

INTEGRATION OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN ASEAN UNIVERSITY NETWORK - OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT IN VIETNAM UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract: *The article aims to (1) present the integration context and the Ministry of Education and Training's policy on applying the AUN-QA standards of the ASEAN University Network in accreditation, improvement, and enhancing the quality of higher education and training; (2) analyze typical pioneering cases in assessing training quality according to AUN-QA; (3) synthesize development opportunities for Vietnamese universities entering integration according to the AUN standards; and (4) provide recommendations for continued sustainable development in Vietnamese higher education, seizing opportunities and gradually adjusting policies and activities according to AUN's requirements harmoniously and suitably.*

Key words: integration, AUN, higher education, sustainable development

1. Introduction

Joining the ASEAN community opens up many opportunities for Vietnam to develop in various aspects, including education and training, especially at the higher education level. In recent years, the accreditation of higher education institutions and programs according to the AUN-QA standards has been approved by the Ministry of Education and Training, and most universities in the country are interested in this process.

ASEAN regional integration has created opportunities for sharing and cooperation for mutual development. As an official member of the ASEAN University Network (AUN), Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam — one of the three national universities in Vietnam — has had early access to quality assessment standards and documents, as well as opportunities to cooperate and learn from leading universities in the region.

However, awareness, determination, and gradually learning and applying quality

standards in a continuous, comprehensive, and systematic manner are crucial for Vietnamese higher education leaders to catch up with the development of countries in the region and the world, contributing to the overall development of the region. Therefore, a step-by-step roadmap for continuous innovation in a consistent and synchronous manner, from input to process and output in higher education, is necessary.

2. Integration context and policy of the Ministry of Education and Training on ASEAN regional integration

The AUN was established in 1995 under the agreement of the ASEAN Ministers of Education. It currently has 30 official member universities in 10 countries, including Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, and Can Tho University in Mekong Delta of Vietnam.

Table 1. Number of AUN-QA members (AUN, 2024a)

No.	Country	AUN Core Member Universities	AUN Associate Member Universities
1.	Brunei	1	2
2.	Cambodia	2	6
3.	Indonesia	4	45
4.	Laos	1	0
5.	Malaysia	5	25
6.	Myanmar	3	10
7.	Philippines	3	52
8.	Singapore	3	1
9.	Thailand	5	17
10.	Vietnam	3	60
	Total	30	218

The ASEAN University Network - Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) was established in 1998 and has issued many important documents related to quality assurance guidelines from 2004 to the present, especially Guidance Document on quality assessment of programs according to the AUN-QA standards set (version 4.0) in 2020. This version includes 8 standards and 53 criteria (previously 11 standards and 50 criteria in 2015, 15 standards with 68 criteria in 2011 and 18 standards with 72 criteria in 2004), focusing on input, process, and output factors to continuously improve and gradually enhance the quality of training.

While Vietnam's higher education system is still striving to search for, build, and

complete a suitable model and a set of standards to evaluate the quality of training institutions and programs, leading universities in Southeast Asia have collaborated with European experts to compile appropriate documents to support the universities in the region to improve training quality.

In general, AUN member universities in Vietnam, including Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, have approached this set of standards since 2005 with the following basic goals and orientations: (1) Using the quality assurance model according to AUN-QA and evaluating programs according to this set of standards to help Vietnamese universities build up a scientific basis to improve the quality of academic programs and contribute to training high-quality human resources to serve the country's industrialization and modernization process; and (2) Determining that the AUN-QA standards are quite suitable for evaluating programs of Vietnamese universities to improve training quality and maintain the reputation and brand of their majors.

Under the permission and consent of the AUN Board of Trustees, the Ministry of Education and Training has advocated for the accreditation of higher education quality based on AUN-QA since 2017. Achieving the AUN-QA standards for Vietnamese programs is only the first step toward creating conditions for Vietnamese universities to gradually move towards interoperability and recognition in the academic field in the region. Vietnamese students will have more opportunities for student exchange programs between universities in ASEAN, enabling Vietnamese universities to attract international students from other universities in the region to study and research.

Achieving the AUN-QA standards for the undergraduate programs the teaching and learning of which have been done via the Vietnamese language, thus called "Vietnamese programs", also clearly demonstrates the accountability of universities to society regarding the quality of training to meet societal needs and labor market requirements, as well as the expectations of the State and Government, which make significant investments at Vietnam National University, Hanoi and Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City. The application and achievement of the AUN-QA standards for Vietnamese programs also contribute to strongly attracting investment from domestic and foreign enterprises, social organizations, and research institutes, thereby advancing the development of education, training, scientific research, technology transfer, and social services. This prestigious set of quality assessment standards in the region also tends to be recognized gradually in other regions such as the Pacific and Europe.

In addition to supporting effective integration in university education, adopting the AUN-QA standards helps promote connections and cooperation with prestigious universities in the region through exchange programs, academic collaborations, research, training, and community services. This contributes to promoting the internationalization

of higher education in Vietnam in a more comprehensive and profound manner.

Pioneering participation in training quality assessment according to the AUN-QA standards for programs, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City has had 75 programs assessed by AUN-QA since registering for accreditation at the end of 2009.

Many universities have been (1) implementing self-assessment of all programs according to the AUN-QA standards; (2) annually participating in official accreditation by AUN for 1-2 programs; (3) recently, member universities of Vietnam National University, Hanoi and Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City have begun to register their graduate programs for assessment and accreditation according to the AUN-QA standards by domestic accreditation centers or the AUN organization; and (4) gradually cultivating the so-called “quality culture” in many faculties, where the units are more aware of quality requirements. As for some units that do not meet the conditions to participate in program external assessment right now, they have begun to establish roadmaps to improve their programs by reviewing course outlines, implementing improvements based on stakeholder feedback, participating in training sessions on building and evaluating programs, and building evidence lists according to AUN-QA.

During the period from 2007 up to now, the AUN evaluated and recognized 994 programs as meeting the AUN standards. Vietnam ranked first in the number of AUN-standard programs, with 388 programs successfully assessed.

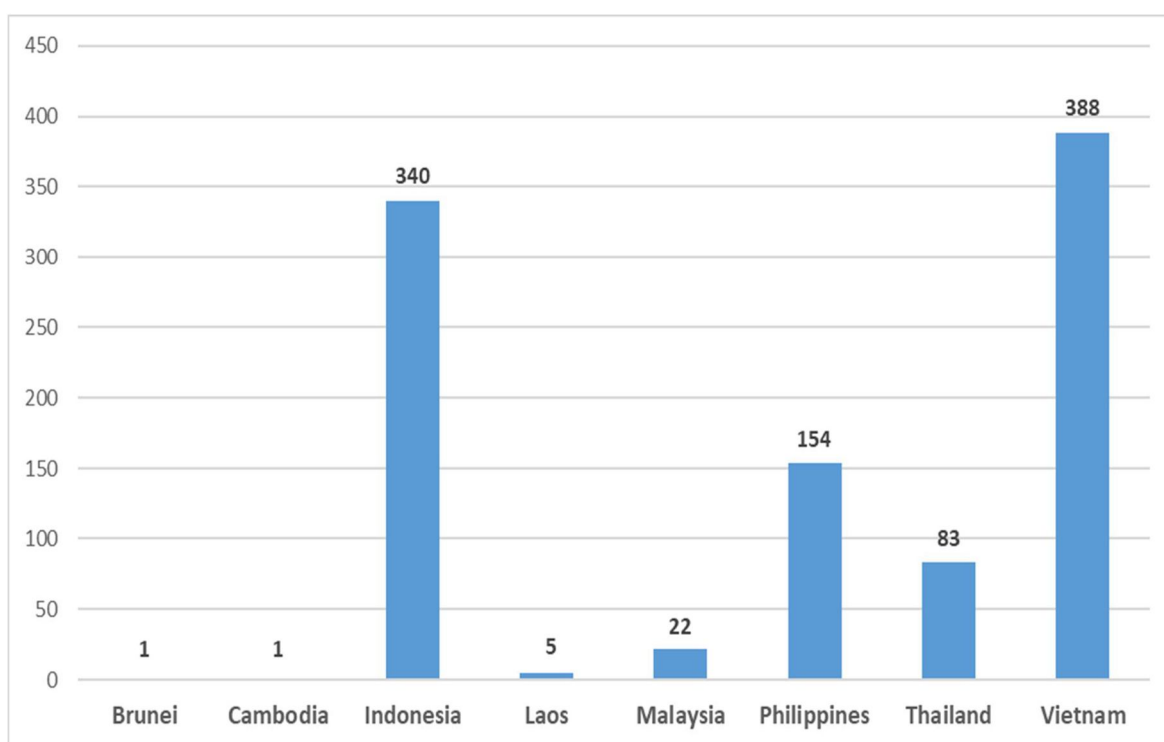


Figure 1. *The number of assessed programmes by AUN-QA (AUN, 2024b)*

In addition, the Guide to AUN-QA Assessment at Institutional Level (version 3.0) was launched in 2016 with 15 criteria and 60 requirements divided into three groups: Strategic quality assurance (8 criteria, 38 requirements), Systemic quality assurance (3 criteria, 8 requirements), and Results (4 criteria, 14 requirements). Several universities in the region have registered for assessment according to this set of standards at the institutional level for the first time and met the AUN standards at the institutional level, including the four Vietnamese universities: University of Science, Vietnam National University, Hanoi (2017); University of Technology, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City (2017); International University, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City (2018); and Lac Hong University (2024).

It is hoped that lessons learned from the accreditation of programs according to the AUN-QA standards at pioneering Vietnamese universities will contribute to elevating Vietnamese higher education to meet regional standards with the goal of “continuous improvement,” as emphasized in the spirit of AUN. This aligns with the aim of achieving breakthroughs in “fundamental and comprehensive innovation in education and training,” as stated in the Resolution of the 8th plenum of the 11th Vietnam Communist Party’s Central Committee.

3. Development opportunities for Vietnamese universities in the integration process

When applying common quality assessment standards at the program and institutional levels, including tools and frameworks, activities for transferring and sharing experiences among universities in the region will occur. These activities specifically include:

The requirements in the quality standards indicate the minimum requirements that universities must strive to achieve. These requirements have been referenced by leading experts from prestigious universities in ASEAN such as Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines, as well as quality models and requirements from other regions such as Europe and North America.

Many evaluation and training sessions on higher education quality management in ASEAN countries, including Vietnam, have involved European and Australian experts, as well as experts from the United States, the British Council, and Hong Kong. These experts often analyze and clarify quality issues in ASEAN and compare them with regional standards. Vietnamese higher education leaders also have the opportunity to join networks such as the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) and the International Higher Education Quality Network (INQAHEE), in which the AUN plays an important role.

Participation in the assessment of programs or training courses in the region provides opportunities to share good practices of universities and advanced academic

fields in the region. The AUN-QA assessment criteria, which include a 7-point scale, identify activities as “having best practices” at levels 5-6. Some Vietnamese experts and AUN assessors have begun participating in AUN assessment teams to evaluate universities in the region, thereby gaining experience to share with domestic universities.

The quality standards and models according to AUN-QA require synchronous development activities aligned with the PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) process to prevent errors to the maximum extent. This process fosters a cohesive quality culture, avoiding superficial or reactive approaches, such as: (1) working spontaneously without planning; (2) creating “suspended plans” that lack actionable steps; (3) implementing measures without fully understanding their impact due to inadequate assessments; (4) completing assessments without leveraging the results for continuous improvement; or (5) failing to share experiences and lessons learned during assessments and subsequent improvements.

The evaluation of programs emphasizes critical factors and requirements, such as: (1) clearly defined and scientifically developed expected learning outcomes; (2) transferable skills and lifelong learning opportunities; (3) a learner-centered and comprehensive educational philosophy; (4) the development of robust assessment criteria that reliably measure expected outcomes; (5) systems to monitor learner progress from input to output; and (6) an effective internal quality assurance process that supports continuous improvement through stakeholder feedback. These requirements and concepts were largely absent in Vietnamese higher education a decade ago. Recognizing these weaknesses allows universities to systematically enhance capacities, policies, and investments.

Vietnamese universities benefit from opportunities to expand cooperative exchange relationships with experts from ASEAN universities, facilitating learning for both lecturers and students.

Universities are gradually adopting active teaching and learning methods, prioritizing learner engagement and motivation, which enhances integration skills and soft skills for students. Examples include improved English language training, incorporating communication and cultural competencies, and establishing stronger connections with businesses and communities.

Capacity building is crucial for two target groups: (1) higher education management leaders, focusing on decision-making, program management, and human resource quality management; and (2) lecturers, emphasizing teaching, student assessment, counseling, and the use of information and communication technology in education to meet regional standards.

Finally, this set of standards underscores the importance of community

outreach/service, which has been underdeveloped or inconsistently implemented in Vietnam. Transitioning toward research-oriented universities necessitates linking research activities with societal needs, addressing social issues, and fostering innovation. Integrating training, research, and community service paves the way for sustainable development and growth in Vietnamese universities.

4. Some recommendations and proposals for the sustainable development of Vietnamese higher education

Vietnamese universities need to seize opportunities and gradually adjust their policies and operations according to AUN's requirements in a harmonious and appropriate manner. The key lesson for establishing a development direction is that universities must adopt more synchronized measures and solutions throughout their institutions, specifically as follows:

Invest in Resources: Prioritize allocating greater human, material, and financial resources to quality assurance activities; develop a modern and effective data information system to support accurate, objective, and appropriate decision-making for continuous improvements.

Foster Innovation and Collaboration: Encourage leaders, lecturers, and staff to overcome challenges and create an environment that supports professional and academic growth; establish a friendly and collaborative culture among colleagues to inspire enthusiasm in innovation and integration efforts; faculty and staff should regularly enhance their quality management capacity and adopt the PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) process.

Implement Self-Assessment Roadmaps: Develop a clear self-assessment roadmap aligned with the AUN-QA standards; implement improvement plans before and after assessments at faculties and departments — the two components under any universities, including member universities of VNU-Hanoi and VNU-HCM, to ensure the completion of continuous quality assurance cycles.

Expand Regional Cooperation: Promote regional collaboration in quality assurance, knowledge sharing, and capacity building by participating in exchanges, conferences, and collaborative learning initiatives.

Training Activities: Department and faculty leaders, along with professional training managers, members of the Science and Training Council/Program Task Force, and lecturers, should: (1) Regularly enhance their understanding of regional practices in developing programs, course outlines, teaching methods, and assessment activities; (2) gradually align with standards for evaluating programs in ASEAN and other regions by participating in capacity-building initiatives; and (3) encourage lecturers to voluntarily implement suggestions from external assessment teams to improve teaching,

assessments, and student services, emphasizing learner-centered approaches. Institutions should also actively solicit student feedback and use the results from external assessments to periodically review, update, and refine programs. Regularly hosting Employer/Alumni Conferences and consulting experts will ensure that programs align with societal and labor market demands. Increasing exchanges with colleagues, participating in seminars, attending lectures, engaging in online self-study, and contributing initiatives to improve quality are essential. Encouraging teamwork, effective collaboration within the institution, and building a strong habit of working in groups will lead to better overall development.

Research and Community Service Activities: Lecturers and researchers should regard research and community service as indispensable and mandatory components, similar to teaching. These activities should be conditions for long-term recruitment, regular evaluations, salary increases, and promotions: (1) Develop individual plans for research and community service to improve communication and cooperation in scientific research. Collaborate with regional scholars through joint publications, international conferences, and joint research projects; (2) gain expertise in ethical standards for scientific research, intellectual property law, and other relevant domains; and (3) focus on linking research activities with societal needs to address social challenges, thus contributing to the institution's mission and goals. Community service activities, such as partnerships with businesses and localities, serve dual purposes: they enhance the institution's reputation and provide students with opportunities to develop essential social and communication skills, as well as lifelong learning motivation. Specific institutional policies should be developed to foster these activities.

5. Conclusion

Change is necessary and inevitable. Programs must evolve to reflect the needs of employers and society, as well as the transformative role of information technology and rapid development. Programs should be continuously developed in a comprehensive and systematic manner.

Simultaneously, universities must strengthen their scientific research and community service activities, which support the development of programs and enhance institutional reputations. Assessing institutional levels and programs using the AUN-QA standards helps establish a culture of continuous self-assessment, fosters appropriate quality planning, and builds commitment to quality improvements.

ASEAN integration in higher education raises awareness of the need to meet current quality standards in a competitive environment while presenting numerous opportunities for collaboration and growth. Through a deeper understanding of the AUN-QA standards and the motivation for continuous quality improvement, Vietnamese universities can advance sustainably and effectively.

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