

Quality Assurance in Practice: Lessons Learned from AUN-QA Assessments in a Vietnamese Higher Education Institution

Le Xuan Mai, Trinh Quoc Lap, Dao Phong Lam, Nguyen Thi Phuong Hong, Le Cong Tuan*

School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University

411 April-30 Street, Can Tho 90000, Vietnam

Tel: 84-02923.872285 E-mail: lctuan@ctu.edu.vn

Abstract

This study examines how a Vietnamese higher education institution has engaged with the ASEAN University Network Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) framework through assessing one academic program. By analyzing the AUN-QA assessment report, the study identifies six key lessons learned: aligning program goals with the institutional vision, refining intended learning outcomes using the SMART framework, implementing constructive alignment, strengthening the link between assessment and outcomes, enhancing collaboration between the university and enterprises, and involving alumni. These insights demonstrate how external QA processes can foster internal dialogue, drive curriculum improvements, and improve institutional coherence. The findings also indicate that regional QA mechanisms serve not only as evaluation tools but also as catalysts for strategic development. The case adds to the growing literature on quality assurance in Southeast Asia by illustrating how structured feedback under AUN-QA can lead to purposeful reforms aligned with national priorities and institutional strengths. Recommendations are offered to foster a culture of quality, embed outcome-based education practices, and utilize stakeholder feedback for sustainable improvement.

Keywords: quality assurance, AUN-QA, higher education, institutional learning, Vietnam

DOI: 10.7176/JEP/16-8-01

Publication date: July 31st 2025

1. Introduction

In recent decades, quality assurance (henceforth, QA) has become a central focus in higher education reform, particularly as institutions strive to meet international standards and enhance program accountability (Dao et al., 2025). In Southeast Asia, the ASEAN University Network Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) framework has emerged as a key mechanism for supporting regional integration and benchmarking the quality of academic programs (Martin & Stella, 2007). In Vietnam, participation in AUN-QA assessments reflects a broader commitment to improving curriculum design, teaching and learning, student services, and academic governance. One Vietnamese higher education institution has undertaken AUN-QA assessments for seven academic programs, offering valuable insights into how QA standards are interpreted and applied in local contexts. These assessments require institutions to conduct self-assessment reports, engage in peer reviews, and implement continuous improvement plans. While the AUN-QA framework offers a structured guideline for institutional development, the process of translating these standards into practice reveals both strengths and limitations within existing quality systems.

This study draws on document analysis and institutional records to examine how QA processes have been implemented across the assessed programs. By analyzing internal reports, self-assessment documentation, and follow-up actions, it explores the lessons learned from the experience. The findings highlight institutional responses to AUN-QA recommendations, identify emerging patterns of improvement, and point to areas that require further attention. Understanding these lessons is crucial for strengthening Vietnam's culture of high-quality higher education. The findings contribute not only to institutional self-improvement but also to the broader regional conversation on effective QA practices. By documenting this case, the study offers practical implications for other institutions aiming to align with AUN-QA standards and sustain long-term quality enhancement.

2. Literature Review

In countries across the Global South, including Vietnam, QA systems in higher education have been implemented in response to international trends. The key goals of these systems include modernizing governance structures, improving institutional management and training capacity, and establishing mechanisms for evaluating and maintaining the quality of higher education programs based on uniform criteria. From 2013 to 2016, Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training regulated the accreditation of higher education programs, including undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, through Circular No. 38/2013/TT-BGDĐT¹, and later formalized a national framework of 11 standards and 50 criteria adapted from the AUN-QA model in Circular No. 04/2016/TT-BGDĐT². These were adapted from the ASEAN University Network Quality Assurance (AUN-QA)³ Framework, with slight modifications approved by the network. This standard set now applies to all higher education programs across Vietnam. The criteria cover a wide range of areas related to program quality, including goals and learning outcomes, curriculum structure, program implementation, human resources, learning support, student services, facilities, financial sustainability, graduate evaluation, and career counseling. This comprehensive model is designed to help institutions align their educational offerings with regional and international expectations while promoting continuous improvement across all functional areas.

Research has shown that the implementation of internal QA (IQA) systems is equally crucial. In a U.S.-based institutional case study, Pham and Nguyen (2021) found that internal QA, when integrated with data-driven learning outcome assessments, helped align program design and teaching practices with institutional goals. Their findings emphasized the importance of transparent feedback loops and stakeholder engagement to sustain quality improvements. Comparative analyses across regions offer further insight. Nguyen, Marshall and Evers (2021) examined QA and accreditation practices across multiple countries, noting that global frameworks such as the ASEAN University Network Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) can provide shared benchmarks for academic excellence. However, a successful application depends on adapting to the local governance structures and educational cultures. International studies also highlight QA's role in promoting institutional resilience and innovation. Vykydal, Foltá and Nenádál (2020), in a study of 12 Czech universities, found that aligning QA with sustainability frameworks, such as ISO 9000 and institutional excellence models, led to improvements in student satisfaction, global engagement, and educational planning. Their findings suggest that QA, when forward-thinking and value-based, can catalyze long-term institutional development.

However, QA implementation is not without its challenges, especially in low-resource settings. A study by Saeed and Sherwani (2023) in Iraq and Kurdistan revealed that although QA systems improved academic planning and faculty performance, they were often constrained by limited financial resources and inconsistent leadership engagement. These constraints limited the depth and sustainability of quality initiatives, highlighting the need for both policy support and institutional capacity building. In Vietnam, the development of QA systems has mirrored global trends while responding to national policy reforms and regional integration goals. Evidence from Vietnamese institutions reflects both progress and ongoing challenges. Pham et al. (2022) examined the internal QA infrastructure of several universities and found that structured QA offices, routine evaluations, and participatory approaches were essential to institutional development. Their findings also emphasize that internal QA must go beyond documentation and focus on fostering a shared culture of quality among academic and administrative staff. Institutional responses to accreditation feedback also reveal patterns of adaptation. Pham (2022), analyzing accreditation reports from 2017 to 2023, observed that most programs met individual QA criteria but often lacked coherence across related standards. Specifically, gaps were identified in the alignment between intended learning outcomes, course content, and assessment practices. The authors suggest that greater emphasis is needed on systemic curriculum design and cross-functional collaboration. Vietnamese institutions have also explored ways to integrate QA with governance reforms. Ta et al. (2022) found that university autonomy, when accompanied by effective QA mechanisms, enabled more flexible, locally responsive approaches to program improvement. However, the study also noted that in the absence of leadership continuity and adequate training, QA remained a procedural obligation rather than a developmental tool. Together, these studies highlight the dual role of QA in Vietnam, serving both as a compliance framework and a driver of institutional learning. While international models, such as AUN-QA, provide a structured reference for quality

¹ Ministry of Education and Training. (2013). *Circular No. 38/2013/TT-BGDĐT: Promulgating the regulations on education quality accreditation and recognition of education quality standards*. Hanoi, Vietnam.

² Ministry of Education and Training. (2016). *Circular No. 04/2016/TT-BGDĐT: Promulgating the regulations on standards for higher education program accreditation*. Hanoi, Vietnam.

³ Ministry of Education and Training. (2022, March 10). *Decision No. 674/QĐ-BGDĐT on recognizing the operation of the ASEAN University Network – Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) in Vietnam*. Hanoi, Vietnam.

assessment, their impact largely depends on how Vietnamese institutions internalize QA principles, mobilize resources, and cultivate a long-term vision for educational quality. The interplay between global standards and national contexts continues to shape how QA systems evolve and what they ultimately achieve in practice.

While previous studies have examined how Vietnamese universities implement quality assurance and respond to accreditation standards, there has been less attention to what institutions learn from participating in international QA assessments such as AUN-QA. A closer look at institutional reflections and adaptations following such evaluations may offer practical insights that are often overlooked in technical or compliance-focused research. Thus, this study seeks to answer the main research question:

What lessons have been learned by a Vietnamese higher education institution from participating in the AUN-QA program assessments?

3. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to examine the lessons learned by a Vietnamese higher education institution from participating in a program-level quality QA assessment conducted under the AUN-QA framework. A case study approach is well-suited for in-depth exploration of complex institutional processes situated within their real-life context, particularly when the focus is on understanding the dynamics and implications of an intervention rather than generalizing to broader populations (Rashid et al., 2019). Given that QA processes are inherently contextual, which are shaped by institutional histories, governance structures, and policy environments, this design enables a focused and interpretive understanding of how a university interprets, responds to, and internalizes feedback from an external assessment process. In the present study, the term “case” refers to a higher education program that has undergone formal assessment under the AUN-QA model. The study does not aim to evaluate QA outcomes per se, but rather to distill institutional reflections and operational learning derived from engaging in the AUN-QA process. Through document-based inquiry, the case study approach allows the researcher to examine how external feedback, structured around regional quality standards, translates into internal discussions, adaptations, and long-term planning (Thai & Phan, 2020).

The primary source of data for this study is the official AUN-QA assessment report for the selected academic program. An external panel of AUN-QA assessors issued this report following a site visit and comprehensive review. It includes detailed qualitative feedback, organized across major QA categories such as expected learning outcomes, program structure and content, teaching and learning strategies, student support, faculty development, resources, and internal QA mechanisms. Of particular interest are the sections that outline specific recommendations, highlight good practices, and identify areas for improvement. The report was selected because it provides a formal, structured, and comprehensive external evaluation of the program’s quality, as benchmarked against the AUN-QA criteria version 4.0. Such documents are valuable data sources in qualitative research, offering rich descriptions and evaluative judgments that can be systematically analyzed to gain a deeper understanding of institutional learning (Morgan, 2022).

The analysis was conducted using qualitative thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach proposed by Naeem et al. (2023). This method was selected for its flexibility and suitability in examining patterns of meaning within textual data. The phases included: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading; (2) generating initial codes by identifying recurring language, emphases, and evaluative statements; (3) searching for themes by clustering codes into broader conceptual categories; (4) reviewing themes to ensure consistency and relevance; (5) defining and naming themes that reflect institutional learning or implications; and (6) producing the narrative report that connects findings to the research objective. Coding was conducted manually and inductively, meaning that themes were not pre-determined but instead emerged from the data. Particular attention was given to the language used in recommendations and commendations, as these offered insight into both external expectations and implicit institutional values. The analysis focused on uncovering patterns that signal how the institution might interpret and act upon the assessment feedback, as well as challenges or opportunities surfaced through the process.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, the researcher employed peer review and analytical memoing throughout the coding process (Indriasari, Luxton-Reilly, & Denny, 2020). Themes were cross-checked with the AUN-QA framework’s principles to ensure alignment with the standards used during assessment. Regarding ethical considerations, this study analyzes publicly accessible or institutionally approved documents. All information drawn from the assessment report is used for academic purposes only, and no personal or confidential data is included. The name of the institution and specific program details are withheld in this report to preserve institutional anonymity and focus on broader lessons. As the research did not involve human

participants, ethics approval was not required; however, the study adhered to standard research ethics in handling institutional documents, including respectful representation and accurate citation.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

The analysis of the AUN-QA assessment report revealed six key lessons learned by the Vietnamese higher education institution. These insights reflect institutional responses to feedback across core quality areas and offer direction for ongoing improvement efforts aligned with international QA standards. Table 1 summarizes these six areas of institutional learning and maps each suggestion to the relevant AUN-QA Programme¹.

Table 1. Lessons learnt from AUN-QA suggestions

Area of focus	Summary of the suggestion	Linked AUN-QA criteria
Alignment with Institutional Mission	Ensure that the program's aims reflect the university's strategic priorities (e.g., innovation, internationalization, community engagement).	Expected Learning Outcomes are clearly stated and aligned with the institution's vision, mission, and educational philosophy.
SMART Learning Outcomes	Refine intended learning outcomes to be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound, enabling more explicit teaching and assessment practices.	Learning outcomes encompass knowledge, skills, and attitudes; programme content is aligned with these learning outcomes.
Constructive Alignment	Strengthen alignment among learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment methods to support coherent, student-centered instruction.	Teaching and learning are constructively aligned with learning outcomes.
Assessment–Outcome Correspondence	Ensure assessments directly measure the competencies described in learning outcomes through varied and authentic formats.	Assessment is constructively aligned to the learning outcomes and teaching activities.
University–Enterprise Engagement	Develop structured partnerships with industry to inform curriculum design, support internships, and enhance graduate employability.	The curriculum is regularly updated and improved based on input from stakeholders.
Alumni Involvement	Formalize alumni engagement through mentorship, feedback loops, and advisory roles to inform program development and maintain relevance.	Stakeholders and alumni are actively engaged in feedback and continuous improvement.

4.1.1 Alignment of curriculum aims with institutional mission and vision

The AUN-QA assessment commended the program for its clear and thoughtful articulation of educational aims. These aims reflected a sincere commitment to developing graduates who are academically capable, ethically grounded, and socially engaged. The goals of the general program aligned well with national education objectives, demonstrating a strong awareness of the evolving needs of students, employers, and the broader community. This foundation shows that the program is already making meaningful contributions to the university's educational mission. At the same time, the assessment encouraged the program to strengthen further its connection to the university's overarching mission and vision. While the program's intentions are aligned in spirit, there is an opportunity to make this alignment more explicit, especially in areas such as innovation, internationalization, and community engagement, which the university holds as strategic priorities. Tightening these connections more directly would not only reinforce the program's relevance but also help stakeholders understand its unique role in the institution's long-term development. Notably, the university recognizes that each faculty and academic unit may pursue its own disciplinary priorities and pedagogical approaches. Diversity of focus across schools is a strength, and such variation is both natural and necessary in a dynamic academic environment. Nevertheless, within this diversity lies a shared sense of direction, a common commitment to excellence, relevance, and societal impact. Aligning program aims with institutional values is not about standardization, but about coherence and clarity of purpose.

The key takeaway here is that intentional alignment can elevate the visibility and distinctiveness of the program,

¹ASEAN University Network (AUN), 2024. AUN-QA assessed programmes. <https://www.aunsec.org/discover-aun/thematic-networks/aun-qa/aun-qa-assessed-programmes>.

both internally and externally. It provides a stronger narrative for quality assurance, enhances curriculum planning, and deepens the program's contribution to institutional identity. As the university moves forward, this kind of strategic coherence, built on shared goals and local strengths, will be essential for sustaining meaningful academic growth and innovation.

4.1.2 Formulation of SMART learning outcomes

The AUN-QA assessment acknowledged the program's efforts to define intended learning outcomes (ILOs) that reflect the broad competencies expected of graduates. These outcomes covered a wide range of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, showing an intention to develop well-rounded learners who can thrive in diverse contexts. This demonstrates the program's awareness of outcome-based education and its central role in curriculum design. Nevertheless, the assessment suggested that further refinement would enhance the clarity and usability of these outcomes. In particular, it emphasized the importance of ensuring that each outcome follows the SMART principle, being Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. Applying this framework helps transform general intentions into actionable goals that guide both teaching and assessment.

Specific outcomes clearly state what the student is expected to learn. Instead of saying "students will understand business practices," a particular result would be "students will describe and apply key principles of marketing in business case scenarios". Clarity reduces ambiguity and ensures that all stakeholders, from faculty and students to assessors, share the exact expectations. Measurable outcomes are those that can be observed or assessed in concrete ways. This involves using verbs that lend themselves to evaluation, such as analyze, design, present, solve, or compare. When outcomes are measurable, it becomes easier to design appropriate assessments and determine the extent to which students have achieved the intended competencies.

Achievable outcomes consider the learners' current level, available resources, and the scope of the program. Ambitious goals are encouraged, but they should remain realistic within the time and support structures of the curriculum. Ensuring outcomes are achievable helps maintain student motivation and instructional focus. Relevant outcomes are aligned with both the discipline's requirements and the needs of stakeholders, such as employers, graduate schools, and society at large. They should also reflect the program's own educational philosophy and the university's mission. Relevance enhances the value of the learning experience, supporting long-term employability and community contribution. Time-bound outcomes suggest when the learning should occur or be demonstrated, typically by the end of a course or the entire program. While this is often implicit, articulating a timeframe helps ensure that outcomes are logically sequenced and matched with learning opportunities at appropriate stages.

By revisiting and refining existing outcomes using the SMART framework, the program not only meets AUN-QA expectations but also builds a stronger foundation for course alignment, student guidance, and curriculum review. This process encourages faculty collaboration, promotes transparency in teaching, and empowers students to track their own development with clearer goals in mind. Ultimately, SMART learning outcomes serve as the cornerstone of high-quality, outcome-based education.

4.1.3 Implementation of constructive alignment

The AUN-QA assessment commended the program for adopting an outcome-based approach, recognizing that ILOs were in place and that teaching and assessment practices had been developed with student learning in mind. These are essential building blocks in any quality curriculum, reflecting the program's responsiveness to contemporary educational expectations. However, the assessment also identified opportunities to strengthen the constructive alignment across the curriculum, specifically between learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities (TLAs), and assessment methods (AMs). In some cases, classroom activities and evaluation tools did not clearly or consistently support the competencies described in the ILOs. For example, outcomes related to critical thinking or problem-solving may have been assessed using closed-ended tests or lectures without opportunities for applied learning. This feedback highlighted that even well-written outcomes must be matched by purposeful instructional and assessment design. The key lesson drawn was the importance of implementing constructive alignment deliberately and systematically. This pedagogical approach, introduced by Biggs (1999), emphasizes that students construct meaning through relevant learning activities, and that all components of a course, including outcomes, teaching, and assessment, must work cohesively to support that process.

To implement constructive alignment effectively, learning outcomes must guide all subsequent decisions. They define the desired competencies and should be clearly understood by both instructors and learners. Teaching and Learning Activities (TLAs) should be selected and designed specifically to help students develop the skills and knowledge described in the outcomes. For instance, if an outcome requires students to "evaluate solutions to real-world problems", the learning activity should include case analysis, discussion, or project-based learning,

not just theoretical lectures. Assessment Methods (AMs) should directly measure whether students have achieved the stated outcomes. Each assessment task, whether a presentation, report, test, or portfolio, should be mapped to the corresponding ILOs and include clear criteria for success. Aligning these three components not only improves the integrity of course design but also creates a more transparent and supportive learning environment. Students are better able to understand what is expected of them, and faculty are better positioned to plan instruction and provide meaningful feedback. Moreover, such alignment demonstrates academic rigor and accountability to external stakeholders, including accreditors.

Moving forward, the program may consider conducting curriculum mapping exercises, revising course outlines to ensure logical alignment, and fostering collaboration among faculty to design assessments that are aligned. These practices promote a culture of quality, making the teaching and learning process more coherent, measurable, and effective. Constructive alignment, when well implemented, transforms intended outcomes from aspirational statements into lived learning experiences.

4.1.4 Improvement of assessment–outcome correspondence

The AUN-QA assessment recognized that the program had implemented a range of assessment methods designed to capture student learning across courses. These included tests, assignments, presentations, and group work, indicating that the program values continuous and multifaceted evaluation rather than relying solely on final exams. This represents a positive shift toward more formative and authentic assessment practices, aligning with the principles of student-centered learning. However, assessors noted that some assessment tasks were not mapped to the ILOs. In some instances, tasks appeared to assess general knowledge acquisition or participation rather than the specific competencies outlined in the curriculum. For example, an outcome emphasizing critical thinking or real-world problem-solving was sometimes evaluated using basic recall questions or multiple-choice formats. While such methods can be helpful, they may not fully capture the depth or complexity of student achievement as intended by the outcomes.

This feedback highlighted the need to improve assessment–outcome correspondence, that is, to ensure that what is being assessed directly reflects what students are expected to learn. Strong correspondence enhances the validity of assessment, strengthens students’ trust in the fairness of evaluation, and provides more accurate data for course and program improvement. To move toward better alignment, the following practices can be considered. Firstly, review and map each assessment task to its associated learning outcomes. For every course, faculty can create an outcome-assessment matrix to ensure that each outcome is being adequately addressed through appropriate methods. Diversify assessment types to reflect the range of expected competencies, with critical thinking that may be better demonstrated through case analyses, reflective essays, or open-ended projects. Communication skills might be captured through presentations or peer evaluations. Digital portfolios, simulation tasks, and group research projects can also provide richer evidence than traditional testing alone.

With the clarification of assessment criteria and rubrics, institutional assessments could make it easier for students to understand how their work will be evaluated. Well-constructed rubrics also support transparency and consistency in grading while providing valuable feedback for learning. Introduce authentic assessment, which involves real-life or simulated tasks that mirror professional practice. These types of functions are fundamental when learning outcomes emphasize application, integration, or decision-making. Utilize assessment results to enhance program-level quality. Aggregate data can inform curriculum reviews, teaching strategies, and support services. When assessment is well-aligned with outcomes, it not only evaluates student performance but also contributes to the institution’s continuous improvement efforts. The key lesson learned is that assessment is more than a grading tool; it is a vital mechanism for ensuring the realization of the intended curriculum. When assessments are thoughtfully designed to match learning outcomes, they reinforce instructional intentions, motivate deeper student engagement, and provide robust evidence of educational quality. Strengthening this correspondence ultimately benefits all stakeholders by making learning goals tangible, measurable, and meaningful.

4.1.5 Enhancement of university–enterprise engagement

The AUN-QA assessment acknowledged that the university had initiated some connections with external enterprises through internships, guest lectures, and occasional collaboration on student projects. These early efforts showed promise and reflected the institution’s awareness of the growing importance of linking academic programs with the demands of the labor market. However, assessors observed that these engagements remained largely informal or ad hoc, with limited evidence of structured, sustained partnerships that could contribute directly to curriculum development, internship design, or graduate employability. In particular, mechanisms for soliciting regular feedback from industry stakeholders were either absent or underdeveloped, reducing the

program's ability to stay responsive to current professional practices and market needs.

The lesson learned was that systematic university–enterprise collaboration is not merely an added benefit, but a critical driver of program relevance and graduate success. Establishing formal partnerships through memoranda of understanding, advisory boards, or co-designed modules can ensure that industry voices inform course content, that students gain access to meaningful workplace experiences, and that employers view the university as a reliable source of talent. Moving forward, the institution is encouraged to build platforms where academic and industry representatives can co-create opportunities, exchange insights, and jointly evaluate the effectiveness of graduate preparation. Strengthening these ties not only improves graduate outcomes but also positions the university as a proactive partner in regional and national development.

4.1.6 Activation of alumni involvement

The AUN-QA review acknowledged the university's efforts in tracking alumni through basic data collection and occasional events. These actions reflect an understanding of alumni as valued stakeholders and long-term ambassadors of the institution. Nevertheless, the assessment also revealed that the full potential of alumni involvement had not been fully realized. Alumni feedback was not systematically used to inform program review, and opportunities for alumni to contribute to mentorship, guest teaching, or career support remained limited. As a result, the feedback loop between graduate experience and curriculum improvement remained incomplete.

The key takeaway was that alumni are a strategic asset, whose lived experiences can provide critical insights into the effectiveness of academic preparation and the challenges of professional transition. Beyond providing feedback, alumni can play diverse roles, including serving as mentors to current students, connecting them to employment opportunities, and contributing to a sense of institutional identity and pride. To activate this potential, the university may consider building a more robust alumni engagement strategy that includes regular surveys, networking events, and structured involvement in advisory activities. Leveraging digital platforms and social media can also help maintain active communication and community building among graduates. By integrating alumni perspectives into its quality assurance processes, the university affirms its commitment to continuous improvement and lifelong relationships. This not only enriches the educational experience for current students but also cultivates a vibrant alumni network that strengthens the university's social impact and reputation.

4.2 Discussion

The articulation of educational aims within the reviewed program aligns with a growing regional trend toward mission-driven program development. The AUN-QA assessment commended the clarity of the program goals and their alignment with national priorities and societal needs. This observation echoes the findings of Alsoud et al. (2021), who reported that quality assurance processes in Malaysian universities were increasingly being used not merely as compliance mechanisms but as strategic tools to reinforce institutional identity and coherence. In the same vein, Chaiya and Ahmad (2021) observed in the Thai context that programs benefiting from regular AUN-QA engagement showed higher levels of institutional reflection, especially when program aims were revisited in light of evolving university missions. These studies suggest that when QA frameworks emphasize strategic alignment, they can catalyze institutional narratives that bridge academic offerings with broader visions for social relevance and regional competitiveness. The Vietnamese case reinforces this trend while also underscoring the necessity for a more explicit articulation of how program-level intentions align with institutional strategies, particularly in emerging domains such as innovation and international collaboration.

In terms of ILOs, the AUN-QA review acknowledged the program's comprehensive approach to defining graduate competencies but also encouraged refinement through SMART principles. This recommendation aligns with Pham's (2022) observation that Vietnamese programs often formulate ILOs that are conceptually rich but lack operational clarity. Wan et al. (2020) similarly found that in Malaysian blended learning programs, transforming abstract goals into measurable, time-bound competencies was key to improving both curriculum structure and assessment validity. These insights reinforce the idea that articulating learning outcomes is not only a matter of regulatory compliance but a curricular design skill that shapes students' academic journeys. The current case reflects growing awareness of this need, though the complete application of SMART-based learning outcomes remains an area for continued development.

The principle of constructive alignment, introduced by Biggs, Tang, and Kennedy (2022), continues to inform QA systems in higher education globally and regionally (Loughlin, Lygo-Baker, & Lindberg-Sand, 2021). The program under review demonstrates foundational steps toward aligning outcomes, teaching, and assessment, yet the AUN-QA assessment noted inconsistencies in practice. This observation is echoed in international QA research by Pham and Nguyen (2021), who emphasized that alignment requires sustained faculty collaboration

and institutional support, particularly when transitioning toward more outcome-based models. Constructive alignment was also a key theme in Chan and Lee (2021), where the development of alignment matrices across courses was found to support more coherent learning pathways and transparent assessment. In the Vietnamese context, while awareness of alignment is growing, its implementation still depends heavily on instructor capacity and curricular coordination. The program's partial integration of these elements reflects both progress and ongoing challenges common to QA reform in the region.

On assessment design, the program's use of alternative competency-based assessments like presentations, group work, and formative tasks signals an encouraging shift away from traditional summative assessment (Ngo, 2024). However, the AUN-QA report identified gaps in how these assessments aligned with the stated learning outcomes. This concern is well documented in both national and regional QA literature. Pham et al. (2022) noted that even when diverse assessment tools were adopted, the underlying rubrics and learning benchmarks often lacked clarity, leading to inconsistent judgments of student performance. Saeed and Sherwani (2023) in a comparative study of Iraq and Kurdistan, further findings revealed that the lack of alignment between outcome assessment and academic standards undermined trust in both academic standards and student feedback mechanisms. However, Alsoud et al. (2021) illustrated how structured QA audits in Malaysia facilitated the redesign of assessment tasks that authentically captured student progress across multiple modalities, including online and blended environments. These findings affirm that assessment–outcome alignment is not only a technical task but a quality culture issue, one that the reviewed Vietnamese program is beginning to address but would benefit from more formalized mapping and rubric development.

Stakeholder engagement emerged as a notable area of potential. While the program has initiated links with industry partners, the AUN-QA assessment recommended a deeper and more systematic collaboration. This mirrors the findings of Ta et al. (2022), who highlighted that while many Vietnamese institutions pursue external relations for accreditation purposes, the mechanisms for sustained input into curriculum and graduate evaluation remain underdeveloped. Nonetheless, in studies of QA-informed enterprise collaboration, feedback loops with employers played a formative role in curriculum review and internship design (Abas, Ibrahim, & Azmi, 2025; Bugeja & Garrett, 2019). This suggests that QA frameworks, when supported by institutional structures, can help transform ad hoc engagement into meaningful co-creation with industry. The current Vietnamese case exemplifies this potential, with further development required to ensure that feedback from the labor market informs curriculum content, skills training, and long-term program evaluation.

Finally, the AUN-QA assessment highlighted the underutilization of alumni in quality assurance processes. Although alumni tracking and occasional involvement were observed, their voices had yet to be systematically integrated into program reflection and development. This insight echoes the broader literature on QA and alumni engagement, as alumni input can be a critical source of information for evaluating graduate readiness and institutional impact, especially in rapidly evolving professional contexts (Trinh et al., 2025; Wiranto & Slameto, 2021). In QA-responsive environments, alumni networks are increasingly viewed as ongoing partners in curriculum co-construction, student mentoring, and institutional feedback (Nguyen et al., 2021). The current program's recognition of alumni as valued stakeholders provides a promising foundation upon which more sustained strategies can be built, such as formal advisory roles, digital platforms for graduate feedback, and structured contributions to program review (Hanson, 2024).

On the whole, the Vietnamese case aligns with regional and international findings that position QA as more than an evaluative framework; rather, it serves as a mechanism for continuous institutional learning. The interplay between articulated aims, curricular alignment, stakeholder engagement, and evidence-based improvement reflects a broader movement in which QA fosters academic coherence and innovation. While challenges persist, particularly in operationalizing outcome-based designs and incorporating stakeholder voices, the program under review demonstrates how AUN-QA principles can serve as both benchmarks and developmental guides. Studies across Southeast Asia affirm this dual role, suggesting that QA's ultimate value lies in how institutions internalize and mobilize its principles to build purposeful, context-sensitive pathways to quality.

5. Recommendations

The analysis of the AUN-QA assessment report reinforces the dual role of quality assurance in Vietnamese higher education, serving both as a regulatory mechanism and a developmental process. While QA systems like AUN-QA are often perceived as external evaluative frameworks, this case illustrates how they can also serve as catalysts for internal dialogue, strategic coherence, and continuous improvement. Institutional engagement with AUN-QA feedback, as described here, not only reinforces alignment with regional benchmarks but also

encourages context-specific reforms informed by local challenges, resources, and aspirations. The findings yield considerable recommendations that can inform both institutional practice and policy development. These findings

First, there is a clear need to strengthen capacity-building for academic staff, particularly in the areas of curriculum design, assessment alignment, and the development of measurable learning outcomes. Institutions should invest in regular workshops and peer mentoring initiatives that build faculty competence in applying frameworks such as SMART and constructive alignment. These efforts would help ensure that learning outcomes are not only well-articulated but also integrated meaningfully into teaching activities and assessment strategies.

Second, the development of internal quality assurance mechanisms should move beyond compliance-based self-assessment to include ongoing reflection, monitoring, and formative evaluation. Tools such as curriculum mapping matrices, outcome-assessment alignment charts, and teaching-learning activity logs can provide actionable insights at both the course and program levels. Encouraging departments to maintain and routinely update these tools would foster a stronger internal culture of evidence-based improvement.

Third, institutions are encouraged to formalize their engagement with external stakeholders, including employers, industry experts, and alumni. The ad hoc or informal nature of many current collaborations limits their strategic impact. Establishing advisory boards, joint curriculum review panels, and co-supervised internship programs can ensure sustained and meaningful contributions from stakeholders. In addition, feedback from graduates should be routinely collected and analyzed, not only for reporting purposes but to inform course revisions and program-level reforms. Digital platforms, alumni networks, and tracer studies offer effective avenues for maintaining graduate engagement.

Fourth, the institutional QA offices themselves can play a more proactive developmental role by curating best practices, facilitating inter-departmental dialogue, and supporting data-informed decision-making. To do so, they must be adequately resourced, trained, and empowered to serve not merely as audit facilitators but as enablers of academic development.

Finally, at the policy level, national QA agencies and ministries of education should support institutional QA enhancement through shared digital infrastructures, benchmarking tools, and knowledge exchange platforms. Incentivizing collaborative research on quality assurance practices across institutions can also promote a more systemic and context-sensitive evolution of QA cultures in Vietnam and the broader Southeast Asian region.

This study draws on a single AUN-QA program assessment report from one academic program at a Vietnamese university. While this focused scope enabled a detailed thematic analysis of institutional learning in response to external quality assurance, it also limits the breadth and transferability of the findings. Moreover, the use of document analysis as the sole method, while effective in identifying structural patterns and institutional narratives, does not capture staff engagement, pedagogical adaptation, or tensions between compliance and development, which may remain hidden in documentary sources. As a result, the study offers a partial view of QA implementation that would benefit more from methodological triangulation.

Future research could address these limitations in several ways. Comparative studies involving multiple programs or institutions, especially across different fields, regions, or institutional types, would provide a broader evidence base for understanding how QA principles are operationalized in diverse settings. Longitudinal research could also offer insights into the durability and impact of reforms prompted by QA engagement, especially regarding the evolution of curriculum design, assessment practices, and stakeholder collaboration over time. Additionally, incorporating qualitative interviews or focus groups with faculty, QA officers, students, and external partners could enrich the understanding of how QA processes are experienced on the ground and what institutional conditions facilitate or hinder meaningful quality improvement. Studies exploring the integration of AUN-QA with national QA frameworks or digital QA tools may also reveal essential synergies and tensions that inform future policy and practice in Southeast Asia.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined how a Vietnamese higher education institution has engaged with the ASEAN University Network Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) framework through an externally reviewed academic program. The document analysis of the assessment report revealed six key areas of institutional learning: aligning program aims with institutional vision and strategic direction, refining intended learning outcomes through the SMART framework, implementing constructive alignment between outcomes, teaching, and assessment, enhancing the correspondence between assessments and competencies, strengthening engagement

with employers, and activating alumni as contributors to curriculum development and quality enhancement.

The case further illustrates that the success of QA implementation depends not only on formal compliance or the presence of documentation but also on the depth of institutional ownership. The transformation of QA from a procedural requirement into a tool for meaningful educational enhancement requires a shift in mindset, from seeing QA as an obligation to embracing it as an opportunity for reflection, innovation, and collaboration. As Vietnamese higher education continues to reform in response to globalization, regional integration, and labor market demands, the ability to internalize and act upon QA feedback will become increasingly vital. As the scope of the study is limited to one program and document source, offering a focused but partial view of QA implementation, future research may expand on this study by exploring multi-program or institutional comparisons, as well as longitudinal assessments of how QA-inspired reforms are sustained over time. Ultimately, fostering a culture of quality requires shared commitment across faculty, administrators, students, and external stakeholders, supported by flexible, transparent, and inclusive QA systems that enable long-term academic and institutional development.

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