be narrowly defined (Kennedy, 2011), focusing merely on professional needs. Otherwise chances would be diminished for the learner to 'have extensive knowledge, a critical approach to the world and a complete, responsible personality' (Bendixen & Jacobsen, 2017, p. 25). The purposes of ECS education should not be limited to learner transformation in job related competences since the instrumental and economic values of ECS learning outcomes were merely immediate and contingent (Tam, 2014; Westerheijden, 2007) and might change when the politico-economic climate changes (Pring, 1992). Instead, ECS education should never ignore developmental outcomes which takes time to take shape (Tam, 2014). Those outcomes were brought up by participants in my study from senior managers, e.g., Hoang-J-A, to middle managers, e.g., Bang-J-A, and teaching staff, e.g., Duyen-F-L. According to them, ECS classes may benefit the learners in many ways, including enhanced lifestyles, happier life, opportunities for academic advancement, increased motivation in ECS learning, or positive changes in personal beliefs and values. ECS learners should be equipped with knowledge and capabilities that can be applied not just for immediate employment after course completion but lifelong and unpredictable future labour market (Mbabazi, 2013; Nusche, 2008; Pring, 1992). If the aim in ECS teaching is subject matter knowledge acquisition and English language capacity development for use in a wide range of contexts, consideration should be taken into creating

opportunities for language habit and response formation and maintenance, and regular practice of the language, without which acquired subject knowledge would soon be forgotten.

### **Changing governance: Shifting responsibility, maintaining power**

The unprecedented demand for HE, the need to diversify funding resources, and the expansion and privatisation of HE meant that the government could not continue to effectively and efficiently monitor the operation of VHEIs without demanding more responsibilities from the local level. Market-driven education also called for greater autonomy granted to HEIs to effectively and flexibly respond to changeable and diverse needs and expectations from student bodies, policymakers, and the labour market and to survive the increasing competition in the sector. Autonomous HEIs necessitate strong accountability to stakeholders and responsibility and capability of establishing and regulating their internal QA systems (Kettunen, 2008). Deregulation and decentralisation, thus, is an inevitable trend in customer-led and market-oriented management. Understandably, the introduction of market orientation to VHEIs was accompanied by the shift of quality responsibility from the centre to local bodies who should be in the best position (Levin, 1998) to make decisions on how they should operate or what actions should be taken to address social, political, economic changes and challenges. The Vietnamese government decided to enhance their QAA capacity, providing VHEIs with training, guidelines, and QAA tools to enhance internal steering, to tackle accountability issues, and to stay in close connection with the industry. This meant VHEIs' setting up QAAUs within their organisational structures and getting engaged in internal/external evaluation at institutional/programme levels following the sets of criteria that MOET or a prestigious foreign QAA agency established. Institutional autonomy was coupled with responsibility to set and manage their own goals and objectives, directing and monitoring institutional processes and activities towards stated goals and objectives which were the foundation for the specification of outcomes-based programmes/courses. Management by objectives, inspection/evaluation practices, transparency requirements, retrospective forms of quality monitoring - outputs/outcomes control, and evidence-based policy were employed as instruments of a new regime of scrutiny and control wherein the central regulatory frameworks retained their role from a distance (Ozga & Jones, 2006; Rönnerberg, 2011).

Enhanced capacity in quality evaluation indicated accurate and credible assessment of institutional conditions for relevant quality and the promotion of challenging yet realistic objectives, hence higher chance of quality commitment being met. That capacity would earn trust for HEIs and make them eligible for wider rights in determining goals, the what and how of programme development and delivery, and institutional management for fulfilling institutional goals and objectives. The provision of evidence of quality as promised was the price for increased institutional autonomy. HEIs' growing capability in assessing and managing their own quality and

QAA conditions would also lay stronger foundation for state steering of HEIs from a distance (Braun, 1999; Rönnerberg, 2011). To maintain central management role while minimising activities at state level and direct interference into HE operations, the government utilised several QAA instruments. OBE and standards-based QAA enabled the participation in supervising quality of HEIs of wider society and any parties that had interest in the sector. To make HEIs open for public scrutiny and to help consumers navigate their choices of academic destinations, the state required HEIs to provide transparent information about admissions processes, outcome standards, academic staff and their qualifications, and results of quality evaluation processes. The government also introduced a tool that helped students have their part in supervising educational processes through giving feedback about a course/programme or a study unit they had finished. Another instrument of state steering of HEIs was the enforcement of external quality evaluation for quality-recognised certifications every five years which entailed careful internal processes of quality evaluation. The decentralisation actually did not necessarily decrease the role and direction from the central government in QM. Rather, as Rönnerberg (2011) acknowledges, state and external monitoring and supervision was intensified for increased autonomy and freedom at lower level.

Consumer-oriented education offered at lower costs meant greater opportunities for VHEIs to be winners in the competitive game to attract students. Market orientation would create incentives for innovative teaching that could give rise to quality learning and usability of educational products as well. Responsibility for quality and QM was transferred from the centre to the hands of VHEIs but the controlling agency (Rönnerberg, 2011) and the determiner of value of degree holders (Bendixen & Jacobsen, 2017) was the educational consumers. The state role was present in a governance mechanism that was focused on accountability, objectives, and results/outcomes, which also characterised education 'reform epidemic' (Levin, 1998) in the Western industrialised world in the early 1990s (Goldfinch & Wallis, 2010; Rönnerberg, 2011). The findings of my research indicated that the governance of VHE, like elsewhere across the globe, was hybrid by nature, combining the role of market forces and that of state supervision (Apple, 2005) which was practiced through QAA measures. The adoption of such a Western model of education management allowed for growing institutional autonomy, the participation of commercial enterprises and professional bodies in decision-making process regarding the operation and purposes of HEIs including those of ECS education, and more efficient use of resources by HEIs.

### **7.2.2 Institutions' responses to public policy on QAA**

The state efforts in QAA towards VHEIs were principally focused on the development of QAA facilities and capacity, the conduct of QAA processes, and the consistency in the implementation

of procedures in association with OBE model. The introduction of OBE model led to the renewal and reconstruction of HE curriculum across the system, of which ECS outcomes-based modules were a part. Although QAA units were constructed in HEIs as requested by MOET their status and functions differed depending on the awareness and understanding of QAA of institutional staff, particularly members of the Managing Boards and QAA actors. This was clearly shown in the two institutions I studied. Junior and Fortress were in different stages of QAA development, with different QAA capacity and different thoughts and beliefs about the reasons for and the roles of QAA mechanisms in ECS education. Each institution had their own way in receiving, interpreting, and practising public policies concerning standardisation in ECS education relevant to their circumstances. As required by MOET, both followed an OBE model in the provision of ECS to the learners but with distinctions in outcome standards, the criteria for the fulfilment of standards, the measures of learning gain, and the processes and measures for assuring the fulfilment of standards.

The learning outcomes for ECS takers across Big University were set relevant to the quality of the programmes which was partly indicated by the amount of tuition fees charged per student per credit/total course. Accordingly, followers of regular, high-quality, and joint/ international-standard programmes were designated with level 3/B1 - level 5/C1. Standards achievement must be demonstrated with a band score secured in independent standardised exam which could be provided by an international or local authorised testing and certification agency. Being in charge of ECS education and its quality for students throughout member universities of Big University, Junior featured an independent testing centre with claimed authorship over a standardised test format that was approved by the government to be used as a tool for measuring proficiency levels of English language learners. The centre could legitimately provide examination and certification services to any customer on demand.

Fortress claimed A2 as their only ECS outcome standard regardless of disciplines or programmes/courses that the students followed. They were considered as achieving required ECS outcomes if they passed all end-of-study-unit exams. These exams were organised by the institution's QAAU as examination coordinator, yet ECS teachers - deliverers of ECS modules were test designers and test markers. Their English tests were designed for internal use only in student learning assessment, being close in format to an international standardised test with modifications to fit teaching and learning resources in use at the institution and the learners' capacity.

It can be seen that standards offered by the two the universities were dissimilar in many ways. ECS outcome standards and any other outcome standards set up by member universities of Big University sound like embodiment of quality. The higher the standards the greater the quality.

Quality as embodied in standards was a part of the pricing policy as it was the basis against which tuition fees were charged. Standards also seemed to stand for the brand name of a HEI. Big University held a leading position in the national HE system and Junior University was a big name in foreign language education in Vietnam. Member universities of Big University agreed upon the application of standards at minimum level as suggested by MOET and higher to their ECS learners. Nonetheless, it was Junior that carried out both teaching and QAA techniques to ensure quality in ECS education which was taken as standards attainment of the learners. Perhaps setting high outcome standards could not be a good chance missed to strengthen institution position in the HE market. Outcome standards were made use of as a positioning and marketing strategy of public universities. They also represented value for money as they may bring competitive advantage to graduates in employment market. Nevertheless, leading all students to a target outcome was not an easy task when there was variation in their English language competency. Therefore, exams were conducted at the start of a course/programme to classify students and to place them in competence-relevant classes. The conduct of the classification exams implied that pre-set outcomes were achievable only if input requirement for English capacity was satisfied. Also, pre-threshold classes were offered to those students whose English language proficiency was below input threshold. ECS standardisation actually caused pressure for the institution and individual students in terms of time, money, energy, and collegiate procedures. Outcome control had bureaucratized ECS education. Extra processes were carried out to get students satisfy threshold standards, but few opportunities were created to promote the achievement of higher levels of ECS competency though.

What was still good for public universities like Junior University was they were supported financially and in procedure in implementing the standardisation policy. Besides receiving general public funding for HE, its Testing Centre with the government authorisation brought about not only a good source of revenue but facilitation in its pursuit of rigid and high-order outcome standards. In addition to proving its position in training and testing in the field, the institution's creation of an evaluation tool for learners' English language proficiency helped establish a complete model of standardisation that covered standardised teaching processes and standardised testing procedures. It allowed for the comparison between local and international standards, which could be an initial step to bring national English language education to regional and international arena although it might take time for the tool to gain wider market acceptance. Currently Junior's Testing Centre mainly served the demand for English language proficiency testing of nation-wide test-takers.

The situation was not the same in Fortress. Being a private university, it faced social prejudice concerning its educational quality, and private-degree graduates had to cope with discrimination in recruitment processes. The reason could be the private sector was developed as a solution to a

massive demand for mass HE in a time of constrained state budgets. The university developed access routes that facilitated entry to HE by learners who did not satisfy entry stringency based on the results of the National High School Exit Examinations. This should not be seen as abnormal or unacceptable as it contributed to the national efforts in bringing HE opportunities to wider population and bore on part of state financial burdens. Notwithstanding such good intentions, the partiality towards private universities presented a barrier in student attraction for the institution. While mass recruitment seemed to never occur to traditionally elite institutions, private institutions tended to be non-selective. A resultant tension was increased accessibility to fill up enrolment quotas, also adequate financial sources for its operations, and the production of quality educational products that met pre-determined standards. A high rate of non-achievement of ECS outcome standards, which meant a lower graduation rate, may add another hindrance in attracting students or investment sources. Yet, the institution could not ignore public policies in standardising and improving ECS learning outcomes. Additionally, it must put onto the scale the learners' knowledge and capabilities related to their specialisation and their English language competence. The former determined their employability whereas the latter enhanced their employment profiles. Therefore, ECS outcomes were set up, executed, and regulated in a way that chances were maximised for students' outcome attainment. ECS results were embedded in course/programme grades without being validated against independent standards. Neither input classification nor standard achievement validation was involved. Students of the same cohorts must study for the institutionally defined standards no matter where they were at concerning their English language competence. The institution may talk around limited budgets or the need for more practical and accurate evaluation of learners' English language capabilities by interested third parties like employers or other academic institutions.

The likelihood was Fortress would want to protect their performance indicators, hence their ranking and reputation. The policy regarding ECS outcome standards in this institution became an issue of formulating and operationalising an outcome that would affect neither graduation rates nor student enrolments. The institution wanted their students to at least reach the ECS outcome standards that MOET put forward since they were part of HE outcomes that contributed to institutional reputation and competitiveness. Nevertheless, it ought to take into account the success rates in ECS standards achievement as it determined students' graduation probability. Apparently Fortress University, with its interpretation and practice of standardisation policy, showed that it was trying to get the majority of, if not all, students satisfy a minimum level of ECS competency rather than encourage them to reach the highest possible achievement level in ECS learning. Their ECS policy appeared to be focused on average and least competent students while overlooking the most competent. Their efforts to balance outcomes attainment and graduation rates resonate with the confusion Sadler's (2017) poses regarding whether the purpose of HE is to

increase the proportion of degree holders or to produce increased competent graduates. It also bounces back the worries about compromised standards in the time of HE massification as discussed by Pring (1992), or the slipping standards and grade inflation discussed by James (2003). The government's objectives-based QAA and general guidelines in ECS standards, as Braun (1999) puts it, left plenty of room for diverse interpretation and measures of fulfilment of political demands. The public policies may be localised in a way that promoted local benefits while leaving aside the global values, or at least the intended value-addedness of academic achievements. In contrast with what Thomas (2003) points out concerning purposes of QAA processes, economic objectives were implanted into QAA mechanisms in both public and private universities in the existing study. For the prestigious public university standards were a brand of public goods and a guarantee to the public about their quality or the integrity of their qualifications (Sharp, 2017). Meanwhile, setting standards for the private university was an issue of balancing with student/investment attraction. This fits the idea that the goals of QAA measures in the private university are for the survival of its business (Thomas, 2003). Nonetheless, it did not necessarily mean the provision of the best quality/highest standards/best learning experiences. Rather, it was assuring standards within its capacity, chiefly on the basis of an anticipation of students' entry levels of English language competency, which was particularly applicable to Fortress University. The standards-based QAA opened up the possibility of academic success to everyone, but the downside of the avowedly 'minimalist' model (James, 2003) was its focus on minimum levels of achievement while HE was supposed to promote a full range of student achievements. Within that quality model it was important that students reach institutionally set minimum standards but there seemed a lack of mechanisms for performance excellence. Junior's quality mechanism was not supposed to work for anything other than assuring pre-set standards; students' achievement of those standards was already a success. Likewise, it was unlikely that the under-challenging minimum required outcomes in Fortress would garner interest and motivation of the learners for better ECS learning outcomes although ECS results may raise their GPAs. Probably the institution's ECS policy gave a strong implication to them that it would be more worthwhile studying specialisation subjects.

Outcome standardisation signalled that all students must accomplish an appropriate performance level to be able to graduate from a HEI. ECS outcome standards were assumed to be accompanied by appropriate learning opportunities and experience that prepared the learners for the criteria/assessment required for being recognised as having attained the pre-determined standards. This was not to say that the higher the standards set the better the learning opportunities offered. Students may have different classroom experience for the same standard levels set within one institution or in different institutions, which was also depicted in Doherty

(2008) and Sharp (2017). Also, assessment methods and grade scales differed from institution to institution. Logically thinking, QAA measures needed to be in place to assure outcome standards which subsumed assuring the learning conditions and environment, ranging from qualified teachers, formal teaching, extra-curricular activities to learning resources, and other student support processes (Sharp, 2017). Both Junior and Fortress, as required by the government, disclosed such information in their annual transparency reports. They both must show that they could provide sufficiently good environments and experiences that were student-focused, learning engaging, and standard-achievement favouring.

QAA measures were utilised to assure outcome standards and that certain processes and techniques were put in place for the accomplishment of standards. However, that did not conclusively direct to a link between QAA mechanisms and quality in ECS teaching and quality of learning experience. Such a vague relationship was acknowledged by a QAA manager of Junior University - An-J-A, "QAA processes can merely monitor the teaching process at a macro level," or by an experienced QAA staff member of Fortress University - Nguyet-F-A, "QAA is not meant for detailed monitoring of ECS classes ... our QAAU has nothing much to do with output standardisation in ECS education." The pursuit of quality as fitness for purpose and quality as value for money, the accompaniment of which was a culture of performance indicators, made QAA mechanisms be hardly well connected with educational processes and the quality of student experience. This is also pointed out by Bendixen and Jacobsen (2017).

The state governance and QAA mechanisms acknowledged the responsibility of individual VHEIs in setting, assessing, and monitoring ECS outcome standards but different versions of standards at local level seemingly called for processes to monitor standards at national level for proper consistency and commonality across institutions, as suggested by James (2003). Contemporarily, insufficient attention was being paid to monitoring how VHEIs had formulated, moderated, and operationalised learning outcome standards. The focus of VHEIs' internal and external QAA practices was the QAA processes rather than the outcomes/standards themselves, which is consistent with the discussion of James (2003) about QAA in Australian HE, and those of Bendixen and Jacobsen's (2017), and Sadler (2017) about contemporary world HE. Both Junior and Fortress put a lot of endeavours and efforts in documenting their attempts for the standardisation of institutional processes such as teaching, teaching support, and management. What HEIs did was to secure public accountability concerning the processes they applied to assure academic standards. Junior conducted programme-level evaluation which involved monitoring the alignment between outcomes, teaching and learning, and assessment. Such a measure was not deployed in Fortress while the institution-level QAA measures could not comment on the standards on a particular subject basis. In either case, it was the processes for QA that were

emphatically assured and enhanced, not better students, better learning outcomes, better learning experiences, or better educational processes.

The public policy of ECS standardisation allowed for the practice of context-relevant standards but it was questionable whether learning outcomes/standards were appropriately set and realised to mean future success of graduates, or at least more English competent students. Therefore, a recommendation from this research is for HEIs to be transparent about not only institutionally defined ECS outcome standards but criteria for standards achievement, how the broad state standards are moderated, and assessment and grading practices. Among these, methods of assessment are specially emphasised as representing standards, and a key feature in standardisation (James, 2003; Sharp, 2017) as they are the means against which competences required are to be judged, hence for the recognition of whether students have achieved the pre-set standards. Besides, it is recommended that the standardisation process include the rights and interests of all students, favouring the demonstration of a wide range of competences of the learners. Moreover, the moderation of learning outcomes and the complexities and uncertainties in how they are realised and measured raise a question about the need for requirements in implementation to prevent 'gaming and corrupt practices' (Sadler, 2017, p. 95). The scrutiny, as recommended by Sharp (2017), needs to particularly be focused on learning outcomes, the moderation methods, and associated assessments that are used for evaluating the learners' competences as attached in the description of the learning outcomes.

### **7.2.3 Individual responses and thoughts**

#### **Different attitudes and leadership - Different QAA cultures**

Administrative staff and managers in both universities, particularly those having received training for assessor certificates, emphasised the importance of institutional staff's beliefs and attitudes and leadership in QAA in the development of effective QAA mechanisms, for which Doherty (1997, 2008) and Jager and Nieuwenhuis (2005) also argue. Besides facilitating the operation of QAA, raising QAA awareness helped reduce the formality while enhancing the contribution of QAA to the training processes. Differences in campus leaders and staff's thinking led to different QAA cultures in the two universities I studied.

The Junior University's Vice Chancellor was determined about building quality culture in each and every individual of the institution. Consequently, QAA measures and processes were integrated into institutional processes and plans. QAA responsibilities were assigned to not only QAAU but other administrative and academic units. There were also mechanisms for communication and cooperation in the conduct of QAA tasks and the dissemination of QAA plans between units.

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Results of QAA processes and instruments, e.g., student feedback on lecturers' performance or new regulations on programme development and delivery, were gathered and processed at different points in its QAA network. Moreover, supervision over QAA plans and procedures was administered from the Managing Board and the Inspectorate Unit. QAA front-line actors in this institution asserted that the managerial stress on QAA activities and the institutional leadership in QAA had brought about positive changes and smoothness in QAA operations in the institution. Also, faculty members had progressively moved away from initial resistance, and showed increased collaboration and openness towards QAA processes such as documentation, class hour inspection, and student feedback surveys.

A QAA network was also formed in Fortress for the implementation of QAA processes as requested by MOET. The network was comprised of several groups of institutional units, each of which was in charge of a group of assessment criteria developed by MOET, documenting institutional activities and procedures and writing up reports. Differing from its counterpart in Junior, Fortress's QAAU ought to handle evaluation procedures without needed influence/legitimacy in the institutional QAA network. The Vice Chancellor may say about the significant roles of QAA, for example, in justifying the effectiveness of managers' decisions in management and training issues yet the institution had not touched upon the foundation of a supporting and facilitating environment to promote newly established QAA procedures. QAA plans were implemented without further supervision from either the same or higher level of management. The other units did not show much collaboration in carrying out QAA tasks, which was worsened by the strong authority each claimed over their specialisation areas. This was due to the characteristic feature of complete labour division in the institution, each unit being assigned with a whole package of tasks, probably for optimising financial and human resources. Nevertheless, there appeared attempts for rearrangements in tasks and responsibilities between units. For example, a range of jobs that the ETMU used to be responsible for, like inspection of training processes and management in testing and assessment were being gradually transferred to the Inspectorate and QAAU respectively. The segregation was occurring between training processes, monitoring and controlling of the training processes, and testing and assessment. Undeniably, QAA was in an initial stage of development in Fortress, but its presence had caused, and called for, changes in management model and institutional processes, particularly in academic programmes/modules management. Moreover, the introduction of QAA processes entailed more jobs that were aimed at standardising and formally (re)shaping all of the activities and procedures they had always been performing. QAA as a new functional area, thus, may receive scepticism and little enthusiasm from institutional staff especially those that said "we had been running the institution well since we started without it [QAA], just we didn't bring everything we did into documents or build up consistent procedures for things we did."

The differences in QAA policy and leadership resulted in differing roles of functional units in assuring quality of educational processes. In Junior, newly adopted QAA measures, which were oriented toward objectives and stakeholder satisfaction, had found their way penetrating into QA of academic programmes/modules and subjects. Programme evaluation was a tool for monitoring and reviewing its OBE model. One of the major aims of the process was to check the alignment between outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessment. The QAAU was the central point, coordinating the evaluation process. Results of student feedback survey could be made used for programme/lecture development, modification, and delivery although “not every comment given by the students can be addressed” (An-J-A) since, for example, they may wish to learn something that was less challenging than the target imposed by the institution (An-J-A; Hoang-J-A). Different units were assigned to collect feedback and information from stakeholders according to modes of study, types of stakeholder, and types of programme. The data was then sent over to the QAAU to be processed, the results being subsequently presented to the Managing Board. The ETMU received these results and collaborated with academic units in using them for necessary adjustments of programme/course content.

Fortress established its own OBE model but no independent procedures were involved to evaluate how the model was put into practice. The ETMU offered guidance on OBE procedures to academic units and the teachers turned the guidance into outcomes-based syllabuses, delivered lectures, and designed tests. The techniques for output control were in place but the QAAU was not in a position to “manage [relevant] institutional processes” or to “judge” academic programmes (Lien-F-A, a QAA manager of Fortress). The QAAU of Fortress gathered feedback from existing students and graduates on ECS modules and returned feedback results directly to academic units who would internally decide on their responses. Yet, the indication was weak from the interview participants that the information obtained from newly employed QAA processes was utilised for programme/course content development/modification, let alone being brought forward for further collaborative review between institutional units. This was a criterion in programme evaluation, which had not yet been conducted at Fortress University.

One thing in common between QAA staff and managers in both universities was their thoughts about the responsibility of assuring quality in ECS education to be primarily taken by ETMUs and relevant academic training units. Those that had experience working in ETM also asserted the significant role of this functional area: “this sector [ETM] is the backbone of an institution ... academic training is a major area besides academic research and support services” (Tue-J-A, a manager at Junior University). Meanwhile, QAA constituted procedures external to the training processes that were intended for assuring those processes were being carried out in line with the institution missions and goals. For example, the Vice Chancellor of Junior University posited that “internal evaluation, external evaluation, or feedback surveys alone cannot help improve

quality ... the QAAU by itself cannot improve quality.” The academics’ attitude echoes resistance against bureaucracies caused by QAA processes and procedures and the appropriateness of industry-stemmed QA models discussed by Idrus (1996), McCulloch (1993), Sayed (1993), and Taylor and Hill (1993a). Probably the newly-developed QAAUs in VHEIs had not gained a sufficiently firm hold, which often happens at the initial stage of QA development in most educational settings. University staff may not feel very comfortable with the implementation of QAA methods since traditionally they had had mechanisms for being both providers and judges of their own services. More specifically, academic units were in charge of the training processes and ETMUs the monitoring and inspection processes. Yet, Martin and Stella (2007) argue that should be the reason for the introduction of new QAA processes and instruments as consistency and comparability need establishing across HEIs.

### **Impact of ECS output standardisation**

As previously discussed, VHEIs were operating under a governance mechanism that was market-oriented, customer-focused, and outcomes/standards-based. To assure quality, VHEIs could have employed various measures, which had been input- and process-focused, and adopted such new measures as quality evaluation and quality accreditation of institutions and programmes, which were output- and customer-focused. All those measures encapsulated QA of ECS education. As being embedded in standards-based QAA of an institution, QA of ECS education was synonymous with ECS output standardisation, being outcomes/standards-oriented. The focus on outcomes and educational consumers did not mean the negligence or elimination of input and process control. Rather, output standardisation in ECS entailed QA in the following key areas: lecturers and teaching, learners and learning, syllabuses/materials development and delivery, and testing and assessment.

To assure the learners’ achievement of ECS outcome standards, the research participants across institutions and roles asserted their belief in the great contribution of lecturers and their teaching, for example:

Improving teacher quality raises the possibility of success in assuring learners and learning quality (Bi-J-L)

Teaching staff is the first and foremost resources for QA (Danh-F-A)

Quality in teaching and learning simply means the teacher being able to make the students understand the subject knowledge and know how to apply it (Thien-J-S)

The important role of teachers in QA was also proclaimed in Education Law (2005): “The teaching staff play a decisive role in QA of education.” Teachers were looked to as not just a source of knowledge but the persons who could inspire the learners with their classroom techniques, enthusiasm, and devotion to teaching. Their role was significant in an OBE model as the ones who

were capable of using appropriate teaching and assessment methods oriented toward outcome standards. This is congruent with discussions about the role of the teacher in OBE literature. For example, Tam (2014) said facilitators of the learning process rather than subject experts would be more suited to depict teachers in an OBE class. Lixun (2011) talked about the teachers being flexible in their delivery and assessment methods, giving diverse opportunities for students to learn and to demonstrate expected outcomes, and setting and maintaining positive learning environments.

From both administrative/managerial and student perspectives, to improve student learning experience the lecturers' classroom management skills played an important role. Students valued a classroom climate that was relaxing, interactive, and inspiring; supported from teacher and peers in diverse classroom interaction; and stimulating audio-visual/technical facilities. The managers in both universities valued lecturers who were qualified, attentive to their teaching and to learners' needs, participation and satisfaction. The institutional managers were conscious of developing and nurturing a facilitating working environment without money worries to enhance lecturers' motivation and work ethic, but lecturers' income was still an issue in both private and public sectors and love of the job played a key role.

Since the start of the ECS output standardisation process English language teachers across VHEIs had been being pushed to attain a standard level of C1 in the CEFR (or equivalent). The minimum proficiency level was applied to existing teaching positions or prospective applicants in HEIs, though teaching staff did not always welcome this. However, English language capacity was not everything that was required of the teachers. In pursuit of good performance indicators which characterises standards-based QA and objectives-oriented management strategies (Bendixen & Jacobsen, 2017; Goldfinch & Wallis, 2010; Rönnerberg, 2011), they were asked to secure degrees higher than Master's, although teachers and administrative managers agreed doctoral degrees for teaching ECS were unnecessary. Teacher quality was also assured through staff self-assessment which included important criteria in teaching and research. The universities put differing emphasis on staff self-assessment practices. Fortress allowed for more flexibility, the teachers producing research products on a voluntary basis. Both teaching and administrative staff in the institution said staff self-assessment was a matter of abiding by the state regulations and that colleagues lacked justice and objectivity giving comments on each other. Junior was more demanding regarding research requirements. Nonetheless, teachers in both universities were conscious of how important doing research was in improving quality. Such interest in research concerning ELT delivery and assessment methods for interaction with practitioners and professional discourse community or for flexible classroom practices is also discussed in ELT literature, e.g., Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011), Pennycook (1989). For participating teachers, doing research, sharing best practices and CPD were activities for quality improvement,

not QA. Therefore, they were interested in joining research conferences or short/university degree training courses. Also, they highly appreciated mentoring wherein their class was observed with less formality and they could get advice and recommendations for better teaching from their colleagues. This quality initiative was only being regularly practiced at departmental level by teachers at Junior University though.

To enable classroom experience to be customer-oriented, the learners completed feedback surveys. This was a criterion in MOET's guidelines in institutional and programme evaluation. Bendixen and Jacobsen (2017, p.31) describe the exertion of external control as such as 'dual quality control in teaching.' Accountability-led monitoring also meant that classroom doors needed to be open to make classroom practices observable to managers, the state, and wider society. University staff regarded student feedback surveys as beneficial in informing refinements to their teaching. The teacher-student relationship would change to be less hierarchical. ETMU and QAAU people in both institutions expected that students' assessment would change teachers' inappropriate attitude and behaviours. To make it work better, sanctions were in place. The teachers who received negative feedback would get warnings from line managers and higher management. Changes would particularly be possible in Junior as student feedback results were brought into lecturers' self-assessment forms. In both participating universities, students' negative feedback may lead to dismissal from employment but that seemed to occur only to (short-term) contract teachers. The teachers were concerned about subjectivity in students' assessment and mistrustful of learners' basis for judging them. They felt the method could be detrimental to learning as students may misconceive customer-focused classrooms as the teacher's indulging behaviour/actions. Also, feedback forms failed to fully cover classroom aspects. The student participants showed little positive attitude toward student feedback surveys as a QAA measure. They did not see changes resulting from them or care much about their rights as customers in giving feedback as their voices were not heard. They felt feedback surveys were a matter of formality/tokenism and did not treat them seriously.

Administrative staff expected that university students should take charge of their own learning and development, being "the ones who decide what to learn and how to learn" (Lien-F-A). Similarly, the lecturers expected students to "actively engage" (Lanh-J-L) and work hard "to assure quality" (Duyen-F-L). The students themselves were also aware of their roles in the educational process, for example, "Quality comes from both sides, one being the teacher the other the student" (Nhi-F-S). These expectations perfectly match prescriptive expectations of learners' roles within an outcomes-based and learner-empowered paradigm. Accordingly, learning outcomes are subsumed to be more the result of learners' engagement, personal efforts and management than that of teaching/tutoring (Jager & Nieuwenhuis, 2005; Sadler, 2017; Tam, 2014). The learner supposedly being placed at the centre of the educational process (Levin, 1998),

must be responsible for their own learning, choosing and managing what to learn and what not to (Bendixen & Jacobsen, 2017) to achieve expected outcomes.

For students in both universities, without a target to move forward meant little extrinsic motivation and they often lacked drive for independent learning. They were far from being actively engaged in classroom learning, often lacking interest and capability. Their passiveness and lack of autonomy could be because English class hours were still largely content-focused and teacher talk-dominated, which is also mentioned by V. C. Le (2004), H. T. Nguyen et al. (2014), and T. T. Tran (2013). Observational data of my research showed that classroom activities could be interactive but not necessarily entail verbal communication; classroom tasks were rarely personalised for practical and meaningful usage of English in wider contexts.

Most participants said that the application of outcome standards reinforced the learners' motivation, forcing them to learn English for a target outcome and for graduation. It also enhanced teachers' sense of purpose, teaching to bring students toward a specific outcome. That learning outcomes function as direction for teachers and students, informing classroom arrangements, is asserted in Bendixen and Jacobsen (2017) and Tam (2014). Students in Big University thought a required outcome helped direct their learning for short-term and long-term goals. A well-defined outcome was also what students and teachers in Fortress University wished for not just improved learning achievement but language use ability. Learning outcome improvement, in turn, had impact on the institution's prestige and reputation. Maintaining and raising outcome standards meant keeping quality commitment and retaining public confidence in the training capacity of the institution. Moreover, it would be graduates' competitiveness provided that the implementation of the standardisation process was rigorous and without corruption.

To lead students to standards achievement, the staff of both universities thought those of the same English language proficiency levels should be placed in the same classes to study together. Moreover, the possibility was higher for standard attainment if their entry competency levels fitted the materials and programmes that a HEI selected and/or designed for a starting level and an intended outcome within the credits/time allocation. The same programme provided to students of varying competency levels could not assure the achievement of the same outcomes for everyone. Mixed-level classes caused difficulty in teaching for the teachers as they had to use different strategies to accommodate varying needs and abilities. Some students also viewed mixed-level classes as problematic. However, variation was unavoidable in ECS takers' entry levels of English language proficiency due to increased accessibility, broader student backgrounds, and different entry English language requirements of ECS followers from programme to programme, and institution to institution. Thus, flexibility in classroom practices was pivotal in market-driven

HE (Bendixen & Jacobsen, 2017) and OBE model (Tam, 2014) wherein an essential objective was to lead students of different abilities, backgrounds and expectations to the same expected level of learning outcomes.

The administrative staff and teachers in the two universities agreed upon the importance of adequate credits allocated to ECS for standards achievement. Learner input and training duration were still of significant concern in safeguarding standards in outcomes-based approach, which contrasts James' (2003) conclusion about the exclusive importance of assessment assuring standards. Nevertheless, the maximum time for ECS education may not influence the total course duration and curriculum. Some teachers expressed worries about too much difference in time and efforts spent on learning English for standards achievement between students of the same cohorts due to gaps in their English language capacity. Requirements for standards achievement may keep them from graduating at the time designated for their courses/programmes. There were even cases that students dropped out for not being able to reach required ECS outcomes.

Output standardisation enhanced ECS learners' motivation but it also caused pressure for teachers and students. Universities were under pressure of the government, the public, educational consumers to show learners' achieved outcomes as evidence of how much graduates had learnt English and how tertiary-level ECS education could make changes to the learners' language use ability. Educational quality was increasingly expected to be visible, measurable, and usable, which is an inescapable feature of evidence-based regulative strategy (Bendixen & Jacobsen, 2017). Some learners may feel scared and stressed about reaching ECS required outcomes while English was not their strength and/or they did not have any future plan that would need English. Being forced to learn English, they would try their best for the targets applied to them but chances were low that they would develop interest in the language or studying English further, which would harm rather than build on improvement in English learning.

Outcomes-oriented learning may make some students focus on exam formats and testing skills and feel reluctant to participate in extra classroom activities that were not exam-related which may discourage teachers' enthusiasm and creativity in teaching. The teachers were bound to the responsibility of getting their students familiarised with tests. Biggs and Tang (2011, p. 197) use the term 'backwash' to describe how assessment may lead to constrained focus on learning tested and testable knowledge and skills, other intellectual skills and developmental outcomes being ignored (Tam, 2014). Exam-oriented teaching and learning was evident in that in most cases the classroom activities centred around the textbook. This contrasts with the common belief in OBE literature, e.g., Jager and Nieuwenhuis (2005), Lixun (2011), Tam (2014), that the teaching should not be materials- and teacher-centred, instead learners- and learning outcomes-focused.

Another concern among ECS teachers about output standardisation was the impediment to further English learning. Outcome standards may create a ceiling in learning achievement. It was highly likely that the learners would not want to continue learning English after attaining the desired test results. The reason could be a feeling of success or a burden relieved. The teachers may have the same thinking. They may not wish to teach more than basic knowledge and skills for students' exam success because students' outcome attainment was their target fulfilment. This was worsened when assessment practices were heavily focused on summative tests/final examinations and certification purposes while the validity of English proficiency certificates and the value of ECS education were determined by educational consumers. James (2003) refers to this as a counter-pedagogical practice as it does not contribute to learning, rather enlarge the gap between teaching and assessment. Kennedy (2011, p. 215) differentiates between 'assessment for learning' and 'assessment of learning.' According to him, the role of assessment in OBE practices should be the former, meaning to promote learning, rather than the latter, meaning to measure students' progression. Students should be provided with timely and appropriate feedback and opportunities for responses to progress toward the target outcomes.

The student respondents were concerned about the link between outcome standards achievement and English language capacity development. They spoke out against little opportunity given for language practice inside and outside the classroom. For them, satisfaction of required outcomes was important but what was more meaningful was to be able to confidently use English in contexts wider than their own learning environments. There were English clubs in each HEI where students could learn from and speak English with others having the same interest. Some ECS syllabuses of Junior University even featured extra-curricular authentic language activities but the frequency in operation and the activities themselves may not meet students' need for demonstrating linguistic performance. One more thing was the maintenance of subject knowledge learnt. The scheduling of ECS at present and students' efforts toward standards attainment from the early stage of study left some interval between the point of ECS modules completion and graduation when they might have more chances to use English at work or for social communication. The stoppage in learning and using the language would make it hard for the learners to respond in English when they need it.

The quality initiatives and output-oriented QA mechanisms gave rise to changes in assessment practices in HEIs. To improve robustness in assessment – an important part in assuring quality of learning outcomes in an OBE model as emphasised by James (2003) and Sharp (2017) – both Fortress and Junior made testing and assessment an independent process instead of being an embedded responsibility of academic units and ETMUs like in the traditional system. Standardised tests that involved four language skills were designed and used to test students' expected outcomes as regards their English language capacity, replacing previous tests that had been

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primarily focused on grammar and reading skills. Those changes enhanced transparency and equity, and minimised personal bias.

There were certain differences in students' attitude toward English learning and teachers' thinking about their roles in assisting the learners in outcomes attainment in the two institutions. Inadequately challenging intended outcomes and no involvement of independent outcomes validation resulted in superficial learning and extrinsically motivated learning engagement among Fortress students. Students' lack of interest and motivation meant the teachers had to make great efforts to not only engage them in classroom activities but seemingly more importantly to "facilitate" students' accomplishment of the institutionally set outcomes through marking their attention/participation and formative assessments, similar to James' (2003, p. 188) 'grade inflation.' Probably, as suggested by Jager and Nieuwenhuis (2005) and Lixun (2011), students should be challenged with both classroom tasks and target outcomes to turn into active learners who might wish and be able to fully develop their potential. Meanwhile, no formative assessments were involved in the provision of ECS education by Junior University. Instead, the provision of separate examination and certification services to validate outcomes achievement meant delineated division of responsibilities between teachers and students. Junior lecturers needed not be worried much about their students' outcome achievement as they were offered study programmes that suited their needs and abilities and different options to show evidence of standards attainment. They were expected and made to be autonomous and independent learners who decided what to study and how to study to achieve their learning targets. Yet, the two parties needed be collaborative, working together in 'a cooperative pedagogical setting' towards pre-set outcomes (Sadler, 2017, p. 94).

Programme specification based on clearly defined outcomes was an important task for universities, being "firstly concerned in assuring quality" and "paid a great deal of attention" (Hoang-J-A). It was a common belief among managers from senior to middle level, from administrative unit to training unit that an effective QA measure rested with teachers' observance of syllabuses and regulations in education and training. There seemed great consistency and uniformity in course/programme design and delivery in the two participating universities owing to the introduction of outcomes-based approach to educational process and QA together with QA instruments such as national qualifications framework, national foreign language framework, student feedback surveys, class hours inspection. The lecturers had to comply with management principles in lecture delivery, using the same core coursebooks and following teaching schedules. They may use supplementary materials but they had to make sure that the teaching content matched test questions and was oriented toward learning outcomes. Objectives, stakeholders' satisfaction, standards, and tests inevitably resulted in a compliance culture in classroom practices. The teachers must conform to common legislation and institutionally interpreted

versions of public policies, yet with their own understanding and interpretations of those policies. Additionally, classroom contexts differed from one another because of the diversity in students' abilities, preferences, and expectations. All of these, according to Bendixen and Jacobsen (2017), make quality constantly equalised from level to level and person to person. The situation became complicated when the teachers wanted to claim their professionalism and academic freedom in their pedagogical settings, being defensive of their authority in the classroom, arguing what classroom techniques they used depended on the learners in each class, not on how the administrative staff and managers looked and wanted them to be. QA processes had largely focused on addressing public confidence about the availability and consistent operations of systems/processes for assuring standards while having light touched classroom occurrences. QAA methods did not look into details of the classroom processes, e.g., what teaching methods a teacher used, what strategies a teacher carried out to motivate students or to satisfy students' specific learning needs. Quality improvement is a result only when 'true teaching' is openly assessed for truly constructive feedback, pointing to where the teacher needs to change for improvement, as posited by Martin and Stella (2007, p. 43).



## Chapter 8      Conclusions

I start this chapter by looking at the research goals set out for my research journey and how I responded to and addressed those goals using case study design and appropriate research instruments. I also summarise what I have achieved in exploring multiple perspectives on and contextualised understandings of the quality concept and quality measures applied in English language education in VHEIs. Next, I discuss the contributions and limitations of the study in terms of theory, practice, and methodology. I then present some implications based on the research findings, suggesting potential avenues for future research and recommendations for practitioners and policymakers that have interests in quality in university-level English language education. I close the thesis with some final concluding statements about the research project.

### 8.1      Summary of the current research

#### 8.1.1      Research aims

Quality in HE is important since HE is much expected to bring about not only personal growth of graduates but their potential contributions to a nation's social, cultural, economic development and prosperity (Lomas, 2003). Countries and regions throughout the world have witnessed the expansion of English from a language of a relative small group of native speakers to a global language through emigration, colonisation, and globalisation (Kuo, 2006; Phillipson, 1992) that is used in a wide variety of contexts and for diverse purposes. The circumstances and conditions in which the language is taught and learnt are varied and many. Quality issues in HE have been expressed as the concern and reason for the conduct of a vast amount of studies, yet literature is sparse regarding quality in English language education (Dawood, 2013; Thomas, 2003), specially that at university level. In this study I addressed a gap in the literature by focusing on conceptualisations of quality in HEIs' provision of English as a compulsory subject in undergraduate programmes in Vietnam. It is a country in the 'Expanding Circle' (Kachru, 1985) where the number of speakers and varieties of English has been strikingly growing compared to the countries in which the language has its origin (Kirkpatrick, 2003, 2012) - the 'Inner Circle'.

The application of and investment in QAA measures and systems in HEIs have been flourishing, without being in proportion to research in their effectiveness and usefulness (Cruz et al., 2016) although recent conferences have brought together pedagogical and QM practices in the field, e.g., the 2nd Quality and Qualification Ireland English Language Education Conference in 2017.

Given reservations around the appropriateness and necessity of QM systems, my study responded to the need for further empirical evidence of the purposes and effectiveness of the implementation of QAA processes and procedures in English language educational processes. I focused not on how bureaucratic QA mechanisms were, but on how bureaucratic changes caused by QM measures may have influenced/changed key, associated areas in ELTL such as the teachers and their teaching, the learners and their learning experience, testing and assessment, and curricula/syllabuses. In essence, the study looked at the teaching and learning processes under the influence of QAA methods as complex and multifaceted processes and in relation to other institutional processes since quality initiatives are more often than not intended for systematic changes of the institution (Cruz et al., 2016; Popescu-Mitroi, Todorescu, & Greculescu, 2015; Thomas, 2003).

### **8.1.2 Research methods**

The research utilised a case study approach, examining one public and one private university, with the participation of individuals in a range of roles and positions, namely Vice-Chancellors, managers and staff in quality practices and education management, teachers, and students. This approach was suited to gaining holistic, in-depth insights into issues of concern from different angles (Simons, 2009; Thomas, 2011) in association with contextual conditions (Gray, 2009; Simons, 2015) in a non-interventionistic manner (Denscombe, 2014). My selection of universities, recruitment of research participants, use of research methods were aimed at examining perceptions of quality and quality measures in ECS education from multiple perspectives in multiple layers of context. Multiple cases (universities) and sub-cases (university people) were studied, each case study being instrumental (Stake, 1995) to learning about multiple contextualised perceptions of quality/versions of realities. To do instrumental case studies it was crucial to capture cases with all their particularity and ordinariness (Stake, 2008) and to look closely at the influence of the contexts bounding cases for understanding those cases (Yin, 2012, 2014). This was important as quality is a multidimensional notion (Frazer, 1994; Harvey 2006; Harvey and Green, 1993; Vlăsceanu et al., 2007), the meaning of which is stakeholder- and context-contingent. The understandings and interpretations of quality concept and quality measures are dependent upon not just personal backgrounds and institutional contexts but the social, political, economic milieus in which HEIs operate. Hence, my investigation into perceptions of quality entailed exploring universities as complex social units (Merriam, 1988, 1998) with their inward and outward complexities that carry out a range of QAA measures to assure and enhance quality in various aspects of the institutions. The two universities were investigated, scrutiny being made into institutional culture, organisational structure, management features, institutional processes and activities, personal experiences, and broader national contexts, casting light onto

thoughts, understandings, and interpretations of quality and quality initiatives at national, institutional, and individual level.

The adoption of a variety of data collection methods, ranging from semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations to document review, enabled the exploration of the research problems in credible depth. Using interviews and focus groups, which were open-ended and flexible by nature, made it possible to secure rich and thick data comprising facts, opinions, thinking, and feelings of the research participants about the phenomenon under investigation. The open-endedness and the generality of the questions eased the way for probing techniques to obtain individuals' understandings and thinking arising from their own circumstances. This grounded the study firmly in real research contexts, keeping away preconceptions of and minimising the influence of presuppositions about the research issues. The combination of interviews, observations (including field notes), and document review helped show the interconnectedness and/or gaps between thinking and actions between and within individuals in various roles and functional areas, from senior managers and middle managers to staff, from the steering board, QAAUs and ETMUs to academic training units. Analysing public policy documents was a way to look at the politics of quality, to enrich contextual features at the national level to the study, and to see differences and commonalities in responses and reactions of HEIs to public regulations in ECS education and QM. Multiple methods and multiple perspectives promoted the validity and trustworthiness in data interpretation as meanings were verified across data sources, repeatability and connectivity recognised in disparate details of diverse data.

### **8.1.3 Research findings**

#### **Contingency quality notions**

This section is a summary of quality conceptualisations as expressed and interpreted by interview and focus group participants in my study in relation to their roles and positions. What individual participants perceived as quality could be influenced by but differed quality defined and presented in policy documents. A common attribute found in quality definitions at all levels of discussion was the focus on learners' ability in applying subject knowledge learnt in wider contexts, or the applicability of subject knowledge learnt as the most significant benefit of English language learning.

From the institutional leaders' perspectives, quality involved learners' personal and professional growth - education should get the learners prepared to enter social life, to live happily in the community, and to be able to continue for a lifetime. Education was not merely passport to social life and career success; learners' mental wellbeing, intellectual development, and lifelong learning

skills are all important but these things were not easily measured. What was measured through examinations was English language proficiency - which was just a thing/an instrument, not everything. Quality as learning outcomes, more exactly as grade points/band scores, thus, may not say much about future success of the learners. Noteworthy are the differences in viewpoints of the two campus leaders of QAA, the result of which was the differences in the development and implementation of public policies on QAA. The Junior University's Vice Chancellor emphasised the cultivation through quality practices of quality culture and responsibility in everyone and every unit, QAAU being an important point in quality activities. Consequently, public policies on QAA were institutionalised and QAA being embedded in institutional processes including programme/syllabus design and lecture delivery. His counterpart in Fortress University saw quality as a result of three interdependent resources, namely human resources, finance, and infrastructure and that QAA actors needed to be knowledgeable in all aspects of the institutions to conduct programme and institutional evaluation. QAA and QAAU had not gained adequate legitimacy in this institution to be successfully integrated in institutional processes, let alone affecting teaching and learning activities.

From the non-teaching staff's perspectives, quality involved standards/targets achievement - quality meant the fulfilment of pre-determined standards/targets. They added the notion of change between input and outcomes through the educational processes - standards achievement should bring about language use capacity outside the classroom context. This called for integrity, rigorousness, and transparency in the standardisation process, institutional leaders' determination, and teachers' compliance with institutional regulations in syllabus/lecture/test design and delivery/markings. QAA needed influential power given by the Managing Board and acceptance by the institutional staff to operate effectively and to cause positive changes to educational processes. QAA as tokenism or abiding by public policies would not work.

From the teachers' perspectives, quality was about learners' ability to apply subject knowledge learnt in wider contexts. What was important for the teachers was to cultivate linguistic, social, cultural knowledge, and inter-personal skills in the learners so that they could use English for social communication, at work, or for academic advancement. Another notion of quality manifested in teachers' discussions was quality as triggering lifelong learning - they expected students could be inspired to keep learning English after completing ECS modules and to be able to use English at any time. However, being assigned with the responsibility to teach English towards outcome standards, the teachers (and their students) were preoccupied with quality as students' exam success. This could be the reason for classroom activities being materials-based and exam-oriented with little time and space left for extra activities or tailoring lessons to other academic, professional, or cultural contexts. To achieve any learning purpose, the learners needed to be well engaged in classroom learning and self-study. Quality monitoring could be

tokenism as it may change administrative behaviour of the teachers, not their professionalism. QA could be a guarantee of a quality programme/course/module delivered once it had been accredited, which may enhance the teachers' confidence in their teaching. Among quality initiatives, the teachers would want to improve subject knowledge and pedagogical skills through CPD such as taking university courses, participating research conferences or short training courses. Moreover, most of them believed in the importance of mentoring practices and informal talks/experience exchanges in improving quality in teaching as through the activity they could exchange classroom experience relating to student characteristics, personalities, capabilities, and learning styles; teaching approaches that worked for students; and their strengths and weaknesses.

From the students' perspectives, quality was acquiring usable subject knowledge - the students wanted to learn knowledge and skills that they could use for certain purposes such as reading materials, communicating technical/business/social issues. Moreover, they expected to have more opportunities to demonstrate and improve linguistic performance and confidence in using English outside the classroom. Although attaining institutionally applied outcome standards was an important learning goal for students as it influenced their possibility of graduation they did not accept the embodiment of quality in grade points/exam results. Quality monitoring for them was tokenism as their voices were not heard and responded to. For them, what was of greater significance for quality teaching and learning was the roles of teachers, materials, interactive learning environment, opportunities for regular language use, and their own roles.

### **Quality notions and assumptions underlying quality measures**

From a macro perspective, quality in ECS education meant targets management and fulfilment, targets being specified by HEIs on the basis of the government's broad benchmarking statements. As an 'Expanding-circle' (Kachru, 1985) country with regard to the status of English, the teaching and learning of the language in Vietnam clearly showed an instrumental orientation. Accordingly, the purpose of ECS education at university level was to produce English competent graduates that could learn and work in multi-lingual and multi-cultural environments. The case studies showed how an outcomes-focused approach to teaching, learning, assessment, and QM, which emanated from Western countries such as the US and UK, was introduced to the HE system in Vietnam. The HEIs I studied sought to define clear learning outcomes for ECS learners, assess learner performance, and assure the alignment between teaching and learning and assessment. It was also a public requirement that HEIs conducted internal and external quality assessment at institutional and programme level based on MOET's sets of criteria and standards. The mechanisms to monitor the establishment of ECS learning outcomes and how well they were assessed were embedded in the quality monitoring and evaluation of programmes and

institutions. In understanding the context for the case studies I found that quality in ECS education of the HEIs was judged against the institutions' progressing towards attaining objectives in the specific subject set forth by HEIs which centred around learners' achievement of pre-determined outcomes. The government employed objectives- and outcomes-oriented quality instruments to increase delegated responsibility for quality (Harvey, 2004). Quality in HE was shown in HEIs' conformance to institutionally specified goals and mission, and compliance with the government policies.

The message of quality in ECS education from the government as presented in public policies indicated a central focus on learners and learning outcomes. Possibly, this was because learners were at the heart of educational processes and the ultimate and important goal of higher learning institutions and quality mechanisms was to promote learning and to improve teaching and learning process for better student performance (Goldberg & Cole, 2002). Despite a hint of transformative quality (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996) in the government's statements of ECS learning outcomes in that learners' attainment of nationally defined ECS outcomes would bring about positive changes in learners' English language competence and career prospects, output orientation in both pedagogical and QM approaches represented an outstanding emphasis on quality as value for money and quality as fitness for purpose and the priority given to accountability as the main aim of the national quality schemes. The competences of graduates as ECS learning outcomes implied the purpose of ECS education and benefits in return of financial, time, and intellectual investment. The evidence-based QA meant the government wanted to see measurable and visible ECS learning outcomes through English test results, which may or may not be compared with the national descriptors of levels of attainment. Test scores allowed only limited aspects of learning achievements to be seen, such as linguistic knowledge or communication skills. Much was left unmeasured, for example, how ECS education may have caused change to students' critical thinking skills, how the institution empowered them in their learning process, how their intellectual ability and inspiration were nurtured for lifelong learning. Regardless of restrictions in quantifying student performance, learners' outcomes embodied in test scores/results were looked to as not only evidence of improvement in student learning but a means to demonstrate accountability to public and private monies and enhanced adaptability to the demand of the knowledge economy. The adoption of output control apparently seemed to be aimed at tackling combined concerns over quality in learning - the core mission of education establishments (Cruz et al., 2016) and financial accountability as well. Nevertheless, market-led and accountability-oriented QA tended to stress immediate and short-term benefits of HE, or economic values and professional development of the learners, leaving aside long-term contributions of educational processes to personal growth, mental wellbeing and physical health. Moreover, standards-based QAA culture endorsed quality as a minimum level of

attainment in learning outcomes, or quality as threshold standards. The government's standards-based quality schemes sought to assure basic quality - a threshold level in ECS learning for all students rather than stimulate excellence and diversity in learning outcomes.

Quality at the meso level was the realisation of political aims set forth for ECS education of HEIs. Accreditation schemes and output control were in place to assure quality as threshold standards in all aspects of HEIs. QA in ECS education was centrally focused on learners' accomplishment of minimum levels of English language proficiency, regularly presented in test scores. Output standardisation practices may differ across HEIs, which meant variation in level of outcome standards, instrument for testing standard achievement, and whether external validation of standards attainment was involved. The practice gave rise to compliance among teaching and non-teaching staff with the state regulations and conformity to national sets of criteria and standards, hence consistency and convergence in course/programme design and delivery in HEIs. This, to some extent, facilitated programme management within HEIs and for state governing bodies as well. An issue of concern was accreditation and quality-as-threshold-standards practices fostered homogeneity in ECS learning performance at basic levels instead of encouraging a full range of academic achievements. Course content, resources, teaching and learning arrangements, testing and assessment methods in the two study HEIs were all oriented towards learners' attainment of minimum ECS learning outcomes. This meant ECS learning was capped. Little space was left for support of further or continuous learning of English after ECS modules completion. Moreover, it could be costly and probably impractical to apply uniform outcomes for varied entry English capabilities within the same frame of training time. This could mean lost opportunities for graduation and jobs of those not being interested in English or English-related job positions. It seemed that insufficient attention had been paid to the relevance of English language education as a dimension of quality.

Output standardisation could be helpful in raising average learning performance since the pre-defined outcome standards were a target for all staff and students to move toward. The pursuit of performance indicators, however, caused certain pressure for HEIs, staff, and students. It led to changes in organisational and functional features of HEIs, reconstruction of curriculum, power struggle between institutional units, extra institutional processes, and added modules for under-competent students. HEIs needed to find ways for proper embedment of newly established QAA mechanisms, e.g., internal and external evaluation of institutions and programmes, so that collaboration and belief was enhanced among individuals concerning quality activities and their effectiveness. Worries about success rates in standards achievement for all students probably increased the chance of the provision of compromised quality, or the lowering of standards and/or corruption in testing and assessment to maximise graduation rates. This particularly applies to private HEIs of which student tuitions were the primary and almost only financial

resources. The pressure of outcome standards achievement together with QA for threshold standards resulted in a compliance culture in the classroom settings. In my study, the teachers ought to follow quite rigidly the teaching schedules, the teaching and learning was heavily materials-based and exam-oriented. Innovation and creativity in teaching and learning, thus, was impeded. Students may be well-prepared for exams in terms of linguistic knowledge and skills, yet opportunities were far below adequate for the formulation, development, and maintenance of linguistic habits and confidence in language use capacity during and after ECS learning experience.

In response to concerns over accountability, transparency was increased as regards quality of institutions and programmes. The two Vietnamese universities in this study abided by public policies in producing and publicising institutional resources for assuring institutionally stated quality. Quality meant making quality commitment and delivering promised quality. The Vietnamese government's expectation was that the introduction of accountability-oriented and market-like QM would keep the provision of ECS education at university level away from being just the business of the insiders. Efforts of HEIs in my study were yet elusive regarding the involvement of students or employers in the development, delivery, and/or adjustment of ECS programmes. The likelihood was that the market demand for English competent graduates had not been prudently investigated, either at the end of an academic course/programme or at the start of a course/programme design. Likewise, student feedback regarding ECS modules delivery was not gathered and processed systematically to be used for improvement purposes. Both teaching and non-teaching staff was sceptical about the objectivity and criticality in ECS learners' assessment of lecturer performance and what was going on in the classroom. Most lecturers were neither aware of nor fully engaged in QA processes both at institutional and programme level; in some cases, they were even indifferent to quality monitoring procedures and otherwise adhered to their teaching responsibilities. In the same way, students did not show much concern, indeed they were ignorant of QM practices including surveys of their feedback. They were less convinced by the contribution of customer-oriented QA to improvement in classroom experience than by the significance of the teachers' innate passion for and devotion to teaching and their own consciousness of learning.

Discussions with the research participants showed that quality was not the result of a single process or person. Quality in teaching and learning entailed responsibilities of the teaching staff, learners, and teaching and learning support staff. Assuring and enhancing learning and learning outcomes involved assuring quality of teachers, quality of teaching, and quality of the management decision and process. Qualified teachers and good teaching did not always result in good learning and/or learning outcomes, which is also mentioned in Cruz et al. (2016). Learners' capacity and motivation did matter. It was crucial to not leave out the importance of

infrastructure, teaching and learning resources, and financial resources. All processes and persons were interrelated and needed taking into account for QA and QE of ECS teaching and learning.

Undeniably, perceptions of and assumptions about quality and quality measures can never be talked of without relation to multi-layer contextual conditions; what needs emphasising is the influence of ideological and political views of quality as commonly found in quality discourses (Newton, 2002; Westerheijden, 2007) on quality conceptualisation and operationalisation in HEIs. Every institution in its evolution is desperate for a context relevant mechanism to assure and improve quality in every aspect of the institution, yet the conduct of quality schemes at the meso level is centrally monitored with guidance and regulations from the government. Notwithstanding the state plan of decentralisation in HE management, the government retains influence from a distance, that is, managerialism based on accountable autonomy (Harvey, 2004), objectives, and outcomes/results (Ronberg, 2011). Such state governance is widely practiced in the time of global HE massification, Vietnam being no exception, which is signalled by the unrestrained expansion of HE sector regarding the number of HEIs in both public and private sectors, and expanding varieties of courses offered and modes of study. It is essential that HEIs be accountable to the government, students, and employers, which means the provision of public information about quality of institutions and programmes, the responsiveness in academic courses to social and economic needs, and the conduct of quality assessment and accreditation. The state governing bodies provide HEIs with instruments for QA, i.e., guidelines for internal and external quality evaluation, but it is HEIs that use the instruments to their understanding and interpretation, and institutional conditions. Hence, quality practices arising from the government mandates convey quality messages underscored by policymakers while revealing the response and reaction of HEIs and individuals who are implementers regarding quality issues. Contingency definitions of quality show prioritised values and concerns in society and specific circumstances; likewise, certain assumptions about quality are embraced in quality schemes but not all dimensions of the quality concepts can find a place in formal quality processes and procedures in education establishments.

## **8.2 Contributions of the current research**

The study has contributed further understanding of the nature, rationales, and impact of quality and quality methods in education, specifically quality in English language education of VHEIs - which has been under-researched (Dawood, 2013; Thomas, 2003) notwithstanding the growing significance of the sector. Approaching the research problem at three levels - national, institutional, and individual - it offers not just contingent understandings of quality from multiple perspectives but the messages underpinning quality policies and practices in VHEIs in both the public and private sectors in the field. The multiple layers of contextual conditions direct attention

to worries of quality researchers and experts about possible malfunctions of quality measures that are transferred from context to context without thorough exploration into the quality concepts served by those measures (Blanco-Ramirez & Berger, 2014; Kells, 1999) and their appropriateness across education systems and sectors, and national backgrounds (Billing, 2004; Harman, 1998; Harvey & Williams, 2010; Kells, 1999). The study has contributed by addressing the contested question of the usefulness of quality activities for teaching and learning (Harvey & Newton, 2004), particularly for ELTL (Heyworth, 2013) at tertiary level. More accurately, it adds further knowledge on the relationship between quality mechanisms and key aspects of the complex teaching-learning processes, namely teaching, learning, assessment, and curriculum.

With regard to research methodology, survey design has dominated the few studies that attend to isolated factors/variables in purposes, effectiveness and impact of quality activities, e.g., Cruz et al. (2016). In contrast, my case study approach presented the link between quality mechanisms and the teaching and learning of English language in higher learning institutions in a holistic and rich picture (Denscombe, 2014; Meriam 1988, 1998; Thomas, 2011) that built up and shed light onto the phenomenon of interest from different angles in connection with national, institutional, classroom, and personal contexts. The inclusion of various voices and insights extracted from diverse data sources, semi-structured interviews and focus groups being the primary sources, facilitated a thorough, in-depth understanding of quality as a multi-dimensional, multi-level, and contested concept. Along with looking into the messages presented in public policy documents, the involvement of key actors in institutional management, quality activities, and classroom practices gave the means to exploring the whole process of localising and internalising state regulations and the interaction between actors and units at management and implementation levels in the embedment of quality measures into educational processes. Simply put, the multiple case study research utilising rich and thick data brought to light the complex phenomenon studied in its most completeness.

In addition, most prior studies, e.g., Walker (2001, 2003), Thomas (2003), and Piccardo (2014), explored relevant issues in English as native language contexts. The focus of my research has been EFL-based ELTL in an 'Expanding circle' (Kachru, 1985) country. Instrumental motivation is chiefly common among learners who do not have much opportunities for exposure to authentic sources or real-life communication outside the classroom environment. The need is unceasingly rising for English as a lingua franca in ASEAN countries (Kirkpatrick, 2012) of which Vietnam is a member, and as an instrument in social, academic, and work life in the global integration era, so it is worth paying attention to assuring and improving quality and understanding of quality and quality measures in English language education in the area. Specifically, my study has provided an insightful and rich picture of Vietnamese universities, and quality mechanisms for English language education and ELT classroom practices in there.

### **8.3 Limitations of the current research**

A major limitation of the study is its scope and scale. It was conducted with the involvement of one public and one private university in a country where QAA was in an embryonic stage of development, state governance being gradually decentralised, EFL being the context of ELTL. The applicability of the research findings, thus, may be confined to similar contexts. However, I endeavoured to maximise variation in attributes of participating institutions and individuals so that dimensions and aspects of the situation under investigation could be explored to the fullest. Moreover, thick descriptions of case studies have been provided to serve intentions of transferring and applying the research findings and implications to other settings. What I pursued in this study has been the diversity in ideas and concepts concerning quality and quality practices rather than (statistical) representativeness. It is strongly asserted in quality literature that there is no unitary concept of quality (Harvey & Green, 1993; Green, 1994); and likewise, there is no single quality scheme that works for all institutional/national contexts (Harman, 1998; Kells, 1999). The findings of this study fortify such statements. Quality perceptions are context- and stakeholder-contingent; institutions develop quality mechanisms and carry out quality measures relevant to institutional culture and QAA capacity/legitimacy. Hence, the case study approach should be promoted rather than being restricted in studies related to QAA practices.

Another limitation of the investigation is that cases were inevitably studied in a short period of time (five months). The exploration of quality conceptualisations in a single phase may have hindered the reflection on the dynamic and evolving characteristics of the phenomenon as Altbach et al. (2009) discuss. The use of semi-structured interviews and focus groups and my role as a researcher rather than an evaluator were useful and advantageous for free and open discussions of individual participants about what and how the quality mechanisms may or may not work for the institution and for themselves as part of the institution as well. Nevertheless, the research participants may have spontaneously brought up issues they had experienced, recent events or immediate impact of quality practices. The research-based conceptualisations of quality may not apply as time passes by changes may occur to purposes/values/benefits in English language education.

### **8.4 Implications of the current research**

These implications are drawn from the conclusions and limitations of this study. Firstly, researchers interested in quality policies and practices should always take into account social, economic, political, organisational, and personal conditions when conducting studies in the field. Quality issues cannot be explored out of either broad or specific contexts. This is because quality

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concepts have political dimensions and are closely linked to what is seen as values and benefits socially and personally. Moreover, educational establishments often implement quality measures under the influence of state governance and regulations, making certain adjustments to fit local circumstances and benefits.

It seems in this study that in Vietnam no evaluation or context-based study had been conducted prior to the adoption of quality initiatives such as output standardisation, OBE model, or quality accreditation/review (there was a pilot stage of external evaluation of HEIs around 2004/5 though). All HEIs had to comply with the government policies concerning measures as such for QA and enhancement in English education at tertiary level. Changes were made as a matter of compliance at lower level rather than being based on review and understanding at higher level of what was going on in the institution or classroom settings. It is suggested that *ex ante* investigations be made into purposes and impact of quality measures/models to assure/strengthen their effectiveness.

A more specific and practical suggestion for future research and for HEIs in quality initiatives implementation is to thoroughly investigate the need for English of university graduates, what the learners do with English during their learning process and after their graduation, and the learning needs of the students in English study. The conduct of quality measures and initiatives should take into account the relevance of education provided to the learners. This will help HEIs be responsive to learners-as-customers' needs in a realistic way. Moreover, HEIs' responses to stakeholders' feedback and recommendations should be publicly reported so that trust and belief is nurtured among stakeholders about their roles in quality issues and HEIs' responsiveness.

Another recommendation is for policymakers to produce regulations for monitoring HEIs' realisation of the OBE model and standards-based quality measures regarding English language education. HEIs should be answerable to the government for institutionally defined outcomes/standards, the reasons for moderation of outcomes/standards, assessment methods and grading practices. This is to assure the integrity of quality as standards, to prevent corruption practices at local level. As regards student learning improvement, attention should be paid to how opportunities are created in and outside the classroom for the formulation and maintenance of language habits and response for the learners. HEIs should link the target of fulfilling pre-defined objectives in ELTL or learners' achievement of outcome standards with that of developing learners' English language capacity and subject knowledge learnt applicability and their life-long learning skills as well.

For researchers and practitioners that are particularly concerned about quality in English language education, this study could be a good foundation for a comparative case study that involves both ESL and EFL contexts or a longitudinal case study. The former could be useful looking into the

differences and similarities in aspects, dimensions, and parameters that are emphasised in the two contexts regarding quality issues. The benefit could be deeper understanding of quality in English language education across ELT contexts. Meanwhile, the latter can help to be seen how quality concepts may evolve, which might be important because the prosperity of language and language education very much depends on foreign policies and political status of Vietnam/countries where the language originally developed. Moreover, quality measures applied may also be changed.

## **8.5 Final concluding statements**

Triggered by complaints about quality in ELTL in Vietnam in a web-based article: 'Students graduate English deaf and dumb after 16 years of study' (VietnamNet, 2011), I started my research journey to look into the meanings of quality and the messages behind the introduction of quality measures/initiatives. I have come to understanding that the focus in quality messages may differ from person to person, context to context, yet regardless from whom they come they are related to educational purposes and the applicability of the subject knowledge in contexts wider than the classroom settings. The employment of quality processes/models is unavoidable, particularly in the time of HE expansion as they are instruments for power struggle between the state and universities irrespective of HE and ELT contexts. A compliance culture at institutional and individual level could be a desired result specially for management purposes notwithstanding its conflicts with freedom in professionalism; outcomes-focus is an inevitable trend in evidence-based education. Purposes and objectives in education may vary depending on contextual conditions, quality may keep being equalised for context- and understanding-dependent practices. Nevertheless, there are values and dimensions that could be of common concerns which could form a basis for the establishment of a consensus at some reasonable level in quality conceptualisations and practices.



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## **Appendix A List of topic areas for semi-structured interviews with university heads**

### **Experience in their role**

1. How long they have been in their position as head of the university and their experiences
2. Their managerial/leadership styles

### **Information about the institution**

1. Organisational and functional structures of the institution
2. Institutional autonomy in finance and academic issues
3. Key people and/or units involved in quality management in general and in ELTL in particular
4. Number of English language teachers, their academic requirements, and plans for professional development

### **Quality mechanisms at institutional level**

1. System of internal/external methods having been used to assure and enhance educational quality of the institution as a whole as well as quality in ELTL
2. How often the institution goes through external quality evaluation, who involves, and what the institution do in the event/process
3. How often the institution implements internal quality processes, what methods are used, in which areas, to which units
4. The quality schemes for ELTL
5. How and how often staff receive training in quality assurance and management

### **Understanding of the CEFR**

1. When and s/he started approach the issues concerning the use of CEFR; how s/he came to his/her decisions regarding the introduction of the CEFR to the institution
2. How s/he understand the CEFR
3. How s/he got circulated and implemented the quality initiative using the CEFR
4. The extent/areas in which the CEFR has been applied
5. Any changes/modifications made to what is described in the CEFR
6. His/her thoughts/comments on the application of the CEFR

### **Understanding/interpretation of quality in ELTL**

What s/he thinks is meant/implied by quality in ELTL



## **Appendix B List of topic areas for semi-structured interviews with heads/teachers of English language department**

### **Experience in their role**

1. How long they have been in their teaching/managerial role
2. What they have been doing in their role as teachers of English language/heads of the department

### **Staff and resources of the department**

1. Number of English language teachers, their academic requirement, and plans for professional development
2. Teaching and learning resources (textbooks, reference materials, technology equipment, etc.)
3. Working environment for staff

### **Quality mechanisms at departmental level**

1. Rules and regulations of the department for quality in teaching and learning
2. Quality initiatives generated within the department
3. How and how often staff receive training in QA measures/models/frameworks

### **Experience and understanding of the institution's quality measures**

1. Methods the institution uses to assure and enhance the quality of ELTL
2. Areas being evaluated/inspected

### **Understanding of the CEFR**

1. How they got to know and got circulated/implemented the quality initiative involving the use of the CEFR
2. Areas in ELTL being applied the CEFR
3. Any changes/modifications made to what is described in the CEFR
4. Their thoughts/comments on the application of the CEFR and its purposes

### **Understanding/interpretation of quality in ELTL**

What they think is meant/implied by quality in ELTL



## **Appendix C List of topic areas for semi-structured interviews with ETM, QAA people**

### **Experience and understanding of quality management processes and procedures**

1. How long they have been working in the area of quality management
2. Their roles in their position
3. Their involvement/participation in the institution's quality management schemes/mechanisms
4. Internal and external quality methods being used for ELTL
5. How and how often staff receive training in quality assurance and management

### **Understanding of the CEFR**

1. How they got to know and got circulated and implemented the quality initiative involving the use of the CEFR
2. Their thoughts/comments on the application of the CEFR and its purposes
3. Challenges/benefits in implementing quality measures in ELTL, including the use of the CEFR
4. Any changes/modifications made to what is described in the CEFR

### **Understanding/interpretation of quality in ELTL**

What they think is meant/implied by quality in ELTL



## **Appendix D List of topic areas for focus groups with students**

### **Students' experience in English language learning**

1. How long they have been learning English
2. The focused areas of knowledge and skills when learning English

### **Students' motivation and objectives in English language learning**

1. How they came to decision to learn English
2. What they learn English for

### **Students' awareness of quality measures**

1. What they think generally as quality teaching
2. What they know and think as measures being used to ensure/enhance quality in ELTL
3. If and how often their classes are visited/inspected, randomly or on schedule
4. If, how often, and how their feedback is collected and dealt with

### **How students' needs are addressed**

1. If and how the institution learns and address their needs
2. How teachers learn about and support them in reaching their targeted objectives (contact hours with teachers, learning materials, how much time they spent for self-study, with whom)
3. Their thoughts on the institution's resources for ELTL as well as the teaching and learning materials used in classroom by their English language teachers

### **Students' understanding of the CEFR**

1. How they got to know about the CEFR
2. What they know about it
3. Their thoughts/comments on the application of the CEFR and its purposes

### **Students' understanding/interpretation of quality in ELTL**

What they think is meant/implied by quality in ELTL



## Appendix E Observation guide

Time duration:

Date/time of observation:

### Classroom physical settings

Name of class:

Number of students:

Classroom seating arrangement:

Facilities/equipment available and their condition:

### Major teaching and learning objectives

Linguistic competence level required/aimed

Language skills (listening/speaking/reading/writing)

Other skills to be developed (personal/(inter)cultural/occupational, etc.)

Areas of language knowledge covered (themes/vocabulary/grammar, etc.)

Areas of socio-cultural knowledge covered

### How stated objectives are obtained

Materials, resources, or audio-visual aids/facilities

Tasks/activities/situations involved

How students are assigned tasks/activities/situations (individual/group/whole class?)

How students deal with tasks/activities/situations

Learners' personality features/characteristics/backgrounds taken into account?

### Classroom interaction

Time	Types of classroom interaction		Tasks/activities/situations
1-10 <sup>th</sup> minutes	T		
	T-Ss		
	Ss-T		
	S-S		
11-20 <sup>th</sup> minutes	T		
	T-Ss		
	Ss-T		
	S-S		



## Appendix F Sample interview at Junior University

**Participant:** Tue-J-A

**Institution:** Junior University

**Interviewer: 4'16''**

First of all, can you tell me about your work experience?

**Tue-J-A: 4'30''**

I have been working in [.....] education and academic training management [.....], starting as [.....] and then [.....].

**Interviewer: 4'50''**

What duties have you taken in those positions that you think can be part of your institution's efforts in quality management, assurance, and accreditation?

**Tue-J-A: 5'06''**

As you know quality assurance and accreditation (QAA) has been given quite a lot attention and developed, to my thinking, systematically. It can be said that Junior University is one among member universities of Big University and which was an early goer in developing its QAA system and registering for program and institutional accreditation as well. Actually the institution has had some training programmes accredited and subsequently accreditation of the institution as a whole since 2009 following an old set of standards provided by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). We also have had three training programmes accredited based on AUN's standards ... three AUN level accredited programmes. Additionally, several programmes have been accredited at Big University level. Well, working in the field of management in education and training, my staff and I involve ourselves in the institution's QAA tasks such as writing up self-assessment reports, collecting documentation to help with the institution's accreditation processes. As for me particularly I had attended an accrediting skills training course in [...] before taking an examination held by MOET to get a quality assessor's certificate, and then was a board member carrying out external evaluation of two universities. That is about quality accreditation.

**Interviewer: 7'13''**

Can you say a bit more specifically about just your personal involvement in quality management and assurance in your institution?

**Tue-J-A: 7'31''**

Concerning the field...of quality assurance, there are various elements that make an institution's quality culture as well as quality assurance in education and training. Well, when it comes to [quality assurance in] foreign language education for example, I can tell you about some activities as follows: first of all it is Junior University's training programmes, we constructed, issued and have implemented outcomes-based curriculum frameworks since 2012. And following a CDIO approach, in those outcomes-based frameworks, we make very clear statements on outcome standards regarding learners' foreign language competency... In the descriptions of output standards, we provide specific details about required knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and positions that learners may take after graduation. Part of the frameworks is descriptions of learners' foreign language competency after graduation, for both majors and non-majors, being level 5 for the former – corresponding to C1 in the CEFR, and being level 3 – corresponding to B1 for the latter or those studying second foreign language. After announcing, then applying the

outcome standards, we have been carrying out a series of correlated actions. First of all, as you know to measure learners' foreign language competency we may use a number of measuring tools such as IELTS or TOEFL for those learning English, and for those learning other foreign languages ..... mostly we have equivalent international examinations. Nonetheless, as an institution, possibly speaking, in a leading position in Vietnam's foreign language education, Junior University is sensible of the need to create a set of tools for measuring learners' competency. And actually we designed a test format to be used for measuring level 5 of learners' competency in all foreign languages .... That was our first task. What I want to say here is to assure that learners have attained the stated outcomes we must have a measuring tool, so the first task was to create that measuring tool ... More specifically, groups of people in charge of testing issue were formed, test formats were designed, question items were generated, then came test item bank – test item bank for examinations validating [learners'] competency of level 5. In addition to that, the institution has built up sanctions, I think those sanctions play a very important role, as once you declare a statement of quality .... once the institution states that our products, or graduates whose foreign language competency must be at level 5, then it is a statement [commitment] to society about quality assurance. And to be able to do that, there must be a range of accompanying actions, the statement alone would not work. The first action lies with measuring tools as I mentioned earlier. The second action is sanctions for learners. That means if students cannot attain stated outcomes of foreign language learning they will not be granted with qualification, they will not be assessed for graduation. That is, it is one of the conditions for students to graduate, leaving Junior University and stepping out into society. And I think that is a sanction not every institution is applying. The reason is once appl ..... once such a statement is released, the institution itself has to face certain pressures concerning what can be offered to students while they are studying here to ensure their attainment of the predetermined foreign language competency. So, that is the second action – sanctions to assure quality regarding foreign language competency per se. The third action is teaching and learning activities to support learners in obtaining the standardised outcomes. As an illustration, if you look at any curriculum framework for foreign language programmes you will see certain amount of credit hours allocated to the block of Language practice skills – Listening-Speaking-Reading-Writing, and Junior University's curriculum frameworks consist of an average of about 134 credits of which 39 credits are administered to the block of Language practice skills, if normally a credit is assigned with 15 credit hours, that will mean if a subject is composed of 3 credits then 45 will be the number of face-to-face class hours for that subject, but with this block of Language practice skills in particular, Junior University uses a coefficient of class hour of 2, that is, to calculate face-to-face class hours the 39 credits is multiplied not just by 15, but by 15 then by 2, so the result will be about 1170 face-to-face class hours so that students can reach level 5 of competency. That is also a measure to assist learners with their attainment of outcome standards in foreign language competency. Those are something I can say quite broadly about foreign language majors. As regards foreign language as a compulsory subject there is a different feature, here I mean English language as a compulsory subject, as we – Junior University's teaching staff – teach English to the entire students of Big University, hence a common sanction is applied to them all, that is, graduates must have B1. Well, the institution has adopted some measures, one of which is input control – that is, students must reach a certain input threshold to be offered a place to study [modules of a foreign language] in the main course and to sit an exam – to complete all required modules and then sit an exam. To sift through the input we use a test, you can imagine, all

students entering Big University have to register to take an exam to see whether their foreign language competency is at level 2, only if being at level 2, or of A2 equivalent, then they will be enrolled to take a main 14-credit course before they can take another exam to be determined if they will have reached B1. Obtaining B1 means reaching the outcome standard required for non-foreign language majors. In case they do not get an A2 out of an input filtering test, they will attend intensive training courses, which will help them achieve the so-called input threshold as required to take main course modules [of a foreign language]. Those are some measures to ensure that Big University can apply the policy of output standards of foreign language competency on its students who must achieve B1 on graduation. This standardisation and sanction has been being applied since 2010, starting with student cohorts of 2010. And the institution is the first one applying that sanction regarding output standards of foreign language competency, and that sanction is the same as with foreign language majors as I mentioned earlier, that is, students of Big University will not receive their qualifications without achieving B1. That is a pressure for students, but at the same time being a commitment Big University makes to society. And we have such measures to help learners achieve the benchmark.

**Interviewer: 14'26''**

Thank you very much for your very detailed answer. Could you please tell me about your institution's organisational structure for quality assurance? What departments and units are involved in the institution's quality assurance mechanisms?

**Tue-J-A: 14'56''**

At present we have an independent centre called the Quality Assurance Centre. The centre's main functions include studying documents, giving instructions in quality assurance to other units. It is a lead in producing self-evaluation reports and registering for the accrediting of training programmes and the institution as well. The centre is also a lead that conducts various surveys, some of which are on annual basis, for example, surveys of student feedback on .... lecturers, which means getting students' feedback regarding their assessment of their lecturers and of the subject; and the second type of survey being to get students' feedback on training programmes, this survey is ... students' feedback on training programmes is normally ... collected from students in their last year of study before their graduation since that is the point of time they have gone through an entire circle of training, hence they can assess their training programmes. In addition, .... the centre is a lead in surveying feedback and assessment of other stakeholders on quality of students, for example, employers' feedback on quality of students. And our university also features a Student Office. The Student Office makes surveys of students' employment status. These surveys are paid a lot of attention as the institution always wants to know about their trained products – in what fields their graduates may work, whether that suits what they have been trained in, and their income. That's about evaluation and survey. Apart from that, our university's quality assurance is represented in that we have a unit of Inspectorate, this inspectorate plays the function of internal monitoring... the function of internal monitoring, that function is like this ... at the beginning of an academic year each unit has to develop a plan for the whole year – a plan of tasks for that academic year, and that task plan is discussed in the unit's staff meeting, and then after being agreed upon the plan will be submitted to the Vice Chancellor for approval, and the unit will carry out tasks according to the task plan approved by the Vice Chancellor. What's more, the institution maintains a mechanism of briefings, for example, quarterly briefings with the presence of all units within the institution, or monthly briefings with the presence of administrative units, or those that need more frequent connection among them

than with academic training departments. So, be it quarterly briefings, or monthly briefings, or meetings between the University Managing Board with relevant units, there are always conclusions, and those conclusions are presented with specific tasks accompanied with specific deadlines. And here comes the Inspectorate with a section doing the monitoring ... they will periodically take visits to and check how all units carry out the Vice Chancellor's conclusions, and how they implement their approved task plans. And by the end of an academic year, a review is always made based on approved task plans. For example, a plan is developed in block frames with work headings and expected results, and at the end there is a section of evaluation of whether the result of this task has been achieved, the progress has been timely due or not ... So, I think those are things that assure quality in many aspects of our institution.

**Interviewer: 18'33''**

As you have just said many units are involved in the process of managing and assuring quality. As far as I know the Quality Assurance Centre has been newly established and has just come into operation recently. Can you tell me about why your institution had to set up that centre and its functions and roles in the institutional process of managing and assuring quality?

**Tue-J-A: 19'13''**

Actually that centre ... it was formerly the Centre for Research in [.....] Education, then it played an additional function of quality assurance, so its name was changed into the Centre for Research in [.....] Education and Quality Assurance. Indeed when I moved to the [.....] Unit, that is in [.....], the centre already existed and carried out activities but around that time ... as I personally observed it was until 2009 or 2010 that quality accreditation in education appeared to ... it had ... everyone had become more aware of it and here I am talking about a common situation which was occurring all over the country and Big University, so I could see that around that period of time, of course, for example, the [Quality Assurance] centre in our institution – Junior University, was established before that time, and some programmes were accredited before that time, maybe in 2008 or 2007 and those programmes were accredited according to an old set of standards [criteria] developed by MOET. And regarding ..., that is ... but ... it is right as you said that over the past 5-6 years more importance has been attached to quality accreditation, it has become more important and particularly with Mr ... when Mr X. was appointed as the Vice Chancellor in [.....] he took it as a matter of special concern. And I think it matters because this is an inevitable trend, and it ... secondly it helps ... this is the one ... trend in quality culture, quality assurance of higher education institutions. And when we are involved in quality accreditation it seems that we know where we are being, what our strengths and weaknesses are, and also in that process some experts will come and give us support, they will point out our inadequacies or shortcomings, and they can offer some reasonable suggestions some practical measures to overcome those shortcomings. I think that is the first reason. But more importantly the second reason is when being involved in accreditation and being accredited ... following different sets of standards [criteria], it is a way of ranking ourselves, and a way of positioning ourselves as well as enhancing our brand value. For example, when a programme is accredited according to AUN standards it will create a so-called ... certain position for the university. I think those are the reasons for the work to have been being developed recently.

**Interviewer: 21'48''**

Besides following an inevitable trend, do you see any circumstances or special conditions based on which your institution stresses the importance of quality assurance?

**Tue-J-A: 22'11''**

I guess I do. The two reasons I've just mentioned in reality may sound objective [externally led], but if you do not have right-minded perceptions towards the work then ... it will be definitely just a matter of complying with formalities. In fact, I reckon that quality accreditation in our institution is implemented .... for real, and it was ... at first, of course at the start probably everyone's psychology was like ... they seemed to not understand why it was required that documentation be collected or kept, right? Because the culture previously was not to keep documentation, and many things had been done without any documentation left, for example ... for example, meeting conclusions, as I just mentioned a few minutes ago, we had meetings and then carried out tasks but we might not make conclusions, so no evidence of such activities was left. After ... the years ... the early years kicking off with quality accreditation, almost all units were complaining, being not sure about the reasons for collecting and storing documentation, and why the entire institution was driven into doing the work, which appeared to ... take much time. But gradually people have become well aware that by getting involved in the work they can look at it more objectively and they are more sensible of ... storing evidence of the tasks they have done, and more importantly, they know how to evaluate their work. And after any accreditation process ... for example after the release of an external evaluation report which contains an action plan, our institution will develop an action programme based on the action plan as recommended by the external evaluation board as well as what we proposed to do in our self-evaluation report. I think in the early days of its implementation people may have some reaction against that practice, but when senior leaders see it as a practical activity and that it helps enhance quality, quality in general, quality in all aspects ranging from training, research, student services, to institutional administration, and when it is perceived as a way, a measure to enhance quality of the institution everyone will take part in the activity more voluntarily. And now I realise that work is being carried out almost naturally [without resistance] in our institution ... it is grounded ... in fact it is grounded in internal reality, with some intrinsic desire for improvement, for increasingly assured quality, and for a more skilful performance of the institutional system. That is the first reason, then comes the other two.

**Interviewer: 25'06''**

So since its early days in management, assurance, and accreditation of quality, your institution has made certain progress in the field. Can you tell me about training activities in this area in your institution?

**Tue-J-A: 25'29''**

Regarding activities in quality assurance ... we have joined quite many, as I have just shared with you. We registered for institutional accreditation ... institutional accreditation ... before that we ... even at a time when MOET organised some board called ... I don't remember what exactly it is, but it is something to do with like post-accreditation, that is, the institution had gone through several cycles of accreditation, and in 2015 it was accredited according to MOET's new set of criteria. And presently it is one among 10 institutions all over the country that has had the recognition – the recognition of quality based on that kind of evaluation. That is the first activity. The second one is applying for accreditation of training programmes, as I have just said, three of our programmes have received the grant of accreditation at AUN level, and several others were accredited at Big University level and in [internal] peer reviews. The third one is staff training in accreditation. For example, in the course of a programme accreditation, of course training in quality accreditation must be provided to the academic training department, and instructions

given to them on related work, on how to write a self-assessment report, etc etc... Or in case of institutional accreditation all units must join to write a self-assessment report and to gather documentation. An additional activity is to send staff to courses to be trained as assessors. For example, on my part, when I received ... when I was informed of such training courses held by Big University's Accreditation Centre, I sent a request to the institution [to undertake the course] and the institution paid the costs for my training. That is just an example of my own case. And I think that is one of the activities that contribute to enhancing our institution's quality capacity.

**Interviewer: 27'14''**

I'm really interested in what you've just said. As far as I know an institution normally would just send staff of a quality assurance and accreditation unit to professional training courses. So can you tell me why you made that request for your training and how the training course has helped you in fulfilling your roles in this unit in relevance to your institution's quality management and assurance?

**Tue-J-A: 27'57''**

The reasons ... the reasons for my application for that training course include ... firstly, when I joined to write self-assessment reports and work on those sets of accreditation criteria that's when I had to study related documents and I found those criteria sets ... very ... that is, all aspects of an institution are covered, so I longed to learn about those aspects. Secondly, ... working in academic training management ... I believe this sector is the backbone of an institution, particularly in Vietnam academic training is still a major sector beside academic research and service activities ... that contribute to society, academic training is still the mainstream. So I want to somehow from my perspective with better understanding of the institutional system get back to better and more skilfully manage and implement training activities. That's why I signed up for that course. And I received a supporting response as the institution's senior leaders are really open in seeing things, and ... they also give encouragement, and I do think that leaders of academic training departments should also join such courses since with a holistic view, a systematic view, and with understanding of culture of quality assurance they will do their jobs, they will manage and operate the system more skilfully and professionally

**Interviewer: 29'30''**

As you have just said, academic training sector is the backbone of an institution, can you tell me more specifically about the role of the academic training management unit in the institution's quality management and assurance?

**Tue-J-A: 29'51''**

Actually I said that academic training is the backbone of an institution because of the fact that it is presently an activity that can be said to be a main activity of the institution. Within our institution, training activities are divided into different sections for different types of students, and that section division is for the purpose of management, for example the Postgraduate Department is to manage postgraduate training, and our unit of education and academic training management is for full-time undergraduate training only, and other sections for international joint training, in-service training, etc. Well, with full-time undergraduate training for example, of course there are many factors contributing to the assurance of quality implementation of academic training activities, right? For example, teaching staff, infrastructure, curriculum, coursebooks, learning resources, teaching methods, and testing and assessment. So, with functions and responsibilities assigned to our unit there are tasks wherein we directly offer consultancy to the Managing Board and work in cooperation with academic departments. For example, in academic programme

development, beside good implementation of existing programmes it's required that new directions be searched so that new programmes can be developed or that current programmes can be better delivered in some way like adding or leaving out some modules for a match with social needs ... to achieve those aims consultancy and cooperation are required between our unit and academic departments. Secondly, in opening a new course its development must adhere to procedures and regulations, and within those procedures it is of considerable importance to get feedback from relevant stakeholders, for example, inviting enterprise representatives or alumni to give their feedback and recommendations on academic programmes ... on draft academic programmes. That is one thing – academic programmes. Another thing lies with coursebooks. Whenever it comes to this matter, reviewing is a must, and other steps need also to be followed, for example, developing a plan for forming new coursebooks. It is not our unit that produces the materials, that is a job assigned to academic departments, but what matters is that we collaborate with them in bringing about a good plan, and after their materials design is done, we arrange for acceptance evaluation of the materials and support them in procedures for publications. Well ... all above ... from the perspectives of those working in [.....] Unit we not only manage but collaborate with people, managing doesn't mean holding a whip to ... push other units, but what's important is you have a holistic view, and you collaborate with and assist other units in the operation of this sector.

**Interviewer: 32'34''**

So your unit not only plays the function of your institution's backbone but is a point connecting with units and departments in managing and assuring quality. Can you tell me some more details about the so-called cooperation between your unit firstly with the Centre for Research in [.....] Education and Quality Assurance, and secondly with academic training departments in the management, assurance, and accreditation of quality. First of all, can you tell me about the link and collaboration between your unit and the Centre for Research and Quality Assurance?

**Tue-J-A: 33'27''**

Actually the connection among units in our institution is quite ... that is, within a system ... of course there is connection, but what I'd like to add here is our institutional culture, which is ... possibly speaking the one of sharing and friendliness, hence cooperation in work, in principle is a must, but we have an additional factor of .. quite friendly an environment so everything goes quite smoothly. And well, the cooperation between our unit and that centre is ... of course shown revolving around issues of quality assurance. Take academic programme development. It is possible to get feedback through that centre when draft programmes are available, the centre can help get feedback from relevant stakeholders ... or once the centre has collected recruiters' feedback on our alumni, they will send us those feedback for reference, or ... by reference I meant with those feedback we can ... add or remove some content that we may offer our students, or ... when we carry out a new task, for example, we recently have made a review, checking the compatibility between output benchmarks and classroom activities, to do so we have to make instructions, and the two units have to cooperate to produce a draft guideline to be sent over to academic departments. So that's the collaboration between the two units. And of course in the course of an accreditation as a unit of our institution we will join to do our part.

**Interviewer: 35'19''**

What about the collaboration between your unit and academic departments?

**Tue-J-A: 35'25''**

Academic departments are units that literally conduct programmes, for example, in organising modules, composing coursebooks, designing syllabuses ... or in arranging for testing and assessment, setting up [teaching and learning] schedules, etc. etc... academic departments and our unit are closely linked, and in addition ... normally at the beginning of every academic year we have briefings on academic training with academic departments whereby we develop training plans, focal training plans for the year. Besides, when academic departments request for support, for example, when a new regulation comes out there can be ... a meeting to introduce that new regulation and to provide departments with instructions for implementation. Or in case of documents that need cooperation for their development, academic departments will cooperate for task fulfilment.

**Interviewer: 36'26''**

Well, so, academic departments are those conducting training programmes as well as assuring quality in education and training. How does your institution introduce quality measures and models to teaching staff and academic departments?

**Tue-J-A: 36'55''**

As regards quality models ... for example ... through events of institutional accreditation academic departments engage with models and measures of quality assurance, or departments that have gone through programme accreditation have really absorbed culture in quality assurance and accreditation. What's more, information about quality assurance activities is introduced to staff via channels such as institutional briefings or staff meetings. Especially our institution has our own website, and internal communication channels, or internal newsletter, that is, newsletters are released quarterly, these channels help departments, particularly teaching staff, access information.

**Interviewer: 37'56''**

With those communication methods, to your own feeling and thinking, what is teaching staff's current awareness and perceptions of the so-called quality, quality culture, as well as quality measures and procedures?

**Tue-J-A: 38'16''**

I think lecturers to some extent know about that. However ... to say impartially they can't ... can't have a systematic view, and ... for example, probably lecturers may not know about getting feedback from ... from recruiters on quality of students, that is, they don't ... they don't know about that activity, and they have no sense of the role and importance of that activity. Presently lecturers can receive students' feedback on academic subjects, that is, I'm talking about delivering and gathering student survey questionnaires, then processing online, then comes the results which are subsequently sent directly to each lecturer, after reading the results lecturers may make some changes in their teaching methods and lecture content. Well ... that way they ... some how get involved directly with the practice. Concerning other activities they may by this way or the other recognise changes occurring in the institution but they may have no clue if that is part of the so-called quality assurance practice or institutional culture in quality assurance. So with lecturers I think in some aspects they may ... probably need more comprehensive information. For example, this is what's just come to my mind, it's really hard to call in all lecturers for a talk about that, but heads of academic departments may help ... as I've just said it would be good if departments' heads can join training courses in accreditation since that would mean they would have more holistic views, and they ... their sense of quality culture would be strengthened. Hence ... they would take responsibility to pass that information on to their departments. That

could be one way. Another measure could be something like ... organising some little competition so that lecturers may have chance to learn about that issue, and they would ... I think those measures may have good effects because ... I believe the very first thing to assure quality lies with awareness, awareness comes first, and lecturers understand its importance, and they wouldn't say things like "well, this takes too much time, what do we do this for, I was doing my job well without its presence", in case they do say it there will be no change.

**Interviewer: 41'12"**

So does your institution have any measure to evoke deeper understanding in lecturers of relevant documents or certain procedures in quality assurance and accreditation?

**Tue-J-A: 41'35"**

Well, as I've just said it's through channels as I've just mentioned, and it's included in ... in institutional documents there is a statement that reads "heads of units are kindly requested to inform all your staff", so they [heads of units] can do that by forwarding emails or sending the document to their units' joint email address, asking everyone to read, but whether or not they may read is not known, right? So I think of the greatest importance is heads of units and departments, once they are aware of its significance and they learn about the issue or they are trained in that issue they will feel the need to ... because once we have learnt about something new and we feel it's useful we normally want to share the information with other people, and if the institution requires that after a training course you be responsible for passing on the information to your units' staff, heads of departments may then come up with more interesting ways of transferring the information to their staff.

**Interviewer: 42'44"**

You have just talked about quality measures. What do you think about their impact on teaching staff?

**Tue-J-A: 43'33"**

I think firstly ..., for example, students' feedback on an academic subject, well ... its impact could be lecturers become sensible to more interesting and effective delivery of their lecture content, particularly for those lecturers with self-improvement when they get learners' feedback they will surely have some thought like ... some lecturers themselves even conduct surveys on students in their classes at the end of a module before the institution makes surveys of students' feedback on academic subjects. Since it's something done, I think, in the interest of self-improvement, that is, to know if the teaching methods they have used with the class and the course content is appropriate or not, what's more that learners need for improvements in course content as well as its quality, I think then that quality measure may cause some impact but at the same time add impetus for lecturers to make changes. Another measure, for example, getting employers' feedback on former students, I would say, has not much to do with direct influence on lecturers, but departmental managers would be those being able to see what their former students may have missed out on and what their further needs can be. And that kind of information is available to us especially as those working in education and training management or those in Student Office. In response to such information, some course may be developed, for example, a course to provide students with supplementary skills. Or if survey results show that our students lack practical experience, departments' leaders will build activities into existing course content so that students can get acquainted with more real-life situations, some of which could be visiting business establishments, inviting employers to seminars or to give talks on future job prospects, etc. etc. ... just some examples of what we can do to increase the chance for our students to get

familiar with the outside world while having lectures in university instead of just sticking to their own academic circle.

**Interviewer: 46'10''**

What about the influence of using tools for measuring students' foreign language competency on teaching staff and their teaching?

**Tue-J-A: 46'21''**

That is a very good question because in fact, under the pressure of output benchmarking we promptly build into existing programmes a subject which can help learners get used to test formats and which may include practices and exam revisions as a way to support them in their benchmark attainment. So ... but... that does not mean all subjects will be focused only on the target of getting required outcomes because ... that is not the only one purpose of a training programme, rather that is just one among multiple purposes. Well, that is ... what our institution ... if no such subject was offered to help learners reach ... to help them get familiar with test formats and reach outcome standards ... perhaps lecturers may integrate such content into their lectures, or they even organise their own revision classes, right? Recognising such issues, our institution developed a separate subject to offer support to learners with their required competency achievement.

**Interviewer: 47'32''**

Besides providing foreign-language-as-a-major programmes, your institution takes responsibilities for teaching foreign language to member universities of Big University. And it is depicted in Guideline X that your institution is responsible for assuring quality of such foreign language training. So, how does your institution ensure the quality and how does it cooperate with the member universities in joint foreign language training?

**Tue-J-A: 48'14''**

Ehm, it's right as you've said as regards joint foreign language training we've Guideline X, which is a new document, and the release of which arose from real processes. More specifically ... as I've just said, Big University has, since 2010, been applying a common sanction regarding benchmarking in foreign language competency among its entire students, that is, their B1 achievement, and Junior University is entrusted with course delivery as well as organising examinations to evaluate learners' capacity before their graduation. In doing so, Junior University cooperates with the other member universities in many ways. A first example is the number of credit hours. Although it is a 14-credits programme, Junior University has allotted far more contact hours than that – nearly 1.5 times regular hours, to help learners achieve the required competency. The collaboration is also shown in that the member universities organise classes for students having not reached the benchmark and ask Junior University to teach in support of students then Junior University will be happy to give assistance. So over ... probably from 2010 to 2016 ... that is, 5-6 years in implementation a number of drawbacks were shown, for example, small percentage of target achievers, many students were lagging behind the standards ... of course some institutions gained high success rate but for some the proportion of students achieving the outcome standard was not that high, and a pressure almost invisible was put onto students. So what caused those problems? – It was unequal students' input, some students are at very low entry level of foreign language competency, so if the same programmes were run the institution could not ensure that the standards will be met. It should be okay if students in a class are at a level matching the course content developed by Junior University, but if students of far lower capacity are also seated in that class, not only they would not be able to take in anything

but the lecturer and the other students would be affected since the lecturer cannot ignore them. That is the one thing. So ... through a time coping with those issues, we made recommendations for the formulation of Guideline X, the key point of which, as I said, is input control, that is, filtering students' input to ensure they are at A2 before being enrolled in a 14-credit course and only by doing that can we assure their B1 output achievement, in case you have not reached A2 level, you have to attend intensive courses. That is the one thing. The second thing is, an appropriate policy, I think, that gives facilitation to learners, that is, granting students with exemption from course attendance and enrolment, for example, when entering the university with B1, even B2 or C1 students are exempted from course attendance and they get a score of 10 for the three modules, and exemption also means the institution does not charge students for the course costs, that is, all in all offering most favourable conditions to learners. If there is no such exemption policy, they will be charged for costs and attend the course while their capacity far exceeds their classmates, and that would also mean a waste of time. So, I think there are various measures, and what I've just mentioned belongs to mechanisms. A solution, for example, concerning teaching staff, is that Junior University has a separate department offering English language education among all members of Big University, and that department's staff are frequently provided with professional training for the most appropriate and up-to-date teaching methods.

**Interviewer: 51'59''**

Are you talking about the English Language Department?

**Tue-J-A: 52'02''**

Yes, I am

**Interviewer: 52'03''**

Does your institution send your lecturers to the member universities? Can they invite lecturers from some other institution?

**Tue-J-A: 52'15''**

No, once Big University states that Junior University is responsible for all General English Modules, the other member universities will ... for instance, the mechanism for cooperation is very simple, that is, each institution will ask students to enrol, set up a timetable for them and then they will send that timetable together with an invite to Junior University and Junior University will send lecturers over from English language Department

**Interviewer: 52'46''**

Are they allowed to get lecturers from other institutions?

**Tue-J-A: 52'52''**

Usually not, usually they are not allowed to do so with programmes approved and managed by Big University.

**Interviewer: 53'00''**

We may have heard a lot about quality in foreign language education in general and quality in English language education in higher education institutions in particular. If you are requested to define quality in English language education in higher education institutions, what would you say? What is quality?

**Tue-J-A: 53'37''**

Defining quality or assessing ...

**Interviewer: 53'40''**

Defining quality, and more specifically defining quality in English language education in higher education institutions

**Tue-J-A: 53'45''**

If ... if I have to define the so-called quality in English language education in higher education institutions I would define it as ... that is ... a tool measuring quality, I guess it would be learners' competency, and that competency must be presented in all 4 skills listening-speaking-reading-writing, and they must achieve certain standard, ehm... that is, I don't care how talented and skilful your teaching staff could be, what your up-to-date coursebooks are, or how well your infrastructure may satisfy the needs as they are just necessary and sufficient conditions. What matters most when talking about quality ... if you say you offer high quality English language education to your students, you must show your evidence which is presented in that your students, after graduation, are capable of using the language well at a certain proficiency level, well, I think, quality in foreign language education at tertiary level is measured by learners' competency after course completion.

**Interviewer: 54'40''**

You've just mentioned learners' use of foreign language after course completion, what do you think about learners' need for using a foreign language after they get their qualifications and complete language courses in universities?

**Tue-J-A: 54'59''**

At present, for foreign language majors for instance, their inescapable need is to become competent users of their first foreign language, but as for their second foreign language, the majority of them choose English [other than other languages] as their second language but that choice is totally up to them, and I think they will need English – their second foreign language – for their jobs. As with non-English majors being competent users of a foreign language, I think, is an inevitable trend. So if the institution does not ... because to create educational products with high competitiveness at the labour market, of course you may have different approaches ... and methods to help your learners gain greater competitiveness, but ... if all educational establishments see foreign language competence as a breakthrough or one of the strengths of their learners then I think that would be a brilliant breakthrough because in this stage of great integration it's trendy that all positions, particularly those related to information technology, economy, commerce, tourism, restaurants, or hotels, or even basic sciences require foreign language capacity. Here, with regular undergraduate programmes the target set is B1, but B2 is the target set for those undertaking advanced programmes. Whatever programme they may undertake, they need to have a very basic level of competence of a foreign language. So ... once an institution has determined that foreign language education should be a breakthrough in their training programmes, they should take into account measures to support learners in their attainment of better foreign language capacity, for example, arranging intensive English courses for them, intensive courses before not after B1 achievement, not intensive courses for A2-target learners as I talked about previously but those courses for standard achievers. This is because many students may meet an outcome standard after their first year, so in their later three years if they don't learn any subject in English or if there are no intensive English classes then on graduation their English capacity will be almost lost. Therefore, nowadays education establishments' ... senior leaders firstly need to see foreign language as a breakthrough and next they need to think about measures. What are they then? For example, delivering some subjects in English, organising above B1 target intensive classes for which students can enrol and pay fees, or

offering short student exchange programmes, or sending students overseas for short-term study courses, etc. etc. of course students will pay but the institution needs to develop such activities to create opportunities for learners. So, I think that is called ... that is, those measures will contribute to greater competitiveness for products of educational establishments.

**Interviewer: 58'34''**

Besides satisfying labour market demand why do you think learners need to learn English?

**Tue-J-A: 58'44''**

Learning English, besides meeting social needs, of course may add various values to learners. For example, studying a foreign language is usually described as living an additional life as we learn about another culture, which is very interesting, right? Learning English also means getting to know Westerners' logical reasoning, which may help us in considering and dealing with daily tasks. So, in addition to helping us expand our knowledge, our foreign language capacity can bring us additional values which not only mean potential job opportunities but make our lives more dynamic and lovely, right? That's what I can see. So, first of all senior leaders of the member universities need to recognise its importance. Secondly, with students, we need to make sure by some how that they don't see a foreign language as a monster. Well, you know, students sometimes are scared of foreign language learning as in high school they could not develop any interest in it, and they continue to be more scared when they know that they have to achieve B1 as their outcome, and they ... will find out some way to get the achievement, but once they are done with it that would be like a burden relieved. Learners may find a foreign language as something scary and awful, so if we cannot break that way of thinking, quality in our foreign language education will reach no where. The reason is, even if our learners have reached B1, but as I said, by the time they leave university and start to get their hands on their work their B1 has been lost, nothing left. Therefore, we must do something to encourage learners' interest and ... develop their self-study ability and self-improve their competences. I think this is important.

**Interviewer: 60'50''**

You also mentioned learners' targets and needs. As a person working in an education and academic training management unit, or as a provider of educational services, you may look at learners' targets and needs in your own way, but learners may think about their targets and needs their way. What has your institution done to learn about students targets and needs?

**Tue-J-A: 61'22''**

We normally use questionnaire surveys or on their enrolment dates we may give them a piece of paper with questions like "why did you choose to learn a foreign language?" ... or when delivering lectures probably lecturers may also use questionnaire surveys. Through those channels we learn that some students may have very clear purposes for their studies, like learning a foreign language to develop personal capacities or to have brighter career prospects whereas some study it just because it is mandatory to. However, we haven't done anything like systematic inspection of learners' needs and targets.

**Interviewer: 62'16''**

If that is the case when you learn about students' targets and needs, how can you know how well their needs are satisfied and their target achieving supported?

**Tue-J-A: 62'27''**

Regarding meeting learners' needs I think we have initially done the job quite well because firstly when they ... or ... this is not just about learners' own targets, as leaders at different levels of Big University set B1 target for graduates, measures described in Guideline X do have positive effects.

Input control through input filtering and placement examination is done rigorously and strictly on all 4 skills, so students will have no way to get their foreign language competency certificates other than truly engaging in studying for real and strict examinations. I think that is the way.

**Interviewer: 63'19''**

As you said, self-study is quite important particularly for those studying in universities. What does your institution do to enhance students' self-study?

**Tue-J-A: 63'46''**

Ehm, to do so the English Language Department combines classroom-based lecture delivery with online classes where students can participate in forums or they may post their speaking or writing assignments. Other activities, not being testing and assessment, that may enhance learners' interest in foreign language learning include English singing contest, Golden Bell Quest, gala events, English Language Clubs, etc. etc.

**Interviewer: 64'39''**

Can you share with me some of your own thoughts about the MOET's target, that is, B1 achievement being a condition for graduation? What do you think about its relevance and feasibility?

**Tue-J-A: 65'12''**

I believe that benchmarking is absolutely reasonable, that is definitely an appropriate policy, and the target is practically feasible, particularly when foreign language education at secondary level is advancing well. It's absolutely reasonable to require that students reach B1 or level 3 on graduation. It's reasonable in a condition that their entry competency is A2. As for those below A2 level, MOET already gave instructions on organising intensive English classes, either ex-ante or ex-post. For example, if Guideline X is applied in Big University then intensive classes are ex-ante, which can be explained as follows: my determined standard is B1 but your entry is lower than A2 so A2-target intensive classes will be delivered before you can enrol in your main course. Meanwhile, ex-post intensive classes mean you can enrol to attend classes which could be of different competency levels and then just sit an exam, if you cannot pass to get B1 you will subsequently join intensive classes to study for your B1 target. Based on that legal framework and guideline, it is legal to organise intensive English classes, what matters is how educational establishments bring them into practice. Another thing that is also very important is ... the validity and reliability of tests. For example, you may require B1 but if tests and testing are organised and taken internally and no one can verify whether they can measure B1 of test-takers then no problem is solved, the regulation the institution announced is for nothing, the organising of the examination is just something done as complying with legalized procedures [formalities]. So, what I want to say here is, that B1 target requirement is appropriate and feasible, and we have legal frameworks for its implementation, and here comes what matters – how do institution implement B1 target policy? If you see this as an opportunity for your learners to gain added values and great competitiveness when they join the work force, and also as opportunities for their better jobs, then you will implement the policy rigorously and with seriousness. If you just see this as merely a regulation which needs to abide by, and you just stay there ... of course you will do it but no one can verify its quality.

**Interviewer: 67'41''**

As a person actively involving in your institutional quality mechanisms and working in collaboration with academic training departments, what do you think about English teaching staff's sense of quality and quality assurance in English language education?

**Tue-J-A: 68'28''**

As far as I know, in general lecturers are all aware of their roles and responsibilities, and as part of Big University staff they have pressures in doing research ... nevertheless, there is still something having not done yet, for example, getting students' feedback on lecturers, that is, the member universities may make student feedback surveys but not for English language subject, whenever our institution works with the member universities we do request that when they conduct surveys of students feedback on subjects they should also get feedback on those subjects taught by lecturers from other institutions and send results to lecturers. Perhaps they start to do that from this academic year ... Actually lecturers teaching classes at Junior University may get students' evaluation and feedback, but when teaching at the member universities they may or may not, in most cases not, I think that is a point we need to get changed.

**Interviewer: 69'49''**

Thank you very much for spending time with me and all the information you have just shared with me in this interview.

**Tue-J-A: 70'19''**

Thank you.



## Appendix G Sample interview at Fortress University

**Participant:** Uyen-F-A

**Institution:** Fortress University

**Interviewer: 3'33''**

Can you tell me about your education background before you worked in the education and academic training unit of your institution?

**Uyen-F-A: 3'51''**

[.....] after graduation I was recruited, initially as [.....] of Fortress University and later [.....] and since then have been an official of the [.....] unit, along with doing administrative tasks I play the role of a lecturer.

**Interviewer: 4'58''**

You currently play a dual role, one being official of [.....] unit and the other lecturer, don't you? How do you manage your time to do your jobs then?

**Uyen-F-A: 5'20''**

Yes, I am an administrative official playing an additional role of a lecturer. Actually I have to spend the entire working days doing administrative tasks, the time I have for teaching normally ... to be honest, I dare not take many classes, just about one class per semester, [.....] so my teaching job would not affect too much my administrative duties. What's more, to give lectures actually I have to spend most of my free time on teaching duties such as preparing for lectures, testing, marking, or assessing students

**Interviewer: 6'16''**

Taking duties of both an official and a lecturer, can you tell me about your involvement in your institution's quality assurance mechanisms with regard to your two positions?

**Uyen-F-A: 6'46''**

With that question I'd first of all talk about my duties in [.....]. As an official of [.....], my responsibilities are as follows: I'm firstly responsible for managing academic programmes of the institution. Managing may sound big but actually my duties include implementing, changing, adjusting, and developing new academic programmes, and opening new courses of study. I do these tasks in collaboration with academic departments and sections, building plans, programmes, new course projects ... and updating and adjusting existing programmes as required by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). According to MOET's most recent regulations, i.e. since 2015, programme adjusting has been done more often, periodically, hence brought into annual work plans. My second job is concerned with assurance ... that is, I'm assigned to join a quality assurance task group, specialising in education and training management, [.....]. My responsibilities in this task group are based on the coordination of the team ... Accreditation Unit, which include collecting documentation, editing and writing accreditation report on the institution's education and training ... or more exactly a part of it – academic programme management. My third job is to verify qualifications. Basing on the institution's graduate and training database we offer verification service to alumni and employers and agencies if they send a request. Their purpose, you know, is to check if you really were a student of Fortress, if your qualification is fake or genuine. My fourth job is to deal with my unit's paperwork. This is a routine involving receiving requests from students and academic

departments, receiving official documents then sorting them out and distributing them ... to the right officials so that things are handled promptly. Those are my main responsibilities in this unit, some may be done more frequently than the other but basically I do my tasks and duties following yearly plans. A typical feature of my duties, particularly in academic programmes managing, is that they are done with lots of dependencies. Although involving in a management job, what I'm doing is more like administrative and procedural management, that is, I give supervision and instructions on programmes and course content via official documents to academic departments, I cannot take the responsibility of ... I cannot intervene in their professional work which lies with departments' heads, sections' heads, departments' education science boards, and the institution's education science boards, my management task is to make things happen systematically, following a fixed file format, and in accordance with state regulations. In addition to that ... Those are my responsibilities in this [.....] unit. Another task that I'm currently doing ... I was initially recruited as [.....] then transferred to [.....] unit ... so I belong to ... well now within Fortress University as it is a private institution ... I ... my position is ... well, [.....] ... so I'm not bound by prescribed standard teaching hours, normally I just take within a range of 45-90 periods per semester, I dare not do more than that as otherwise it may not fit my roles. Since I do administrative work, all duties related to teaching I have to fulfil as out-of-hours ones, well, duties like preparations for lecture delivery. Like other lecturers I have to teach as what has been described in a detailed syllabus, make teaching schedules, develop and design lectures, update information, keep informed of new teaching methods, suit teaching methods to students who are more and more quality and ... who have changed in their nature and transformed in their quality. Probably in the past ... a simple example is students used to ... how to say ... they used to be studious and diligent but they were quite passive, passiveness in knowledge receiving whereas students of present generation – just by a three years gap, differ in their nature and quality, I mean, they are presently more active, more independent and autonomous. Therefore, adjustments ... need to be made in many aspects of teaching, which include firstly changing attitudes towards students, and secondly adapting lecture content and teaching methods. Regarding the former ... actually I'm nearly entering my middle age and together with the education I received in my old days, what stay deeply in my mind is a teacher-student relationship that was much different than a present one. Previously if teachers said 1 students dared not say 2 but now it has changed. Therefore, we have to learn the so-called ... how to dialogue with students and to make changes in ... that is, when students have changed we need to make necessary adjustments for their benefits. So, that's what to do about relationship with students in the classroom. The second thing that need to be changed concerns knowledge and teaching methods. Nowadays, information can be accessed in numerous ways, to say in a funny way, if you can google can your students, you may be able to give a talk about certain things but you never know if your students may have learnt about them. Hence, lecturers must be extremely proactive in keeping their knowledge up to date ... and only by doing that thoroughly can they ... how to say ... earn their students' respect in their teaching. That's true. Students in the past ... like me nearly 15 years ago ... to complete my undergraduate dissertation I had to spend months in library as it was like the only resources. But at present students may stay home and after just 15 minutes googling they may get dozens of documents to do their dissertation. They are really quick and clever in such a thing and I reckon that their interaction is good, but they are not very good at synthesizing data as they lack logical reasoning ... Hence, we need to sometimes guide them in searching for information and combining them in a coherent

way instead of just teaching them some subject. Beside that we need to change our teaching approach in a way that can encourage students' activeness in taking knowledge, which means they will be more actively involved in searching for knowledge instead of passively receiving knowledge like just copying down their lecturer's sayings. But I think there are two purposes in teaching. The first one that is practical to students is to help them clear up the subject, that is, to pass their exam ... to pass an exam they need basic knowledge. The second purpose is to teach them something out of the book ... that is ... well, I often say to my students "you don't need to learn by heart each and every word but after finishing my subject I do expect ... when you suddenly recall it or need related information you will know where to search for it." That's all that we need. We all know that we cannot memorise everything that we have learnt so we just need to know where to get it. That's my viewpoint in teaching.

**Interviewer: 16'32''**

Can you tell me about your institution's academic programmes in relation to English language training? How have they been developed and adapted to satisfy students' needs and social demand?

**Uyen-F-A: 17'27''**

Actually ... at higher education establishments ... English language training ... in our institution is divided into two types. The first one is for non-English majors, for whom English is a compulsory subject and standard is of A2 ... A2 standard ... in Fortress University 18 credits is allotted to General English for non-English majors. The 18 credits of General English are developed on the basis of A2 standard, that is, when students finish GE4 (General English – me) – the last module of the subject, they will be recognised as achieving A2, which is a graduation requirement. To be honest, the benchmark intended for non-English majors, if in line with Project 2020, is B1. However, at present Fortress University hasn't aimed for B1 standard, rather just A2 standard, and in future ... for example, in the latest document – Circular 07/2017, which concerns regulations in organising examinations to evaluate foreign language competency in accordance with MOET's frame of six competency levels ... And after the release of Circular 07 Fortress University has developed a plan, requesting MOET for the establishment of an English testing centre with an aim to set GE – English for non-English majors – apart from academic training programmes and to require students for B1 achievement. That would mean we aim to follow a model like ... well, within that model you have to study English yourself and are required to get B1, or level 3/6 ... so we'll aim for B1 benchmark in a near future ... maybe in ... up to now in fact Project 2020 is unachievable ... not just in Fortress but almost all over the country ... So what I've just discussed is English for non-English majors. Basically our current benchmark is A2 and later we'll try to aim for B1 standard, and along with this B1 targeting we'll consider to remove 18-credit GE from the curricular and reallocate the credits to other subjects, English will thus become a condition or a skill that students must complete themselves. As regards English language majors ... when Fortress University started to adjust academic programmes in 2016 ... and even in implementing programmes prior to 2016 ... Project 2020's benchmarks were followed, for example, to train students for examinations in accordance with the Foreign Language Proficiency Framework we built into the programme a subject with which students would study as a condition and nearly at the end of the programme one to get well-prepared for their examination. Well, those are things about academic programmes and standard outcomes for both English language majors and non-English language majors.

**Interviewer: 21'12''**

When did you start to set standard outcome of A2 for non-English majors?

**Uyen-F-A: 21'18''**

We started it in 2012

**Interviewer: 21'26''**

As you've just said not all higher education establishments can follow MOET's B1 target as described in Project 2020, can you tell me about the difficulties or challenges that your institution may have faced applying B1 standard to your students?

**Uyen-F-A: 22'04''**

Well, actually when we first brought Project 2020 into action we made changes to General English ... more specifically to syllabuses of 4 GE modules, and how did we do that? Previously English was allotted just 13 credits in the curriculum, then the number of credits was raised to 18, so 5 credits were added aiming at helping students with their B1 achievement. However, in the course of such implementation we encountered several problems. Firstly, Fortress University is a multi-disciplinary institution, consisting of 2 distinct sectors – the first one being Economics, Management, & Social Sciences – or more exactly Language and Linguistics, and the second one Science and Technology. For those doing Science and Technology, it is really hard to achieve B1. Why did I say so? We conducted an inspection in 2014 ... in 2014 before students started their programme, they registered to do an English level test and it was encouraged that if they could pass GE1 they would be exempted from GE1 enrolment and attendance and would rightly be enrolled for GE2. However, as I can recall more than 60-70% of the students was not qualified to be enrolled in GE1, let alone GE2. Because your level was lower than GE1, you had to start from GE1 ... If B1 standard is required, it is like ... when entering a university you have to be at a certain level no matter what group of subjects you were doing in in high schools – could be Group A, Group B, or Group D, and taking that entry level we set ... GE1 as their starting point. But 70% of the students was not ready to start from that, so we had to offer them additional class of GE0 to help them get GE1 first. But that caused longer course duration and increased training costs. And it was realised that despite 18 credits being allotted to GE training – from GE1-GE4, since students' entry competency level was below GE1, it would be hard to aim for their achievement of B1. Therefore, we made changes again to the General English training programme. The number of credits was kept the same – 18 but the standard was lowered to A2 with the completion of GE4. This benchmark is more practical and doable for students because for institutions ... Fortress is a private university, be it a long-established one, we ourselves reckon and public opinion shows that Fortress' input level is just of MOET's prescribed minimum input ... of middle-ranged institutions' ... no, just the same as MOET's minimum input, so students' input quality, particularly that in foreign language training is not uniform. The lack of uniformity is shown firstly in multiple disciplines that students undertake. Secondly it is shown in acceptance of students ... Because up to 70% of the students was not qualified to start at GE1 – a good level to start with and to combine with our training plan if students' B1 achievement was desired – we had to make adjustments for a match with student quality. It's like when our kids are learning to walk we can't push them to run, we have to help them walk then gradually help them run. So, what did we do? In 2012 we kept our programme the same, in 2014 we announced another benchmark which was A2 and which has been kept since then, still not changed to B1 and as I just said, it is expected that in 2018 when we make changes to our academic programmes we may consider again if we should target for B1 benchmark but at present we haven't had any plan yet. Actually if we want to change the benchmark, we have to carry out an inspection of students' entry competency like we

did in 2014 which would be absolutely costly as it will involve many tasks, people, and processes. And together with benchmark changing, we need to weigh up 2 possibilities: first, General English is to be left out, students have to study and improve English themselves to get B1, and second, continue to make changes in programmes in accordance with B1 to aim students for B1 achievement.

**Interviewer: 27'26''**

You've just mentioned an inspection of students' English competency, did you invite experts or people from any centre for that?

**Uyen-F-A: 27'36''**

Frankly speaking we did not. We had the Foreign Language Department which is responsible for English language training, which is in turn divided into General English and English Language. The former type of training is offered to non-English majors by GE section whereas the latter is offered to English majors by English Language section. So what we really did in that inspection was organising an examination for classifying students' English input in collaboration with the Foreign Language Department and other departments and units of our institution. It didn't involve external experts. So actually it was an internal examination wherein we ourselves assess our own student's competency to see if they would be able to achieve B1.

**Interviewer: 28'28''**

What was the test format like?

**Uyen-F-A: 28'33''**

Ehm ... lecturers designed the test ... like a model of ... ehm ... probably KET ...

**Interviewer: 28'51''**

Did it include all four skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing?

**Uyen-F-A: 28'52''**

The test format involved ... four skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing ... and it was ... like KET ... yes ... KET format ... 'cause it was quite a long time ago I'm not sure if that's right ...

**Interviewer: 29'01''**

You also talked about removing GE from the curriculum as a measure to move towards B1 benchmark. What is your own thinking about how such measure may support students' B1 achievement? Why would you need GE removal for that benchmark?

**Uyen-F-A: 29'46''**

This is my personal viewpoint as a person having worked in programmes organising and managing for quite long ... [.....] ... in the era of information technology ... and forthcoming 4.0 revolution and in a world that's flat, English is a must-have tool ... so if we don't make our efforts toward B1 benchmarking for students, which means making it a condition for their graduation they then would not try ... not have motivation ... and without motivation they would be excluded from society, and social exclusion of our educational products would mean decrease of the institutions' prestige. Paying regard to the issue we cannot distance ourselves from the game in the long run, it would be no good at all if all establishments but ours take the measure to save students. Hence, we need to consider adopting B1 as our output standard sooner or later. Presently as far as I've learnt about the issue on a local basis, B1 benchmarking has been being carried out in two ways. The first way is like what we are doing in our institution with A2 standard, that is ... how to say ... quite imperative a way in that it is built into academic programmes on purpose of pushing students to study to pass their exams, which also means their achievement of the output standard. But students' success in their exams being considered their standard meeting is just our

self-imposed rule. Another way is to target for B1, or to leave it [English] out, turning it [English] into a subject ... no, a skill that students have to improve themselves then we can build a testing centre and ask for MOET's permit to legally grant B1 certificates. Consequently, students can choose to take exams for B1, TOEIC, TOEFL, IELTS certificates at that centre or at external ones. This B1 thing is ... widely known and practiced, for example, it's a requirement in postgraduate courses like those for master's degrees. So what happens if we remove B1 [English] from the curriculum and make it [B1 achievement] a condition for their graduation? – students would feel obligation to study otherwise they wouldn't be eligible to graduate. That would mean students have stronger impetus for their study, studying for (a) graduation [condition] is different completely from studying for clearing up modules. A second thing is if we do not create impetus or put pressure on our students it ... it'll be ... hard for them to ... honestly speaking ... this is not to criticise them but a characteristic of Vietnamese students formed from their childhood is their lack of activeness [self-consciousness] in their study. Plus, a current trend in education is reduction in contact hours yet increase in time for self-study. That is, students' independence and autonomy in learning is pushed. Meanwhile, if the 18 credits of GE remain in the curriculum, course length will rise. To my memory, maybe in ... probably Decision 19 by the Prime Minister ... on national course duration policy the time limit for completion of regular undergraduate courses is now decreased to 3-4.5 years rather than being 4-5 years like in the past. Shrinking course duration means cutting down on [lecture delivery time] but that does not mean decline in educational quality. Whatever you can study yourself, you have to – foreign languages are one thing, information technology is another – we will just focus on professional training. Therefore, that measure is in line with government policy as well as MOET's orientation. We cannot stay away from the common trends, so we have to leave out English to decrease course length. But what is the downside of that measure? Actually if within our training framework students can achieve A2 standard, or later B1 standard in a way like ... learning English as a compulsory course element for standard achievement is easier than self-studying to later sit an exam elsewhere for that achievement. Self-studying means students have to pay whatever the costs, which, compared to payments for 18 credits, can be higher or lower, who knows? But if efficiency is taken into consideration you will surely spend more on both the cost and time for self-study. Of course everyone will say they study themselves ... [online courses] are plentifully available on the internet. Yes, that's right, but not everyone is capable of or has sufficient experience for studying by themselves. Take me for example. Having been teaching for 14 years I still get "blurry vision" when searching for data, so how can students ... well, their skills and capabilities are not the same so their time and money consumption for B1 achievement will be dissimilar. Well, actually everything has two sides. We may weigh it up for pros and cons ... but we cannot ignore trends ... the trend created by the government, the trend in education, the common trend of decreased course duration, the trend of increasing self-study capacity, yet we have to think about the right time for it.

**Interviewer: 35'02''**

What's the connection between GE removal and your institution's request for establishing a testing centre?

**Uyen-F-A: 35'20''**

No, that's just a plan our unit is developing, yet it's not on paper yet ... the idea was formed after ... you know, previously only 10 higher education establishments were eligible to grant B1 certificates, but MOET is more open now, which is shown in Circular 23/2017 on conditions for

institutions to organise foreign language competency examinations. So if we can get permission for such organisation it will be really an advantage for us in dealing with our 4500 students first, right?

**Interviewer: 36'09''**

What are the conditions to establish a testing centre?

**Uyen-F-A: 36'16''**

You can refer to Article 5 Circular 23/2017 by MOET, I don't remember what exactly they are, some of them may be ... number of test graders, a system of exam results management ... our institution basically can satisfy those conditions as we have the Foreign Language Department

**Interviewer: 36'38''**

Well, as you said, everything has two sides, what do you think can be the drawback of having your own testing centre? What do you think about the possibility of "distorted" B1 or A2 compared to the original version?

**Uyen-F-A: 37'24''**

I understand what you mean ... distortion currently ... not only in our institution ... well it may occur in those ten legalised centres, right? As far as I know the newest standard [of English language competency] for state personnel is A2. The benchmarking is even mechanically applied in that one of my friends who is a teacher at a secondary school was required to take an exam for A2 although she had graduated from University A - a university specialising in foreign language training ... or [.....] ... It was not until much later did MOET give guidelines ... Okay, now get back to your question. So, should there be any chance of risk? There are two problems here. Firstly, as regards organising foreign language competency examinations in accordance with 6-level Foreign Language Proficiency Framework of Vietnam our plan is still in its embryonic stages. But once we get the permission, our first and foremost task will be helping our students achieve B1 – if we set this benchmark for them. And what will that centre involve? – training, teaching for exams ... concerning the possibility of malfunctions or distortions in the course of its operation no one can nor dare say for sure. Working in this unit we offer consultancy to the Vice Chancellor when we get such circulars or instructions, and at present we've just formed that idea. And what is that idea for? – for moving toward B1 ... that is like ... we formerly came last in the list and we are gradually moving to the middle ... I don't think there is a good answer to your question of that possibility but personally [.....], yet, there hasn't been an official inspection of such doing in those 10 centres, and [.....].

**Interviewer: 40'04''**

What do you think about lowering the benchmark from B1 to A2 in your institution? Did MOET say anything about that?

**Uyen-F-A: 40'27''**

In the past few years, MOET's policy has been ... autonomy of higher education institutions has been strengthened, yet Fortress has always been autonomous ... that's true ... by autonomy ... everyone just see autonomy ... under the influence of social media ... they just see autonomy as financial autonomy, but what actually is autonomy? It means, firstly – financial autonomy, secondly – autonomy in education and training, thirdly – autonomy in enrolment issues, and fourthly – autonomy in governance ... Standards in foreign language training is what we can determine. Institutional autonomy means our output standard is our commitment to society that our educational products achieve that standard – a minimum standard. Therefore, MOET ... even in connection with Project 2020, it's not MOET's requirement that all educational establishments

set students' B1 achievement as a condition for their graduation, rather it is just an encouragement that such a benchmark is aimed for. And we admit that at present our students can only achieve A2 while B1 is what we will intend for our students' achievement in a later stage. But we are aiming for that target of B1 not because of any force from MOET, we are doing that because we want to assure ... that is, what is our commitment to society? – we create products with a minimum standard of B1 for example, obviously Fortress's educational products will gain a new status at employers' and in society as well. And that's our goal – a goal of survival for our institution ... it's social prestige that we are aimed at for our survival, isn't it? It shapes our brand, and it means institution's attraction to more students, doesn't it?

**Interviewer: 42'12''**

What measure and model are being used to assure quality in English language training in your institution?

**Uyen-F-A: 42'57''**

Well, I am just a member of a quality assurance task group, doing tasks like writing reports ... yet our unit does not play a leading role in measures and models in quality assurance and accreditation, rather the quality accreditation unit is accountable to these. So I'll tell you a bit about what you are concerned – quality accreditation in English language training. In fact, what Fortress is now doing ... as I've just said ... albeit called [students'] A2 achievement we do not organise an independent examination to validate that attainment, just we have syllabuses and curriculum of A2 standard, when students finish 4 GE modules – from GE1 to GE4 they achieve the standard, passing all end-of-module exams means A2 attainment. Therefore, accreditation ... the so-called quality control ... of course is shown in the institution's processes and regulations in testing and assessment, grading, test item bank, etc. etc ... all the things that are in compliance with the institution's regulations in education and training which in turn are in line with state ones. What's more, we've separate instructions for each exam which are all provided in syllabuses. We also have regulations and instructions for designing tests. All in all we have all documents of regulations and instructions for that [quality control via testing and assessment]. Nonetheless, as I said, passing an end-of-module exam is distinctively different than passing a separate exam just serving the inspection of standard satisfaction ... the two types of examination in essence are not different but they are dissimilar in organising and level [of compliance of examination rules and regulations]. That's a reality in Vietnamese education and training without exception to Fortress. This is one of the reasons we bring 18 GE credits into the curriculum – it facilitates our students' achievement of the benchmark, hence their graduation. That's my personal opinion. When it comes to English Language programme for English majors, it's quite similar. On completion of a course which consists of 140 credits – used to be 147 prior to 2016, students are eligible for graduation. Our policy is as soon as students complete 140 credits with a minimum GPA of 2.0, they are allowed to leave school and recognised as meeting the standards. But as I said, that is a minimum standard that Fortress University announces to society. What is the measure of assurance then? – it's strict examination procedures, .... it's inspection, it's management and planning of academic programmes, it's assuring proper programme implementation according to training plans, it's developing and following syllabuses, it's termly teaching schedules set up by lecturers based on which inspectorates can check if schedules are followed, it's surveys of students' feedback on lecturers' teaching quality which are carried out by the Accreditation Unit at the end of each semester, it's surveys of former students' feedback on

the institution's programmes and quality. Yes, they are measures of quality accreditation that our institution is implementing.

**Interviewer: 46'30''**

Well, so the measures being conducted in your institution range from developing programmes, conducting programmes, inspecting and checking processes, to examining learners' feedback and assessment. How long have they been implemented and do you pay central attention to any particular measure?

**Uyen-F-A: 47'02''**

I'll give answer to each and every aspect, okay? First of all, academic training programmes. Our programmes formerly were not developed nor changed periodically. The institution's programmes in its early years of establishment were annually based [wherein students' yearly average grades were used to decide their eligibility for transfer to the next stage of their study]. Not until 10 years later, around the middle of 2000s, did we start to change to academic credit-based training. In the transition to credit-based training due to the occurrence of certain problems changes and amendments were continuously made. And all programmes were altogether converted and built in line with credit training mechanism in 2011. After that, our institution implemented our revised programmes in a fully scale for 5 years from 2011-2016. By 2016, according to Circular 07 by MOET on review and amendment of programmes every two years, we revisited and continued to make changes to our programmes. This time, changes involved course length, syllabuses for each subject and module including for General English and English Language. Regarding inspection, the institution's Inspectorate has existed since its first days. It used to be part of the education and training management unit until recent 4 or 5 years. At present it is an independent unit accountable to comprehensive inspection of the institution including education and training. Within the first week before a semester starts lecturers have to send their teaching schedules to education and training management unit from where they will be transferred to the Inspectorate. With lecturers' schedules in their hands the Inspectorate' staff will inspect teaching processes. By the end of a semester the Accreditation Unit conducts teacher evaluation via feedback forms ... of course this kind of evaluation may be done but not necessarily with all departments and lecturers every semester, rather can be with certain groups of departments and lecturers

**Interviewer: 49'28''**

Do the Inspectorate have regular activities?

**Uyen-F-A: 49'34''**

Yes, they do. They're full-time staff of the institution and they carry out inspection on a regular basis. For example, regarding classroom inspection, they do daily schedule check, that is, checking if lecturers start their lecture on time, if they are in the room assigned, if they follow the training schedule and syllabus properly. However, it's just random checking, they don't rush into the classroom every day to see if this or that teacher is teaching this or that lesson according to a schedule, if otherwise that would be absurd as adjustments occur during teaching processes provided that such adjustments do not influence contact hours or lecture content. Additionally, our institution now arranges for multiple choice exams and test item banks, so if lecturers don't teach in conformity with the syllabuses their students would unavoidably fail their exams. Of course there can be other ... but if 50 out of 70 students per class fail then that should be problematic.

**Interviewer: 50'32''**

## Appendix G

How many people does the Inspectorate consist of?

**Uyen-F-A: 50'34''**

Presently 3 people are working as our institution's inspectorate

**Interviewer: 50'36''**

Just 3 people, wouldn't that mean they have to do a lot of work?

**Uyen-F-A: 50'39''**

That's true ... in fact in our institution just about 80 people are doing administrative work, you can imagine ... 80 people doing it ... for the entire institution, and the rest 140 ... no, about 150 are lecturers. That is, we have approximately 200 people ... less than 300 whereas there are 4500 students ... because this institution is financially independent ... its staff must be kept at a small number

**Interviewer: 51'38''**

What do you mean exactly by financial independence?

**Uyen-F-A: 51'48''**

That means we depend entirely on students' tuition fees, nothing else, no one gives us anything, all we have is students' tuition fees and all our expenditures must stay within what we have.

**Interviewer: 52'00''**

Do you charge tuition fees considering a ceiling level set by MOET?

**Uyen-F-A: 52'07''**

No, but certainly tuition fees currently applied in Fortress is even lower than that in independent public institutions

**Interviewer: 52'26''**

Basing on what do you charge tuition fees?

**Uyen-F-A: 52'29''**

The credits. They pay for as many credits as they undertake ... there are no extra fees

**52'37'' – 52'44''**

*[further question and answer concerning tuition fees but not relevant to my research]*

**Interviewer: 53'07''**

Well, you've told me about programme development, schedule check, and contact hours inspection, what about feedback surveys?

**Uyen-F-A: 53'23''**

Those surveys are carried out by Quality Assurance and Accreditation Unit .. that is, our institution features a unit called Quality Assurance unit which is in charge of accreditation and testing issues

**Interviewer: 53'37''**

When did you start to collect students' feedback and evaluation of lecturers?

**Uyen-F-A: 53'44''**

... could be ... in 2013 ... 2013, right

**Interviewer: 53'56''**

It was ...

**Interruption (mobile phone 54'01'' - 54'32)**

**Interviewer: 54'33''**

Is it true that part of the function of the education and training management is evaluating lecturers' teaching? Do you send staff out ...

*(This information was offered in a previous interview, so I was just trying to get some confirmation)*

**Uyen-F-A: 54'48''**

For classroom observation and inspection

**Interviewer: 54'50''**

Yes, ... yes ...

**Uyen-F-A: 54'51''**

Generally speaking, we're supposed to send out staff to observe classroom activities, and normally we have plans for that annually. Nonetheless, we don't do that too often, it just occurs a couple of times each year and is scheduled ... and randomly with academic departments. We truly do that but teaching assessment ... at present we don't ... Regarding teacher assessment ... we have two measures, firstly it's through students' feedback gathered from surveys conducted by the Quality Assurance Unit, and secondly it's lecturers' self-assessment which is done annually in each academic department ... and which is based on their prescribed standard teaching hours, their research work ... if you fulfil all the tasks you are assigned that means you satisfy the standards, if not you don't. Nevertheless, this type of assessment is ... how to say ... you know ... sometimes it's not too accurate ... it ... for example, your colleagues never say you don't teach well or ... honestly speaking that's the way it is ... so it's hard to do. The so-called teacher assessment ... although our current programmes are credit-based ... students don't have as many options in selecting teachers as they do in public institutions. Therefore ... for instance, in public institutions if a teacher is said to be excellent many students will choose to be enrolled in her class and if you're not quick enough you may fail to do get a place, right, it's like that, but that doesn't occur in Fortress 'cause we've a limited number of lecturers, despite having qualified teachers our students don't have many choices due to a small number of teachers available. However, receiving students' feedback and comments that are not good the lecturers have to change as they will be reminded [by their unit's managers] and that's it.

**Interviewer: 56'55''**

Is reminding lecturers your ultimate response after you receive students' feedback results? Do you have any sanctions other than that?

**Uyen-F-A: 57'15''**

Fortress introduced its regulations on teacher management in 2003 but they haven't changed since then, maybe ... it seems like ... the human resources management unit is supposed to advise amendments but well, that's their responsibility. We should not continue with this issue as I'm unable to discuss it further.

**Interviewer: 57'44''**

Well, you've just told me about quality assurance methods being used in your institution. What do you think is the influence of such measures on teachers and their teaching?

**Uyen-F-A: 58'33''**

Actually there is some effect, but ... as I said ... one of the inspection procedures ... obviously when their classes are inspected lecturers will take it more serious in doing their jobs, they will conform to the teaching schedules and lesson plans with more rigidity. Getting students' feedback lecturers will make certain changes. For example, if students say they don't understand your lecture ... we randomly get feedback results of a class ... if the results are too bad we will send out some reminders suggesting some changes for them. That's just what we've done so far ... As for lecturers, to be honest with you, they have pride in their abilities ... the so-called self-... self-

respect in doing their jobs so the majority of them will change. However, Fortress is indeed a private institution, despite the fact that we try to cover up to 70% of contact hours, we have to invite guest lecturers [short-term contract lecturers]. It's worth saying that most of the cases being reminded were not our full-time staff, rather external teachers whom we do not manage, rather just ask to come for lecture delivery. To deal with that, we won't invite them any longer, and will invite someone else instead, if the feedback is too bad, after 1 or 2 semester without change for progress they'll be replaced. That's it. We haven't used any measure that is ... but it's visible that reminders, inspection, checking ... have caused ... changes, which is good ... more specifically, some of our full-time staff assessed bad this semester made positive changes the next semester. They clearly work but as I said, because we haven't specific sanctions the worst consequence they may face is they won't get the title Excellent Official, instead they may only be titled Good Official, which means they will just ... lose some little bonus. That's it.

**Interviewer: 60'42''**

As a member of a quality assurance task group, you have to collect documentation. What documentation do you have to collect, and how?

**Uyen-F-A: 61'04''**

Officials are asked to collect documentation in areas related to their positions. For example, [...] documentation in [...] ... like documentation of training programmes, documentation of new course projects, of educational research etc. etc. Such documentation is shown ... up to now the Quality Assurance Unit has developed a programme for managing evidence online so it can be transferred electronically ... they have their own codes ... we've got our rules for encoding documentation of each item ... [self-assessment] reports are produced every 5 years, aren't they? We report on documentation first, then add it up every semester, every year ... following the notice or plan sent out by the Quality Assurance Unit ... that's it ... if now I'm asked to show documentation ... actually ... like our training programmes - we do have ... yes, our evidence is here...

**Interviewer: 62'04''**

And the process you have to undertake is ...

**Uyen-F-A: 62'05''**

Encoding ... and computerizing it [documentation], that is, turn it into ... electronic version ... or scan it ... and encode it for the purpose of management, or else it would be unimaginable how many rooms like this one [the interview venue] will be large enough to accommodate all documents when documentation is added up

**Interviewer: 62'25''**

When did you start encoding documentation?

**Uyen-F-A: 62'29''**

We started in 2017 ... just recently

**Interviewer: 62'34''**

This academic year?

**Uyen-F-A: 62'35''**

Right

**Interviewer: 62'36''**

How do you introduce and enhance expertise in quality assurance and accreditation for staff of the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Unit and those in other departments and units involving in quality assurance tasks?

**Uyen-F-A: 63'03''**

People working in that unit as well as those officials doing quality accreditation tasks ...all received training ... they were provided with training before they started doing the tasks, then they underwent training again when there were changes or adjustments informed by the Department of Testing and Quality Assurance or when they [the institution's Quality Assurance and Accreditation Unit] brought into use new management software.

**Interviewer: 63'33''**

Who were sent to training courses? Are staff of academic departments included?

**Uyen-F-A: 63'50''**

No. The training is like this. Firstly, officials of the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Unit were sent to training courses held by MOET ... we do have an evaluation expert ... she joined external evaluation boards assessing other institutions. After receiving training those officials of that unit will in turn train us. In our institution, training is just given to people engaging in quality accreditation tasks, and hasn't been extended to a larger scale.

**Interviewer: 64'24''**

So you are one among your unit's staff joining ...

**Uyen-F-A: 64'26''**

Up to five of us are participating in that task group ... almost ... because actually that sector ... our unit involves two criteria in MOET's set of criteria .. that is, training programmes and training management ... so they cover almost all our unit's duties and responsibilities, hence all officials have to join

**Interviewer: 64'47''**

What about other units?

**Uyen-F-A: 64'49''**

It's the same .. almost the same

**Interviewer: 64'50''**

Your institution is now using MOET's set of evaluation criteria, don't you? Can you tell me a bit more about the participation undertaken by other units and departments in the evaluation process?

**Uyen-F-A: 65'10''**

MOET's evaluation criteria set is comprised of 60 criteria involving a number of areas. For example, it can be ... something big, at macro level like institutional mission ... which is responsibility of the Institutions' Managing Board or the Board of Directors ... that's just an example ... I mean whoever working in areas related to evaluation criteria must get involved. The involvement means doing two tasks. The first one is after getting their [officials of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Unit] instructions on sets of criteria, you have to examine if in reality your institution satisfies the criteria, then write that down onto a report, followed by collection of documentation to prove what you report on. At present we have 7 task groups, each specialising in one area, each consisting of a group leader, a secretary, and other people ... a secretary drafts and edits a report, a group leader leads the group, and group members collect documentation and encode it.

**Interviewer: 66'02''**

So, depending on criteria units and departments will send staff to join ...

**Uyen-F-A: 66'05''**

Right. Exactly.

**Interviewer: 66'09''**

Does sending people to training courses concern any financial issue?

**Uyen-F-A: 66'21''**

I'm not sure. Frankly speaking, the Quality Assurance Unit does this, they plan for their budgets, I don't care, as that's not my work I've no clue.

**Interviewer: 66'33''**

Does institutional self-evaluation have impact on teaching and learning activities, or more exactly English language teaching and learning?

**Uyen-F-A: 66'47''**

Actually it hasn't got impact so far, because ... at present, there are two things in our institution's quality assurance. First, report on what we've done in reality. Second, in the report identify weaknesses, make recommendations [for improvement]. The units toward which those recommendations are made will have to act for improvements. That unit [Quality Assurance and Accreditation] may assign tasks and duties to academic departments, and from here lecturers may get their own tasks and duties. However, in fact, teachers are not much aware of or interested in quality accreditation because ... the connection between units in an institution is not the same as in business settings. In establishments doing business their daily tasks are linked together whereas in educational establishments teaching staff do not pay regard to nor is concerned with administrative staff and procedures and related documents as well. They [teaching staff] only focus on their teaching roles, they only care about instructions on their expertise and profession-related processes. Meanwhile, they take no notice to administrative procedures. Therefore, this [institutional self-evaluation] hasn't reached close to lecturers ... so the so-called quality evaluation and accreditation ... for example, in the forthcoming time if we propose to aim for B1 standard, we have to build up B1 standard first ... but ... the education and training management unit cannot develop that standard ourselves, we have to put forward the task to English section in the Foreign Language Department and from there they will implement the task by holding seminars to get lecturers' opinions as they're directly involved in teaching. Or like in examining students' English language competency as I told you, we were the organising board but what did we organise? – We sent notices to academic departments who in turn would meet and talk to students, English sections were asked to design tests ... we formed a group of test designers, a group of invigilators, a group of test graders, etc. etc... we did all those things, but specific tasks or groups of tasks must be carried out from bottom up. So, the influence of quality assurance ... or quality accreditation on teachers and English teaching is actually not clearly shown ... If we ask them to do a specific job of teaching and helping students achieve a standard ... then it will be another story.

**Interviewer: 69'10''**

But actually in the description of the output standards that your institution developed, students' English competency standard is mentioned ...

**Uyen-F-A: 69'21''**

... right, it's clearly defined to be A2

**Interviewer: 69'24''**

As far as I know teachers are those responsible for lecture content and teaching methods. In what way can they get familiarised with output standards and related regulations so that they can help their students with standard achievement?

**Uyen-F-A: 69'55''**

I ... get that, but like I said from the start, when our institution set up A2 benchmark .. originally it was B1 but then was lowered to A2, and 18 credits were allotted, completing those 18 credits and passing exams students are recognised as having reached A2, no independent exam is involved for A2 standard evaluation, right? When lecturers do their teaching jobs of course they are informed of that information, they ... because it's GE section that develop the syllabuses they absolutely understand that after they finish teaching all modules their students will satisfy A2 standard. However ... for example, if they teach 10 students, 8 of them pass the exams while 2 do not, that means the two students do not meet A2 standard, hence those students have to attend the modules again and study until they succeed in their exams. Ehm ... lecturers' awareness is just within that extent, they know that they have to teach an A2 programme, like teachers teaching Grade 12 – not every student can pass their exams, not every student can study well, isn't it? But they will try to make sure that their students can finish Grade 12 [She may have referred to English test in High School Exit examination]. And it's just like that here, lecturers will try to make sure that their students can pass end-of-GE4 test, which means A2 standard achievement.

**Interviewer: 71'04''**

An important part contributing to students' standard satisfaction is professional training for teaching staff. Can you tell me about professional training for English language teaching staff in Fortress University?

**Uyen-F-A: 71'31''**

Regarding their qualifications, lecturers teaching both English majors and non-English majors all have master's degrees. Secondly, ... this is not required at institutional level ... but the Foreign Language Department previously in about 2007 or 2008 required a standard for lecturers, that is ... probably IELTS 6.0 or TOEFL 600, those not being able to meet the standard had to leave ... but that was the only one time we carried out such an inspection of lecturers' English language competency.

**Interviewer: 72'25''**

Why did you do that at that time?

**Uyen-F-A: 72'29''**

Actually we're highly aware of developing and training [teaching staff] ... concerning standards for lecturers ... how to say ... surely it's easiest to set standards and benchmark for foreign language lecturers ... as for lecturers in [.....] like me, there are no standards for us other than qualifications, right? But for English language lecturers, there are standards because English is a popular language, there is a lot of international standard [maybe she was referring to results of exams like TOEFL, IELTS, etc.]. And at that time ... our institution aimed for quality ... and quite a lot of lecturers had to leave, even those having been teaching for years could not meet the institution's standard ... in 2008 TOEFL 600 and IELTS 6.0 were quite high targets to be achieved

**Interviewer: 73'20''**

Why didn't you continue to do that?

**Uyen-F-A: 73'23''**

After that inspection ... actually teacher assessment has always been a sensitive issue ... and the stability of teaching staff was quite good ... I mean ... after the inspection there's not much changes in our teaching staff ... although some stayed some left, and those recruited later are mostly qualified in that previously we accepted lecturers with BA but following MOET's contemporary regulations we required applicants for lecturing positions to have master's degrees,

the situation of “undergrads teach undergrads” stopped existing. For that reason, we didn’t do any further inspection.

**Interviewer: 74’14’’**

What do you mean by “undergrads teach undergrads”?

**Uyen-F-A: 74’17’’**

Formerly lecturers in higher education establishments were just BA holders ... after a couple of months being lecturer assistants they were allowed to deliver lectures although they hadn’t finish their master’s courses ... at that time people called such a situation “undergrads teach undergrads” ... later when teacher standards were announced, in our requirements of potential lecturers we said that we would only recruit master’s degree owners

**Interviewer: 74’45’’**

What do you think about setting international exam results like IELTS, TOEFL as standards in English language lecturer recruitment?

**Uyen-F-A: 75’00’’**

That was what happened in 2008, we don’t do that any longer

**Interviewer: 75’04’’**

Why don’t you?

**Uyen-F-A: 75’08’’**

No. Currently ... as for foreign language lecturers we just take holders of master’s degrees upwards, master’s degrees in appropriate fields of study

**Interviewer: 75’19’’**

Why don’t you implement international standards on lecturers while you set A2 and later maybe B1 standard for your students which is international?

**Uyen-F-A: 75’36’’**

That depends on human resources unit ...

**Interviewer: 75’41’’**

No ... just some of your personal thoughts ...

**Uyen-F-A: 75’42’’**

... personally I think, I used to do [.....] a major ... at that time I knew that ... after graduation I did have intention of studying overseas ... so I revised and did practice tests of TOEFL and IELTS and I found that it was likely that native speakers ... would not be able to achieve the standard if they took IELTS and TOEFL exams, it’s just like when we take a Vietnamese exam, and this is ... like TOEFL and IELTS mainly are just a standard [target of certain TOEFL, IELTS scores] for non-native learners to study ... or to practice for the exam ... if we practice we’ll get it ... of course an international standard has its good point, that is, you can only achieve it if you are really competent. However, as a lecturer having teaching for many years I think that it’s reasonable to require that lecturers have knowledge and improve it day by day. And another requirement concerns teaching methods ... frankly speaking ... if a GE1 teacher is required to have 6.0 [IELTS of 6.0] ... or 7.0, 8.0 ... it is .... but an achiever [of IELTS] of 6.0, 7.0, 8.0 may not be able to teach GE1 if he/she doesn’t have experience in teaching, doesn’t have teaching methods. So, it’s okay ... it’s good if a teacher knowing 10 can help their students understand 2 or 3 out of 10. Many teachers are professors and doctors and they are absolutely excellent, which may make it more appropriate for them to do research but not to teach what they are experts in to others. So your knowledge ... or your qualifications ... how to say ... may be the first thing showing that you’re

qualified ... you're capable of teaching, but that [capability] is most clearly shown via your students' feedback on what you teach them

**Interviewer: 78'01''**

What do you think if you hear some student say "I need to see whether or not your lecturers who will teach me can meet the standard"?

**Uyen-F-A: 78'20''**

Maybe there'll come a time when people look at that, for example ... don't know if you've learned about Vietnam's enrolment regulations, in the past few years ... starting from 2015 all educational establishments have to submit their enrolment plans and publicize them, and since 2016, 2017 it has been required that more and more information be provided in enrolment plans and one of the requirements concerns teaching staff, their titles, positions, and qualifications. Hence, prospective students can have a look at an institution's teaching staff prior to their selection, and it can be seen that between an establishment full of professors and doctors and an establishment like us with fewer professors and doctors, fewer master's degree owners, there will certainly be comparison. But that's just one standard [criterion]. That's what I think ... and certainly having more qualifications means you're better ... that's a normal logical judgement, and as for high school students ... the majority of them at their age can only look at things like that. Some day standards can be set up ... but up to now there have been no state standards nor regulations on lecturers in higher education institutions ... but some institutions have developed such regulations, for example, the University C has its own recruitment regulations: master's degrees are demanded for to be candidates ... under 45-year-olds with doctoral certificates will be directly accepted, but candidates having master's degrees are asked to gain PhD candidature within 2 years after recruitment, after a year of probation an English competency standard, for example, TOEFL 650, must be achieved ... that is, they build standards into their recruitment requirements. But our institution ... as I said, we haven't established any criteria in lecturer recruitment since 2003 ... what we've got so far is just requirements for master's degrees in appropriate fields of study.

**Interviewer: 80'14''**

If you are asked to give your viewpoint and a definition of quality in English language training in higher education institutions, what would you say?

**Uyen-F-A: 80'52''**

Quality in ... English language education ...

**Interviewer: 80'55''**

Your definition ... viewpoint ...

**Uyen-F-A: 80'56''**

... definition of quality in education ... actually, as regards standards like A2, B1, B2, to my thinking ... how to say ... they should be ... required ... in ... not only undergraduate training but postgraduate training because it wouldn't feel all right saying that there is no need for standards, we do need standards. Notwithstanding such a need for them benchmarking give rise to many issues. Theoretically, it could be an appropriate policy but many issues could be raised ... many people may be said to be "qualified, meeting the standard", but their certificates are bought. This is due to problems in implementation and supervision. Isn't it? What I'm currently doing here is involved in a thing like this, your B1 standard ... I mean, your B1 certificate is valid for 2 years and this is in line with Circular 15 by MOET on regulations for postgraduate training. So what they believe is if a foreign language is not used for two years certificate achievers' capacity may fall,

hence they have to study it again, sit exams again – it needs practicing regularly. So, personally I think standards are needed, it's no good to not have standards, yet management needs tightening and practicality needs considering. Rather than state standards we simply need what? – capacity ... In the detailed description of B1 standard for followers of master's courses... it's said that they need to be capable of reading and writing well, of presenting in English regarding your field of study, and of studying documents in English. That's a state standard. But how many B1 owners can do those things? You will surely know the answer with just a small scale examination. How many master's programme takers can do those things? If standards are carried out without strict procedures, if it's just done like complying with legalized formalities, standards then would aim for nothing. So, should there be no single unit organising examinations for standard evaluation? Or should there be just one prestige organiser, and all procedures must strictly adhere to so that they will be like national examinations? Just to assure fairness. It doesn't seem okay if power to make decisions is entirely in the hands of local centres or organisations. Anyway, I still believe in a need for standards.

**Interviewer: 83'26''**

State authorities may have their own views, but what I'm more interested in is your personal thinking. What is your definition of quality in English language training in higher education institutions?

**Uyen-F-A: 83'50''**

Definition of quality in English language training in higher education institutions, okay, by the time students leave, first they have basic communication skills, secondly, they can read basic documents in their field of study ... thirdly they can write simple English like in a CV or an email ... or what else? They can read about work processes, job requirements, job descriptions, or the so-called SOP, etc. etc. Right, all those things. Because all businesses need those things, those things are in need at any places. There are processes, regulations, and basic criteria everywhere, so they need to understand them, have basic conversations, and understand basic documents about their profession. It's more than good if your students can do those things. If saying about how they improve their English later you can see it this way: if two students graduate gaining the same English language competency but later one is working in an environment involved in foreign factors, hence using English regularly whereas the other is not touching it completely, just after one year the latter's capacity will be like this ... [the interviewee using gestures]. Therefore, when they graduate, they just need those things.

**Interviewer: 85'15''**

At the start you said that students need to be equipped with skills which they can later use to search for information in relation to knowledge they learnt. What does your institution do to firstly promote students' autonomy and secondly develop their potential so that they can learn to be competent in English language wherever they want?

**Uyen-F-A: 85'50''**

I'm not sure if you ... [.....] ... I'd say ... just about English okay? In English, there are a lot of tenses and complex structures, when you read in English, for example, English literature, particularly old English literature, you'll see that you may spend a lot of time reading it again and again without understanding a single bit of it. But not many of those things are used at work. People at work just speak basic English, write emails using just simple structures like simple present or simple past tense. That's true indeed. Contract papers mainly feature words in relation to particular areas but the grammar structures being used in there are absolutely simple and easy

to understand. So, regarding the so-called ... developing skills for students for their later use in information and knowledge searching, I still hold my view that students just need this or that, if you really want to learn something you can totally manage that, there's a lot available on the internet when you try google, you can get whatever you want from there, for example, CV samples, documents in your field. Hence, you just need to know vocabulary in your field, basic grammar structures, basic communication skills, and basic writing skills, you can totally do everything else.

**Interviewer: 87'12''**

What about improving their independence and autonomy?

**Uyen-F-A: 87'20''**

Honestly speaking, at present training programmes in Vietnam depend on ... having developed quite a lot of programmes I find that they ... if we compare local programmes with foreign ones we'll see two big differences. For example, foreign programmes are focused on [real-life] situations, of course they contain basic knowledge and accompanied with that is comprehensible explanations whereas Vietnamese coursebooks are lengthy with bullet points which are extremely hard to understand and indeed not needed. Despite that fact we have to implement our programmes and what are outlined in our syllabuses. Hence, when teaching, we need to take into consideration what to leave out, what to add so that the lecture will be appropriate [for our students]. Now getting back to developing students' independence and autonomy ... saying this may sound like a cliché but it's indeed true that we have to change from their starting point. Because I've several times ... for example, I'm currently teaching [.....] to a class, to be honest with you, it took me so much time and effort to get examples of real-life [.....] processes ... [.....] or job descriptions of [.....], job descriptions of [.....]. And I must say everything like those in [....] is in English. In their first year when teaching them [.....] I strongly advised them to study English and explained to them why. But now after [.....] I see them again, they are exactly the same as when we first met, I mean, their English is exactly the same ... when I brought to them documents about [.....]...they said "I can't read in English" so I said "if now you can't read [in English] you have to learn it, if you don't know this or that word just ask and I'll tell you, and the internet is there, dictionaries are there... you lack nothing, why do you say you can't read [in English]?"

**Interviewer: 89'33''**

Well, the need for English ... but they actually ...

**Uyen-F-A: 89'35''**

That's why I said their need for passing end-of-GE exams differs from their need for a certificate to graduate. That is, they lack motivation. Secondly, they have a very bad sense of professional orientation ... The orientation of their future career is formed in two ways: they study a course in areas that their parents are working in so that later their parents can get them a job; they follow contemporary hot courses, and third, they do a field of study as they failed to get a place in a hot course. Those are three common career orientation among up to 99% of students, so literally they have no specific orientation, they don't have a plan for future. They just know that they study to get a qualification, but they have no clue what they'll do next. Due to lack of orientation they ... don't know what to learn ... they don't need to know what to learn ... So if we expect students to study themselves ... the time they spend on Facebook scrolling is three times more than the time they spend on study ... that means they can't learn anything. Certainly, we can't blame everything on students, it's like a system error, from ... they have been too passive, so it's hard ... When I see

## Appendix G

such a situation, I make changes. How do I do that? Beside assigning tasks for students to study at home, I still use traditional methods, that is, teaching lectures combining with reading the most basic and important parts for them to write down without which they wouldn't be able to do their exam. So, I have to combine many ways to teach. Now get back to your HOW question.

Nowadays, students have to be self-conscious as if they don't want to learn we'll find no way to feed knowledge into their brain, but because they lack self-consciousness beside teaching them you have to give them encouragements. Of course, students with good awareness will still be successful. I'm extremely upset with a recent story about an excellent student doing nothing but waiting for help from local authorities to get a job. That's a good illustration of lack of self-consciousness. So here I just want to assert that to make students learn, beside teaching them knowledge you need to teach them to develop their autonomy and if they have autonomy, that's when they can learn for long life. That's my viewpoint.

**Interviewer: 92'50''**

Thank you very much for spending time with me, for helping me complete this interview, and for all the information you've just shared.

**Uyen-F-A: 93'05''**

Hope that it's useful for you.

**Interviewer: 93'07''**

Thank you very much. I do appreciate what you've shared with me and all your support.

**Uyen-F-A: 93'12''**

Thank you.

## Appendix H Code development illustrations



**Figure 3 Development of all codes of the research project**

## Appendix H



**Figure 4 Development of codes for definitions of quality**



Figure 5 Development of codes for QAA learning



## Appendix I Ethics protocol

*This version updated December 2013*

### SSEGM ETHICS SUB-COMMITTEE APPLICATION FORM

(Submission ID: 26562;

Submitted 17/07/2017; Approved 21/07/2017)

Please note:

- **You must not begin data collection for your study until ethical approval has been obtained.**
- ***It is your responsibility to follow the University of Southampton's Ethics Policy and any relevant academic or professional guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing appropriate information sheets and consent forms, and ensuring confidentiality in the storage and use of data.***
- ***It is also your responsibility to provide full and accurate information in completing this form.***

1. **Name(s):** Phuong Truong

2. **Current Position:** Postgraduate research student

3. **Contact Details:**

**Division/School:** FSHMS Education

**Email:** ptct1m14@soton.ac.uk

**Phone:**

4. **Is your study being conducted as part of an education qualification?**

Yes

5. **If Yes, please give the name of your supervisor**

Dr John Schulz & Prof Daniel Muijs

6. **Title of your project:**

Quality in English language teaching and learning in Vietnamese higher education institutions

7. **Briefly describe the rationale, study aims and the relevant research questions of your study**

Vietnam has invested great efforts in legalising processes and procedures for quality in higher education, including that in English language education. The most recent quality initiative in the field is the application of the Common Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment (CEFR), which was originally developed for greater unity in language teaching and learning among European countries. A "Vietnamised" version of the framework is said to be constructed for a similar purpose of standardising foreign language teaching and learning in Vietnam. However, there still have been no few public complaints about quality in English language teaching and learning in Vietnamese universities. Meanwhile, the concept of "quality" is relative to contexts and its meaning differs depending who the stakeholder is. Initially triggered by such complaints, the study is conducted to examine contextualised understandings of quality in English language education. The understanding of constituencies' perceptions of quality are expected to be attained in-depth from varied angles ranging from managerial and

administrative perspectives to those in teaching and learning positions. The inquirer also seeks to see whether there are any similarities and differences in the way people view, think, feel, and do about quality and quality measures in English language teaching and learning in Vietnamese higher education in public and private sectors. A further focused concern of the study is the compatibility of Western ideas presented in the CEFR and prescribed English language teaching methods when developed and practiced in Vietnamese higher education institutions.

**8. Describe the design of your study**

The present study is designed as a multiple case study on the basis of a replication logic. That is, three universities will be deliberately chosen for a two-phased investigation to test the conditions under which the same findings might be replicated. In the first phase of the study, one public university and one private university will be selected and studied intensively to explore the commonalities and potential differences in the way people think about and act upon the issue of quality in English language teaching and learning as well as the nature of such variations in quality mechanisms for English language teaching and learning between the two sectors. The second phase will involve choosing an additional public university which is in the process of becoming independent of state funding. The aim is to examine if first-phase findings can be extended to such a state-owned institution. It is expected that some similarities can be found between quality mechanisms for English language teaching and learning in the additional case and the private university. Likewise, similar patterns are predicted for the case added compared to the public university as it is still in the course of assimilation.

The two phases of data collection of the study is diagrammatically illustrated in Figure 1 attached.

**9. Who are the research participants?**

The study will involve key actors of two functional areas in Vietnamese universities, which include quality management and English language teaching and learning. Those presenting quality processes and procedures will consist of heads of universities, heads of English language departments/sections, quality management people including those responsible for management in education and training of the institution and those responsible for testing and quality assurance of the institution. Participants representing English language teaching and learning processes will comprise of teachers and students.

It is anticipated that the study may involve the participation of expanded elements. Their roles may differ from those categories of people listed above and their significance for the study may become clearer once the study has begun.

For further details of participants of the study, see Figure 1 and Table 1 attached.

**10. If you are going to analyse secondary data, from where are you obtaining it?**

No secondary data will be used for this study.

**11. If you are collecting primary data, how will you identify and approach the participants to recruit them to your study?**

*Please upload a copy of the information sheet if you are using one – or if you are not using one please explain why.*

Access to participants of the study depends on the permission by the head of each participating university. Therefore, necessary permissions will be secured through contacting with such gatekeepers of potential universities via post or email. The email/letter will include a brief introduction to the project and its overall purposes as well as a request for their agreement to participate in the study. The researcher will ask for permission to firstly work with the university head and heads of departments/units.

A snowball method will then also be used to recruit people in the two relevant functional areas, that is, quality mechanisms in English language teaching and learning and the practice of English language teaching. Initial participants will be asked to propose individuals who might be

interested in participating and who initiate and/or are actively and directly involved in related processes and procedures. Contact details of the researcher will then be passed on to prospective participants.

With regard to student participants, relevant information (i.e., the English program they followed in high school, discipline, year of study, contact details) will be gained from their lecturers or administrative staff. With such information, initial student participants will then be asked for their willingness to participate. Subsequent participants will be recruited using a snowball strategy.

**12. Will participants be taking part in your study without their knowledge and consent at the time (e.g. covert observation of people)? If yes, please explain why this is necessary.**

All participants will give their consent, both verbally and in written form, to participate in this study.

Please see attachments for separate consent forms to be delivered to participants involved in different research methods (i.e., interviews, focus groups, and observation).

**13. If you answered 'no' to question 12, how will you obtain the consent of participants?**

*Please upload a copy of the consent form if you are using one – or if you are not using one please explain why.*

With permission granted by the heads of universities, it is much hoped that I will be able to obtain information needed for the study from university people. However, I would still prefer to get research participants to sign informed consent forms. One of the reasons is to give respondents the opportunity to be fully informed of the nature of the research and the implications of their participation at the outset. Further, I will have a signed record of consent if any concerns are subsequently raised by participants or others.

Concerning students' participation in classroom observation, I will ask classroom teachers who wish/do not wish to be involved, with or without being recorded. For those students who do not wish to take part in the observations, alternative learning provision will be arranged with the help of the teachers. For those students who wish to get involved but do not want to be recorded, classroom seating and camera positioning will be arranged so that the recorder will not be pointed at them.

Each participant will be provided with a Participant Information Sheet explaining the aims of the research as well as the value in/of their involvement. Before an interview/focus group/observation begins, participants will be asked to complete a consent form. During a few minutes at the beginning of the interview/focus group/observation, they will be asked to give their verbal consent. The same consent procedure will be followed for all sessions of interview/focus group/observation.

Please see attachments for separate forms of Participant Information Sheet that will be administered to different groups of participants.

**14. Is there any reason to believe participants may not be able to give full informed consent? If yes, what steps do you propose to take to safeguard their interests?**

It is thought that there is no such reason for participants unable to give full informed consent.

**15. If participants are under the responsibility or care of others (such as parents/carers, teachers or medical staff) what plans do you have to obtain permission to approach the participants to take part in the study?**

No participants will be under the care of others.

**16. Describe what participation in your study will involve for study participants. Please attach copies of any questionnaires and/or interview schedules and/or observation topic list to be used**

Study participants will get involved in interviews, focus groups, and/or observation.

*Participation in interviews*

Prior to each session of interview, participants will be, via email or telephone, provided with a brief introduction to the research, the time, location, and sequence of the interview/focus group/observation, as well as their opportunity to ask questions and to seek clarification. Also they will be asked to complete a consent form before the start of the event.

Interviews will all take place at locations convenient to participants and will last within 60-90 minutes. The interviews will be audio recorded if allowed by and with participants' consent. In case participants do not wish to be recorded, the researcher will just compile field notes. Nevertheless, they retain the right to end their involvement in the study at any time before, during, and after interviews. I will make it transparently clear to respondents that their participation in the research is entirely voluntary and that they have the right to withdraw at any time, even after they give their consent, either in written form or verbally. If participants decide to end their participation and to withdraw their data in the middle of the interviews, their data will be destroyed immediately. To facilitate data withdrawal and to keep resources away from the analysis/interpretation of data that may not be used, it will be explicitly stated in the PIS, consent forms, and verbally that all requests to withdraw data made within four weeks of the interview taking place will be respected. It is expected that the four week's time will be sufficient for the participant to think carefully about the withdrawal of their data.

*Participation in focus groups/group discussions*

Prior to each session of focus groups, participants will be, via email or telephone, provided with a brief introduction to the research, the time, location, and sequence of the focus groups/group discussions, as well as their opportunity to ask questions and to seek clarification. Also they will be asked to complete a consent form before the start of the event.

Focus groups/group discussions will all take place at locations convenient to participants and will last within 60-90 minutes. The focus groups/group discussions will be video recorded if allowed by and with participants' consent. The video recording is only to facilitate the analysis and interpretation of group interaction and discussion. Images from the recording will not be used. In case participants wish to participate in focus groups but do not wish to be recorded, the researcher may form and administer separate focus groups for those participants (the criteria must be satisfied concerning the diversity and number of participants) and will just compile field notes during the group interviews. Alternatively, seating and positioning of the camera will be arranged so that the video recorder will not be pointed at those wishing not to be recorded. Participants retain the right to end their involvement in the study at any time before, during, and after group discussions. I will make it transparently clear to respondents that their participation in the research is entirely voluntary and that they have the right to withdraw at any time, even after they give their consent, either in written form or verbally. If participants decide to end their participation and to withdraw their data in the middle or after the completion of the group interviews, the data involving their disassociated voices will not be used. To facilitate data withdrawal and to keep resources away from the analysis/interpretation of data that may not be used, it will be explicitly stated in the PIS, consent forms, and verbally that all requests to withdraw data made within four weeks of the interview taking place will be respected. However, participants will be made to be aware of the fact that focus group interviews involve the participation of a group of individuals and group interaction, so it will be impossible to completely remove their data. In case other participants use or discuss ideas or comments of participants whose later may wish to withdraw their involvement and data, efforts can just be made to not reveal their identity in research report. Likewise, once the recording has been made it will be impossible to erase the part of the data involving individuals wishing to end their participation and data.

*Participation in observation*

Prior to each session of classroom observation, participants will be, via email or telephone, provided with a brief introduction to the research and the focus as well as the purpose of the observation. Also they will be asked to complete a consent form before the start of the event.

Classroom observation will all take place on the premise of the participating university and will last within 45-50 minutes. The class hour will be video recorded if allowed by and with participants' consent. The video recording is only to facilitate the analysis and interpretation of class interaction and discussion. Images from the recording will not be used. In case all participants wish to participate in observation but do not wish to be recorded, the researcher will just compile field notes during the event. If some of the participants do not want to be recorded or opt-out, seating and positioning of the camera will be arranged so that the video recorder will not be pointed at those participants. Nevertheless, participants retain the right to end their involvement in the study at any time before, during, and after classroom observations. I will make it transparently clear to respondents that their participation in the research is entirely voluntary and that they have the right to withdraw at any time, even after they give their consent, either in written form or verbally. If participants decide to end their participation and to withdraw their data in the middle or after the completion of the observation, the data involving their disassociated voices will not be used. To facilitate data withdrawal and to keep resources away from the analysis/interpretation of data that may not be used, it will be explicitly stated in the PIS, consent forms, and verbally that all requests to withdraw data made within four weeks of the observation taking place will be respected. However, participants will be made to be aware of the fact that classroom observation involves the participation of a group of individuals and classroom interaction, so it will be impossible to completely remove their data. In case other participants use or discuss ideas, comments, actions/interactions of participants who later may wish to withdraw their involvement and data, efforts can just be made to not reveal their identity in research report. Likewise, once the recording has been made it will be impossible to erase the part of the data involving individuals wishing to end their participation and data.

Draft copies of interview, focus group and observation guide are attached.

**17. How will you make it clear to participants that they may withdraw consent to participate at any point during the research without penalty?**

This will be explicitly stated both in the Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Form. Also participant consent will be gained verbally during communication to plan for interviews/focus groups/observations and immediately prior to the occurrence of such events.

Please see attached copies of Participant Information Sheet and Consent forms.

**18. Detail any possible distress, discomfort, inconvenience or other adverse effects the participants may experience, including after the study, and you will deal with this.**

It is likely that participants may face certain psychological issues caused by, for example, interview scheduling or conditions of interview venues. Therefore, participants will be informed in advance via email and/or mobile of the time and location of the interview. Confirmation of the date and time of the interview will also be provided via email and/or mobile. In doing so, disruption to respondents can be avoided. Moreover, I will check in advance the size, facilities, and seating where the interviews will take place. This is to make sure that the venues will be adequately sized, neither too large for participants to feel lost nor too small for them to feel cramped. Also attention will be paid to assure comfortable seating, for example, in focus group interviews participants will be seated around a table so that each participant will see other participants and the moderator. Efforts will be made to make sure that the venues are least affected by noise and free from disruption/interruptions.

In discussions about how certain quality assurance mechanism and teaching approach may work, particularly when rapport and trust-building strategies have been employed, the likelihood is that distressing and emotive sayings and behaviours may be reflected. For example, criticisms of the institution and its management, or classroom practices. If this should be the case, it is required

that identity be safely kept in order to not cause embarrassment. To protect participants from mental and emotional harm, on the one hand, the researcher will make clear to participants that it is their choice how much they say, that they are free not to answer questions or to say they do not want to discuss a topic further. In addition, I will be attentive during interviews/group discussions/classroom observations to be as alert as possible to signs of discomfort or potential withdrawal of consent during the engagement. On the other hand, research participants will be fully informed in advance of the proposed plans for confidentiality. Statements about confidentiality will be explicitly made as a promise and treated with all the seriousness, yet with acknowledgement that one cannot predict the nature of the data that will be provided or observed during the research process. In any case, in any storage procedure, individuals will be anonymized as effectively as possible so that any adverse effects for individual respondents can be minimized. Endeavours will also be made to use suitably anonymized extracts in the thesis to support the arguments and analysis, and not to make available the entire body of data.

As regards classroom observation, discomfort and distress might be caused to the teacher who will be being observed in terms of their classroom techniques and strategies in dealing with learners' needs and objectives. Therefore, their consent will be attained in both written form and verbally in advance of the observation. They will be sufficiently and appropriately informed of the purpose, focus, and process of the observation, their role and the value of their participation, as well as the plan and procedures to assure and maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of all classroom talks, actions, and interactions. It is necessary to explicitly state that the information derived from observation will not be abused, no talks/actions/interactions will be belittled or ridiculed. Additionally, the researcher will encourage the teacher's willing participation by making it clear how observation may be useful for both parties, for example, providing feedback to the teacher, or reflecting the teaching and learning situation as seen through fresh eyes.

**19. How will you maintain participant anonymity and confidentiality in collecting, analysing and writing up your data?**

The research will be compliant with the Data Protection Act/University policy. Participating universities and participant as well as all data sources about them and related processes/events will be anonymised using pseudonyms.

The data will all be stored on a password protected personal computer and access available to the researcher only. The raw data including names and other means of identification will not be shared with anyone else. I myself will transcribe the interviews partly due to constrained budget, partly for the purpose of immersion in, hence reading more accurately the data.

Concerning focus groups, principles and procedures for participant anonymity and confidentiality will be followed and maintained during the whole processes of collecting, analysing, and writing up research report. However, accidental breaches could emerge where there are connections between participants beyond the research study. The researcher may indicate in the consent form that focus groups participants agree not to disclose information shared, yet it may be not possible to remove the risk completely.

The universities/participants and their settings/circumstances will be reported to the details permitted/wished by the gatekeepers and prospective participants. Any comments/viewpoints that may reveal individuals/institutions' undesired identity will not be used in the research report.

**20. How will you store your data securely during and after the study?**

*The University of Southampton has a Research Data Management Policy, including for data retention. The Policy can be consulted at <http://www.calendar.soton.ac.uk/sectionIV/research-data-management.html>*

The data will be anonymous and stored on a password protected personal computer, access available to the researcher only. After a reasonable period of time, abiding by the time duration of data storing by the University of Southampton policy, the data will be discarded so that it does not fall into the hands of other researchers who might misappropriate it.

**21. Describe any plans you have for feeding back the findings of the study to participants.**

Opportunity will be given to participants and key informants to receive any copies of the research report with their contact details provided. Also necessary comments/corrections on transcription will be secured in advance of final stage of data analysis. However, no individual is entitled to interview/focus group/observation data without their involvement. After raw data has undergone the interpretative stage, some of the resulting analysis will become available to participants/informants in the public domain, for example, a published article in an academic journal. In addition, it is important to send heads of universities copies of their case reports before final research report to finalise the agreement on what can be reported as part of the case study.

**22. What are the main ethical issues raised by your research and how do you intend to manage these?**

Discussions over the topic of quality in teaching and learning may include issues that may be considered sensitive or in confidence. Similarly, some organisational documents may contain confidential information, e.g., quality reports, which, if revealed, may affect the institution's reputation. Therefore, the researcher will try her best in the commitment to the matters of anonymisation and confidentiality. Also explanations and guidelines will be given to participants concerning inappropriate disclosure of sensitive and/or confidential information. It is also important to establish good field relationships should something unexpected happen so that all parties are open to apologies or negotiation upon an alternative to what may have gone wrong.

**23. Please outline any other information you feel may be relevant to this submission.**