Journal of Leadership and Quality in Education
ISSN: 3083-1768
Volume 1, Issue 1, 2026
pp. 1-19

# When Self-Study Becomes Compliance: Quality Assurance, Concealment, and Improvement in Vietnamese Higher Education

Huong Thi Pham[1*]
Phuong Vu Nguyen[2,3]
[1]*University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam*
[2]*University of Economics and Law, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam*
[3]*Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam*
*Corresponding author email: huongpt.2742@ueh.edu.vn
https://doi.org/10.65956/leqa.2026.63

**Abstract**

*Self-study is widely positioned as a core mechanism in external quality assurance for promoting institutional reflection, accountability, and continuous improvement. However, limited research has examined how self-study is enacted within compulsory quality assurance (QA) systems in Vietnam and whether it leads to meaningful quality enhancement. This qualitative multiple-case study investigated self-study in three universities in Vietnam. Participants included 7 academic leaders, 6 QA members, and 22 academics. Data were collected through in-depth interviews exploring how self-study was understood, implemented, experienced, and its perceived contribution to institutional improvement. Findings revealed that self-study was primarily implemented as a compliance-driven exercise. Factors included limited QA knowledge, restricted academic participation, concerns about institutional reputation, and pressure to align with external requirements. In two cases, these conditions encouraged selective disclosure and the production of more favourable reports. Although the process contributed to some administrative and organisational improvements, there was limited evidence of substantive improvement in teaching and learning quality. The study argues that self-study does not automatically function as a developmental quality mechanism. Its effectiveness depends on how its purposes are understood, how safely weaknesses can be disclosed, and how far institutions are supported to use self-study for genuine improvement rather than symbolic compliance. A clearer purpose for self-study reports is needed to minimise the tendency toward "beautiful reports," ritualism, and tokenism, which waste time and resources while distorting authentic reflection. These findings have implications for the design of external QA in Vietnam and similar contexts where accountability pressures may undermine honest self-evaluation.*

**Keywords** quality assurance, external quality assurance, self-study, higher education, symbolic compliance, Vietnam

**Article history** Received: 10 Apr 2026 | Accepted: 27 Apr 2026 | Available: 12 May 2026

## INTRODUCTION

Self-study is widely regarded as a foundational component of external quality assurance (EQA) in higher education because it is expected to promote institutional reflection, identify weaknesses, and support continuous improvement (Hodson & Thomas, 2003; Sin et al., 2017). As a central

stage in accreditation processes, self-study is intended to enable institutions to critically evaluate their own practices and generate evidence for both internal improvement and external accountability. However, these expected benefits cannot be taken for granted. Empirical research has shown that quality assurance (QA) mechanisms often produce changes in formal structures, procedures, and documentation without necessarily leading to substantive improvements in academic quality (Sin et al., 2017).

A key reason for this gap lies in the enduring tension between improvement and accountability within QA systems (Hodson & Thomas, 2003). When QA is externally mandated and closely tied to evaluation, ranking, or resource allocation, institutions may prioritise compliance with standards over genuine self-reflection. In such contexts, self-study may function less as a developmental process than as a compliance exercise, where institutions seek to demonstrate conformity rather than critically examine their weaknesses (Teelken, 2012). Under these conditions, academic staff may respond through symbolic compliance, professional pragmatism, or disengagement, rather than meaningful participation in quality improvement processes (Teelken, 2012).

This tension is particularly salient in developing higher education systems where QA has expanded rapidly through policy-driven reforms. In Vietnam, the introduction and institutionalisation of quality assurance and accreditation (QAA) have been strongly shaped by national initiatives led by the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), with support from international organisations such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. These reforms have contributed to the widespread adoption of self-study as part of accreditation processes across higher education institutions (Madden, 2014). However, broader governance and implementation challenges continue to influence how QA is enacted in practice, including limited institutional capacity, uneven understanding of QA concepts, and the persistence of hierarchical organisational cultures (Dao, 2015). As a result, questions remain about whether QA processes in Vietnam generate substantive institutional improvement or primarily produce formal conformity to national requirements (Misra & Stensaker, 2024).

Although previous studies have examined the development of QA policies and systems in Vietnam (Pham & Nguyen, 2019), impacts of QA on curriculum design (Pham et al., 2022), limited effects of EQA on internal QA (IQA) (Pham, 2019), or the role of AUN-QA on quality improvements (Pham & Nguyen, 2024), limited research has explored how self-study is actually understood, enacted, and experienced by those directly involved in the process, as suggested by Miranda (2025). In particular, there is a lack of empirical evidence on how academic leaders, QA staff, and academic staff perceive the purposes of self-study, how organisational and cultural conditions shape its implementation, and to what extent it contributes to meaningful quality improvement within institutions. Miranda (2025), in a review study, recommended that further studies could examine how staff experience the accreditation process among tensions between compliance and quality improvement.

This study addresses this gap by examining self-study practices in three Vietnamese higher education institutions. Drawing on document analysis and in-depth interviews with academic leaders, QA staff, and academic staff, the study investigates how self-study was implemented and explores its perceived contribution to quality improvement. Therefore, it seeks to collect data to

answer a research question: "How was self-study implemented in three Vietnamese higher education institutions, and to what extent did it contribute to quality improvement?

By doing so, the study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it provides qualitative evidence on how self-study operates within a compulsory EQA context in a developing higher education system. Second, it identifies key organisational and cultural factors that shape the enactment of self-study in practice. Third, it shows that self-study may generate limited administrative and procedural improvements while falling short of producing broader academic quality enhancement, thereby highlighting the conditions under which self-study becomes a form of symbolic compliance rather than a genuinely developmental process.

## SELF-STUDY AND PURPOSES OF SELF-STUDY

### Self-Study As a Core Mechanism in EQA

Self-study is widely recognised as a central component of EQA systems in higher education. Within accreditation and audit processes, it typically constitutes the first stage through which institutions evaluate their own performance against externally defined standards before undergoing peer review and external judgement (Vlăsceanu et al., 2004). In this sense, self-study serves both as a preparatory exercise for external evaluation and as an internal process of institutional reflection.

Conceptually, self-study, often used interchangeably with self-evaluation or self-assessment, refers to the systematic and critical review of an institution's own activities, including its academic programmes, organisational structures, and quality management processes (Harvey, n.d). The Council for Higher Education Accreditation defines self-study as an internally conducted evaluation based on external standards, typically undertaken in preparation for an external review (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2001). Similarly, the EQUIPE project conceptualises self-assessment as a fundamental element of evaluation, through which institutions define their objectives, analyse their activities, identify weaknesses, and propose solutions (EQUIPE Project, 2004).

Across different national contexts, self-study has been positioned as a key mechanism for enhancing institutional self-knowledge and fostering continuous improvement (Kolomitro et al., 2022; Lackner, 2024; Pham et al., 2022). It is expected to promote reflective practice, encourage evidence-based decision-making, and support the alignment of institutional activities with strategic goals. Empirical research also suggests that self-study can stimulate organisational learning and contribute to the development of internal QA systems, particularly when institutions actively engage academic staff in reflective processes (Sin et al., 2017; Stensaker, 2008).

However, the effectiveness of self-study as a developmental mechanism depends heavily on how it is understood and enacted within specific institutional and policy contexts. While formal models of EQA assume that self-study naturally leads to reflection and improvement, studies have shown that its actual implementation varies considerably, raising questions about whether it consistently fulfils its intended purposes (Diatta & Blanco, 2024; Hodson & Thomas, 2003; Stensaker, 2008).

## The Dual Purposes of Self-Study: Accountability and Improvement

A central theme in the literature is that self-study serves two interrelated but potentially conflicting purposes: accountability and improvement. On the one hand, self-study provides evidence for external stakeholders, such as accrediting bodies and governments, regarding the quality of institutional performance. On the other hand, it is intended to support internal reflection and continuous enhancement (Brennan et al., 1997; Diatta & Blanco, 2024; Pham et al., 2022).
This dual function is widely acknowledged in QA research. Brennan et al. (1997) argue that self-assessment enables institutions to identify strengths and weaknesses, thereby supporting both accountability to external stakeholders and internal quality improvement. Similarly, Harvey (2002b) emphasises that self-evaluation, when conducted in an appropriate context, can encourage fundamental reviews of institutional objectives and practices. These perspectives position self-study as a bridge between external evaluation and internal development.

Nevertheless, the coexistence of accountability and improvement creates inherent tensions (Miranda, 2025). When self-study is closely tied to high-stakes external evaluation, institutions may become reluctant to disclose weaknesses, particularly if negative findings could affect their reputation, funding, or enrolment (Diatta & Blanco, 2024; Harvey, 2002a; Kis, 2005).

Under such conditions, the developmental purpose of self-study may be undermined, as institutions prioritise presenting favourable accounts over engaging in critical self-reflection. This is what Harvey (2002a) calls the risk of two sets of books. In other publications, Harvey and Newton also caution that externally imposed self-assessment may lead to bureaucratic, paper-driven processes that prioritise documentation over genuine evaluation (Harvey, 2024; Harvey & Newton, 2004).

These dynamics are often described in terms of ritualism, tokenism, or symbolic compliance, where formal adherence to QA requirements does not necessarily reflect substantive change (Chikazinga, 2025; Stensaker, 2008; Van Kemenade & Hardjono, 2010).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Research on organisational responses to external regulation suggests that actors' behaviour is shaped by the need to balance technical demands with pressures for legitimacy. Within higher education, QA systems institutionalise expectations for accountability and improvement, yet these expectations are not always internalised uniformly across organisations (Chikazinga, 2025; Hodson & Thomas, 2003).

From institutional theory and professional theory, prior studies indicate that responses to QA reforms tend to cluster into three broad patterns. Teelken (2012) theorised three strategy patterns explaining how academics often respond to managerial and QA demands through strategies: symbolic compliance, professional pragmatism, and formal instrumentality. First, formal instrumentality reflects procedural compliance, where QA is enacted as a routine set of required practices. Second, professional pragmatism captures strategic and negotiated engagement, in which actors selectively adapt to QA demands while managing constraints such as workload, risk, and competing priorities. Third, symbolic compliance refers to performative adherence, where

documentation and reporting signal conformity without corresponding changes in underlying practices (Chikazinga, 2025; Teelken, 2012). These responses reflect a tendency to comply with external requirements while minimising disruption to core academic activities.

These three conceptual perspectives suggest that engagement with QA is not a binary of compliance versus resistance, but a spectrum of contextually shaped organisational behaviours, which may help explain variation in how self-study is enacted and the extent to which it contributes to quality improvement.

This study draws on these conceptual categories to interpret how self-study is enacted in higher education under EQA pressures. While QA is designed to promote reflection and improvement, organisations may prioritise formal conformity to secure legitimacy (Chikazinga, 2025; Hodson & Thomas, 2003). Building on this, university actors' responses to QA reforms can be understood as falling into these three broad patterns. These response types highlight that participation in QA does not necessarily imply genuine commitment to quality improvement, but rather reflects contextually shaped organisational behaviour.

Importantly, the effectiveness of self-study is shaped not only by policy design but also by organisational and cultural conditions. Limited understanding of quality assurance concepts among academic staff leads to ambiguity, lack of ownership, and ultimately superficial participation in self-evaluation processes (Harvey & Green, 1993; Newton, 2002; Pham, 2019). Heavy workload and competing academic priorities reduce faculty motivation and result in compliance-driven rather than meaningful engagement in QA activities (Do et al., 2017; Newton, 2000; Pham & Nguyen, 2024; Stensaker, 2008). Without broad-based participation, self-study risks being confined to small administrative units, limiting its capacity to influence institutional practices.

## THE CASE OF VIETNAM

The challenges associated with self-study are particularly pronounced in developing and transitional higher education systems, where QA mechanisms are often introduced through top-down policy reforms. In such contexts, institutions may have limited experience with QA, and the rapid expansion of accreditation systems can create pressures to comply with external requirements without fully internalising their underlying purposes (Madden, 2014).

In Vietnam, QAA has been developed as part of broader higher education reforms led by MoET. As a result, self-study is a core component of accreditation processes (Madden, 2014; Pham & Nguyen, 2019). However, studies have highlighted persistent challenges related to governance, institutional capacity, and the implementation of QA practices (Dao, 2015; Pham, 2019).

Cultural factors also play an important role in shaping how self-study is enacted. In contexts influenced by Confucian traditions, concerns about face-saving, hierarchical relationships, and the avoidance of public criticism may limit the willingness of institutions and individuals to disclose weaknesses (Nguyen & McInnis, 2002; Nguyen, 2017). This can contribute to a preference for presenting positive institutional images, particularly in externally visible processes such as accreditation.

As a result, self-study in Vietnam may be influenced by a combination of policy-driven accountability pressures and cultural norms that discourage open critique. Misra and Stensaker (2024) argue that the balance between control and legitimacy is critical in higher education policy implementation, and that excessive emphasis on control may lead to formal compliance rather than genuine institutional engagement. This insight is particularly relevant in contexts where QA systems are still evolving and where institutional autonomy remains constrained.

Despite the rapid expansion of QA in Vietnam, there remains limited empirical research on how self-study is experienced by those directly involved in the process and how it contributes to institutional improvement.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative multiple-case study design to examine how self-study was implemented and experienced in three higher education institutions in Vietnam. A qualitative approach was appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research and its focus on understanding participants' perspectives, meanings, and interpretations of self-study practices within their institutional contexts.

The study was informed by an interpretivist epistemology, which assumes that organisational practices such as QA are socially constructed and understood differently by various actors (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In this regard, self-study was not treated as a fixed technical process but as a situated practice shaped by institutional, organisational, and cultural conditions.

A multiple-case study design was employed to allow for in-depth exploration within each institution and cross-case comparison across different contexts (Yin, 2009). Each university was treated as an individual case, while the comparison across cases enabled the identification of common patterns and contextual variations in the implementation of self-study (Stake, 1995). This design is particularly suitable for examining complex organisational processes such as QA, where context plays a critical role in shaping practice. This paper reports part of a study leading to a doctoral thesis.

### Selections of Participants

The study was conducted in three higher education institutions (hereafter referred to as University 1, University 2, and University 3) located in Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. The institutions were selected purposively to capture variation in their experience with QA and accreditation, as well as their organisational arrangements for self-study. They represent three types of universities: mature, evolving, and embryonic (Hopkin, 2004). All three institutions had engaged in self-study as part of the national QAA requirements issued by the MoET.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation from key stakeholder groups involved in or affected by self-study processes. These included academic leaders, QA staff, and academic staff. The inclusion of multiple stakeholder groups enabled the study to capture

diverse perspectives on how self-study was understood, implemented, and experienced across institutions.

**Table 1.** *Participants by University and Role*

| Role | University 1 | University 2 | University 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Academic leaders | 2 | 3 | 2 |
| QA staff | 3 | 1 | 2 |
| Academic staff | 9 | 8 | 6 |

*Note. Academic leaders at University 1 included the dean and the head of the Educational Testing and Quality Control Office. Academic leaders at University 2 included the dean, the head of the Business English Division, and the deputy head of Educational Testing Services. Academic leaders at University 3 included the head of the Business English Division and the director of the Centre for Education Assessment and Accreditation.*

A total of 35 participants took part in the study, including 7 academic leaders, 6 QA staff members, and 22 academic staff across the three institutions. Table 1 summarises the distribution of participants by role and institution. Academic leaders included deans, heads of divisions, and directors of QA-related units. QA staff were responsible for coordinating self-study and accreditation activities, while academic staff were involved to varying degrees in teaching, research, and, in some cases, self-study activities.

## Interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from the three stakeholder groups. The interviews aimed to explore participants' understanding of self-study, their experiences of participating in self-study processes, and their perceptions of its impact on institutional quality.

Interviews were conducted in two stages of fieldwork. The first stage involved data collection at University 1 over a two-month period. The second stage involved data collection at Universities 2 and 3 over approximately three months. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was conducted in Vietnamese. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

The interview protocol included open-ended questions covering topics such as participants' roles in self-study, their understanding of its purpose, challenges encountered during implementation, and perceived outcomes. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility to probe emerging issues and capture context-specific insights.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative and inductive process, informed by strategies proposed by Yin (2009) and thematic analysis approaches commonly used in qualitative research. First, all interview transcripts and documents were read multiple times to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated to capture key concepts and patterns related to the implementation and impact of self-study. Coding was conducted manually, with attention to both anticipated themes derived from the literature and emergent themes arising from the data. Second,

codes were grouped into broader categories and themes through a process of constant comparison within and across cases. This stage involved identifying similarities and differences in the enactment of self-study across the three institutions. Case descriptions were developed to provide a detailed account of each institution's practices, followed by cross-case analysis to identify recurring patterns and explanatory factors (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). Third, rival explanations were considered to enhance analytical rigor. Competing interpretations of the data were examined, and evidence was sought to support or challenge emerging findings. This process helped to refine the analysis and ensure that conclusions were grounded in the data rather than driven by prior assumptions. The final stage involved synthesising the findings into key themes that reflected both within-case insights and cross-case patterns, forming the basis for the discussion of how self-study was implemented and its impact on quality improvement.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained in accordance with institutional research guidelines at the institution where this research was conducted, leading to a doctoral thesis. Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the institutions and individuals. All interview data were securely stored, and access was restricted to the researcher. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any negative consequences.

## FINDINGS

The findings indicate that self-study in the three institutions was implemented primarily as a response to national QAA requirements rather than as an internally driven process of institutional reflection. Across the three cases, five major themes emerged: (1) self-study as part of QAA process, (2) limited participation and uneven understanding of self-study, (3) tensions between honest reporting and the production of a "beautiful report," (4) restricted circulation and weak institutional learning from self-study reports, and (5) limited but identifiable organisational improvements, particularly in archiving and research-related practices.

### Self-Study As Part of QAA Process

Across all three institutions, self-study was described primarily as an activity undertaken in response to requirements from the MoET. At University 1, self-study was linked to the Vietnamese government policy, promulgating the regulation on criteria to self-assess the quality of universities. One QA said:

> *The first activity was the 2002-2007 institutional self-study report. This is what my university did to respond to Decision No. 65/2007/QD-BGDDT, the regulation of criteria to self-assess the quality of universities.* (QAA2)

He explained that the entire process of QAA involved (a) self-assessment from individual universities, (b) peer review, and (c) external accreditation by the government. This was seen as a

must-do QA activity. One QA member explained that the university would not have been accredited until it was ready and formally registered to do so (QAA2).

Similarly, at University 2, the university established a committee to self-assess the institution against a set of standards predefined by the government, and the committee was disbanded after completion of the report. At University 3, the first institutional self-study process conducted in 2009 was also reported as a significant response to the MoET's requirement. One QA said,

> *Vietnamese universities did not have to do this before; it is something new… has just been introduced by the MoET. Our university was a beneficiary of some projects to pilot this new regulation.* (QAC1)

One participant at University C was an expert in this aspect, sharing that,

> *Compliance with the national policies and regulations was believed to be a feasible measure to improve quality.* (QAC3)

She elaborated that because of the absence of compliance (as distinct from coping strategies) with national policies, regulations, decrees, and documents, higher education in Vietnam was struggling to address the quality issues of the education system. As she said,

> *No new policy works if current ones are not observed and well implemented.* (QAC3)

**Limited Participation and Uneven Understanding of Self-Study**

A second strong pattern across the cases was the limited engagement of academic staff in the self-study process and the uneven understanding of QAA among those involved. At University 1, all interviewed academic staff reported limited participation in the self-assessment process. One said, *"quality accreditation, self-study… I have no idea…"* (TTA5). Only QA staff members were able to discuss the self-study report in any detail. One QA member revealed that the report itself was available only in a few hard copies, and only a few people at the university were able to read and keep the report.

Discussing the difficulties encountered, one QA member said,

> *One of the largest challenges is a limited understanding and awareness by staff about the concept [quality assurance and accreditation] and self-assessment.* (QAA3)

Or another viewed the national accreditation as "a messy heap" (QAA1).

The university reportedly took no further action after the report was completed, apart from sending it to the MoET as required.

At University 2, limited participation was accompanied by uncertainty about the meaning and scope of QA. The deputy director observed that even senior leaders lacked a clear understanding of QA and accreditation:

> *Even the Board of Rectors, deans, and directors were uncertain of what it [QA and accreditation] is. They only heard about it. In their view, quality accreditation means accrediting study programmes and teaching methods rather than a wide range of issues like this [showing the self-assessment report].* (ALB2)

Although workshops, talks, and seminars had been organised to raise awareness, these efforts appeared to have limited reach within the wider academic community. One academic staff member commented:

> *I have no idea how it [the committee to self-evaluate the university] works because I'm not part of the committee. It only requires the involvement of the leaders of departments. Then, I am unsure of what and how it is.* (TTB4)

At University 3, a similar pattern was evident. Although the institution had a QA centre in place for more than five years in 2012 and had participated early in external accreditation activities, none of the academic staff interviewed discussed the earlier project or the concept of QAA in any depth. Little information was reportedly shared even among QA members regarding the self-study report and the result of external accreditation.

**Tensions Between Honest Reporting and the Production of a "Beautiful Report"**

The most striking finding across the cases concerns the tension between reporting institutional realities and producing an externally acceptable or "beautiful" report. This tension was present to varying degrees across the three institutions, but it was especially explicit at Universities 1 and 2.

At University 1, the self-study process was described as difficult partly because those assigned to write the report struggled between reporting the situation "as it was" and inventing a more favourable account which concealed the university's weaknesses. In addition to a limited understanding of QAA and weak evidence systems, the head of the QA section referred to this as a "conflict in thought" (QAA4) among those involved in writing the self-study report.

This is similar to findings reported at University 2, a tendency of self-deception and concealment. The pressure to present a favourable institutional image was more explicit. One QA member identified a broader pattern of avoidance of self-evaluation among higher education institutions, including her own institution, and linked this to concern over institutional prestige and the fear of losing students. She stated:

> *It is important to look at the reality. An obstacle is that universities avoid this self-assessment.* (QAB1)

She further recalled that the rector became angry with the self-assessment committee for revealing the university's shortcomings in the report, because a low ranking or negative judgement was believed to have consequences for enrolment quota and government funding. As a result, the university was said to have produced a different report:

> *Many of us know that for some criteria, we do not have evidence, but we still admit that we did… I think we need to accept the reality. We should not think that everything is fine with such a careless and irresponsible report. The reality is far different… The problem is that HEIs do not dare to admit that they are "bad". In general, everyone wants to be good.* (QAB1)

The making up of evidence for a favourable report was also reflected in the use of an online student survey conducted in 2011. Three participants described the survey as being designed primarily to provide the MoET with the required evidence that student feedback had been collected. As one QA member put it:

> *As I can see, it [the survey] is for nothing except a kind of evidence; I mean, we [the university] have to design such a survey since the MoET requires us to do so.* (QAB1)

**Restricted Circulation of Self-Study Reports and Weak Institutional Learning**

Another consistent pattern was that self-study reports were not widely shared within the institutions. At University 1, only a few people had access to the report, which existed in five hard copies. Academic staff had very limited opportunity to read or discuss it, and no broader follow-up actions were reported beyond submission to the MoET.

At University 3, little information was shared about the self-study report and the result of external accreditation, even among QA members. More broadly, across the three universities, the reports appeared to be accessible only to a small number of staff. This restricted circulation limited the potential of self-study to stimulate institution-wide reflection or collective learning.

The limited dissemination of reports appears to have been linked, at least in part, to their sensitive nature. Where the reports pointed to institutional shortcomings and recommendations for improvement, they were treated as confidential documents. In the case of University 2, the existence of a more favourable external version of the report further reduced the likelihood that the self-study process would serve as a transparent basis for internal discussion. As a result, even when weaknesses were identified, self-study did not consistently generate open institutional dialogue about improvement priorities

**Limited But Identifiable Organisational Improvements**

Despite these limitations, the findings also indicate that self-study was not entirely without effect, which is evident at University 2. At University 2, the self-assessment report was believed to help identify areas requiring improvement, especially research and the archival system. Participants reported a noticeable change in research activity following the introduction of a new policy after the self-study process. The report also highlighted the need for a better archiving system, which was seen as contributing gradually to a stronger culture of evidence. As one QA member explained:

> *It looks like the university document system will be better filed, then they will have a system of evidence such as evidence that 80 percent of students are employed.* (QAB1)

Some QA participants also believed that the national accreditation standards could help the university develop an internal QA system. One participant stated:

> *I mean, when we grasp the frame of quality accreditation [the MoET's standards], and familiarise ourselves with it, management of training activities at the university would be ...a piece of cake. (QAB1)*

However, these improvements were accompanied by concerns about duplication and workload. The QA office was reported to be checking programmes, syllabi, test banks, and academic qualifications in ways that overlapped with existing departmental quality arrangements. One academic staff member noted:

> *Recently, the institution required me to set up a plan to observe academics. I told them we [the department and her division] did. I don't see any need to observe them again, but they said it's a decision from the board of rectors. Then, I have to do it again. (TTB1)*

She concluded:

> *In sum, some policies by the university frequently increased teachers' workload for nothing. (TTB1)*

At University 1, by contrast, the findings point to minimal post-report action. Although difficulties in evidence retrieval and limited understanding were clearly identified, no substantial improvements were reported after the self-study, other than the completion and submission of the report itself. So did University C.

## DISCUSSION

### Self-Study - A Symbolic Compliance

The findings of this study related to how self-studies were enacted show that all three universities demonstrated some signs of symbolic compliance, which Teelken (2012) describes as a pattern in which actors present an appearance of enthusiasm for change but engage only at a surface level, as underlying resistance persists due to the influence of deeply embedded traditional values.

The findings of this study suggest that self-study did not consistently function as a developmental mechanism for quality improvement across the three institutions. Although self-study is formally positioned as a process intended to support reflection and enhancement (Vlăsceanu et al., 2004). In practice, it was implemented primarily as a response to external accreditation requirements. Across all three cases, self-study was initiated in relation to the MoET regulations, organised through temporary committees or designated units, and oriented towards the completion of a report for submission rather than sustained internal engagement.

Although the data were collected between 2012 and 2014, the findings remain highly relevant, as subsequent studies indicate that similar patterns persist in both Vietnamese and international higher education systems. In Vietnam, quality assurance has continued to be largely compliance-

driven, with institutional activities frequently oriented toward meeting accreditation requirements rather than fostering continuous improvement (Chikazinga, 2025; Do et al., 2017). More recent empirical research further shows that, despite the establishment of IQA structures, institutions often do not systematically use self-evaluation outcomes to enhance educational quality, suggesting a limited impact (Pham et al., 2022). At a broader level, international literature also highlights the persistence of this phenomenon, where QA processes are implemented as formal procedures for accountability rather than as genuine mechanisms for institutional learning and improvement, reinforcing the durability of such patterns over time. From a neo-institutional perspective, QA systems are often adopted in response to external pressures for legitimacy, resulting in formal compliance and isomorphic practices rather than genuine internal improvement (Guil Gorostidi & Rubio-Arostegui, 2026; Pham, 2019). Similarly, more recent quantitative research shows that the implementation of QA practices is frequently driven by external accountability demands, reinforcing a compliance-oriented approach (Serrano et al., 2026).

This study also found restricted access to self-study reports, which is also mirrored in the literature, often linked to an institutional culture of fear regarding reputation and funding. Research has highlighted the difficulty in accessing QA-related documents from individual universities, as many institutions do not allow open access to their reports (Aburizaizah, 2022). This practice, sometimes termed gaming the measures or malicious compliance, occurs because universities fear that revealing genuine weaknesses in a self-evaluation will lead to financial sanctions or a loss of public trust, as resources are frequently used to reward existing strengths rather than to combat identified deficiencies (Diatta & Blanco, 2024; Harvey, 2002a).

Finally, the limited opportunities for broader institutional reporting in this study are indicative of a compliance culture that prioritises passing accreditation tests over genuine improvement (Do et al., 2017; Kolomitro et al., 2022). In highly centralised systems, the self-study is often treated as a top-down implementation where academics and students are expected to act as information providers rather than active partners or co-participants (Kolomitro et al., 2022; Stensaker, 2008). This lack of a participative culture stifles the critical dialogue necessary to transform professional activities, often resulting in a short-term response rather than the permanent cultural changes intended by QA policies (Aburizaizah, 2022; Harvey, 2002a; Pham et al., 2025). Without a genuine move toward transformative quality, which focuses on the added value of study programmes in a student's life, the self-study remains a marginal administrative exercise with a weak link to the core academic activities of the institution (Diatta & Blanco, 2024; Harvey, 2002a; Harvey & Newton, 2007).

One of the most significant findings of this study is the tension between honest self-evaluation and the production of externally acceptable reports. This finding provides empirical support for concerns raised in the literature about the risks of selective disclosure in self-assessment processes. Harvey (2002) describes the possibility of institutions maintaining "two sets of books," while Kis (2005) caution that externally imposed self-assessment may encourage bureaucratic and symbolic forms of compliance. The evidence from this study suggests that such dynamics are not merely theoretical but can be observed in practice, particularly in contexts where external evaluation is perceived as high-stakes.

Importantly, the findings also highlight the role of perceived consequences in shaping reporting behaviour. Concerns about institutional reputation, enrolment, and funding were identified as key factors influencing how self-study reports were constructed. In this sense, selective disclosure was not simply a matter of individual choice but was shaped by broader organisational and policy environments (Harvey, 2002a).

**Institutional and Cultural Conditions - Limited Participation and Understanding of QAA**

This tendency can be partially explained by the second theme reported in this study, the self-study process involved limited participation of academic staff, with uneven understanding of QAA across the institutions. This reflects the organisational conditions at the three universities. Self-study was only weakly institutionalised as a shared academic process. Rather than engaging the wider academic community in collective reflection, the process was often confined to administrative or managerial actors. This pattern is consistent with previous research showing that academic engagement is critical to the effectiveness of QA processes (Stensaker, 2008). Research indicates that while the self-study process should ideally be a communal exercise in discernment, the reality often sees the burden of the work rest on the shoulders of a few individuals, while for the majority of the department, the process is almost as if it did not exist for them (Diatta & Blanco, 2024; Kolomitro et al., 2022).

This centralization is often a byproduct of the professionalization of QA, where administrative systematization creates clearer lines of responsibility but can simultaneously strip individual academics of their sense of agency, leading to a perception that QA is something done to an institution rather than a collaborative effort (Harvey, 2002a; Stensaker, 2008). Consequently, the limited participation identified in this study results in a "paranoia" shift among staff, moving from initial fear of the process to a cynical belief that the exercise will have no meaningful impact on their daily academic work (Harvey, 2002a).

The uneven understanding of self-study among staff aligns with findings of a significant implementation gap between planned policy and ground-level execution. Previous studies have noted a documented inability of some staff to understand the meaning of quality and a general lack of understanding regarding self-assessment concepts among university officials (Aburizaizah, 2022). This conceptual confusion is frequently attributed to a focus on managerial orthodoxy rather than pedagogy; self-study guides often prioritise governance and administrative issues over the actual substance of teaching and learning (Diatta & Blanco, 2024). When the process is framed in a checklist fashion, it fails to promote the institutional quality conversations necessary to reflect on student growth, reducing the exercise to a cold, mechanical review that many academic staff find irrelevant to their professional identities (Diatta & Blanco, 2024; Stensaker, 2008).

**A Few Tangible Organisational Effects**

Despite the limitations identified above, the findings indicate that self-study was associated with some organisational effects, particularly in the areas of archiving, documentation, and research-related practices at University 2.

These findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that accreditation processes can have observable impacts on institutional structures and procedures, even when their effects on core academic practices are less clear (Pham, 2018; Sin et al., 2017). In this study, self-study appeared to contribute to the development of what might be described as an infrastructure of QA, including systems for documentation, evidence, and reporting. This is similar to what was found in another study within the same country (Pham, 2018).

The scope of these improvements was relatively narrow. There was limited evidence that self-study led to substantial changes in teaching and learning practices or to broader transformations in academic culture. In addition, some of the reported changes were associated with increased workload and duplication of tasks, particularly where new QA activities overlapped with existing departmental practices (Lemaitre & Karakhanyan, 2020). This disconnect can be understood through the persistent tension between accountability and improvement within QA systems. Recent synthesis work by Harvey shows that QA processes continue to be perceived by academics as having little direct impact on transformation, with compliance-oriented activities often overshadowing meaningful pedagogical change. As a result, improvements tend to remain incremental and surface-level, rather than leading to sustained innovation in teaching and learning (Harvey, 2024). These findings suggest that self-study may have a differentiated impact, with stronger effects on administrative and procedural aspects of QA than on substantive academic practices.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined how self-study was enacted in three institutions in Vietnam, and how far it contributed to quality improvement. The findings indicate that self-study did not consistently function as a developmental mechanism for improving quality. Instead, it was often implemented as a symbolic compliance shaped by limited QA knowledge, weak academic participation, concerns about institutional reputation, and fear of exposing weaknesses. Although the process supported some administrative improvements, particularly in archiving, documentation, and evidence collection, its contribution to broader academic quality enhancement appeared limited. The study, therefore, argues that the impact of self-study depends less on its formal inclusion in an external QA model than on the institutional and cultural conditions under which it is conducted. Where self-study is perceived primarily as a high-stakes reporting requirement, it is likely to encourage symbolic compliance rather than honest self-reflection.

This study is limited by its focus on three institutions in one national context and by its reliance on interviews rather than direct observation of institutional change over time. Future research could compare self-study practices across different institutional types, examine changes longitudinally, and investigate how policy design may better balance accountability and improvement within external QA systems.

## AUTHORS' PERSONAL REFLECTION

As QA experts in the Vietnamese system and authors of this manuscript, below is our reflection on changes since the data was collected. Although the data for this study were collected between 2012 and 2014, it is important to reflect on how the QA landscape may have evolved since then.

Over time, there has likely been a gradual improvement in institutional familiarity with QA processes, alongside increased training and capacity-building efforts for academic staff. These developments may have contributed to a more structured and systematic implementation of QA at the institutional level. However, despite these advancements, the fundamental patterns observed in this study appear to remain relevant. In particular, the enactment of QA continues to exhibit a strong administrative orientation. While academic staff may now possess a clearer understanding of QA concepts and procedures, these activities are still frequently implemented as discrete, time-bound exercises, often linked to external accreditation cycles, rather than as ongoing, embedded practices within everyday academic work.

From this perspective, the nature of engagement with QA may have shifted in form but not necessarily in substance. That is, while processes may have become more formalised and technically refined, they do not always translate into deeper, collaborative efforts aimed at enhancing students' learning experiences. Instead, QA activities may still be perceived as compliance-driven tasks, carried out to satisfy external requirements rather than to foster genuine reflection and pedagogical transformation. Furthermore, there are indications that the expansion of QA systems has been accompanied by increased administrative demands on academic staff. In some cases, this may exacerbate existing challenges by creating duplication of tasks and diverting attention away from teaching and research. As a result, the potential of QA to function as a developmental mechanism remains constrained, not due to a lack of awareness or technical capacity, but because of the way these processes are structured and enacted within institutional contexts.

This reflection suggests that the limitations identified in the original study are not merely historical artefacts but may reflect more enduring structural tensions within QA systems. Specifically, the coexistence of accountability and improvement agendas continues to shape how QA is interpreted and practiced, often privileging procedural compliance over meaningful educational change.

## DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

We have no conflicts of interest to declare.

## DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT to edit the language and improve the readability of the manuscript. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

All participants in this study were informed about its purpose, their voluntary participation, and the confidentiality of their data. This was approved by a relevant ethics committee.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting this study will be made available upon request.

## REFERENCES

Aburizaizah, S. J. (2022). The role of quality assurance in Saudi higher education institutions. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, *3*, 1-8. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2022.100127

Brennan, J., De Vries, P., & Williams, R. (1997). *Standards and quality in higher education* (Vol. 37). Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Chikazinga, W. W. N. (2025). University actors responding to the national quality assurance regime for higher education in Malawi: A case of instrumentality, pragmatism and symbolic compliance. *Higher Education Quarterly*, *79*(1), 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12577

Council for Higher Education Accreditation. (2001). *Glossary of key terms in quality assurance and accreditation*. Retrieved 06 April from https://www.uv.es/alfa-acro/documentos/documentosinteres/29.htm

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage.

Dao, K. V. (2015). Key challenges in the reform of governance, quality assurance, and finance in Vietnamese higher education - A case study. *Studies in Higher Education*, *40*(5), 745-760. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2013.842223

Diatta, J. B., & Blanco, G. L. (2024). Double-edged sword in the quality assurance toolkit: uncovering the influence of self-study on higher education institutions in francophone West Africa. *Policy Reviews in Higher Education*, *8*(2), 188-211. https://doi.org/10.1080/23322969.2024.2374716

Do, Q. T. N., Pham, H. T., & Nguyen, K. D. (2017). Quality assurance in the Vietnamese higher education: A top-down approach and compliance-driven QA. In M. Shah & Q. T. N. Do (Eds.), *The rise of quality assurance in Asian higher education* (pp. 191-207). Chandos Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-100553-8.00005-7

EQUIPE Project. (2004). *Case study, Lithuania (D. Dumciuviene)*. https://equipe.up.pt/RESOURCES/Casestudies/sg2kaunas.pdf

Guil Gorostidi, S. C., & Rubio-Arostegui, J. A. (2026). Quality management in higher education from the perspective of institutional isomorphism: A scoping review. *Frontiers in Education*, *10*, 1-15. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1720224

Harvey, L. (2002a). The end of quality? *Quality in Higher Education*, *8*(1), 5-22. https://doi.org/10.1080/13538320220127416

Harvey, L. (2002b). Evaluation for what? *Teaching in Higher Education*, *7*(3), 245-263.

Harvey, L. (2024). What have we learned from 30 years of Quality in Higher Education: academics' views of quality assurance? *Quality in Higher Education*, *30*(3), 360-375. https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2024.2385793

Harvey, L. (n.d). *Analytic quality glossary. Quality Research International*. Retrieved April 6, 2026, from https://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary/

Harvey, L., & Green, D. (1993). Defining quality. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, *18*(1), 9-34. https://doi.org/10.1080/0260293930180102

Harvey, L., & Newton, J. (2004). Transforming quality evaluation. *Quality in Higher Education*, *10*(2), 149-165. https://doi.org/10.1080/1353832042000230635

Harvey, L., & Newton, J. (2007). Transforming quality evaluation: Moving on. In D. Westerheijden, B. Stensaker, & M. J. Rosa (Eds.), *Quality assurance in higher education: Trends in regulation, translation and transformation* (pp. 225-245). Springer.

Hodson, P., & Thomas, H. (2003). Quality assurance in higher education: Fit for the new millennium or simply year 2000 compliant? *Higher Education*, *45*(3), 375-387. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022665818216

Hopkin, A. G. (2004). Frame factors and a quality assurance agency in an 'embryonic' higher education system. *Quality in Higher Education, 10*(3), 181-195. https://doi.org/10.1080/1353832042000299478

Kis, V. (2005). *Quality assurance in tertiary education: Current practices in OECD countries and a literature review on potential effects*. OECD Directorate for Education. https://hdl.voced.edu.au/10707/149162

Kolomitro, K., Inglese, J., Stockley, D., Scott, J., & Wright, M. (2022). Institutional change through departmental quality assurance self-studies. *Quality Assurance in Education*, *31*(3), 386-401. https://doi.org/10.1108/qae-02-2022-0030

Lackner, E. J. (2024). Legitimising quality work in higher education. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, *68*(7), 1584-1595. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2023.2262494

Lemaitre, M. J., & Karakhanyan, S. (2020). Quality assurance in higher education, a global perspective. In P. N. Teixeira & J. C. Shin (Eds.), *The international encyclopedia of higher education systems and institutions* (pp. 2400-2410). Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8905-9_263

Madden, M. (2014). Walking the line: Quality assurance policy development and implementation in Việt Nam. *Higher Education*, *67*(1), 91-104. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-013-9642-8

Miranda, F. J. (2025). Accreditation and quality assurance in higher education institutions: a systematic literature review and a research agenda. *Quality in Higher Education*, *31*(3), 304-320. https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2025.2553983

Misra, D., & Stensaker, B. (2024). Balancing control and legitimacy in higher education policy implementation. *Studies in Higher Education*, *49*(12), 2343-2356. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2306340

Newton, J. (2000). Feeding the beast or improving quality? Academics' perceptions of quality assurance and quality monitoring. *Quality in Higher Education*, *6*(2), 153-163. https://doi.org/10.1080/713692740

Newton, J. (2002). Views from below: Academics coping with quality. *Quality in Higher Education*, *8*(1), 39-61. https://doi.org/10.1080/13538320220127434

Nguyen, K. D., & McInnis, C. (2002). The possibility of using student evaluations in Vietnamese higher education. *Quality in Higher Education*, *8*(2), 151-158. https://doi.org/10.1080/1353832022000004340

Nguyen, T. Q. T. (2017). Maintaining teachers' face in the context of change: Results from a study of Vietnamese college lecturers' perceptions of face. *Teachers and Teaching*, *23*(1), 78-90. https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2016.1203779

Pham, H. T. (2018). Impacts of higher education quality accreditation: A case study in Vietnam. *Quality in Higher Education*, *24*(2), 168-185. https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2018.1491787

Pham, H. T. (2019). Limited legitimacy among academics of centrally driven approaches to internal quality assurance in Vietnam. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, *41*(2), 172-185. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2019.1565298

Pham, H. T., & Nguyen, C. H. (2019). History of quality assurance in Vietnamese higher education. In C. H. Nguyen & M. Shah (Eds.), *Quality assurance in Vietnamese higher education: Policy and practice in the 21st century* (pp. 59-80). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-26859-6_3

Pham, H. T., & Nguyen, P. V. (2024). ASEAN quality assurance scheme and Vietnamese higher education: A shift to outcomes-based education? *Quality in Higher Education*, *30*(2), 285-312. https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2023.2261974

Pham, H. T., Nguyen, P. V., & Nguyen, N. D. H. (2025). IQA models: An introductory literature review and suggestions for developing an IQA model for Vietnamese higher education. *Quality in Higher Education*, *31*(3), 402-426. https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2025.2553987

Pham, N. T. T., Nguyen, C. H., Pham, H. T., & Ta, H. T. T. (2022). Internal quality assurance of academic programs: A case study in Vietnamese higher education. *Sage Open*, *12*(4), 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440221144419

Serrano, O., Miranda Gonzalez, F., & Mourato, J. (2026). Impact of quality assurance on higher education institution performance: Differences between public and private institutions. *Societies*, *16*(3), 76. https://www.mdpi.com/2075-4698/16/3/76

Sin, C., Tavares, O., & Amaral, A. (2017). The impact of programme accreditation on Portuguese higher education provision. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *42*(6), 860-871. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2016.1203860

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research.* Sage.

Stensaker, B. (2008). Outcomes of quality assurance: A discussion of knowledge, methodology and validity. *Quality in Higher Education*, *14*(1), 3-13. https://doi.org/10.1080/13538320802011532

Teelken, C. (2012). Compliance or pragmatism: How do academics deal with managerialism in higher education? A comparative study in three countries. *Studies in Higher Education*, *37*(3), 271-290. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2010.511171

Van Kemenade, E., & Hardjono, T. W. (2010). A critique of the use of self-evaluation in a compulsory accreditation system. *Quality in Higher Education*, *16*(3), 257-268. http://search.proquest.com/docview/762466028?accountid=14782

Vlăsceanu, L., Grünberg, L., & Pârlea. (2004). *Quality assurance and accreditation: A glossary of basic terms and definitions*. UNESCO-CEPES. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000134621

Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Sage.