INSTITUTIONAL STAFF PERCEPTIONS
ON THE IMPACT OF ACCREDITATION: A STUDY IN
TWO VIETNAMESE VOCATIONAL TRAINING COLLEGES

BY

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ABSTRACT

Governments in many countries worldwide have increasingly focused on accreditation as an important strategy to improve the quality of vocational education and training (VET). In Vietnam, accreditation in vocational training is still in its initial stage of development. The first cycle of accreditation at institutional level was conducted in 2008, and accreditation at programme level was piloted for the first time in 2012. The purpose of this mixed method study was to investigate the actual effects of institutional and programme accreditation from the perspectives of staff members in two Vietnamese vocational training colleges. Sixty staff members in these two institutions participated in the study. A questionnaire combining closed-ended and open-ended questions was administered to all participants. To obtain more in-depth responses about the impact of accreditation, individual interviews were conducted with eight participants. The findings suggest that the staff members overall had a positive perception towards the impact of accreditation regardless of the type of accreditation. The three main perceived benefits of accreditation included the increased awareness amongst staff of QA, its role as a catalyst for institutions' change and enhancement, and the improvements in managerial practices. However, the study found support for the view that accreditation seemed to have been geared towards accountability rather than improvement. Many staff members observed that accreditation did not lead to a significant increase in teaching and learning quality or the institutions' reputation. The effects of accreditation were also seen to be temporary rather than long-lasting. In conclusion, the study argues that though accreditation in vocational training in Vietnam has gained some preliminary success, there is still a mismatch between policy and reality. A number of important implications at both national and institutional levels for more effective accreditation are identified.

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ABBREVIATIONS

CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
DVT	Directorate of Vocational Training, Vietnam
DVTA	Department of Vocational Training Accreditation (under the administration of the DVT)
EQA	External quality assurance
IIEP	International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) (created by UNESCO)
IQA	Internal quality assurance
MoET	Ministry of Education and Training, Vietnam
MoLISA	Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, Vietnam
QA	Quality assurance
QAA	Quality assurance agency
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences
VET	Vocational education and training

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The last decade has witnessed a growing interest in quality assurance (QA) in VET sector. Governments in most countries worldwide have established QA systems to assure and improve VET quality (see European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training(CEDEFOP), 2009; CEDEFOP, 2011a). As in higher education, QA in VET has moved beyond the institutional and national parameters to become a global issue. In 2002, 32 ministers responsible for VET in European countries and the European Commission adopted the Copenhagen Declaration to agree on the strategies for promoting cooperation towards "shaping a proper European VET area" (CEDEFOP, 2009; p.2). This process has identified QA in VET as a policy priority, confirmed by the establishment of European QA reference framework for VET in 2009 (Ciobanu, 2009).

The main reason behind such increasing interest in VET QA is a growing awareness of the key role of VET in delivering a productive and high-skilled workforce (Seyfried, 2008). The increasing challenges facing VET systems in the era of globalization and rapid technological development have also generated concern worldwide about VET quality and QA (see Conford, 2010). The challenges include the current trend of expansion and diversification in the sector, the emergence of new technologies, the requirements of adherence to standards for cross-border recognition, and the high demands for the employees in real world work situations (Coates, 2009).

Like other systems, the quality and QA of vocational training[1] have always been high on the agenda at both national and institutional levels in Vietnam over the last decade. The Government of Vietnam has made great efforts to enhance the quality of vocational training to meet the demands for a well-trained labour force. Developing the accreditation system in vocational training is one of these efforts. The first cycle of institutional accreditation was conducted in 2008 and programme accreditation was piloted for the first time in 2012. This study aims to investigate the actual impact of both institutional and programme accreditation from the perspectives of staff members in two Vietnamese vocational training colleges. This chapter will set the scene by presenting the development of the accreditation system in Vietnam as the background in which the study was conducted. This will be followed by a description of the rationale of the study and my

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[1]VET system in Vietnam includes secondary technical and vocational education system under the government supervision of the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), and the vocational training system government supervision by the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MoLISA) (see Appendix A). This current study only focuses on the vocational training system controlled by the MoLISA.

interest in this research topic. The purpose of the study and the organisation of this thesis will conclude the chapter.

1.1. Accreditation in vocational training in Vietnam

In the last decade, vocational training in Vietnam has considerably recovered after a lengthy period of slow growth. The vocational training network[2] has expanded to almost every locality nationwide. As of late 2013, the network has 165 vocational training colleges, 300 secondary vocational training schools, 875 vocational training centers and more than 1,000 other establishments participating in vocational training, an increase of more than double compared with 2006 (Directorate of Vocational Training - Vietnam, 2014a). The scope of vocational training has also considerably expanded with 1,732,016 trainees in vocational training colleges and secondary vocational training schools, and 1,515,900 trainees in vocational training centers and the short courses of less than three months in 2013 (DVT, 2014b). Parallel with this expansion, the sectoral structure and the training quality has also been increasingly upgraded (Tien, 2009; Phi, 2012).

However, many studies (e.g., Phi, 2012; Specht & Aipperspach, 2009) indicated that the training quality of many vocational training institutions in Vietnam has still not met the requirements of the labor market. Xuyen (2008) indicated a paradox that while many industrial areas had difficulty in recruiting highly skilled employees, a number of vocational training graduates could not enter the world of work, due to lack of qualifications. According to Tien (2009), vocational training institutions have not met the needs for highly skilled workers in some advanced technical and technological jobs. In his more recent study, Tien (2014) revealed that the ability of many vocational training graduates to adapt to changes in technology is rather limited. The studies of Phuong (2009) and Phi (2012) reported that both vocational skills and 'soft' skills (such as working style, team working, and social communication) of Vietnamese workers and technicians are still low compared to other countries in the region. This suggests that the considerable expansion of the scope of vocational training has not been matched with the improvements of the training quality; rather, such expansion might pose a threat to the conditions that assure quality. As Dac (2010) noted, the conditions to assure quality in some newly established institutions are very limited.

In this context and in response to international trends, the Government has identified the development of the accreditation system as one of the priority policies to enhance the quality of vocational training (see Government of Vietnam, 2012; Hang, 2008; Phi, 2012).

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[2]See Appendix A: Educational system in Vietnam

It should be noted that compared with many other systems, accreditation in vocational training in Vietnam is at its initial stage of development. While VET accreditation has been in place in India and Romania since the 1990s or in Hungary and Italy since the early 2000s (see CEDEFOP, 2011a; Prasad & Bhar, 2010), the provisions of this process were promulgated for the first time in Vietnam in the Law on Vocational Training in 2006. The Directorate of Vocational and Training (DVT) as a part of the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MoLISA) takes the responsibilities of advising the MoLISA in building up national policies and strategic plans for vocational training, promulgating the managerial regulations under its own authorities as well as directly performing the state management functions over the vocational training sector. As stipulated in the Law, the DVT is also the national accrediting body responsible for developing and maintaining an accreditation system in vocational training. In 2008, the Department of Vocational Training Accreditation (DVTA) was established under the direct administration of the DVT, marking the important milestone in the establishment of the accreditation system in Vietnam. DVTA takes a leading role in developing and implementing policies of accreditation which include organising training courses on self-study, training external reviewers, organising external reviews of institutions and programmes, and appraising the accreditation results.

Accreditation (*kiem dinh chat luong*) in the vocational training sector of Vietnam refers to the process of periodic quality evaluation and recognition of an institution or programme that has already been granted a license to operate. Accreditation, initial licensing[3] (*dang ky hoat dong*) and inspection[4] (*thanh tra*) are the three different methods of external quality assurance (EQA) in the vocational training QA system in Vietnam. While both initial licensing and inspection primarily aim to control quality, the primary purpose of accreditation is to stimulate quality improvements in vocational training institutions. The features of accreditation in vocational training in Vietnam are listed below:

- Participation in accreditation is voluntary;

- Successful results lead to the accreditation certification which can be used for marketing purposes. The quality certification is valid for 5 years;

- No direct linkage exists between accreditation and reward/priority policy (e.g., funding);

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[3]See Section 2.2.2
[4]See Section 2.2.2

- An accreditation process is based on three main elements including self-study, external review, decision-making and follow-up. The DVT provides training on self-study for institutions;

- Almost all of the external reviewers are staff members from vocational training institutions. A very small number of external reviewers are experts in vocational training QA.

In 2008, the four legal documents specifying the regulations of institutional accreditation which were stipulated in Law on Vocational Training 2006 were issued. These documents stipulate the process of institutional accreditation, the set of criteria and standards for institutional accreditation in vocational training colleges, the set of criteria and standards for institutional accreditation in vocational training secondary schools, and the management and use of external reviewers. These documents created the legal base for implementing the first cycle of institutional accreditation in vocational colleges and vocational secondary schools in late 2008. In 2010, the legal document stipulating the set of criteria and standards for accreditation in vocational training centers was issued, allowing the implementation of the first cycle of accreditation at the vocational training centres in the same year. In 2011, the DVT drafted the set of criteria and standards for programme accreditation and conducted the pilot of programme accreditation for the first time in 2012. Ten vocational training colleges participated in this pilot study (each college had one programme evaluated in the pilot). As seen below in Table 1.1, a limited number of institutions participated in accreditation during the 2008-2012 period.

Table 1.1: Institutions' participation in vocational training accreditation during the 2008–2012 period [5]

Institutional type of the vocational training system	Number of institutions in the vocational training system	Number of institutions participating in institutional accreditation	Number of institutions participating in the pilot of programme accreditation
Vocational training colleges	158	74	10
Vocational training secondary schools	304	42	
Vocational training centers	870	27	
Total	**1332**	**143**	**10**

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[5]Source: DVTA (2013) (This current study started in March 2013, the data in this Table was collected as of this time)

1.2. Rationale of the study

This study examines the effects of institutional and programme accreditation as perceived by staff members in two Vietnamese vocational training colleges. The primary aim of accreditation is to stimulate changes and improvements in the institutions; however, to date, little is known about the actual impact of accreditation in the Vietnamese vocational training context. According to Harvey (2002), the starting point to improve EQA is not the evaluation methodology or the composition of the evaluating agency but "what the current situation is and what are its problems or shortcomings' (p.16). Stensakera, Langfeldt, Huisman, Harvey, and Westerheijden (2011) argue that despite much rhetoric about the impact of EQA, "there are reasons to believe that there is a gap between intention and reality" (p.465). Therefore, with limited evidence of accreditation outcomes, the DVT faces difficulties in its efforts to enhance the accreditation system.

The Vietnam Vocational Training Report 2011, issued by the National Institute of Vocational Training, Vietnam (2012), indicated that there had been no study on the impact of accreditation in the Vietnamese vocational training context. It is surprising that, to date, there is still a lack of such research in the literature. Despite the fact that staff members witness the changes in their institutions during and after accreditation, and are also the implementers of accreditation policies, no study has been done to investigate the impact of institutional and programme accreditation from their perspectives. This literature gap has opened the door for this current research. This study is not an analysis of the impact of accreditation in vocational training in Vietnam; rather, it seeks to interpret the impact of these two accreditation processes from the perspectives of staff members in the accredited institutions.

Due to the limited scope of the study, I chose to focus on the views of the staff members in the two vocational training colleges which underwent both the accreditation processes. However, the results of the study may have relevance for how the staff members in other Vietnamese vocational training institutions receive and respond to accreditation. The study is expected to illuminate issues around the implementation of accreditation, and yield practical ways to improve accreditation effectiveness. In particular, since the DVT is reviewing the regulations stipulated in the Law on Vocational Training 2006 and programme accreditation is still in the pilot period before the policies on this evaluation method are officially issued, it is hoped that the findings of the study may contribute to these processes. The study findings are also expected to benefit the institutions, especially those which have not been involved in accreditation, in assisting them to maximise

accreditation benefits and anticipating potential challenges for future accreditation implementation. Additionally, as this is the first empirical study that explores staff perspectives on the impact of accreditation in vocational training institutions, it is hoped to serve as a foundation for further research on this area.

1.3. My interest in the research topic

My passion for this current research stemmed from my own reflections and experiences as a staff member of the DVTA. During the three years of working there before studying in New Zealand in 2012, I was always interested in how staff valued accreditation and how this process had affected involved institutions. This is because I believed that staff response to this process would reveal much insight into the success as well as the shortcomings of accreditation policies and practices. Indeed staff perceptions about accreditation, which were usually captured during field trips to the institutions, helped me recognise the gaps between the rhetoric and the reality. However, from my personal observations, only in the informal and open conversations did they give sincere, multi-dimensional feedback about accreditation, and only in such conversations were the drawbacks of the process revealed. It seems that the shortcomings of accreditation were usually hidden in workshop/conference speeches or formal reports sent to the DVT. This convinced me that a systematic empirical study which captures multiple staff perspectives will provide valuable information for improving the accreditation system. My study in New Zealand has granted me an opportunity to conduct this research. I feel strongly that this study has broadened my understanding of this research area and also research methodology which are both of great importance to my future career in vocational training accreditation.

1.4. Purpose of the study

The study aims to describe staff perceptions and experiences on the impact of institutional and programme accreditation in two Vietnamese vocational training colleges. The findings of the study are expected to yield significant implications for further improvements in the accreditation system. Three specific purposes of the study included:

1. To investigate the overall perceived impact of institutional and programme accreditation;

2. To explore the perceived benefits as well as problems associated with these two accreditation processes;

3. To identify ways in which the two accreditation processes could be improved.

1.5. Structure of the thesis

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter, Introduction, provides an overview of the background, the rationale and the purposes of the study. The second chapter, Literature Review, examines the theoretical literature pertaining to EQA through accreditation and reviews the past empirical studies of institutional staff's perceptions and experiences of EQA. This chapter will also identify the gaps in the literature that inform the focus and design of the study. Chapter Three, Methodology, deals with the methodology through which the research data were collected and analysed. Chapter Four, Findings, reveals the analysis of the data findings in relation to the research questions. The final Chapter, Discussion and Conclusion, summarises and discusses the findings of the study. The limitations and the implications of the study for policy and practice, and for future research will also be presented in the final chapter.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Chapter overview

This chapter presents the theoretical background of the study. The chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section, literature pertaining to EQA through accreditation in VET will be reviewed. It will first discuss the key concepts extensively used throughout the thesis including quality, QA, internal quality assurance (IQA) and EQA. It will then outline the four main mechanisms of EQA which include accreditation, before presenting the purposes, types, standards, process of accreditation and the results of successful accreditation. Staff perceptions of EQA will then be discussed.

The second section of the chapter will systematically review the past empirical studies on institutional staff's perceptions based on their experiences of EQA in higher education and VET. This section will outline the literature scope for the review and the methodology employed for this review. A summary table of the studies included in the review will then be provided, followed by a discussion of emerging themes in the studies. Finally, the gaps in the literature that informed the focus and design of this present study, and how this study contributed to fill these gaps will be discussed.

2.2. EQA through accreditation in VET

2.2.1. The conceptions of quality, QA, IQA, and EQA

Quality

Various definitions of 'quality' in the field of education can be found in the literature. In a much quoted study titled "Defining quality", Harvey and Green (1993) grouped differing concepts of 'quality' in higher education into a framework by suggesting that it can be viewed as exceptional, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money, and transformation. More recently, Martin and Sanyal (2006) identified ten definitions of 'quality' in higher education. Seven of these have not been included in Harvey and Green's (1993) framework. These were 'quality as excellence', 'quality as conforming to specifications', 'quality as getting things right for the first time', 'quality as having zero defects', 'quality as providing added value', 'quality as exhibiting fitness' of purpose' and 'quality as meeting customers' needs'. This indicates that the definitions of 'quality' in education are diverse and have evolved overtime.

Such approaches to define quality may be applied alone or in combination to any level of education including VET (Hager, 1997). However, extensive literature indicated that there is no universally applicable definition of quality in VET (e.g., CEDEFOP, 1996; CEDEFOP, 2009; Hager, 1997). Interestingly, a lack of consensus on a single definition of 'quality' in higher education is also highlighted by numerous scholars (Harvey & Green, 1993; International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) (created by UNESCO), 2010a). There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, most definitions of quality have been criticised for different reasons. For instance, according to Pfeffer and Coate (1991), defining 'quality as exceptional' is problematic as it does not provide any criteria against which to judge quality. The "consistency" definition of quality is also criticised on the grounds that it will lead to undue emphasis on bureaucratic processes rather than input and output (Watty, 2003). Similarly, though 'quality as fitness for purpose' is seen by some scholars as encompassing the other definitions of this notion and currently a prevailing definition of quality in many QA systems (see Shah, Nair, &Wilson, 2011; Watty, 2005), the problem with this definition is that it is not simple to identify good 'purpose' in the context of education (Utuka, 2012). The second reason for the lack of a single definition of 'quality' in higher education and VET lies in the fact that quality is a multi-dimensional and dynamic concept in these two contexts, any definition of quality, therefore, should reflect the complex nature of this concept (see Navaratnam & O' Connor, 2006; Masson, Batti & Seyfried, 2010; Saroyan, 2011). As noted by Navaratnam and O' Connor (2006), multiple aspects including expectations, contexts of training, inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes provide a forum to introduce the concept of quality in VET.

A consensus about the notion of quality in higher education and VET, however, does exist at the broad level, that is, quality is relative to the users of the term (see CEDEFOP, 2011a; Harvey & Green, 1993, Law, 2010; Navaratnam & O' Connor, 1993). Navaratnam and O'Connor (1993) highlighted that the concept of 'quality' has "different meaning to different stakeholders in vocational education" (p.115). Additionally, various scholars (e.g., CEDEFOP, 2011a; Saroyan, 2011; Seyfried, 2008) commonly agree the contextual variables determine how quality will be defined. As Newton (2002) pointed out in his study, the elite institutions in the UK adopted the notion of 'quality as exceptional' while the newly established ones opted the meaning of 'quality as fitness for purpose'.

It is therefore not easy for a quality assurance agency (QAA) to determine the main approach to define and assess quality. An important message taken from the previous discussion is that determining the main approach to define quality requires careful

consideration of its dimensions, the interests of different stakeholders and contextual variables. It is noted that the approach to define quality employed by a QAA is signaled through the set of standards, criteria and indicators for quality evaluation. The sub-section 'Accreditation standards' in Section 2.2.3 of this chapter will provide further insights into this issue.

Quality assurance

The concept of 'quality assurance' (QA) has been defined in different ways though it has been a 'buzz' term in the field of education in the last few decades. In their study on QA in VET, Visscher, Hendricks, Andersen, Deitmer, Heinemann, Keskula, Larsen, Pepper and Tramontano (2009) defined QA as "all the activities carried out with the intention of ensuring institutional quality" (p.179). CEDEFOP (2011b) provided another definition of QA as "activities involving planning, implementation, education and training evaluation, reporting, and quality improvement, implemented to ensure that education and training (content of programmes, curricula, assessment and validation of learning outcomes, etc.) meet the quality requirements expected by stakeholders" (p.134). While a variety of definitions of 'QA' have been suggested, my study adopts the definition suggested by The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) - a world-wide association of QA in higher education that QA - is "the collections of policies, procedures, systems and practices, internal or external to the organization designed to achieve, maintain and enhance quality and improve standards" (INQAAHE, 2013, p.1). This is a condensed definition of QA which highlights both internal and external procedures. This definition also places emphasis on the quality improvement function of accreditation, supporting William's (2002) viewpoint that "continuous improvement - enhancement - is an integral part of QA" (p.1). In fact, this perspective to define QA is also used in a wide range of studies on QA in both higher education and VET (see IIEP, 2010a; Politynska, Rijsselt, Lewko, Philp, Figueiredo, & De Sousa, 2012; Saroyan, 2011).

IQA versus EQA

As indicated in the definition suggested by INQAAHE (2013), QA can be internal or external. IQA is QA conducted by an institution itself, and EQA (sometimes termed as 'external quality monitoring' or 'external quality evaluation' in the literature) is performed by an organization external to an institution. It is widely agreed that although quality is primarily the responsibility of an institution itself, the institution or programme needs to be

evaluated or monitored by an external body to make sure that the quality of that institution or programme is assured and improved (IIEP, 2010a).

2.2.2. Mechanisms of EQA in VET

A VET or higher education system can use one or a mix of the following main mechanisms of EQA: initial licensing, quality audit, accreditation and quality assessment (see Banji, 2010; IIEP, 2010a; Kis, 2005; Seyfried, 2008; Skolnik, 2010). However, it is worth noting that the terms referring to different mechanisms or approaches to EQA are "frequently used very loosely" in QA language (IIEP, 2010a, p.14). Also, the concept "accreditation" in the field of education means different things in different countries (e.g., CEDEFOP, 2009; IIEP, 2010a; Stella, 2002). It is, thus, important to clarify the meaning of terms used in this current study.

Initial licensing (also referred to as approval or initial registration)

Initial licensing is a traditional procedure of EQA used in nearly every VET system (Seyfried, 2008). It refers to a one-off procedure of quality evaluation to determine if VET providers will be granted permission to start their new programmes. To be granted the license to deliver a new programme, a VET provider must fulfill compulsory minimum requirements stipulated in national laws or regulations. Those requirements focus on input standards and/or process standards.

Quality audit

Quality audits are undertaken at the institution level on a periodical basis. This approach to EQA does not assess the resources, activities or the quality of an institution or a programme, but focuses on whether the internal processes carried out by institutions are effective enough to assure quality. An audit, therefore, does not lead to a yes/no decision about a specific level of quality or the comparability of quality levels (IIEP, 2010a). This approach to QA is being used in some QA systems such as in Norway, Australia and New Zealand (see NZQA, 2013; Shah, 2013; Stensaker et.al, 2011). In New Zealand, the quality audits are currently conducted with universities on a five-year cycle by Academic Quality Agency (AQA). However, for the institutes of technology and polytechnics in New Zealand (including VET institutions), the audits have been replaced by another mechanism, external evaluation and review since 2009 (see NZQA, 2013). In some other systems, external evaluation and review is termed quality assessment or quality inspection. This process will be discussed below.

Quality assessment (also termed quality review, quality evaluation or quality inspection)

Quality assessment refers to the process of evaluating the actual quality of institutions and programmes by an external body. While quality audits examine the processes implemented by institutions for achieving goals and objectives, quality assessment focuses on the quality of the institutions or programmes itself. In some countries, quality assessment refers to the periodical review of the performance of a specific programme to ensure that VET providers continue to comply with the requirements of initial licensing. It establishes confidence among stakeholders but does not lead to a quality label as an accreditation (CEDEFOP, 2011a).

Accreditation

The definition of 'accreditation' in education varies from country to country (see CEDEFOP, 2009; IIEP, 2010a; Stella, 2002). This notion might imply different procedures in different systems (Harvey, 2004). For instance, in the Indian QA system, accreditation in the sector of technical education programmes is "a process, based on professional judgement by an external authorised agency, for evaluating whether or not an educational institution or programme meets specified standards of educational quality" (Prasad & Bhah, 2010, p.189). This process is voluntary in Indian QA system. However, in New Zealand, accreditation in both universities and VET institutions is carried out at the course level and it "confirms that a provider is deemed capable of delivering an approved course" (NZQA, 2013). This process in New Zealand is of compulsory nature.

For the purposes of this study, it is important to identify a common understanding of the concept 'accreditation' used in this current study. Accreditation, in this study, is defined as a process of quality evaluation of an institution or a specific programme undertaken by an external body based on predetermined standards. This process results in the award of a status (a yes/no decision), recognition, and sometimes a license. This definition of accreditation draws on the approach adopted in some recent conceptual studies of the international organizations such as CEDEFOP (2011a) or IIEP (2010a).

It is noted that the accreditation standards may be either minimum or good quality ones (IIEP, 2010a). When an accreditation system uses minimum standards, the process equates to a periodical licensing mechanism (the periodical quality evaluation after initial licensing). When good quality standards are used, it is assumed that the minimum standards are already checked through a different mechanism (for instance, initial licensing or quality assessment) or that the quality of the institutions in the system is relatively even. Due to these features of accreditation, CEDEFOP (2009) asserted that, depending on

different contexts and the mechanisms for external evaluation in VET systems, accreditation may be termed initial licensing, assessment and "finally they may lead to official accreditation" (p. 30). Similarly, IIEP (2010a) noted accreditation "can represent either a transformer of other existing methods of EQA or an entirely new method" (p.16).

To further clarify the meaning of the notion 'accreditation' in this study, the two following distinct features of accreditation highlighted by CEDEFOP (2011a) are noteworthy:

(i) Accreditation results in the act of decision making of the quality seal or quality label for an institution or a programme which is important for marketing purposes;

(ii) Accreditation is not a one-off procedure but a periodical process with the aim to assure and improve the quality of an institution or a programme.

These two characteristics of accreditation make it possible to differentiate this process with the three other main approaches to EQA including initial licensing, audits and quality assessment. Accreditation is different from initial licensing in the fact that while the former is an ongoing process, the latter only refers to one-off procedures. Accreditation is also distinct from audit as accreditation focuses on the quality itself while an audit only looks at the processes to assure quality. Furthermore, while the successful results of all the four above-mentioned approaches of EQA enhance the image of an institution or a programme, accreditation is expected to do this to a higher degree.

2.2.3. Accreditation in VET

According to CEDEFOP (1996), while QA has been developed in higher education for a long time, it has only recently been introduced in VET. This perhaps helps to explain why accreditation is the most widely used method of EQA in higher education (IIEP, 2010a; Martin & Sanyal, 2006) while it is currently not widespread in VET (Seyfried, 2008). Despite this difference, literature reveals no significant difference between higher education and VET in terms of the purposes, types, approaches to identify accreditation standards and accreditation process as well as the results of successful accreditation in each context.

Purposes of accreditation

Accreditation serves four main purposes in both higher education or VET contexts (see Banji, 2010; CEDEFOP, 2011a; IIEP, 2010a; Kis, 2005; Martin & Sanyal, 2006):

- Quality control

- Accountability

- Quality improvement

- Facilitation of student mobility

The first purpose, quality control, assures that the minimum requirements are met by institutions and programmes. It is oriented towards the collection of information to correct unfavourable development and thus is a precondition to ensure the measures of QA. The second purpose, accountability, links to concerns over the concept of 'quality as value for money'. More specifically, accreditation aims to ensure the different stakeholders receive high value for their investment. To address this concern, accreditation is expected to provide the public with explicit information about the performance of institutions or programmes. With respect to the third purpose, quality improvement, Martin and Sanyal (2006) asserted that accreditation helps detect the strengths as well as the areas needing improvements in institutions or programmes, based on which corrective measures are proposed to improve quality. This process also stimulates competition among institutions and thereby is expected to contribute to quality enhancement. Finally, accreditation aims to facilitate the mutual recognition of credentials which allows students mobility among regional, national and international institutions (depending on the scope of accreditation).

In a conceptual study on accreditation in VET, CEDEFOP (2011a) highlighted the ambiguity between the impetus to contribute to quality and the accountability function in current VET accreditation systems. In fact, there has been a long debate in the literature on whether quality accountability and quality improvement are compatible or mutually exclusive (see IIEP, 2010a; Kis, 2005). Vroeijenstijin (as cited in Kis, 2005) argued that it is impossible to balance these two purposes as it cannot work for institutional improvement and accountability for the outside world at the same time. Contrarily, according to Woodhouse (as cited in Kis, 2005), some authors claimed that accountability and improvement are inseparable as accountability can always be reframed to focus on quality improvement. In a recent study, Hargreaves and Braun (2013) argued that educational accountability is meant to contribute to quality improvement but the authors also acknowledged that "there are often tensions and sometimes direct conflicts between these two twin purposes of improvement and accountability" (p.3).

Although the tension between accountability and improvement purposes might be difficult to resolve completely, it cannot be denied that accreditation has been increasingly expected to add value to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in institutions rather than only possessing an accountability function (see CEDEFOP, 2009). However, depending on the

nature of each accreditation system, this process might be more related to either an accountability or improvement purpose. The discussions of voluntary accreditation versus compulsory accreditation, and accreditation standards in the following sections will provide further insights into this matter.

Types of accreditation

Accreditation, as noted by Harvey (2004), is organised differently among different systems. Two of the main differences among those systems refer to whether this process is compulsory or voluntary, and whether it is carried out at institutional level or programme level or both levels.

Compulsory accreditation versus voluntary accreditation

Compulsory accreditation requires institutions or programmes to undergo this procedure periodically. Such accreditation systems, as in Hungary, Austria, and the Netherlands, are generally concerned with minimum standards (see CEDEFOP, 2011a). This process implies the periodical renewal of the licenses for institutions or programmes. In some countries such as Argentina and Colombia, accreditation is compulsory for teacher training programmes because it is of significance to national development or security. The programmes that must undergo accreditation in these two countries include medicine, law, accounting and some aspects/disciplines of engineering (see Martin & Sanyal, 2006).

In voluntary accreditation systems, institutions or programmes may decide themselves to undergo or not undergo this process. According to IIEP (2010a), voluntary accreditation systems are often more directly related to the improvement function. Institutions or programmes may apply for accreditation as they want to seek a chance to be granted a quality label which would help them to have the competitive advantage in attracting students and accessing specific funding. In their study on the accreditation system for technical programmes in India, Prasah and Bhar (2010) conducted a comparative analysis of the accreditation framework of some countries which are signatories or provisional members of Washington Accord and found that accreditation is voluntary in all these countries. This finding was supported by Martin and Sanyal (2006). However, according to IIEP (2010a), while there are many voluntary accreditation systems at the early stages of the EQA movement, an increasing number of countries have moved their existing systems to a compulsory procedure. If this becomes a real trend, the effectiveness of the voluntary accreditation system will be questioned.

Institutional versus programme accreditation

Accreditation can target an entire institution or a specific programme of an institution. While institutional accreditation looks at the institution as a system of which academic programmes are a part, programme accreditation focuses on individual study programmes (IIEP, 2010b; Martin &Sanyal, 2006). Institutional accreditation is, thus, more generic than programme accreditation. According to CEDEFOP (2011), institutional accreditation is a preferred option in a system in which quality between institutions varies widely and the managerial effectiveness in institutions is weak. With regard to programme accreditation, the two main reasons for promoting this process include: each programme has its own policy, curricula and possibly national qualification framework; and institutional accreditation cannot recognise programmes of different quality delivered differently in institutions. Further, some programmes must undergo compulsory accreditation due to their national importance or the requirements of professional bodies.

A QA system can implement both institutional and programme accreditation. However, according to CEDEFOP (2009) and IIEP (2010a), most accreditations in higher education and VET levels focus on programmes, not the whole institutions. CEDEFOP (2009) noted that in some VET systems, the first approval focuses on the institutions' organization and the VET programme is evaluated along with its implementation.

Accreditation standards

An accrediting body accredits an institution or a programme based on predefined standards. These standards include preconditions institutions must meet to undergo accreditation (e.g., having implemented self-study, having completed a self-study report, and having delivered the programmes for a period of time), and the specific standards for quality evaluation. Overall, accreditation systems based on minimum standards primarily aim to check conformation with standards as well as accountability. In contrast, good quality standards provide a set of references towards which institutions should strive and therefore are the mechanisms for quality improvement.

As quality is a contextual concept and relative to different stakeholders, it is not surprising that Harvey (2004) and CEDEFOP (2011a) maintained that accreditation standards developed by an accrediting body for quality evaluation must be transparent and widely agreed. A variety of studies highlight the importance of having a balance of all four types of indicators including input, process, output and outcomes and a balance of quantitative and qualitative indicators in the set of standards for quality evaluation (e.g., Chalmers, 2008; Scheerens, 2004; UNESCO, 2014). This is closely linked with the multi-

dimensional nature of the concept 'quality' in education as noted in the discussions of this concept in section 2.2.1 of this chapter. Though the specific standards for accreditation vary between countries, these standards, irrespective of the unit of accreditation, cover the following core institutional areas:

- Governance and administration

- Curricular aspects

- Teaching, learning and assessment

- Research and other scholastic activities

- Student learning support

- Infrastructure and learning resources

- Human resources

- Development plans

(see Martin & Sanyal, 2006; Stella, 2002; Stensakera et.al, 2011)

Process of accreditation

Most accrediting bodies follow the three stage accreditation model. These stages include self-study, external review by a group of experts, decision-making and follow-up (see Kis, 2005; Monnapula-Mapesela & Moraka, 2008; Politynska et.al, 2012)

Self-study

Self-study provides the institution with an opportunity to assess its pre-determined specific standards of the accreditation body. In this process, the institution or programme collects the data or evidence needed for writing a self-study report which informs and orients the process of external review by the panel. This process is thus considered as the backbone of the accreditation (see Niradhar, 2011). In order to support institutions in conducting self-study, some systems provide guidance or manuals. According to Kis (2005), only a minority of higher education systems provide training for institutions to conduct and prepare for accreditation.

External review by a panel of experts

External review is carried by a group of experts external to the institution whom evaluate the quality of an institution or programme based on QAA's accreditation framework. In VET accreditation, the experts are usually the academics in VET (i.e., representatives from other VET providers) (CEDEFOP, 2009). Panellists will review the self-study report

prepared by the institutions and conduct the site visits to the institutions to look for evidence to validate the self-study reports. During the site visit, panellists will interact with constituents of the institution, visit important facilities and check documentation. Based on the results of the site visit, the panel will complete a report which indicates the institution or programme strengths and issues to be addressed. In some accreditation systems, panellists must express their judgment using indicator scores against the benchmarks and make recommendations for quality improvement. The panel sends the report to the institutions for their comments and then revises, if necessary, before finally submitting to the accrediting body.

Decision-making and follow-up

Based on the accreditaton report of the panel, the accrediting body makes the final decision or recommendations which may take the form of approval/denial, conditional accreditation or a grade. Following a positive evaluation, a VET provider or a VET programme will receive a quality certificate. In some cases, only the final outcome is disclosed; in others, both the outcome and report are disclosed. It is noticeable that a quality certificate is only valid for a limited period of time and therefore the next re-accrediation review is decided. Woodhouse (as cited in Kis, 2005) pointed out that few accrediting bodies have thorough follow-up procedures to review what insitutions have done in light of the recommendations made in the accreditation reports or whether they maintain the quality as at the time of being awarded its accreditation.

Results of successful accreditation

Successful results of accreditation have varying implications in different systems. In the Irish system, successful accreditation is the precondition to offering awards from the national qualification framework (see CEDEFOP, 2009). In Italy, only the providers that are certified as successfully achieving minimum accreditation standards have the right to participate in regional tenders (see CEDEFOP, 2009). Although accreditation in some systems such as United States and Chile, is of voluntary nature, this process still links with the funding policies (see CEDEFOF, 2009; Harvey, 2004). In all systems, successful accreditation leads to a quality label used for marketing purposes. According to CEDEFOP (2009), when the market plays a strong role in the development of an institution or a programme, the value of such a label will become particularly meaningful for the providers.

2.2.4. Interest in institutional staff perceptions of EQA

Perception is "the process of organising and interpreting sensory information so that it makes sense" (Ofoha & Bolupe, 2011, p.53). Together with an increasing interest in quality and QA in higher education and VET is the increasing interest in how insittutional staff received and responded to EQA in these contexts. Many studies on institutional staff's perspectives on EQA have been conducted in different QA systems. Such an interest can be explained by the two following reasons.

The first reason pertains to the complexities of measuring the impact of EQA. Studies (e.g., Harvey, 2006; Kis, 2005; Rosa, Tavares, & Alberto, 2006; Shah, 2013) stated that it is difficult to isolate the effects of EQA from those of other changes that institutions may be experiencing. Rosa, Tavares, and Alberto (2006) also cited the complexity of higher education institutions as a difficulty in measuring the impact of EQA. So far, most past studies did not attempt to analyse the impact of EQA but sought perceptions of significant stakeholders particularly the institutional staff on the changes that had happened after EQA processes (Lemaitre, Torre, Zapata, & Zenteno, 2011).

The second reason lies in the importance of institutional staff's voices in improving the effectiveness of EQA. Staff members both witness the changes in their institutions post-EQA and implement EQA policies. As indicated by Newton (2000), "a significant feature of policy implementation is the discretion exercised at the point of implementation by 'frontline workers' or 'street-level' bureaucrats" (p. 154). Linked with this, Lipsky (cited in Newton, 2000) highlighted that the policy implementers are the 'realmakers of policy'. Therefore a deep understanding of the institutional staff's attitudes and opinions about the consequences of EQA will help improve the future process.

These two reasons help explain why the call for further research on this area is highlighted in a number of studies including some recent studies, for instance, by Stensaker et al. (2011) and Shah, Nair, and Wilson (2012). The next section will present a systematic review of the past studies on institutional staff perceptions of EQA.

2.3. Review of studies on institutional staff perceptions of EQA

This section presents a systematic review of the empirical studies on institutional staff's perceptions and exprinces of EQA in VET and higher education. The review aimed to discover how the institutional staff in different QA systems experienced and responded to EQA mechanisms. It also aimed to identify the gaps in the past studies to inform the focus and design of the present study.

There are two reasons that studies selected for review pertain to VET and higher education though VET is the context of the present study. Firstly, there is very limited literature examining QA in VET (Conford, 2010; Hager, 1997). Secondly, review of the conceptual studies on EQA reveals a wide range of similarities between higher education and VET in terms of the purposes, characteristics and procedures of EQA processes. In fact, according to Seyfried (2008), in many QA systems, progress with QA in higher education filtered down to VET. The inclusion of studies pertaining to differing EQA mechanisms is a result of limited literature on accreditation in both higher education and vocational training contexts, and the degree of overlap in the object, focus, rationale, and methods of the different EQA mechanisms (see Harvey, 2004; Nicholson, 2011).

This section will first report the methodology for the review, followed by a summary of the selected studies. An outline of some major emerging themes from the studies will be provided and finally, the gaps of the literature and how this present study fills these gaps will be discussed.

2.3.1. Methodology for the review

Several criteria were identified before articles were included in the review. First, those to be selected had to be empirical studies which investigated institutional staff's viewpoint of EQA based on their past experiences of these processes. Second, articles were required to be conducted in either VET or higher education. Further, articles had to be reported in English and published between 2000 and 2013. As QA refers to both IQA and EQA procedures, studies which sought institutional staff perceptions of QA were also selected for the review.

With those inclusion criteria in mind, varying combinations of key terms were used to search for the possible studies for the review using four electronic databases: Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Proquest Center Complete, Education Research Complete and A+ Education. The researcher also searched for eligible studies in two specific journals in QA titled Quality in Higher Education and Quality Assurance in Education. The search terms included: staff, academic(s), stakeholders, universities, higher education, vocational training, views, perceptions, voices, responses, opinions, feedback, perceive, quality, QA, EQA, accreditation, audit, evaluation, and assessment. The reference lists of papers which met the inclusion criteria were also examined for additional relevant studies.

After screening the titles and the abstracts of the papers, 18 eligible studies were included in the review. Table 2.1 in the next section provides a summary of these studies.

2.3.2. Summary of the studies

Table 2.1: Summary of the empirical studies included in the review

No.	Topics	Authors & Year	Context	Participants /Sample	Research design	Significant findings relating to staff perceptions of EQA
1	Academics' responses to external quality monitoring	Newton (2000)	UK	Academics in a university sector college*	Interviews	The academics' responses revealed a mismatch between EQA policies and the reality. Their perceptions centred around the theme that accountability and improvement had not been reconciled.
2	Academics' feedback about the quality culture	Carmichael (2001)	Australia	100 academics	Quantitative survey	The majority of respondents felt fairly strongly that EQA had little value in improving the students' learning outcomes
3	Academics'perceptions of subject review	Blythman (2001)	UK	19 academics at a college	Interviews	The responses reveal resentment against the system. However, the process was perceived to make implicit system explicit
4	Academics' responses to quality policy **	Newton (2002)***	UK	Academics in a university sector college*	Interviews & Focus group interview	Quality processes were perceived to be associated with 'bureaucracy', 'inspection', 'intrusion' and 'conforming behaviour' (p.16)
5	Academics and administrators' perceptions of accreditation	Harvey (2004)	UK, USA, Canada & Australia	53 academics & administrators	Email correspondence followed by discussions.	Most of the respondents observed that accreditation was associated with heavy-handed bureaucracy and unnecessary degree of control. They also found that this process did not enhance the job prospects of graduates

6	Academics' perceptions of quality processes**	Jones & Saram (2005)	Hong Kong	22 academics in one university	Interviews	The QA processes were seen not to resonate well with their lived professional practice.
7	Academics' resistance to the IQA and EQA processes	Anderson (2006)	Australia	30 academics from 10 universities	Interviews, Documentation, Literature review	Academics indicated their resistance to IQA and EQA processes. They held a view that QA mechanisms were associated with workload burden and failed to assure quality in a meaningful way. QA processes were seen as 'games' to be played.
8	Rectors and academics' opinions on quality assessment system and its institutional consequences	Rosa, Tavares, & Alberto (2006)	Portugal	12 rectors, 93 academics in public universities	Mixed questionnaire	Rectors and academics had optimistic views of the positive impact of quality assessment for their institutions. While rectors paid more attention to the results and management practices, academics were more centred on processes and the core business of universities, teaching and learning.
9	Academics' perceptions of QA processes by government bodies	Cartwright (2007)	UK	6 academics in two post-1992 universities	Interviews	The study reported the 'at best ambivalent and at worst hostile' reaction to the QAA's interpretation of quality (p. 296). The academics were sceptical about quality improvement function of the quality systems and saw QAA review as paperwork and a game to be played

10	Academics perceptions of quality audit policy at institutional level	Monnapula-Mapesela & Moraka (2008)	South African	9 academics in one university	Qualitative questionnaire	Audits were perceived to be a time-consuming exercise and to increase workload. The respondents, however, saw them as a chance to measure their impact within the institution and forced them to become more accountable.
11	A comparison of the experiences of institutional audits of three South African universities	Botha, Favish& Stephenson (2008)	South African	University 1: 45 respondents University 2: * University 3: 499 respondents (including academic managers, lectures, support staff and students)	Quantitative questionnaire	In all three institutions, the audit preparation processes were perceived to have more positive impacts on the institutions than the audit visits. The study also indicates the vital role of institutional agents in mediating the QAA expectations within the specific institutional contexts
12	Academic voice about the impacts of EQA on higher education quality	Mertova & Webster (2009)	UK & Czech Republic	30 senior academics and/or leaders; academics from four universities in the Czech Republic and two university colleges in UK	- Interviews - Literature reviews; - Documentation	The academics and leaders in two systems shared a number of issues in the current HE approaches to quality, some of which included focus on innovation and change, value of research in teaching practice; and benefit of exposure to different worldviews. Some of culture-specific issues included a need for transparency in educational processes, and greater focus on quality enhancement

13	Academics' attitudes towards self-study and EQA systems at departmental levels	Huusko & Ursin (2010)	Finland	- Survey 1 on self-evaluation: 122 heads of department in four universities - Survey 2 on QA: 466 heads of basic units in 20 universities	Two semi-structured surveys	The results did not reveal the perceived impact of self-study and external review on the actual quality of research and educational activities. The respondents however thought these processes can strengthen the practicality and reliability of a department's functions. They saw these processes as means to administer their everyday life but also increase bureaucracy and control.
14	Perceptions of frontline academics of the audit culture and its practice	Cheng (2011)	UK	64 academics in a pre-1992 university in England.	- Interviews - Document analysis.	Academics' responses reveal resentment to quality audits. Most of them saw audit process to be ineffective in terms of the money and time. They perceived the measures as simply paperwork.
15	Academic staff perceptions of the audit	Shah, Nair & Standford (2011)	Australia	40 academic staff in a private higher education college	Paper-based mixed questionnaire	The external quality audit preparations, including the self-review were perceived as a key driver for change and improvement.
16	The perceived impact of various kinds of EQA conducted by the Norwegian QAA.	Stensaker et al. (2011)	Norway	567 staff members and students	Web-based quantitative questionnaire	A majority of the respondents perceived the purpose of the EQA processes to be associated with control. Most of the respondents perceived the impact of the process as 'moderately positive' irrespective of the type of evaluation.

| 17 | The current quality framework used in Australia | Shah, Nair, & Wilson (2012) | Australia | 40 staff members including senior QA staff academics; managers or quality officers from 25 Australian universities | - The experiences of authors
- Focus groups | The respondents saw AUQA audits together with change in government policy and external operating environment as a driver for change and improvements in universities. |
| 18 | The correlation between Accreditation - Bologna process - Continuous Quality Improvement | Qefalia & Totoni (2012) | Albania | 141 professors / pedagogues in Albanian public universities | - Interviews,
- Questionnaires
- Literature review | The correlation between Accreditation - Bologna process - Continuous Quality Improvement is strongly positive with confidence 95%. |

*Number of participants was not provided in the study
** The study targeted the QA processes as a whole which include EQA.
***This study was the second phase of Newton's (2000) study

2.3.3. Institutional staff's perceptions of EQA

The focus of 18 empirical studies is the impact of EQA as perceived by institutional staff. The first important theme that emerged from the review refers to the two opposite viewpoints of the respondents towards the overall impact of EQA: First, EQA, has not significantly contributed to institutional improvement (e.g., Anderson, 2006; Blythman, 2001; Carmichael, 2001; Harvey, 2004; Newton, 2000; Newton, 2002); and second, in contrast, these processes have positive impacts on some core aspects of the institutional practices (e.g., Mertova & Webster, 2009; Rosa, Tavares, & Alberto, 2006; Shah, Nair, & Standford, 2011; Shah, Nair, & Wilson, 2012; Stensaker et al., 2011).

As an illustration for the first viewpoint, Newton's (2000; 2002) studies, which investigated academics' attitudes and responses to external quality monitoring in a university sector college in UK, indicated a large perceived gap between the EQA policies and the actual outcomes. This gap was also identified in Jones and Saram's (2005) study, which examined how academics in one university in Hong Kong perceived the quality processes. Jones and Saram (2005) reported the negative views of most respondents on the impact of QA procedures though respondents were asked to discuss both positive and negative incidents. In the same vein, the most common theme from the interviews with academics in 10 Australian universities in Anderson's (2006) study is that QA mechanisms actually "failed to assure quality in a meaningful way" (p. 171).

Contrastingly, some studies indicated the positive attitudes of the institutional staff towards the overall consequences of EQA processes. Mertova and Webster (2009) conducted a comparative study to investigate the academics' voices about the EQA impacts on higher education quality in the UK and Czech Republic. Interestingly, the academics and leaders in the two systems shared a number of issues, indicating the positive aspects of EQA including increased focus on innovation, the value of research and teaching practice, as well as the benefit of exposure to different world views. In another study, Huusko and Ursin (2010) investigated how academics in Finland experienced and responded to self-evaluations and EQA systems using two semi-structured surveys. The survey findings indicated that though respondents found that EQA processes could take a lot of time and could increase bureaucracy, they acknowledged the important role of a QA system in enhancing the practicality and reliability of a department's functions. The positive attitudes of institutional staff towards EQA were also reported in a recent study of Stensaker et al. (2011). Stensaker and his colleagues conducted a quantitative study investigating the perceptions of different institutional actors on different EQA mechanisms in Norway. This study found that the

majority of respondents perceived the impact of EQA irrespective of the type of EQA as "moderately positive" (p.470).

It is noted that the two different viewpoints toward the overall impact of EQA as discussed above remain true when looking at the studies which targeted the same specific EQA mechanism (e.g., either accreditation or audit). Illustrating this, while the academics in Cheng's (2011) study saw little value of audits and perceived the measures as simply paperwork, the academics in Shah, Nair, and Standford's (2011) study in contrast, saw the audits as a key driver for change and improvements. Similarly, of the three studies on accreditation, while Harvey's (2004) study pertains to the category of a negative viewpoint towards this mechanism, the two other studies including Stensaker et al. (2011) and Qefalia and Totoni (2012) belong to the opposite category, that is the study participants had positive attitudes towards accreditation. This perhaps helps convey why Harvey (2006) argued in his study that "there has been considerable debate about the impact of EQA in higher education" (p. 1).

The second noteworthy theme from the review is the perceived positive and negative aspects of the processes are not entirely consistent among the studies. Specifically, while some studies reported perceived pros and cons of this process, the subsequent works only partially confirm them or provide evidence for other aspects. For instance, though Monnapula-Mapesela and Moraka (2008) reported a rather lengthy list of the perceived benefits of quality audit policy, this study did not provide evidence that EQA leads to increased transparency in the institution's activities as reported in some other studies (e.g., Blyman, 2011; Shah, Nair, & Standford, 2011).

Nonetheless, several overlaps in the findings of some studies in terms of the perceived benefits and drawbacks of EQA could still be found. Typically each point of the following overlapping issues was supported by three to five different studies. Relating to the benefits of EQA, some studies reported that EQA processes were regarded as presenting an opportunity for the institutions to measure their effectiveness and identify strengths as well as areas needing improvement (see Cartwright, 2007; Huusko & Ursin, 2010; Monnapula - Mapesela & Moraka, 2008; Shah, Nair, & Standford, 2011). Also, the introduction of EQA systems was seen to increase the transparency and solidity of the institution's activities (see Blythman, 2011; Huusko & Ursin, 2010; Shah, Nair, & Standford, 2011). Additionally, some studies indicated that EQA mechanisms benefit the institutions as well as the staff members in the way they provided a framework within which the institutions and staff can work and reflect (Cartwright, 2007; Huusko & Ursin, 2010; Shah, Nair, & Standford, 2011). Furthermore,

perceived consequences of EQA included institutional staff becoming more aware of QA and thus becoming more responsible and accountable for their work (see Cartwright, 2007; Monnapula-Mapesela & Moraka, 2008; Shah, Nair, & Wilson, 2012).

With regard to overlapping drawbacks of EQA, most of the perceived problems centered round the theme that EQA processes are conducted as an accountability/control driven regime rather than for improvement (e.g., Cartwright, 2007; Huusko & Ursin; 2010; Newton, 2000; Stensaker et al., 2011). Findings of Newton's (2000; 2002) studies indicated that the main drawback of the EQA system is a great focus on accountability as opposed to quality enhancement, and the fact that EQA would interfere with academic autonomy and demotivate staff innovation and quality initiatives. According to Newton (2000, 2002), EQA mechanisms, from the standpoints of academics, were the "beast" to be fed (p.155). He further reported that some academics had a 'game playing' attitude towards the quality mechanisms which reflects their lack of commitment to the set of practices that are demanded. All these aspects of Newton's (2000, 2002) studies were confirmed among the 18 studies reviewed (e.g., Anderson; 2006; Cartwright, 2007; Cheng, 2011; Harvey, 2004; Huusko & Ursin, 2010). As an example, Huusko and Ursin (2010) reported that the academic staff observed the "growth of mechanicalness and control" of EQA and had a fear that EQA would threaten their academic freedom (p. 866).

Some studies also highlighted the institutional staff's strong criticisms towards the bureaucratisation of EQA (e.g., Anderson, 2006; Blythman, 2001; Carmichael, 2001; Huusko & Ursin; 2010). The academics in the studies of Carmichael (2001) and Anderson (2006) argued EQA was just a bureaucratic exercise with extensive administrative requirements and it did not actually focus on the improvement of teaching and learning. Some studies also had indications of a view that EQA has little effect on student learning outcomes. This theme remains true in some studies which indicated the positive opinions on the overall impact of EQA (e.g., Monnapula-Mapesela & Moraka, 2008; Stensaker et al., 2011). For example, the academics in Monnapula-Mapesela and Moraka's (2008) study, though acknowledging a number of benefits to the institutions, highlighted that the process 'does not have any effect on learners" (p.388). Some other perceived drawbacks and challenges of EQA processes include the over reliance on a quantitative approach of measuring quality (e.g., Anderson, 2006; Cartwright; 2007; Cheng; 2011; Jones & Saram, 2005), the additional workload burden (e.g., Cheng, 2011; Huusko & Ursin, 2010; Monnapula-Mapesela & Moraka, 2008) and the increased time and resource spent for participating on EQA processes (Anderson, 2006; Huusko & Ursin, 2010; Jones & Saram, 2005).

2.3.4. Gaps in the literature

The systematic review of empirical studies on institutional staff perceptions of EQA also helped identify the literature gaps in this research area. The following three main points merit attention. First, further research conducted in diverse contexts is needed as the studies are not consistent in terms of the staff perceptions of the EQA impact. It should also be noted that since no similar research has been found in the Vietnamese context, it is worthwhile to conduct research in this area. Second, almost all of the studies reviewed only focused on examining institutional staff's perceptions and attitudes in general towards EQA without systematically seeking to examine the reasons behind such perceptions and attitudes. For instance, some studies (e.g., Anderson, 2006; Blythman, 2001; Cartwright, 2007; Cheng, 2011) reported the resistance of academics towards EQA, but the underlying reasons for these attitudes displayed by institutional staff were still not clear in these studies. The third gap in the literature is that most of the previous studies reviewed targeted perceptions of academics towards EQA while only a few studies targeted institutional leadership and administration groups who have the main responsibilities for conducting these processes.

Aside from the above three main gaps, a number of other gaps were also identified. The review revealed the lack of studies on institutional staff perceptions towards EQA in the area of VET. Although the review was aimed at both VET and higher education contexts, all studies meeting the inclusion criteria were based on higher education. There were no studies conducted within the VET context. This result confirms the studies of Hager (1997) and Cornford (2010) which highlighted only a small amount of literature pertaining to QA in the VET context. An additional gap refers to the fact that although there are a number of studies examining audits or EQA, there are only three among a total of 18 studies examining accreditation. Furthermore, most of the studies reviewed employed either a quantitative or qualitative research approach to address the research objectives, indicating that a limited number of studies used a mixed method approach.

2.3.5. How does this study fill these gaps?

This current study sought to address the literature gaps identified in section 2.3.4 by capturing staff perceptions on the impact of institutional and programme accreditation in two Vietnamese vocational training colleges. The study employed a mixed method design. It targeted staff members in different positions including college leaders, academics and administrators. The study not only focused on institutional staff perceptions and attitudes towards the outcomes of accreditation but went further to uncover the reasons behind such perceptions and attitudes. The study was expected to help identify strong and weak points of

Vietnamese vocational training accreditation policies in order to improve system effectiveness.

2.4. Chapter summary

In this chapter, literature relating to the concepts of quality, QA, IQA, EQA and the four mechanisms of EQA in VET was explored. Literature pertaining to the different aspects of accreditation was also included. The systematic review of empirical studies on staff perceptions of EQA in higher education and VET provided an overview of how staff received and responded to EQA. The review also helped identify literature gaps in this research area that informed the focus and design of this present study.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Chapter overview

This chapter outlines the research methodology through which the research data were generated, interpreted and evaluated. It first sets out the research objectives and questions that guided the study. Secondly, it provides the explanation for the paradigm and the research design employed to achieve the desired study outcomes. Before moving on to discuss the trustworthiness and the ethical issues of the study, a detailed description of participant recruitment, data collection and the data analysis is provided.

3.2. Research objectives and questions

This study aimed to describe the staff viewpoints and opinions on the actual impact of institutional and programme accreditation in the two Vietnamese vocational training institutions. It also sought to understand the reasons behind such perceptions and attitudes. The research findings are expected to yield significant implications for improving the vocational training accreditation system in Vietnam. To achieve these objectives, the following main question was formulated:

What are the staff's perceptions and experiences of institutional accreditation and programme accreditation in the two Vietnamese vocational training colleges?

The three research sub-questions that guided this study are:

1. What are the staff's perceptions and experiences of the key policies and practices of institutional and programme accreditation in the two Vietnamese vocational training colleges?

2. What are the staff's perceptions and experiences of the purposes and impact of institutional and programme accreditation in their colleges?

3. What suggestions do the staff members offer to improve the policies and practices of vocational training accreditation in Vietnam?

3.3. Research paradigm and design

3.3.1. Research paradigm

A research paradigm or a philosophical worldview is a set of assumptions and beliefs that a researcher brings to the study (Creswell & Clark, 2011). A research paradigm informs how the study should be conducted (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The present study is grounded in the

pragmatism paradigm, which puts more emphasis on the outcomes of the study than the methods, and on combining different methods of data collection to address the research problem (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Pragmatists, as noted by Harrits (2011), use different tools (methods, theories, concepts, etc.) in their research to best understand the phenomenon under investigation. In this study, emphasis was placed on the "workable solutions" to provide a wide and deep picture of the two accreditation processes through the eyes of the institutional staff (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006, p.54). This intention ultimately determined the mixed research design for the study, and also a number of other issues regarding the implementation of the study, such as how to assign priority in the design, how to sample, and how to integrate the two strands of quantitative and qualitative data in this study.

3.3.2. Research design

This study was designed in the form of descriptive research which "focuses on providing an accurate description or a picture of the status or characteristics of a situation or phenomenon" (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p.585). This methodological approach was chosen as the study primarily sought to describe and understand as fully as possible the staff perceptions of institutional and programme accreditation rather than determining any cause-and-effect relationships concerning the research topic. Additionally, as little has been known about the subject area, a descriptive research design was seen as an appropriate approach to provide rich and accurate information about the phenomenon.

In providing a detailed description of how the two accreditation processes were received and responded to by the institutional staff, a mixed research design was employed for this study. Mixed research, according to Tashakkori and Creswell (as cited in Creswell & Clark, 2011, p. 5) is "research in which the investigator collects and analyzes data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or a program of inquiry." In this present study, both quantitative and qualitative methods were utilised to address the research questions. The study was conducted in two consecutive phases. In the first, a survey using a questionnaire with both closed-ended and open-ended questions was carried out with 60 participants. The initial analysis of the survey results informed the follow-up individual interviews in the second phase with eight participants. The purpose of the interviews was to gain a more in-depth understanding of the survey results and also to further explore the interviewees' perspectives of the issues in respect of the research focus.

The rationale for a mixed research design employed for this study is that neither the quantitative nor qualitative methods alone were believed to be sufficient to adequately answer

the research questions. It is evident that quantitative methods can involve a large sample of participants as well as produce results that are easy to analyse; the single use of quantitative methods, however, is unlikely to provide thorough insights into the study population perspectives of the two accreditation processes. As the study aimed to provide a comprehensive description of how the institutional staff perceived and experienced the two accreditation processes, a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods was expected to be the best solution to meet that purpose. As Fielding (2012) argues, the rationale for mixing methods is not "to get more reliable and valid findings but to get a wider and deeper picture from all angles" (p.138). This also aligns with the argument which is widely discussed in the literature that each type of research method has particular strengths and weaknesses, and consequently, a mix of different methods would generate a wide range of complementary strengths and non-overlapping limitations (e.g., Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Kelle, 2006).

In this study, the qualitative and quantitative methods employed have "equal priority" within the design or, in other words, each method has the same weight in addressing the research questions. This is because each method was expected to provide differing insights into the problem being studied. It is also important to note that the study was mixed in all three stages: data collection, data analysis and data interpretation. Figure 3.1 illustrates the research design for data collection:

DESCRIPTIVE RESEARCH

Phase 1	**Phase 2**

A questionnaire survey combining closed-ended questions & open - ended questions

QUAN - QUAL methods

→

Initial analysis of the survey findings

↓

to provide an overview of the staff perceptions of institutional and programme accreditation

to inform →

Individual semi-structured interviews

QUAL methods
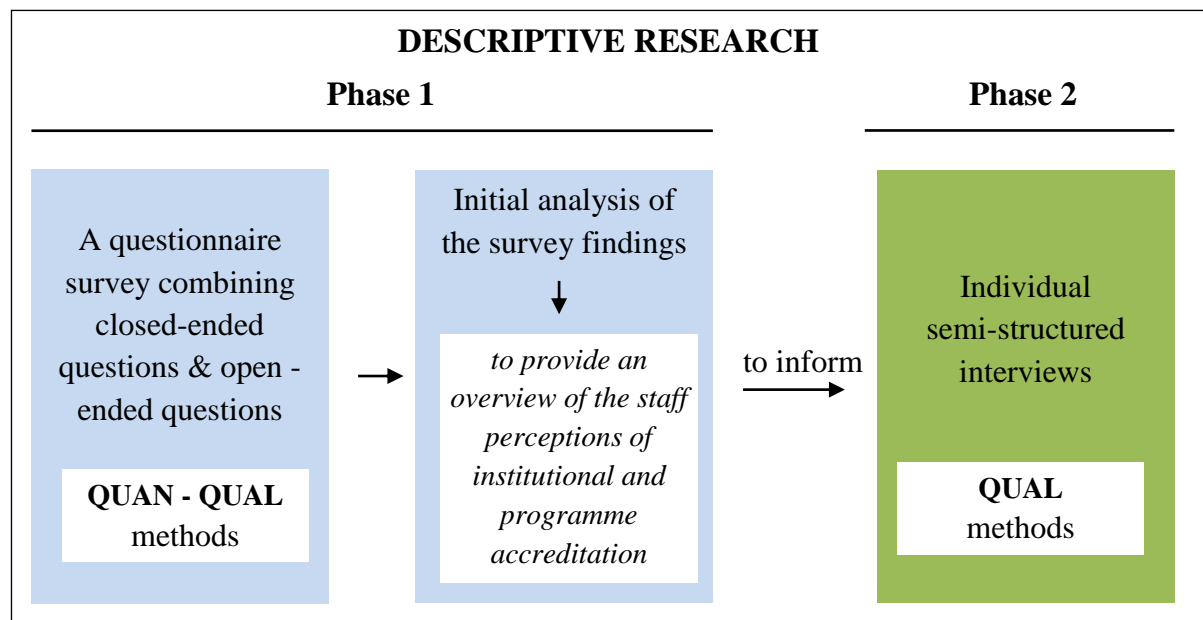
Figure 3.1: Research design for data collection

3.3.3. Participants and participant recruitment

Setting

This study was carried out in two vocational training colleges in Vietnam in 2003. For ethical considerations, the pseudonyms of College A and College B are used to refer to the two colleges. College A and College B are the successor institutions to the two vocational training schools established in 1978 and 1999 respectively. They were officially recognised as public vocational training colleges by the Government in 2007. College A provides training courses for 1,900 students enrolled in 15 vocations while 3,400 students are enrolled in 18 different vocations in College B. One hundred and seventy-four staff members serve in College A compared to 102 in College B. Each college has one campus located in a developed Vietnamese city. In the 2008 institutional accreditation, both colleges were granted Level 3 quality certificates (the highest level of quality). Both received scores equivalent to Level 3 in the 2012 programme accreditation.

The two colleges were selected for this study for several reasons. Firstly, they are among a small number of vocational training colleges in Vietnam which have undergone both institutional and programme accreditation. As discussed in the Introduction Chapter, the pilot of programme accreditation in 2012 involved only 10 vocational training colleges including these two colleges. Furthermore, based on my experience of working with some staff members in these institutions, the staff seemed to be interested and open to the issues of accreditation. This motivated me to conduct the study in their institutions. Additionally, convenience of data collection procedures in light of the location of the two colleges in the same city was also a reason for my selecting those colleges.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed to choose study participants. The criteria for participant selection were the institutional staff in College A and B who had been involved in accreditation in their institutions. These individuals were expected to provide rich information for the study. Due to the constraints of time and resources, the number of potential participants for the study was also considered in determining the sampling approach. At this stage of research design, I contacted the two colleges and was informed that the number of staff participating in the accreditation processes ranged from 30 to 40 in College A and 20 to 30 in College B, creating a suitable sample size for the scope of this study.

Participants of the study

Survey participants and survey participant recruitment

The participant recruitment commenced when I sent letters to principals of College A and College B formally requesting permission to conduct the study in their institutions (see Appendix B, Appendix C). In the letters, the principals were requested to provide me with a list of staff members, including those directly involved in both institutional and programme accreditation processes and those engaged in either the institutional accreditation or programme accreditation. The principals were informed that the list of potential participants should include all the staff members of the two self-study committees, and individuals who were not members of those committees but participated in the self-study processes or worked with external reviewers during the time of the panels' site visits to the colleges.

Both principals expressed their willingness to participate in the study and to provide the researcher with the lists of potential participants. Colleges A and B provided me with lists of 34 and 26 individual staff respectively. Each of the 60 individuals on the lists received an appropriate information sheet as a cover letter of a questionnaire (see Appendix D, Appendix E). In that information sheet, they were invited to participate in the study by completing a paper-based questionnaire. The response rate of the survey was 100%. This indicates that 60 staff members were participants of the study.

Table 3.1, 3.2, 3.3 below provide the demographic characteristics of the participants and their roles in the accreditation processes:

Table 3.1: Demographic characteristics of the study participants

Description	Number of participants
Current position	
Principal	2
Vice Principal (Academic)	2
Vice Principal (Administrative)	1
Dean of the accredited programme	2
Vice Dean of the accredited programme	1
Lecturer	26
Administrator	26

Experience in vocational training	
< 5 years	9
6-20 years	42
>20 years	9
Working time in the current colleges	
< 5 years	14
6-20 years	43
>20 years	3

Table 3.2: Participants' involvement in the accreditation processes

Involvement in the accreditation processes	Number of participants
Involvement in the institutional accreditation	41
Involvement in the programme accreditation	47
Involvement in both processes:	*28*
*Involvement in **only** institutional accreditation*	*13*
*Involvement in **only** the programme accreditation*	*19*

Table 3.3: Participants' roles in the institutional accreditation in 2008

Participants' involvement in the institutional accreditation	Number of respondents	%
I was the coordinator of the accreditation	2	5%
I was a member of the self - study committee	18	44%
I participated in the self- study process	38	93%
I worked with or was interviewed by the external review panel during their site visit	34	83%

*Note: As several participants were involved in the institutional accreditation processes in multiple ways, the sum of participants in each column 2 exceeds 41 and the percentage in column 3 exceeds 100

Table 3.4: Participants' roles in the programme accreditation in 2012

Participants' involvement in the programme accreditation	Number of respondents	%
I was the coordinator of the accreditation	2	4%
I was a member of the self - study committee	15	32%
I participated in the self- study process	44	94%
I worked with or was interviewed by the external review panel during their site visit	37	79%

*Note: As several participants were involved in the programme accreditation processes in multiple ways, the sum of participants in column 2 exceeds 47 and the percentage in column 3 exceeds 100.

Interview participants and interview participant recruitment

Of 60 potential participants, eight (four in each institution, including the Principal, the coordinator of the institutional accreditation, the coordinator of the programme accreditation and the Dean of the accredited programme) were invited to answer the questionnaire and participate in the follow-up individual interviews. Those individuals were selected for the interviews because of their vital roles in the accreditation processes as well as different positions they held in their colleges. Those characteristics informed the further valued information obtained from them to complement the survey findings. The limits of time and other practical conditions were also taken into account to determine the number of potential interviewees. Eight one-to-one interviews were evaluated to be appropriate to the scope of a master's study.

All eight individuals agreed to take part in both phases of the study. Of those, six participated in both the institutional accreditation process in 2008 and the pilot programme processes in 2012 while two others were engaged only in the latter process. Thus, six individuals were interviewed about both accreditation processes while two others were interviewed about their perceptions of the programme accreditation. Table 3.5 provides the information regarding the interviewees' current positions, and their roles in the two accreditation processes:

Table 3.5: Interviewees' positions in their colleges, and their roles in the two accreditation processes

Interviewees	Current position	Roles in the accreditation processes	
		The institutional accreditation in 2008	**The programme accreditation in 2012**
College A			
Interviewee 1	**Principal**	Member of the self-study committee	**Chairman of the self-study committee**
Interviewee 2	**Dean of the accredited programme**	*(not involved in this process)*	Member of the self-study committee
Interviewee 3	Head of Organisation and Administration unit	**Coordinator of the self-study**	Member of the self-study committee
Interviewee 4	Deputy Head of QA Unit	*(not involved in this process)*	**Coordinator of the self-study**
College B			
Interviewee 1	**Principal**	**Chairman of the self-study committee**	**Chairman of self-study committee**
Interviewee 2	**Dean of the accredited programme**	Member of the self-study committee	Member of self-study committee
Interviewee 3	Head of the Organisation and Administration Unit	**Coordinator of the self-study**	Member of self-study committee
Interviewee 4	Head of QA and Research Unit	Member of the self-study committee	**Coordinator of the self-study**

3.4. Data collection

As "good research cannot be built on poorly collected data" (Gilliam, 2008, p.1), the methods of data collection for this study were carefully and thoughtfully planned so as to obtain rich information from the respondents. This section first discusses a paper-based questionnaire and semi-structured individual interviews used as the data collection instruments for the study. It then describes how the questionnaire was piloted, followed by a detailed description of the data collection procedures.

3.4.1. Data collection instruments

Questionnaire

A paper-based questionnaire (Appendix F) was used for data collection in the first phase of the study. A questionnaire, according to Malhotra (2006), is a formalised set of questions to achieve information from the respondents. Mathers, Fox, and Hunn (2007) highlighted that a questionnaire is "a very convenient way of collecting useful comparable data" from a large number of individuals (p.19). The questionnaire in this study was designed with the research questions and the characteristics of the target respondents in mind. It is comprised of three sections. Section A requires the participants to provide their demographic information, followed by section B aiming to capture the participants' perspectives on institutional accreditation. Section C examines their views on the programme accreditation process. All participants were requested to answer Section A and to select the appropriate section (B, C) based on their experience.

The questions employed in sections B and C are almost the same. The sole point of difference between sections B and C is that while section B includes questions to extract the participants' views on key policies and practices of the follow-up, those questions were excluded from section C. This difference is due to the fact that the programme accreditation in 2012 was a pilot and therefore the results were not approved and published.

In each section of B or C, the questions were categorised into the two following sub-sections:

Sub-section 1: Staff perceptions of the key policies and practices of accreditation

As there has not been prior empirical research examining the perceptions and experiences of different stakeholders of some key policies and practices of EQA, most of the quantitative items in this sub-section were developed by myself based on literature on the key elements of accreditation and my experience as a practitioner in the field. Some items relating to the self-study course were developed based on those employed in the studies on teacher training course evaluation of Wong and Yeung (2003) and Uysal (2012). Due to the limited scope of the study as well as the practical conditions, only main aspects concerning key policies and practices of accreditation were taken into consideration in designing the quantitative items. Each quantitative item is a positive statement with respect to a specific policy or practice of accreditation, using a 5 point Likert scale (1=strongly agree, 5=strongly disagree). The respondents were also asked to respond to the open-ended questions denoting key limitations of accreditation policies and practices.

Sub-section 2: Staff perceptions of the purposes and impact of accreditation

Similar to sub-section 1, this sub-section includes both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Mathers, Fox, and Hunn (2007) noted that in selecting between pre-existing questionnaires and the self-developed one for the study, the priority should be given to the former. One of the benefits is that the pre-questionnaires have already been validated and tested well for reliability. Thus, the quantitative items employed in this sub-section were adapted from Stensaker et al. (2011) as the well-known scholars in the area of educational QA. Although their study only used a closed-ended questionnaire to collect data, it was seen to be successful in drawing a comprehensive picture of how different stakeholders within universities and colleges in Norway perceived the impact of different methods of EQA. The questionnaire in their study covered a range of key issues in respect of EQA impact as documented in the literature.

Based on the Stensaker et al.'s (2011) study, the quantitative items in this sub-section are comprised of Likert-type response items focusing on three issues including: (1) the perceived purposes of accreditation, (2) the perceived overall impact of accreditation, and (3) the perceived impact of accreditation on different areas of institutional practices and institution's reputation. The participants were also requested to give open feedback with regard to the purposes of the accreditation, the benefits gained as well as the problems and challenges they faced when implementing this process. They were also asked to recommend what could be done for more effective accreditation.

In short, the questionnaire employed in this study was carefully designed so as to obtain a wide range of data from the participants. While the closed-ended questions allowed information to be captured from the predetermined categories, the open-ended questions allowed the respondents to answer in the manner they wished, thereby eliciting their true feelings and opinions of the research problems (Gillham, 2008).

Semi-structured interviews

Interviewing is a powerful tool for eliciting people's views and attitudes (Gray, 2009) and also "the main road to multiple realities" (Stake, 1995, p. 64). The second phase of the study involved the one-on-one interviews with eight 'key' staff members. In their study, Colton and Covert (2007) underscore that a survey may bring about meaningful results but a researcher needs to gather some additional information not readily assessed by predetermined items. Therefore, the combination of questionnaire and interviews in this study would lead to a more in-depth understanding of staff's perspectives on the two accreditation processes.

The decision to conduct individual interviews instead of group interviews in the second phase was made as the former seemed to be easier to arrange and manage than the latter. The staff members in the colleges were often very busy, which made it difficult to arrange a meeting that suited them all. Moreover, the individual interviews, according to Tomal (2010), could draw out true feelings that might not be obtained in a group setting. The type of interview selected for this study was semi-structured face-to-face interviews. The reason is that this type of interview permits probing and exploring within the predetermined inquiry areas to obtain additional information about the phenomenon under investigation (see Gall, Gall & Borg, 1999).

After the initial survey data analysis, eight different interview protocols were prepared to serve as the guides to the 'conversations' with the eight interviewees. Each interview protocol included the common themes used for all the interviews and the additional specific ones according to the responses of a specific interviewee in his or her returned questionnaire. The common themes in all the interview protocols not only referred to the significant survey findings but also the general perceptions and experiences of accreditation.

3.4.2. Piloting the questionnaire

Extensive literature highlighted that piloting was of paramount importance before administering the questionnaires to the research sample (e.g., Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Marshall, 2005). A pilot might uncover any potential problems that may "affect the quality and validity of the results" (Blessing, & Chakrabarti, 2009, p.139). The questionnaire of this study was piloted with a sample of seven individuals who were the lecturers and the management staff from six different vocational training colleges other than the two institutions prior to the main study. As the questionnaire had been designed in English, it was translated into Vietnamese to be used in the pilot. The selection of the above-mentioned pilot sample stemmed from the time limit of the study, which made me decide to pilot the questionnaire while waiting for the principals' formal permission for conducting the study in their colleges. Though the pilot participants did not come from the target sample of the study, they still had the same characteristics as the participants of this current study. Of the seven pilot participants, three were involved in both institutional and programme accreditation processes, and the others were involved in the institutional accreditation of their colleges. The pilot participants were also external reviewers with whom the researcher had established a good relationship, making it easy to invite them to participate in the pilot survey.

The pilot participants were requested to complete the questionnaire and make any comments with regards to the length, content, wording, instructions and layout. They were also

encouraged to raise any questions regarding the questionnaire and were informed that they could provide feedback with or without the completed questionnaires. All the pilot participants provided their feedback within a week from the day they received the questionnaire. With reference to the feedback of three respondents who completed the whole questionnaire (as they were involved in both processes), they commented that the questionnaire was rather long and it took them approximately 35 minutes to answer all the questions. Nevertheless, they argued that it should not be shortened as all the questions were important for the purpose of the study. As with the responses of the four others who only completed Sections A and B of the questionnaire (as they were only involved in the institutional accreditation), they reported that they spent around 15 minutes completing questionnaire. No one raised questions but had some comments on the wording of the questionnaire items. For example, the item "the trainers have a good knowledge of the training contents" was suggested to be changed into "the trainers have a good knowledge of accreditation". Three pilot participants also returned their completed questionnaires together with their comments. Those questionnaires produced the responses as expected. The questionnaires were then reviewed and adjusted based on the feedback of the pilot participants.

3.4.3. Data collection procedures

Administration of the questionnaire

The method of questionnaire administration can have potential influences on the response rate and the quality of the data collected (Marshall, 2005). Therefore, how the questionnaire would be administered in this study was carefully considered. In an attempt to maximise the response rate of the survey, the researcher decided to travel to the research sites to directly distribute the questionnaires to the participants. As noted by Mathers, Fox, and Hunn (2007), handing out the questionnaire encourages a much higher response rate than a postal survey. Punch (2005) also contended that "if it is a choice between the researcher administering the questionnaire, and somebody else on the researcher's behalf, the former is the better" (p. 100).

After being granted permission to conduct the study in the two colleges, I consulted the two principals about appropriate times and procedures for collecting data in their institutions. Following the arranged plan with the principals, 52 sets of questionnaires, each including an information sheet (Appendix D), a questionnaire (Appendix F), a consent form for survey participation (Appendix G) and an addressed return envelope, was prepared for the 52 potential participants invited to participate in the survey only. Eight other sets of questionnaire sets, each included an information sheet (Appendix E), a consent form for

survey participation (Appendix G), a consent form for interview participation (Appendix H), and an addressed return envelope, were prepared for the eight participants invited to participate in both the survey and the follow-up interviews. All participants were informed that they might decide not to participate in the survey and in that case, they did not need to return the consent forms and the questionnaires. They were also encouraged to contact the researcher through the contact details provided on the information sheets if they needed any further information about the study and the questionnaires. They were instructed to place the completed questionnaires together with the consent forms in a collection box in the Administration Unit of their college within a week from the day they received the questionnaires. This allowed the respondents to complete the questionnaire at their convenience and to have sufficient time for reflection before responding.

In each college, I first met and greeted the principal and delivered to him/her the sets of questionnaires. After that, an administrative assistant was arranged in each college to accompany me to the offices of the potential participants to hand out the questionnaires. At those meetings, I briefly introduced myself and the objectives of the study, and invited them to participate in the study. I spent some time in the meetings with the potential interviewees to discuss further the aims and methods of conducting the interviews. It took me four days (two days in each college) to meet the potential participants and distribute the questionnaire sets. The administrative assistants helped me to deliver the questionnaire sets to four potential survey participants who were not present in the colleges during the time I worked there. I telephoned rang the absentee participants and invited them to join the study.

Two weeks after the questionnaires had been distributed, I received 60 completed questionnaires and consent forms for the questionnaire from the 60 staff members. All eight 'key' staff members also signed the consent forms indicating their willingness to take part in the follow-up interviews.

Follow-up interviews

The two-phase approach of the study permitted me to initially analyse the survey data and to tailor the interview instruments to follow up on the survey responses. All the returned questionnaires were entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 19) software and by the end of week 2 at the research site, I had finished the initial analysis of the survey data. Eight different interview protocols were then prepared in Vietnamese and sent to the interviewees two to three days before the interviews were held. The protocols informed the interviewees of the topics to be discussed so that they could prepare and be comfortable with the interviews.

The interviews were conducted in week 3 of the fieldwork time. The time and locations of the interviews were arranged at the interviewees' convenience, mostly in their offices. All the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese. The researcher started the interviews with informal conversations to build rapport and create a natural and friendly atmosphere for the interviews. I briefly explained the purpose of the interviews, and how the information and data collected would be used and treated as confidential. Before starting the interviews, I sought the interviewees' permission for audio-recording the interviews and they all agreed.

In the interviews, the interview protocols were employed to direct the flow of the conversation. The order of the questions in the interview guides, the wording of those questions and the additional questions in the interviews varied depending on the responses of the interviewees. It is worth noting that I took into account the interviewees' positions in their institutions and their roles in the accreditation processes before deciding any additional probing questions. For example, for an interviewee who was the coordinator of the programme accreditation in college A, I asked her more questions regarding programme accreditation than those regarding institutional accreditation although she was involved in both processes. The informal manner of the interviews relaxed the interviewees and this allowed them to openly share their thoughts about accreditation. I also took notes of their important answers as well as their interesting non-verbal responses during the interviews. The duration for the interviews ranged from 45 to 65 minutes and was determined by each interviewee's convenience.

3.5. Data analysis

In this study, the quantitative and qualitative data obtained from the survey were analysed separately and then integrated to provide the initial findings that informed the data collection in the follow-up interviews. After the interviews were conducted, the results of the survey and the interviews were integrated in the final discussions to draw meaningful conclusions with respect to the research questions. A detailed description of the survey and interview data analysis is discussed below:

3.5.1. The survey data

Quantitative data

The SPSS descriptive statistics programme was utilised for analysing all the quantitative items of the questionnaire. The participants' responses to the quantitative items were arranged to produce the frequency distributions, which were then illustrated in the format of a percentage. The bar chart graphs were generated afterwards (as shown in the Findings

Chapter) to give a visual trend of data that helped highlight the significant findings. It is noteworthy that, the "Don't know" responses to the quantitative items were treated as missing data. This approach did not distort the data interpretation as there were only a very small number of respondents who selected this category for their answers.

Qualitative data

To interpret the survey's qualitative data, I followed Creswell's (2009) framework for data analysis in qualitative research. All the participants' responses to the open-ended questions were also put into the SPSS programme in the form of texts to help the researcher trace the original responses of each participant to both the quantitative and qualitative survey items. The researcher then copied a list of the participants' responses to a specific open-ended question from the SPSS to a separate excel sheet and translated it into English. As the study report would be written in English, the researcher found it easier to work on the data in English.

The data analysis was started by scanning line by line the participants' responses to each open-ended question and taking notes. The participants' responses were hand-coded by segmenting and labeling the meaning texts (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). At this stage of analysis, the themes were allowed to emerge from the data instead of using the predetermined codes. The themes or major data findings were then identified based on the coding process, and the data were quantified by calculating the number of the respondents who provided the answers to a specific theme. As the participants' responses to the open-ended questions were not many and most of them often very brief, the process of coding as well as identifying the major themes emerging from the data was straightforward and did not take time.

3.5.2. The interview data

Creswell's (2009) framework of qualitative data analysis continued to be used to guide the interview data analysis. Although similar steps to the analysis of the qualitative survey data were followed, the analysis of the interview data required much more time and attention due to a larger amount of interview data and the more in-depth nature of the interviewees' responses.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and then translated into English by one of my colleagues. I then carefully checked the translations to ensure the consistency with the original words of the interviewees. Though prior codes and themes were derived from the survey data, the literature review and the research questions acted as the framework that helped deal with a much larger amount of interview data compared to the qualitative survey

data. I was always open to identify any new codes emerging from the interview data related to the study focus. The openness in capturing new themes allowed me to better understand how the institutional staff thought and felt about the accreditation processes. It is noted that, when new codes emerged after coding in a specific transcript, the previous coded transcripts were reviewed to check if those codes were or were not recognised. Also, the notes I made during the interviews were also reviewed to help analyse the interview data.

3.6. Trustworthiness of the study

As this study employed a mixed method design, the trustworthiness of both the quantitative and qualitative strands of data and the related issues when integrating the two methods in this research design needed to be considered (Creswell & Clark, 2011). This section first discusses the trustworthiness of the quantitative approach concerning its reliability and validity. A description of the parallel issues for the qualitative approach with respect to the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) is then provided. Finally, the strategies used to address the potential threats relating to the merging of the two strands of data are presented.

Quantitative issues

Reliability and validity

Reliability and validity are the two concepts associated with the trustworthiness of quantitative research. Reliability refers to the consistency, suitability or repeatability of the research instrument (Johnson & Christensen, 2008), while validity refers to "the correctness or truth of an inference" (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 253). Due to the practical conditions and the specific purpose of the quantitative approach of this study, the strategies employed to validate the quantitative data of the study included seeking comments from six colleagues of the researcher on the suitability of the questionnaire items with the study focus prior to the pilot, and conducting a questionnaire pilot with seven individuals who had the characteristics of the study participants. The afore-mentioned practices primarily aimed to discover any ambiguous and unsuitable questions that might have negative impact on the reliability and validity of the study.

Qualitative issues

Credibility

Credibility is about determining the congruence of the findings with reality (Tracy, 2010, p.842). Two strategies of triangulation and participant feedback were employed to promote the credibility of the study results. Triangulation refers to the examination of the information

or conclusions through the use of multiple data sources or procedures (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Among four types of triangulation, including data triangulation, methods triangulation, triangulation through multiple researchers and theory triangulation, I adopted the first two types to enhance the trustworthiness of the study, (i.e., data triangulation, and methods triangulation). Firstly, data triangulation involved the use of the data sources drawn from 60 study participants from different groups of the institutional staff in two different vocational colleges. It was also involved with the use of multiple follow-up individual interviews with eight participants. With respect to the method triangulation, the quantitative and qualitative methods were combined in this study to complement each other for better addressing the research questions.

Participant feedback or member checking involves the process of the researcher sharing the data analysis and interpretation of the study data with the actual participants for verification and insight (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Because of the time constraints of the study, I only applied one part of this process to obtain truthful qualitative interview results. The preliminary data analysis and interpretation were not sent to the interviewees for their feedback. However, the transcripts of the interviews were dispatched to the interviewees within two weeks after the interviews for their review and amendments if necessary. Two participants returned the transcripts with minor changes while the six others totally agreed on the whole transcripts.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research refers to the consistency of the research findings (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). Dependability requires a researcher to watch out for his or her bias, and to be transparent about the process and procedures of conducting the study. In relation to the research bias, I was mindful that my experience of working in the DVTA – the accrediting body might affect my understanding of the research problem under investigation. For instance, my assumption prior to the study was that some of the external reviewers might not be equipped with sufficient knowledge and skills to complete their tasks and this assumption might influence the evaluation of the policies and practices regarding the external review. To cope with this problem, throughout the study, I was actively engaged in self-reflection in order to monitor and control my potential biases. In addition to make it easy for readers to determine the consistency of the study results, the methods of participant recruitment, data collection and data analysis were also discussed in detail in the study report.

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research indicates the extent to which the research findings of a study can be applied to other settings (Tracy, 2010). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a researcher cannot specify the transferability of their study but he or she can provide sufficient information so that a reader then can determine its relevance for their purposes. In this study, to provide the basis for the researchers to judge the transferability of the study, I described in detail the context of the study, especially, what "accreditation" means in the context of vocational training in Vietnam and the history of accreditation development

Confirmability

The confirmability of research refers to "the extent to which the characteristics of the data, as posited by the researcher can be confirmed by others who read or review the research results" (Bradley, 1993, p.437). In this study, my supervisor looked at the raw data, my analysis notes and personal notes, and supported me in interpreting the data results. In addition, I have provided sufficient detail of the methods and procedures undertaken to enable replication of the study in the future.

Mixed method issues

According to Creswell and Clark (2011), the potential threats when merging data in a mixed research design could be identified in three different areas, including data collection, data analysis and interpretation of a study. As noted by the authors, a specific issue that might compromise data collection might involve inappropriate sample selection for quantitative and qualitative data collection. In this study, the samples for quantitative and qualitative data collection were from the same population; the interviewees were selected from those who responded to the questionnaire. Further, to eliminate the potential threats to the validity of the study resulting from collecting two types of data that do not address the same topics, the questions in the interviews of this study were guided by the survey results, ensuring that both strands of data focused on the research problems.

With respect to data analysis, Creswell and Clark (2011) highlighted the potential threats involving the inadequate and unclear analysis of data that becomes the focus of the follow-up procedures. The initial analysis of the survey in this current study produced clear and detailed description of the significant findings which were followed up in the interviews. Furthermore, the priori codes as the themes identified from the survey data analysis were used in analysing the interview data.

Regarding the interpretation of data findings, Creswell and Clark (2011) suggested that mixed-methods researchers should consider the potential threats resulting from giving more weight to one form of data than the other, not taking full advantage of the two data sets or leaving unattended contradictions. In this study, the quantitative and qualitative strands of data had equal weights in answering the research questions. Any contradictions between the quantitative data and qualitative data findings were noted and explanations were sought in the follow-up interviews. The findings of the survey and the interviews were integrated in discussing the final outcomes of the study. The remaining contradictions were reported in the data findings.

3.7. Ethical considerations

The most fundamental ethical issue in doing research is the treatment of research participants that involves insuring that they are not harmed physically or psychologically in anyway (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). In this regard, I was well aware that the most important ethical issue in this present study refers to the dynamics of the power relationship between me and the participants. More specifically, my current position as a staff of the DVTA might make the study participants think that they have to participate in the study even if they did not want to and that providing their perceptions on the actual impact of accreditation might do harm to them and their college. To address those issues as well as to protect the participants' rights and interests in general, a number of ethical practices were employed throughout the study:

1. The ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Victoria University of Wellington's Faculty of Education Human Ethics Committee (Ethics Committee) prior to the data collection (Appendix H).

2. All the approved ethical procedures were strictly followed in conducting the study. The consent forms were sought from the two principals of the colleges before targeting the potential participants. The principals were provided with detailed information with respect to the purpose of the study, the procedures of data collection, and my commitment to protecting the participants' rights. They were informed that participation was voluntary, and the confidentiality for the colleges and the participants is ensured by using pseudonyms in the study report. Similar information was provided to the study sample in the consent forms.

   A confidentiality contract was signed by both me and the transcriber/translator of the interview content to maintain the confidentiality of the identifying information related

to the colleges and the participants (Appendix J). All the documents, as well as the electronic files that contain identifying information about the two colleges in the study and the participants, are securely stored and accessed by the researcher only. Within two years after the completion of the research, all that research data will be destroyed.

3. A number of ethical actions that go behind the "procedural ethics" encompassed by the Ethics Committee were also undertaken (Tracy, 2010, p.847). Throughout the study, I repeatedly reflected and questioned the ethical decisions (Tracy, 2010). For example, the questions formulated during the interviews ensured that the respondents did not feel anxious and stressed and that those questions were not misleading.

In summary, practices within and beyond the procedural ethics were carried out in this study. It is noted that such actions not only addressed ethical issues but also led to more credible data for the study (Tracy, 2010).

3.8. Chapter summary

This chapter has explained the choice of the pragmatist paradigm and the two-phase-mixed research methods for this study. It has also outlined the processes of participant recruitment, data collection, data analysis and the steps taken to ensure the trustworthiness, and the handling of the ethical issues of the study. The following chapter presents the data findings.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1. Chapter overview

This chapter presents the data analysis in relation to the three research questions. It will first discuss the feedback of the staff members in the two colleges on some key policies and practices of institutional and programme accreditation. This will be followed by a description of the perceived purposes and impact of the two accreditation processes. Finally, an outline of their suggestions for more effective accreditation in vocational training in Vietnam will be presented. In this chapter, the data obtained from the two phases (the survey and the follow-up interviews) will be presented separately to make it possible to understand the context of the data in each phase, and to lend credibility to the interpretation of the research findings.

4.2. Staff perceptions of the key policies and practices of institutional and programme accreditation (Research question 1)

4.2.1. Staff perceptions of the self-study training course

Staff perceptions of the self-study training course in institutional accreditation

Survey findings

Of the 41 participants engaged with the institutional accreditation, 29 attended the self-study training course and responded to the five quantitative items relating to the course. Figure 4.1 summarises the participants' responses:
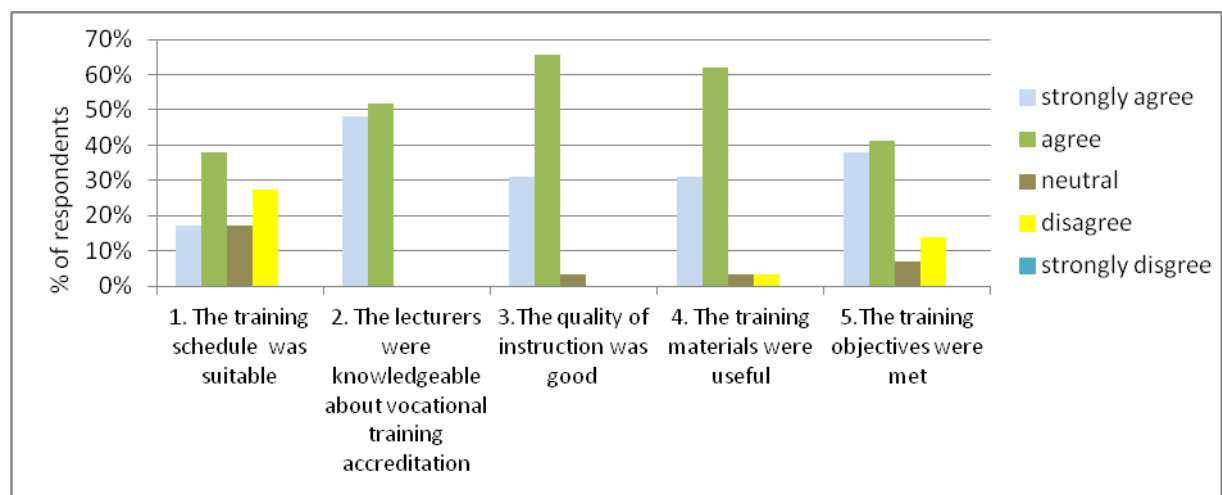
Figure 4.1: Staff perceptions of the self-study training course
in institutional accreditation

Overall, the participants were satisfied with the lecturers, the quality of instruction and the training materials of the course. Most of the participants (>90%) indicated 'strongly agree' or

'agree' with Statement 2, 3, and 4 relating to these aspects of the course. There was also a high level of support among the respondents concerning Statement 5 'The training objectives were met' with 79% of the participants indicating 'strongly agree' or 'agree'. However, many participants seemed not to be happy with the training schedule of the course. Nearly half of them (45%) indicated 'neutral' or 'disagree' with Statement 1 'The training schedule was suitable'.

Sixteen participants answered an open-ended question which requested them to indicate the limitations of the course. The majority of the respondents (68.7%) mentioned the lack of detailed discussions and practice in the course schedule. There were also several negative comments from one or two respondents with regard to the other aspects of the course, such as the training materials, the lecturers or the assignment of unsuitable staff to attend the course.

Interview findings

Generally, the interviewees were satisfied with the lecturers, the atmosphere in the training sessions and the training materials. However, of the six individuals interviewed about institutional accreditation, five complained about the inadequate discussions and practice for gathering evidence. As one interviewee commented:

> *The trainer needs to spend most of the time instructing the trainees to find evidence and then practising it during the training process. However, this content only took one quarter of the course duration and the trainees did not have any chance to practice. It was just a visit to a school rather than practicing how to find evidence* (Respondent 28 - Administrative staff).

When asked about the other drawbacks of the course, two interviewees complained about the limited number of staff trained, an issue that was not covered by the five quantitative items in the questionnaire. Their response implied that all staff members from their college should be trained about self-study as this process involves all of them. The following quotes illustrate this:

> *I mean, only several people participated in the course while they could not cover all the self-study work of the whole school. In preparation for accreditation, all staff from Deans to lecturers had to be involved in the self-study, so all of them should have been trained* (Respondent 16 - College leader)

> *It is better to have a training session for the whole school so everyone achieves the same awareness and can understand each accreditation indicator. After that, they*

know what they should do. They could also provide appropriate evidence if requested by others (Respondent 28 -Administrative leader)

Staff perceptions of the self-study training course in programme accreditation

Survey findings

Of 47 participants engaged in the programme accreditation in 2012, 40 (85%) attended the self-study training course in this process and rated their responses on five statements relating to the course. Their responses are presented in Figure 4.2.
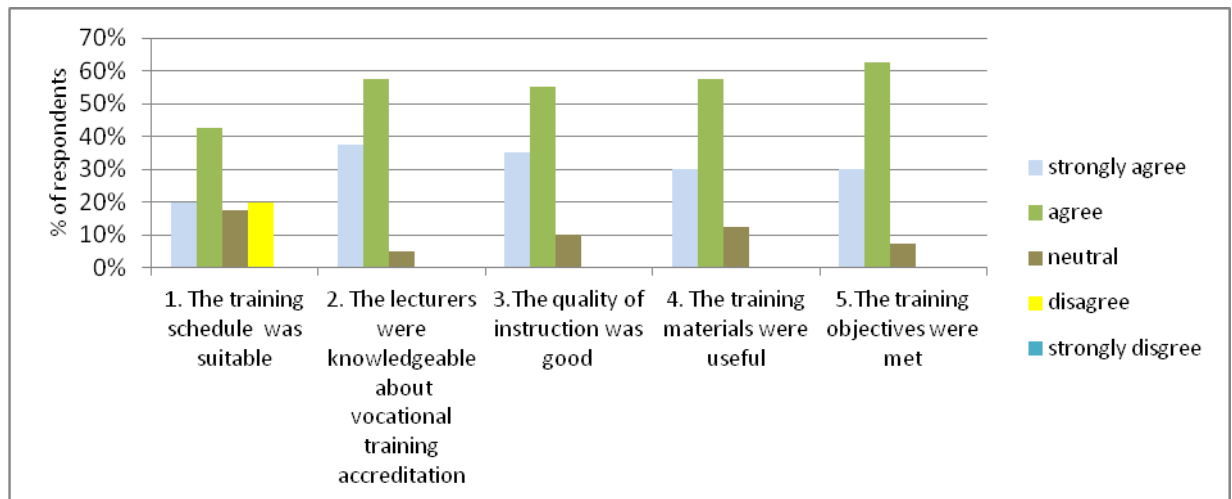
Figure 4.2: Staff perceptions of the self-study training course in programme accreditation

Figure 4.2 reveals similar staff perspectives on the self-study training course to the institutional accreditation in 2008. Almost all of the respondents supported all the five statements except Statement 1 'The training schedule was suitable'. While the percentage of participants who indicated 'strongly agree' or 'agree' to Statement 2 to 5 was higher than 85%, the percentage for Statement 1 was only 62%.

The respondents' open feedback regarding the limitations of the course confirmed the quantitative findings. Of 16 respondents, half complained about the inadequate time allocated for instructions and practice about gathering evidence in the training programme. The others mentioned different aspects of the course such as the limited length of the course and the limited number of staff attending the course.

Interview findings

Most of the interviewees who attended both courses in the two accreditation processes tended to express similar attitudes towards the courses. Inadequate guidelines, discussions and practices for finding evidence and writing self-study in the training schedule were the main perceived obstacles of the programme course. Two interviewees (who only attended the

programme accreditation course) also perceived a lack of instructions on identifying and gathering evidence as the major limitation of the course; one put it:

> *The time of the course, especially of instruction about finding suitable evidence was quite short. It would be better if the training course gave more specific examples so that the people in charge may prepare evidence well* (Respondent 12 - Academic leader)

One respondent who complained about the limited number of staff allowed to attend the course in her open survey feedback was asked to explain her view. Interestingly, in the interview, she referred to the lack of suitability in assigning staff to attend the course. The following quote illustrates her concerns:

> *The number of learners in one class may be 15 but the right people will bring more effectiveness... we did not fully understand the process so we did not send the right people to be trained... If a staff member who is not in the position of decision- making participates in the course, he or she might know what needs to do to prepare for external review but could not lead this process later* (Respondent 2 - Academic leader).

4.2.2. Staff perceptions of the set of standards and criteria for accreditation

Staff perceptions of the set of standards and criteria for institutional accreditation

Survey findings

The participants' responses are presented in Figure 4.3 below:
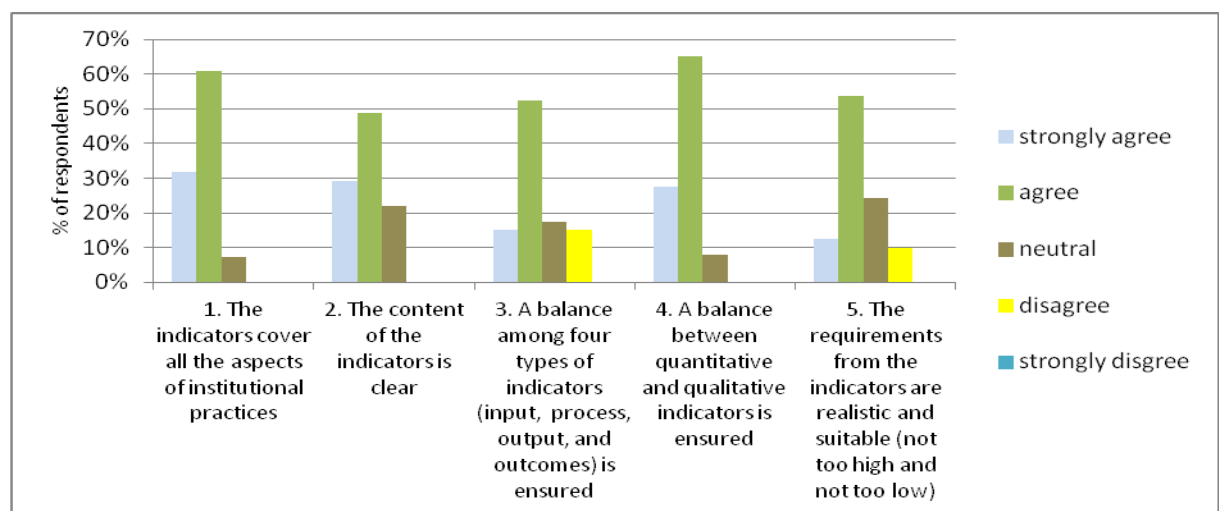
Figure 4.3: Staff perceptions of the set of standards and criteria for institutional accreditation

Almost all of the respondents (93%) either agreed or strongly agreed with Statement 1 'The indicators cover all the aspects of the institutional practices' and Statement 4 'A balance between quantitative and qualitative indicators is ensured'. Less support was found for Statement 2 'The content of indicators is clear' with 78% indicating 'strongly agree' or 'agree'. Nearly 67% of the respondents indicated 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with Statement 3 'A balance of four types of indicators (input, output, process and outcome) is ensured', and Statement 5 'The requirements from the indicators are realistic and suitable (not too high, and not too low)'. It is noted that the 'disagree' responses only appeared in Statement 3 and 5.

Only 11 respondents (26.8%) answered the open-ended question which requested them to specify the limitations of the set of criteria and standards for institutional accreditation. Five individuals indicated their dissatisfaction with the overlaps among the indicators. Four other respondents perceived the requirements from some indicators to be unrealistic (too high compared to reality), such as those of Standard 9.2a (hostel), Standard 6.1 (library), and Standard 8.3 (finance).

Interview findings

Overall, the participants' responses in the interviews were in line with the survey results pertaining to the set of indicators of institutional accreditation. There was a strong agreement among the interviewees that this set of indicators was comprehensive and it nearly covered all the activities of vocational training. The interviewees did not see the requirements of the indicators to be too high or too low overall. In this regard, one held a view that if the requirements were too low, all the institutions involving the process would have been certified. One other respondent added that it was not easy for her institution to get the high scores to be certified. Most of the respondents also found the balance between the quantitative and qualitative indicators generally satisfactory. One interviewee found that although the set of standards and criteria seemed to be over reliant on quantitative indicators, this approach fit well with the current conditions of accreditation in Vietnam.

However, all interviewees strongly agreed with the survey findings concerning the 'overlaps among the indicators'. Most of them argued that this issue is caused by the repetition of the evidence required to prove some specific indicators. Some believed that this problem resulted from the fact that some indicators are not specific and clear enough. In the views of some respondents, a large amount of indicators (150 indicators) along with the repetition among the indicators made the set of standards and criteria too complicated.

The second perceived problem with the set of criteria and standards pertained to the imbalance among the four types of indicators (input, output, process and outcome). Four interviewees who rated 'neutral' or 'disagree' on Statement 3 'A balance of four types of indicators (input, output, process and outcome) is ensured' in the questionnaire were asked to explain their ratings. The most common theme that emerged from the respondents' answers is that the evaluation seemed to be too heavily reliant on the input and process rather than output and outcome. Such an approach to quality evaluation, according to them, did not force the institution to focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning. This can be seen through the following perspectives:

> *The focus should be on students' performance and the achievements of an institution as input or process did not reflect the genuine quality of an institution. The current system just led to the burden of paperwork instead of the improvements of real teaching and learning* (Respondent 45 - Academic leader).

> *The number of books a school has does not reflect the quality of that school….Output and outcome indicators are much more important* (Respondent 47 - Administrative leader).

Additionally, though the requirements from the set of criteria and standards overall were perceived not to be too high or too low, the interviews revealed the dissatisfaction of some respondents with some indicators which they perceived to be unrealistic and unsuitable. Consider, for example, the following comment of one interviewee:

> *About the library, the indicator requiring the number of 10 to 15 books per student is not realistic. Also, the average area required for a reading seat (1.8m2) is high. If my school had 5,000 students, there would be a giant library. That is not necessary as now we have e-library…The criterion 7 for scientific research is not too difficult for my school to meet…However, as a vocational training school, we should focus on training vocational skills for students rather than doing research* (Respondent 47 - Administrative leader).

Staff perceptions of the set of criteria and standards for programme accreditation

Survey findings

Figure 4.4 reports the participants' responses to the five statements:
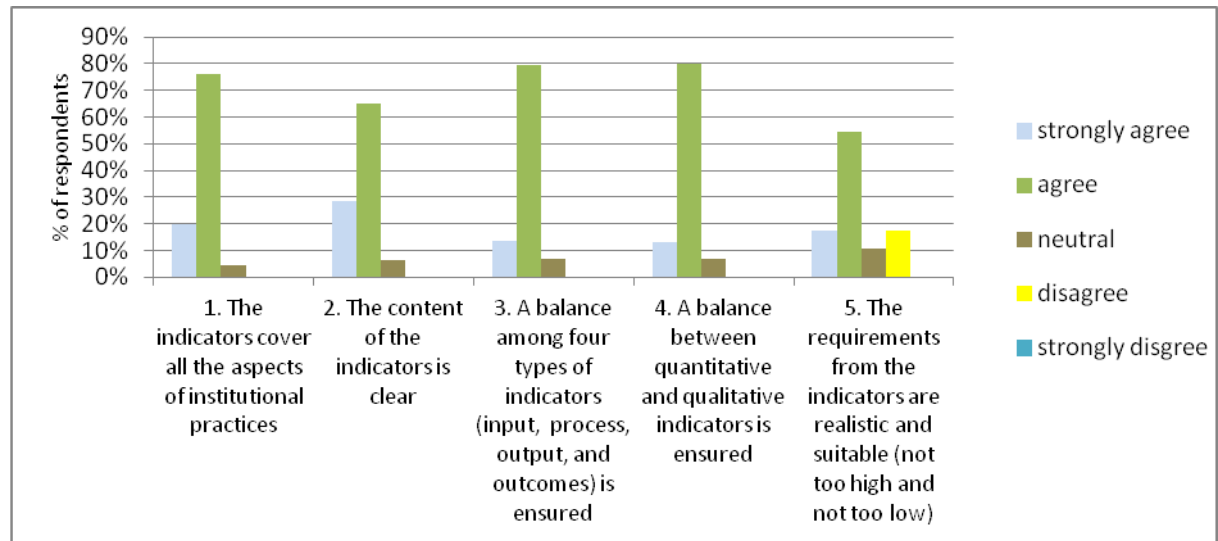
Figure 4.4: Staff perceptions of the set of standards and criteria
for programme accreditation

As indicated in Figure 4.4, the participants overall were positive about the set of standards and criteria for programme accreditation. Almost all of them (>93%) indicated 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with the first four statements (1, 2, 3, and 4), and a lower percentage (72%) indicated 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with Statement 5.

Only four participants answered the open-ended question concerning the drawbacks of the set of standards and criteria in programme accreditation. Three of them reported that the requirements from some indicators were not realistic, and the last respondent found no significant difference between the two sets of standards and criteria used for the two processes.

Interview findings

A finding worth noting from the interview data was that the set of criteria and standards for programme accreditation is perceived to be much better than the one used for institutional accreditation. According to some interviewees, the set of programme criteria and standards has less overlaps among the indicators and is also less complicated than the set of institutional criteria and standards.

Similar to staff perspectives on the set of standard and criteria for institutional accreditation, most of the interviewees were positive towards the balance of quantitative and qualitative indicators in the programme standard and criteria. Most of them commonly agreed that the

requirements from the set of standards and criteria for programme accreditation in general were not too high and not too low.

The interviewees, however, had concerns about a number of unrealistic indicators in the set of programme standards and criteria. They did not only complain that the requirements from some indicators were too high for their colleges to meet, but also mentioned the incompatibility of some indicators with other current related regulations as well as the practical requirements. This was illustrated in the following quotes:

> *Regarding the indicator '100% of teachers have participated in composing textbooks', obviously, this cannot be done as those who can compose books must be doctors or professors* (Respondent 18 - College leader).

> *The indicator that requires 100% of teachers to have a vocational skills qualification is far from practice as now we do not have any mechanism or regulations about this* (Respondent 45 - Academic leader).

> *The panel checked the training equipment based on technical specifications as stipulated on legal documents published some years ago. However, at the time of the site visit, those specifications were out of date as technology changed* (Respondent 30 - Academic leader).

Another area of some interviewees' concern refers to the balance of input, output, process, and outcome indicators. They found the set of standards and criteria for programme accreditation not to have enough output and outcome indicators for quality evaluation. These views are not congruent with the quantitative survey findings which indicate the positive perceptions of the respondents towards the balance of four types of indicators (input, process, output and outcomes). Consider the following representative perspective:

> *It is evident that output and outcome elements are of importance during the process of accreditation. Nonetheless, they have not yet been fully included in the set of criteria and standards* (Respondent 12 - Academic leader).

Notably, although Statement 1 'The indicators cover all the aspects of the institutional practices' was supported by almost all of the survey respondents, two interviewees stressed the lack of the indicators referring to e-library in the set of criteria and standards for programme accreditation. According to them, e-library is a must-have facility in any institution in the era of technology.

4.2.3. Staff perceptions of the key policies and practices of self- study

Staff perceptions of the key policies and practices of self-study in institutional accreditation

Survey findings

Figure 4.5 reports the participants' responses:
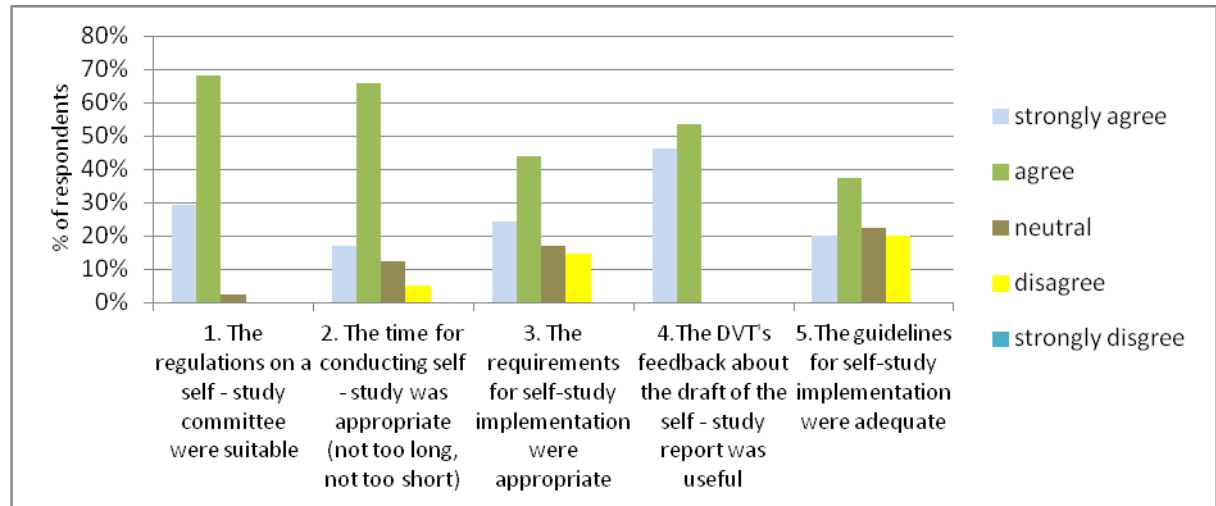
**Figure 4.5: Staff perceptions of the key policies and practices of
self - study in institutional accreditation**

Ninety eight per cent strongly agreed or agreed with Statement 1 'The regulations on a self-study committee were suitable' and 100% strongly agreed or agreed with Statement 4 'The DVT's feedback about the draft of the self-study report was useful'. A lower percentage (83%) supported Statement 2 concerning the time for conducting self-study. The two least supported statements were Statement 3 'The requirements for self-study implementation were appropriate' and Statement 5 'The guidelines for self-study implementation were adequate' with 68.2% and 58% respectively indicating 'strongly agree' or 'agree'. These results raise questions of the possible limitations relating to the requirements for self-study implementation, and the guidelines for self-study.

Nine individuals provided open feedback on the limitations of the key policies and practice of self-study. The participants' responses contained mixed views, some of which referred to the issues covered by the quantitative survey items relating to self-study while others did not. Table 4.1 summarises their responses:

Table 4.1: Participants' responses about the limitations of the key policies and practice of self-study in institutional accreditation

Responses referring to the survey quantitative items	Responses not referring to the survey quantitative items
Unspecific guidelines for writing self-study report, and identifying evidence (n=2) Lack of a legal document on budget and cost norms for self-study activities (n=2)	Limited budget (n=1) Limited staff trained about accreditation (n=1) Low awareness of staff of accreditation (n=2) *'The implementation of self-study was just ticking a box, it was not done seriously'* (n=1)

Interview findings

Similar to the qualitative survey data, when questioned about the self-study process, the interviewees expressed a wide range of ideas which did not simply refer to the five quantitative survey items pertaining to self-study in institutional accreditation. In order to avoid overlaps in reporting the study results, only the perspectives which directly referred to the relevant five quantitative survey items will be reported in this section. Others will be reported later in Section 4.3.2 which describes the perceived impact of accreditation.

Generally, the interviewees' perceptions of some key policies and practices of self-study in institutional accreditation aligned with data obtained from the survey. All interviewees valued the DVT's feedback about the self-study report drafts, and supported the regulations on a self-study committee. However, when asked about the time constraint for self-study implementation in 2008, their responses indicated varied views. While three interviewees reported they faced issues with time constraint during the self-study, three others did not.

The interview data also provided further insights into the quantitative survey findings relating to the two least supported statements (Statement 3 and 5). In this regard, some interviewees again stressed the unrealistic requirements from some indicators, and the repetitive evidence they had to prepare which led to a huge workload in the self-study. The respondents also commonly viewed the guidelines for finding evidence to be still general and unrealistic. As reported by one interviewee who was the coordinator of the institutional accreditation in 2008 in his college:

We received the instructions for identifying suitable evidence. However, those instructions did not help us much. They should be more specific and the DVT also should take the realities of different institutions into account (Respondent 28 - Administrative leader).

Two interviewees, additionally, complained about the lack of a legal document stipulating budget allocation for accreditation as well as the norms for the costs relating to self-study. One said:

Without the legal document on budget and expenditures for accreditation, we faced many difficulties. Until now, such document has not been issued (Respondent 16 - College leader).

Staff perceptions of the key policies and practices of self-study in programme accreditation

Survey findings

The participants' responses to the five quantitative survey items are illustrated in Figure 4.6:
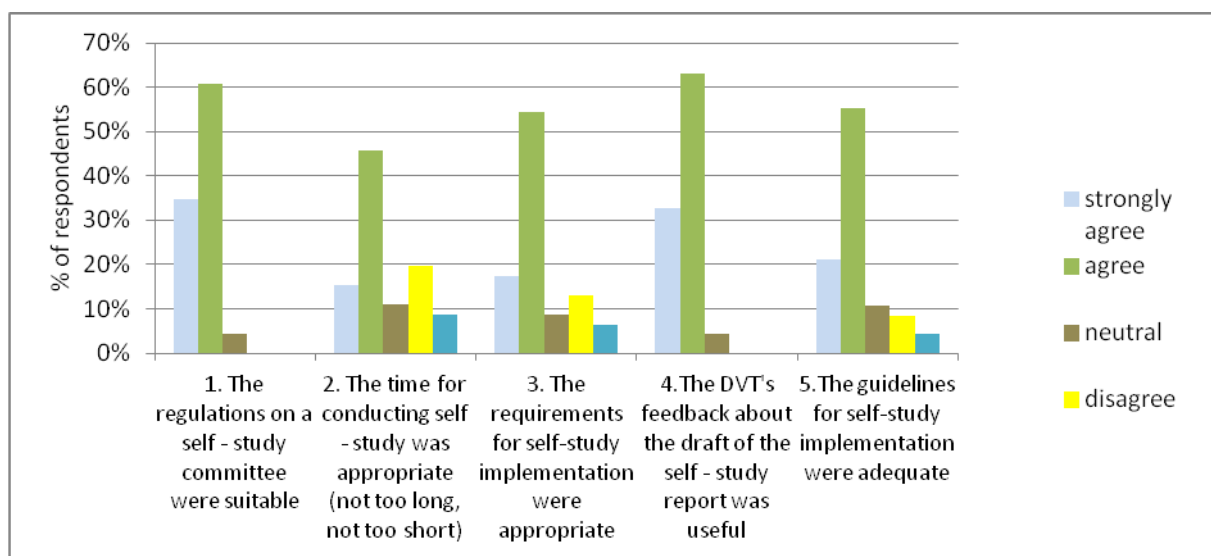
Figure 4.6: Staff perceptions of the key policies and practices of self-study in programme accreditation

Similar to the staff perspectives of the key policies and practices of the self-study in the institutional accreditation, Statement 1 'The regulations on the self-study committee were suitable' and Statement 4 'The DVT's feedback about the draft of self-study report of the college was useful' continued to be most supported by the respondents. Less supported were Statement 3 'The requirements for self-study implementation were appropriate' and Statement 5 'The guidelines for self-study implementation were adequate' with 72% and 77% of the respondents rating 'strongly agree' or 'agree' respectively. Statement 2 'The time for

conducting self-study was appropriate (not too long, not too short) received the least support from the participants with 60% selecting 'strongly agree' or 'agree' options.

Of five participants who provided open feedback about the limitations of the policies and practices of self-study in the programme accreditation, two referred to the unclear guidelines for finding evidence for some indicators. Two others complained about the limited time for undertaking self-study and the last recommended making a better plan for self-study.

Interview findings

Generally, when reflecting about the self-study in the programme accreditation, the interviewees expressed similar views as those in institutional accreditation. The main difference in their views on the two processes referred to the time constraint when undertaking self-study. While only three interviewees perceived the shortage of time for self-study in institutional accreditation to be a challenge, six interviewees admitted coping with that issue in programme accreditation. This confirmed the survey data indicating that Statement 2 'Time for conducting self-study was appropriate (not too long, not too short)'was least supported among five statements by the respondents. One respondent explained that:

> *We only had less than two months to prepare everything. Programme accreditation was done for the first time so we had no experience. Although it was conducted within a programme but it still involves many units and staff members* (Respondent 2 - Administrative leader).

4.2.4. Staff perceptions of the key policies and practices of external panel's site visit

Staff perceptions of the key policies and practices of external review panel's site visit in institutional accreditation

Survey findings

The participants' responses to the statements were reported in Figure 4.7 as below.
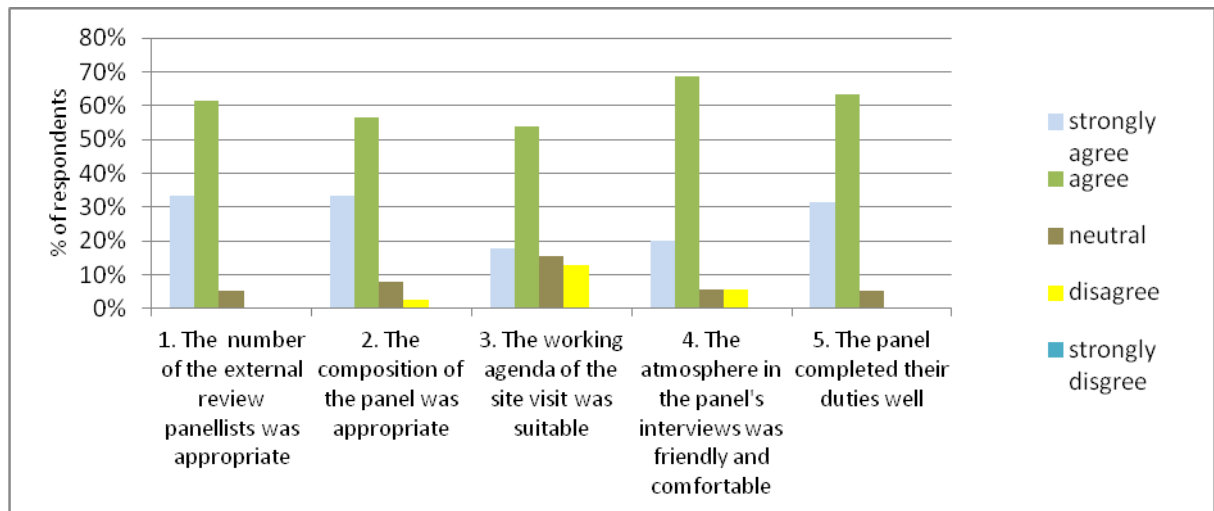
Figure 4.7: Staff perceptions of the external review panel's site visit
in the institutional accreditation

There was a high level of support amongst the participants towards all five statements with a minimum of 72% of respondents indicating 'agree' or 'strongly agree' for each statement. Twelve participants gave open feedback about the limitations of the panel's site visit. The two major themes emerging from those responses referred to the time of the site visit, and the performance of the external reviewers. Five respondents shared a view that the time for the site visit was too limited. Three other respondents complained about the different aspects related to the practices of the panellists during their site visit at their colleges.

> *Some panellists sometimes acted as inspectors and did not understand the indicators well* (Respondent 28 - Administrative leader).

> *The panel did not assess seriously, they seemed not to want to break the harmony* (Respondent 45 - Academic leader).

> *The panel members should agree with the contents to question with the interviewees before the interviews* (Respondent 12 - Academic leader).

Interview findings

The interviewees basically agreed with the number and the composition of the panel members in the institutional accreditation. With respect to the panel's working schedule during the site visit (relating to Statement 2), similar to the responses of some participants in the survey, there was a common perception among the interviewees that the time of the site visit was too short. One noted that, as the time for site visit was too short, the panel might not assess the institution precisely. Notably, the effectiveness of the panel's interviews arranged in advance with employers, or those with the alumni or the students during the site visit time was a major theme raised in the interviews. Four interviewees perceived that the panel's interviews overall did not bring the expected values. Two of them even described such meetings as a formality.

> *I think the quality of the interviews was not high, especially those with arrangements in advance* (Respondent 16 – College leader).

> *Such meetings in general were conducted as a formality as the respondents tended to only give positive comments about the school* (Respondent 45 – Academic leader).

One respondent, however, was more positive towards the panel's interviews. From his perspectives, such interviews would still give valuable information, and he highlighted the importance of interview skills. He said:

> *In fact, some schools might prepare for students and enterprises what to say but it was important that panel did not fall into traps. This required skills of the panellists* (Respondent 28 - Administrative leader).

Regarding the panel's performance, the interviewees' respondents revealed mixed views. Three respondents generally expressed their satisfaction with panellists' practices. They stressed that the panellists worked responsibly. Two other interviewees seemed to be more critical about the panel's quality with one noting that, in the institutional accreditation in 2008, some panellists did not evaluate exactly as required since they might not understand the indicators well. There is also evidence from the interviews that some panellists were rigid and rule-bound as inspectors and therefore the atmosphere of the interviews was not natural and comfortable. This seemed not to be congruent with the quantitative survey findings but coincided with the comments obtained from the open survey question related to the panel' site visit.

Staff perceptions of the key policies and practices of external review panel's site visit in programme accreditation

Survey findings

The participants' responses to the statements were illustrated in Figure 4.8.
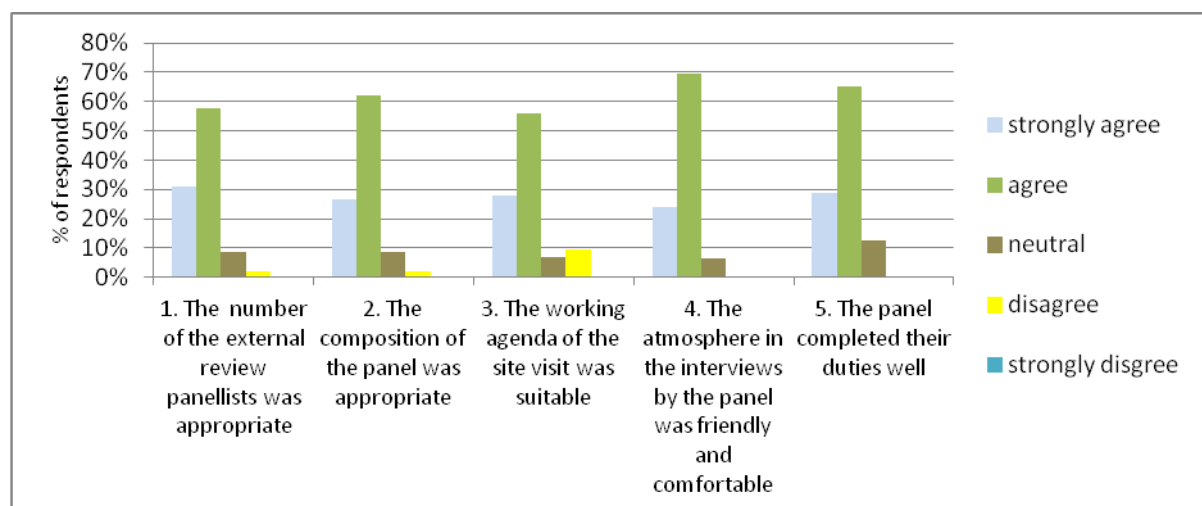
Figure 4.8: Staff perceptions of the external review panel's site visit in programme accreditation

The respondents seemed not to have any concerns relating to the site visit of the external review panel in the programme accreditation. A significant percentage of respondents (always higher than 82%) tended to 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with all the five statements.

However, the open feedback from nine participants in the questionnaire revealed some negative aspects relating to the site visit. These included: some panellists did not understand the evidence required for some standards in the same way; some interview questions were not well-constructed; the small number of the panel members may lead to incorrect judgment towards to the programme by the panel; and it is difficult to invite the enterprises' representatives to the interviews.

Interview findings

There was strong support amongst the respondents regarding the number of members and composition of the panel in both institutional and programme accreditation. Only one interviewee argued that the external reviewers should not be selected from the staff of vocational training institutions but from the DVT's own staff so as to eliminate the conflicts of interest. Elaborating on this point, she argued that the external reviewers coming from other vocational colleges would be unlikely to objectively judge the programmes as they might not want to damage the collegial relationship with the staff in the institutions being

reviewed. When asked if the panel should have at least one member from the sector (enterprises) relating to the programme under evaluation, most of the participants disagreed. In their standpoints, those from the enterprises do not have vocational training and accreditation experience as required for evaluating the quality of a vocational training programme.

Most of the interviewees also perceived the time of the site visit to be too limited for accurately evaluating the quality of the programme. One respondent believed that as the time of accreditation is so short, the panel might not review the college meticulously. Most of the respondents did not highly appreciate the value of the panel's interviews with enterprises, alumni and students. The difference found in their perceptions towards the site visit in the two processes mainly related to the performance of the panellists. One respondent who was not satisfied with the practices of the panellists in the institutional accreditation in 2008 was more positive to the panellists in the programme accreditation in 2012. None of the interviewees complained about the 'behaviour as inspectors' as with the institutional accreditation. All interviewees reported the friendly and comfortable atmosphere in the panel's interviews as well as when working with them. The following quote is typical:

> *They worked professionally. In the previous accreditation, we were mainly sharing and discussing. It was a good thing as there was no gap between the accreditor and the accredited* (Respondent 30 - Academic leader).

Though the performance of the panel in the programme accreditation was generally believed to be better than that in the institutional accreditation, the evidence of the rigidity in the practices of some panellists was still found in some participants' responses about the site visit in the programme accreditation. Consider the following views by two interviewees:

> *I have no comment on evidence. However, evidence was under different kinds, panellists should be more flexible. They should not only focus on seeking documentary evidence* (Respondent 12- Academic leader).

> *I adjusted the format of a report progress a little bit, I still kept the indicators but I arranged them in a more logical way, however, an external reviewer refused the format as it had not been officially published. I think we should focus more on the quality of the panellists* (Respondent 16 - College leader).

4.2.5. Staff perceptions of the key policies and practices of the follow-up in institutional accreditation

Survey findings

The participants' responses to the three quantitative items are illustrated in Figure 4.9:
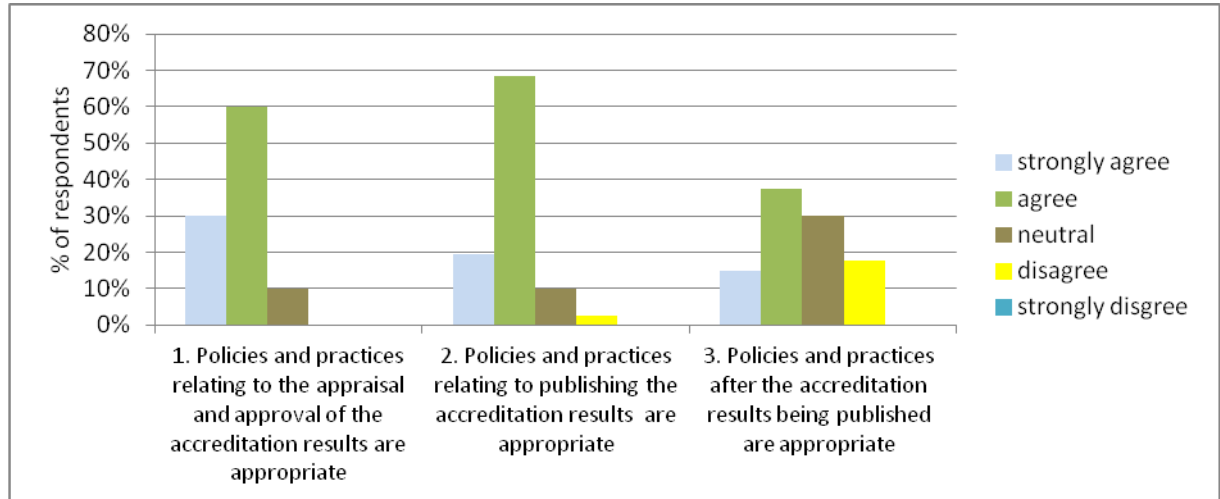
Figure 4.9: Staff perceptions of the follow-up in institutional accreditation

According to the survey data, while almost all of the participants (>88%) supported Statement 1 'Policies and practices related to the appraisal and approval of accreditation results are appropriate', and Statement 2 'Policies and practices related to publishing of accreditation results are appropriate', just more than half (53%) signalled agreement with Statement 3 'Policies and practices after the accreditation results being published are appropriate'.

The open feedback of seven participants could be categorised into three major themes, including the lack of priority policies for the colleges that have been awarded quality certificates, the inadequate monitoring from the DVT for those colleges and the inadequate support from the DVT in advertising the accreditation results deeply and widely. Some respondents referred to more than one of such themes in their feedback in the questionnaire*.*

Interview findings

The interview data were consistent with the survey findings. Most of the interviewees indicated their agreement with the procedures of appraisal, approval and publishing of the accreditation results. Some participants highlighted that publishing only the names of the institutions which were awarded quality certificates instead of the accreditation results of all the accredited institutions is suitable. They explained that this approach would help motivate other institutions to register for accreditation as they will not be afraid of 'losing face' if they did not get successful accreditation results.

With respect to the policies and practices after the accreditation results have been approved and published, the interviewees expressed multiple perspectives which centred round the three themes of the qualitative survey findings as mentioned above. They regarded these issues as the main reasons for the lack of motivation amongst staff towards accreditation. These findings will be discussed in detail later in Section 4.3.2 which reported the interview findings about the lack of staff motivation as one of the difficulties during the accreditation.

4.3. Staff perceptions of the purposes and impact of institutional and programme accreditation (Research question 2)

Emerging from the dataset of the study are numerous similarities between institutional accreditation and programme accreditation in terms of the perceived purposes and impact of the two processes on the institutions. This was especially apparent in the interviews with six respondents who were involved in both accreditation processes. When asked about their experience of each process, these interviewees argued that they saw no significant differences in the purpose and impact of the two processes on their institutions and it was, therefore, unnecessary to discuss their purpose and outcome issues separately. Indeed, when discussing the purpose and impact issues, the interviewees mostly mentioned accreditation as a general term irrespective of each type of process. Because of this, in this section, the interview data will be reported for both processes together whilst findings from the survey will still be reported separately for each process. The survey findings will be presented first, followed by the interview findings.

4.3.1. Staff perceptions of the purposes of institutional and programme accreditation

Survey findings of the perceived purposes of institutional accreditation

 Figure 4.10 summarises the participants' ratings on the survey scale concerning the purposes of institutional accreditation:
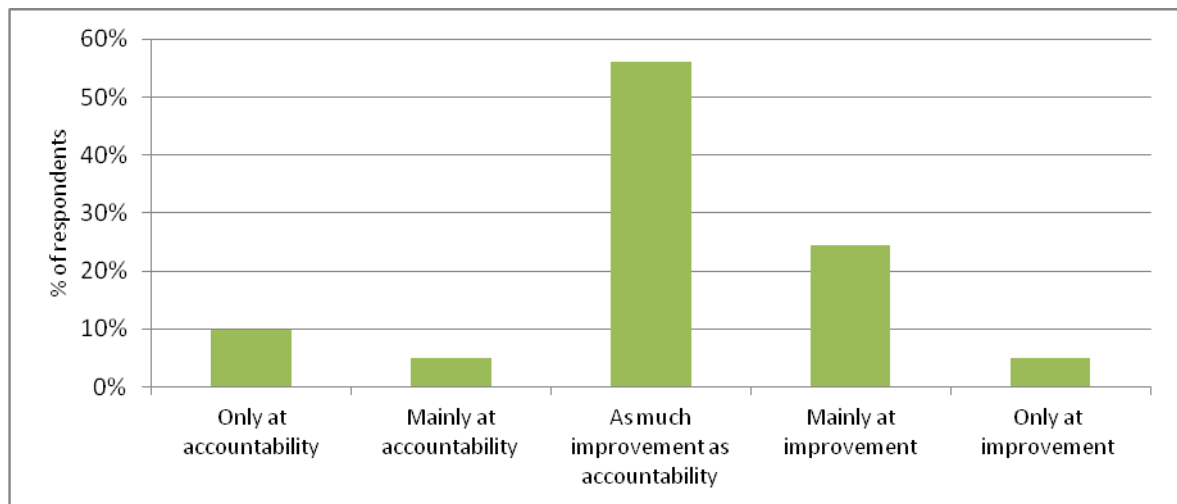
Figure 4.10: Staff perceptions of the purposes of institutional accreditation

Over half of the respondents (57%) selected the 'as much improvement as accountability' option on the survey scale. Nearly one quarter (24%) perceived the process to be 'mainly at improving', and very few respondents (between 4% and 10%) saw the process to be associated with 'only accountability' or 'mainly accountability' or 'only at improving'.

Twenty six participants explained their ratings on the purposes of institutional accreditation in their open feedback. The following quotes are typical of the most frequent comments of those selecting the 'as much improving as accountability' option.

> *It requires the institution to report its operation and helps identify strengths and shortcomings* (Respondent 1- Lecturer)

> *The DVT will monitor the activities of an institution. The process enables the school to realise the areas needing improvements* (Respondent 29 - Academic leader)

Most of the respondents who perceived the process as 'mainly at improving' or 'only aimed at improving' only referred to the positive effects of accreditation on their institutions' managerial practices. For those who saw the purpose of accreditation as 'only at accountability' or 'mainly at accountability', their responses mostly implied the limited value they saw in the process. Notably, some thought that the process was only a ritualistic practice.

> *The process only focused on finding evidence, not the solutions* (Respondent 16 - College leader)

> *Accreditation is only as formality* (Respondent 43 - Administrative staff)

Survey findings of the perceived purposes of programme accreditation

Figure 4.11 reports the participants' responses to the quantitative item regarding the purposes of programme accreditation:
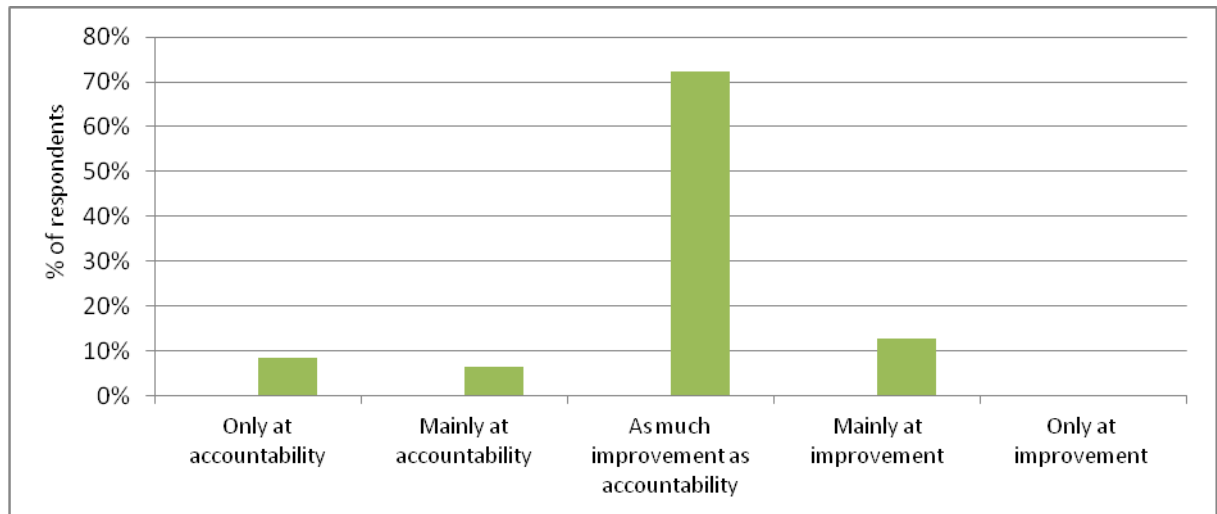
Figure 4.11: Staff perceptions of the purposes of programme accreditation

A majority of participants (72%) selected the 'as much improving as accountability' option as the purpose of programme accreditation. Few respondents believed programme accreditation aimed 'only at accountability' (8.5%) or 'mainly at accountability' (6.4%) or 'mainly at improvement' (12.8%). No one saw the aim of the process as 'only at improvement'.

Twenty participants explained their selection concerning the purposes of programme accreditation. Their explanations for a specific category on the survey scale were similar to those given to the same category for institutional accreditation. The following explanations from the two respondents who perceived the aim of programme accreditation as 'only at accountability' are noteworthy. While one seemed to be sceptical about the overall impact of the process, the other (who was the coordinator of the programme accreditation in her college in 2012) expressed her dissatisfaction with the limited value of the process to the quality of teaching and learning.

> *It did not benchmark with other schools and I don't see significant improvements after the accreditation* (Respondent 53 - Administrative staff).

> *It was only paperwork and did not bring about improvements in the quality of training and learning* (Respondent 02 - Academic leader).

Interview findings of the perceived purposes of institutional and programme accreditation

Although most of the interviewees selected 'as much improvement as accountability' option for the purposes of accreditation irrespective of each type of process, when probed for further

explanations about the perceived purposes of the two accreditation processes, some interviewees did not seem to confirm their ratings in the survey. At least two interviewees who had selected 'as much improvement as accountability' option for the purposes of accreditation implied in the interviews that the processes were mainly associated with accountability. The discussion of the interview data in the next section will provide further insights into this issue.

4.3.2. Staff perceptions of the impact of institutional and programme accreditation

Survey findings of the perceived impact of institutional accreditation

Figure 4.12 summarises the participants' responses to the closed-ended survey question regarding the overall impact of institutional accreditation:
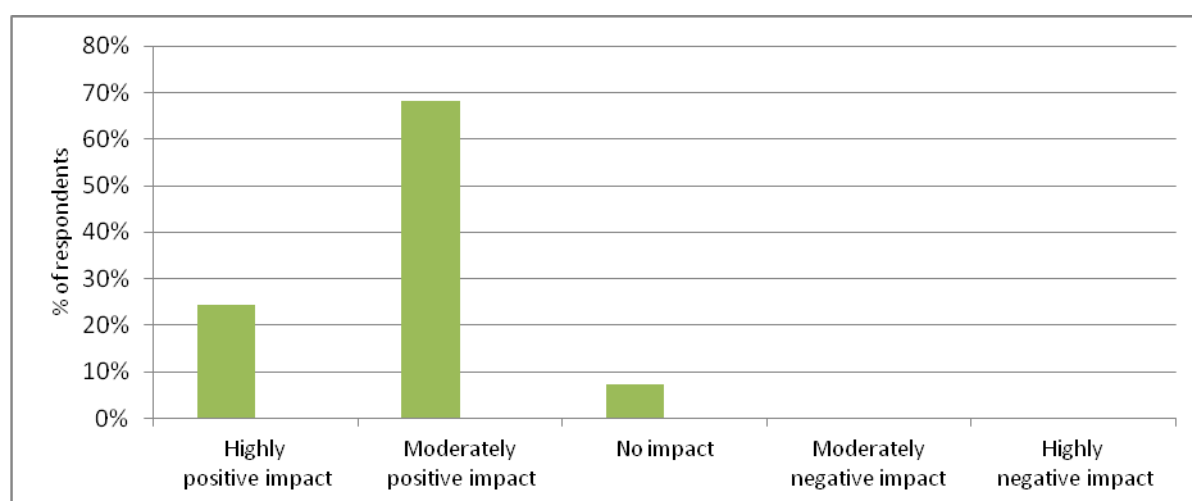
Figure 4.12: Staff perceptions of the overall impact of institutional accreditation

According to the survey data, most of the respondents had positive attitudes towards the overall impact of institutional accreditation. The majority (68%) perceived the process as having a 'moderately positive impact' and nearly a quarter (24%) saw the process as having a 'highly positive impact'. The rest (only 8%) found the process to have 'no impact' on the institutions.

Figure 4.13 illustrates the participants' selection concerning the impact of institutional accreditation on different areas of institutional practices:
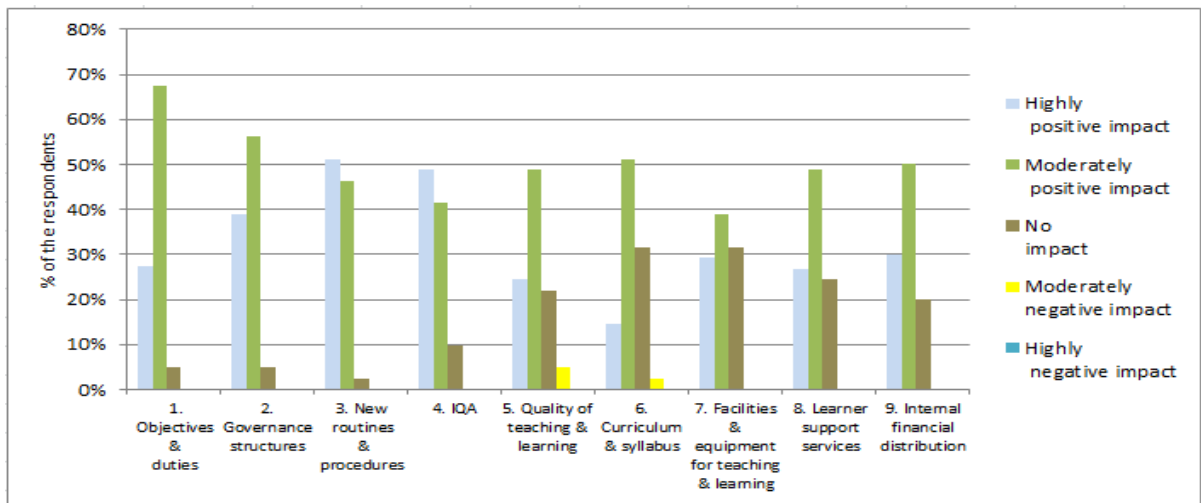
Figure 4.13: Staff perceptions of the impact of institutional accreditation on different areas of institutional practices

As observed in Figure 4.13, almost all of the respondents saw positive effects from the process on the 'objectives and duties' (Item 1, 95%), 'governance structures' (Item 2, 95%), 'new routine and procedures' (Item 3, 98%) and 'IQA' (Item 4, 94%). A lower percentage saw positive effects from the process on 'internal financial distribution' (Item 9, 80%), 'learner support services' (Item 8, 76%), and 'the quality of teaching and learning' (Item 5, 73%). A further lower percentage viewed the process as having positive effects on the 'facilities and training equipment' (Item 7, 68%) and 'curriculum and syllabus' (Item 6, 66%). Looking at the different areas for which the respondents selected the 'highly positive impact' option, half of the respondents observed 'highly positive impact' for 'new routines, and procedures' and 'IQA' (Items 3, 4) while a mere 24% and 15 % respectively selected the same option for 'quality of teaching and learning', and 'curriculum and syllabus' (Item 5,6).

The participants' responses to the impact of institutional accreditation on the institution's reputation are presented in Figure 4.14 below:
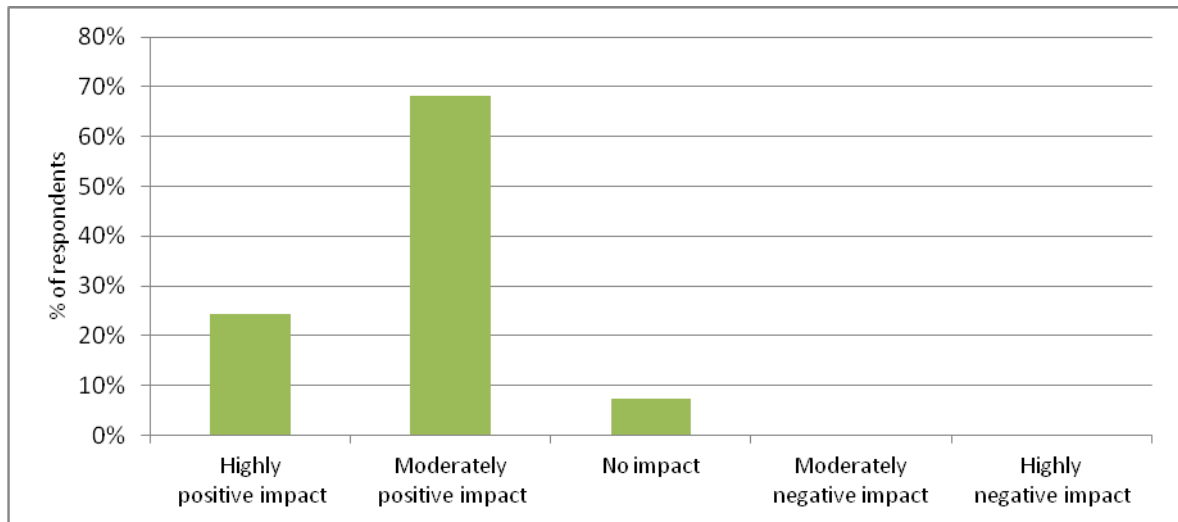
Figure 4.14: Staff perceptions of the impact of institutional accreditation on the institution's reputation

The majority of the respondents saw the process as having a 'moderately positive impact' on the institution's reputation. Very few respondents (24%) saw the process as having a 'highly positively impact'. Seven percent of the respondents selected the 'no impact' option, showing their dissatisfaction with the effects of accreditation on the reputation of their institutions.

Table 4.2 summarises the open feedback of 20 respondents regarding the benefits of institutional accreditation to the institutions.

Table 4.2: Perceived benefits of institutional accreditation

- Increases the staff's awareness of QA and forces them to be more accountable (n=16)
- Forces better documentation (n=12)
- Promotes better goal setting and strategic planning (n=8)
- Forces the institutions to standardise their systems and processes (n=8)
- Is a catalyst for changes and improvements (n=7)
- Enhances the quality of teaching and learning (n=6)
- Enhances the institution's reputation (n=6)
- Promotes self-review on regular basis at different levels of an institution (n=5)

- Contributes to improve the governance structure (n=5)

- Fosters evidence-based decision-making (n=4)

- Enhances facilities and equipment (n=4)

- Promotes changes in curriculum and syllabus (n=4)

- Enhances better support services for learners (n=2)

Table 4.2 reveals two themes that had not been reflected by the quantitative data. These include the positive impact of the process on staff's awareness of QA, and the perception that accreditation is a catalyst for improvements. Regarding the former theme, some respondents believed that the process had made the staff understand more fully the conditions for QA in education while some observed that their colleagues had become more accountable and more responsive for their work after attending the self-study training course and/or involving in the institutional accreditation. Regarding the perception that institutional accreditation is a catalyst for improvements, some respondents had a common thought that the institutional accreditation provided an opportunity for their institutions to review all their practices in a systematic manner and encouraged them to address the shortcomings before the panel's site visit. One contended that the system had provided a framework of evaluation indicators which facilitated them to self-evaluate their operations. It is noted that the theme 'Increases the staff's awareness of QA and forces them to be more accountable' received the highest number of citations (16 respondents). Some other themes which received significant citations from the respondents referred to the benefits of the process to documentation, goal setting and strategic planning, and the standardization of the processes and procedures within the institution. Table 4.3 summarises the participants' viewpoints towards the problems and challenges associated with institutional accreditation.

Table 4.3: Perceived problems and challenges associated with institutional accreditation

Negative perceptions towards institutional accreditation:

- Is seen just as a formality (n= 4)

- Does not lead to long-lasting and widespread improvements (n=3)

- Does not result in significant changes in the quality of teaching and learning (n=3)

Difficulties and challenges entailed in institutional accreditation

- Gathering of evidence (n=16)

- Writing up self-study report (n=8)

- Absence of IQA procedures at the institutional level (including those related to conducting surveys and feedback mechanisms) (n=7)

- Implementing surveys and feedback mechanisms (n=7)

- Heavy loads of paperwork (n=6)

- Staff- related issues

  . Lack of motivation (n=5)

  . Low awareness of QA and accreditation (n=3)

  . Lack of experience and capacity in undertaking self-study (n=3)

  . Lack of time for self-study work (n=3)

- Leadership related issues

  . Limited number of staff assigned to participate in self-study (n=3)

  .Unclear specification of the responsibilities of staff and units in carrying out self-study (n=3)

  . Ineffective coordination among units (n=3)

  . Leaders' indifference to the accreditation activities (n=2)

  . Poor planning (n=2)

  . Lack of a specialized unit of QA (n=1)

- Self-study training course issues

  . Insufficient training for staff for conducting self-study (n=3)

  . Limited number of staff trained in the self-study training course (n=1)

- Unrealistic indicators and overlaps in the evidence required for some indicators (n=4)

- Lack of guidelines for self-study (n=3)

- Limited budget (n=3)

- Time constraint (n=2)

The participants had various views towards the problems and challenges surrounding the implementation of institutional accreditation. Their feedback revealed doubts about both the real value as well as the challenges associated with this process. Regarding the value of the

process, some participants observed that it was somewhat formulaic and associated with a snapshot approach rather than had real and long-lasting influences on the institution. Some others argued that the process was not effective in making significant changes in the teaching and learning activities.

With respect to the challenges, three specific types of self-study tasks that they found challenging included 'gathering of evidence', 'writing up the self-study reports' and 'implementing surveys and feedback mechanisms'. It is noted that 'gathering of evidence' was cited by almost all of the respondents while the two other tasks were referred by approximately one third of the participants. Numerous reasons that underpinned those difficulties were also found in the data. Many of the reasons matched the themes identified in the data of research question 1. Examples are those reasons related to the drawbacks of the self-study training course, the limitations of the set of criteria and standards, the inadequate guidelines of the DVT for self-study and the limited budget for self-study. The 'new' themes that emerged from the data included the disorganised internal procedures before accreditation, the heavy loads of paperwork and those categorised under two big themes: 'staff-related issues' and 'leadership related issues' (as illustrated in Table 4.3).

Survey findings of the perceived impact of programme accreditation

Figure 4.15 demonstrates the participants' responses to the quantitative survey items regarding the overall impact of programme accreditation.
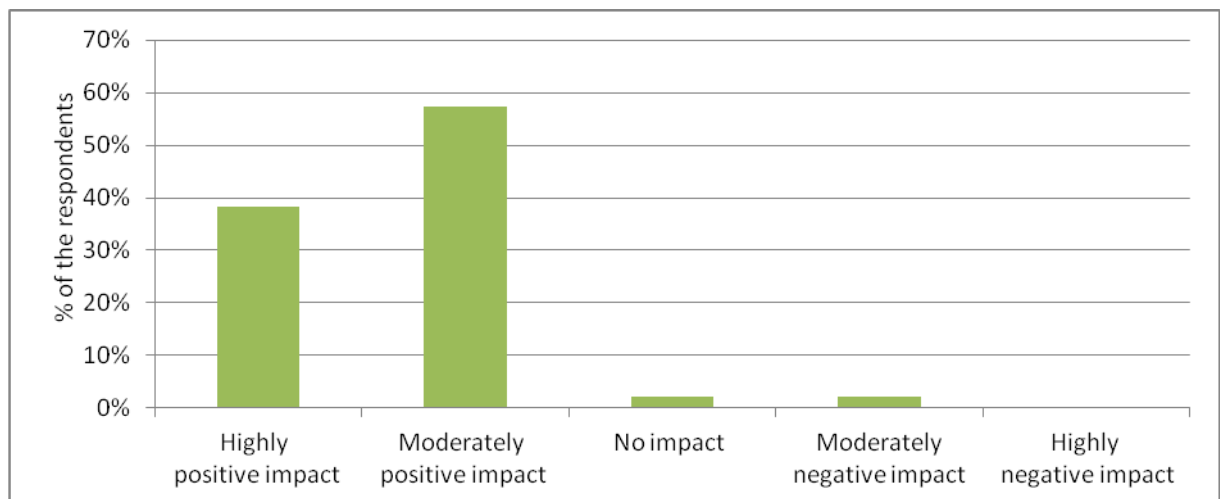
Figure 4.15: Staff perceptions of the overall impact of programme accreditation

Nearly every respondent appreciated the overall value of the programme accreditation in 2012. The majority (58%) selected the 'moderately positive impact' option, and 38% selected the 'highly positive impact' option.

Figure 4.16 reported the participants' opinions towards the impact of programme accreditation on the different areas of institutional practices.
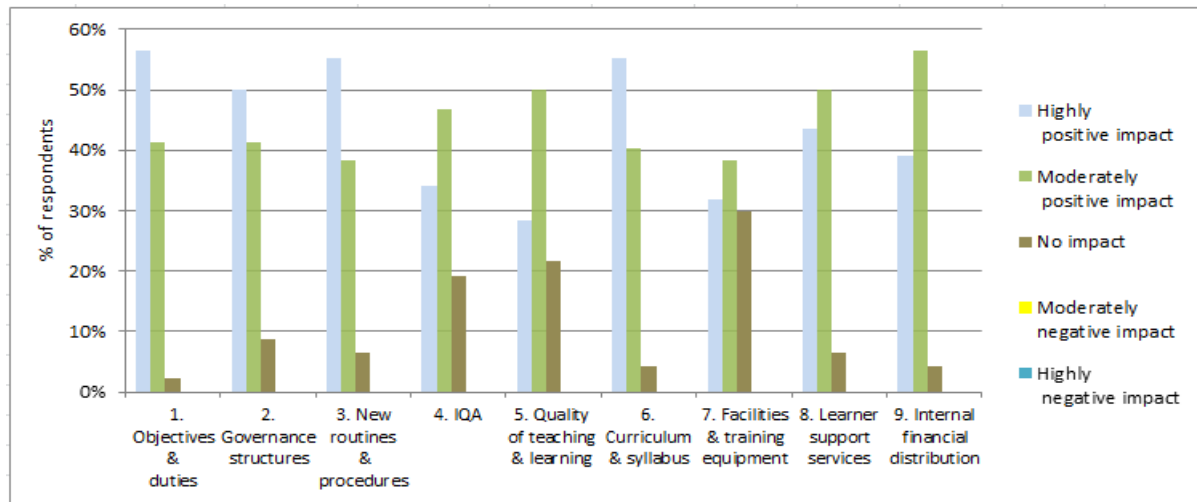
Figure 4.16: Staff perceptions of the impact of programme accreditation on different areas of institutional practices

Almost all of the respondents (90%) had positive perceptions towards the impact of programme accreditation on the six following areas 'objectives & duties' (Item 1); 'governance structures' (Item 2); 'new routines and procedures' (Item 3); 'curriculum & syllabus' (Item 6); 'learner support services' (Item 8); and 'internal financial distribution' (Item 9). Approximately 81% and 78 % of the respondents respectively saw the positive effects of the process on 'IQA' (Item 4) and 'curriculum and syllabus' (Item 5). A smaller number of respondents, 70%, perceived the benefits of the process on 'internal financial distribution' (Item 7).

Of the nine areas of institutional practices under study, the respondents perceived less positive results of programme accreditation in only three areas compared to the institutional accreditation. These included 'governance structures' (Item 2), 'new routines & procedures' (Item 3) and 'IQA' (Item 4). For the other six areas, they had more positive perceptions than the institutional accreditation. It is noted that the biggest differences between the two processes in light of the perceived impact on the institutions are mainly for the two areas 'curriculum & syllabus' (Item 6) and 'support services for learners' (Item 8). While 66% of the respondents saw positive impact from the institutional accreditation on 'curriculum and syllabus', a much higher percentage, 96% expressed the same positive attitude on the impact of programme accreditation in this same area. Similarly, for Item 7 'learner support services', while just over half of the respondents (51%) perceived the institutional accreditation as

having a positive impact on this area, the percentage in the case of programme accreditation was 94%.

Figure 4.17 demonstrates the perceived impact of programme accreditation on the institution's reputation:
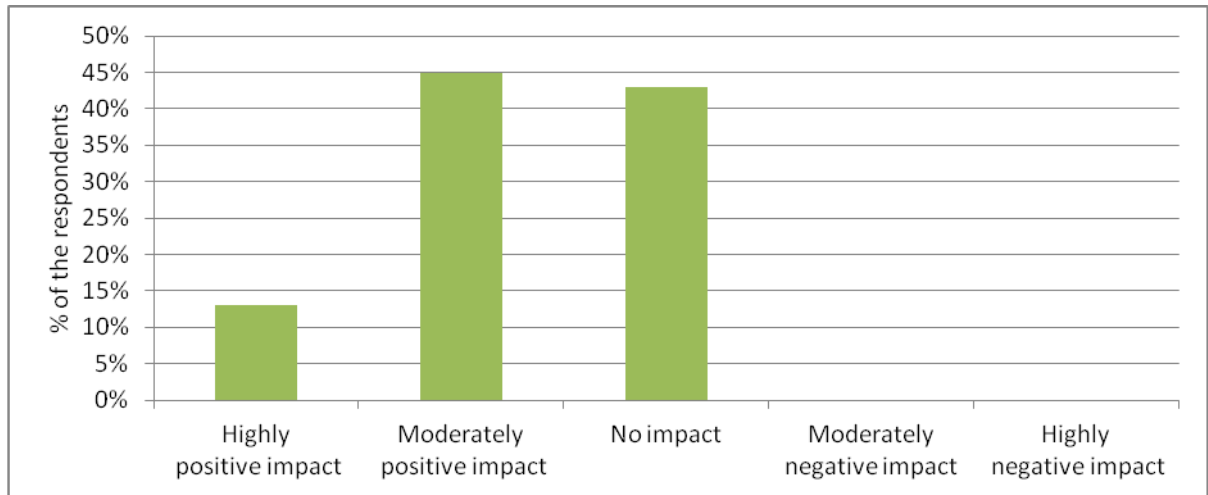
Figure 4.17: Staff perceptions of the impact of programme accreditation on the institution's reputation

Only a few respondents (12%) perceived programme accreditation as having a 'highly positive impact' on the reputation of their institution. Nearly half of the respondents (45%) selected 'moderately positive impact' and 43% selected the 'no impact' option.

Twenty six respondents provided open feedback concerning the benefits, and challenges of programme accreditation. Table 4.4 summarises the respondents' open feedback on the benefits of programme accreditation:

Table 4.4: Perceived benefits of programme accreditation

- Increases the staff's awareness of QA and forces them to be more accountable (n=12)
- Forces the institutions to standardise their systems and processes (n=8)
- Forces better documentation (n=7)
- Promotes better goal setting and strategic planning (n=6)
- Enhances the quality of teaching and learning (n=6)
- Is seen as a leverage for changes and improvement s (n=4)

- Promotes self - review on regular basis at different levels of an institution (n=4)

- Promotes changes in curriculum and syllabus (n=4)

- Contributes to improve the governance structure (n=3)

- Enhances facilities and equipment (n=3)

- Enhances the institution's reputation (n=2)

- Fosters evidence-based decision-making (n=2)

- Enhances better support services for learners (n=2)

The findings did not reveal any additional themes than those identified in Table 4.2 regarding the benefits of institutional accreditation. It is noted that, similar to the case of institutional accreditation, the theme 'Increases the staff's awareness of QA and forces them to be more accountable' was also most cited by the respondents for programme accreditation. Many participants also reported that the process facilitated the school to develop their management practices.

The perceived problems and challenges entailed with programme accreditation are summarised in Table 4.5 below:

Table 4.5: Perceived problems and challenges associated with programme accreditation

Negative perceptions towards programme accreditation:

- Is seen just as a formality (n= 4)

- Does not lead to significant improvements after accreditation (n=2)

- Has limited impact as it is not done on a regular basis (n=3)

Difficulties and challenges entailed in programme accreditation:

- Gathering of evidence (n= 8)

- Time constraint in conducting self-study (n=8)

- Difficulties in implementing surveys and feedback mechanisms (n=6)

- Heavy loads of paperwork (n=5)

- Writing up the self-study report (n=5)

- Lack of standardized IQA procedures (n=3)

- Staff- related issues

    . *Lack of motivation (n=4)*

    . *Lack of time for self-study works (n=3)*

    . *Low awareness of QA and accreditation (n=2)*

    . *Lack of experience and capacity in undertaking self-study (n=1)*

- Leadership related issues

    . *Limited number of staff assigned to participate in self-study (n=3)*

    . *Unclear specification of the responsibilities of staff and units in carrying out the self-study (n=3)*

    . *Ineffective coordination among units (n=2)*

    . *Leaders' indifference to the accreditation activities (n=2)*

    . *Poor planning (n=2)*

- Self-study training course issues

    . *Limited number of staff trained in the self-study course (n=2)*

    . *Limited number of leaders attending the self-study course (n=2)*

    . *Insufficient training for staff for conducting self-study (n=1)*

- Unrealistic indicators and overlaps in the evidence required for some indicators (n=4)

- Lack of guidelines for self-study by the DVT (n=3)

- Limited budget (n=3)

- Ineffective implementation of self-study and site visit (n=2)

As seen in Table 4.5, most of the themes that emerged are the same as those indicated in Table 4.3 relating to institutional accreditation. Nevertheless, it is notable that the two same themes 'time constraint in conducting self-study' and 'difficulties in implementing surveys and feedback mechanisms' were cited by many more respondents than in the case of institutional accreditation. While only two respondents referred to 'time constraint in conducting self-study' for the institutional accreditation, eight individuals raised this issue for the programme accreditation. Similarly, two individuals pointed out the 'difficulties in

implementing surveys and feedback mechanisms' for the institutional accreditation, six respondents directly indicated this difficulty in the case of the programme accreditation.

Interview findings of the perceived impact of institutional and programme accreditation

As the interviews attempted to seek further insights into the interviewees' responses in the survey, the interviewees' survey responses regarding the perceived impact of institutional and programme accreditation were taken into account before deciding the interview questions. All six interviewees who were involved in both institutional and programme accreditation selected the 'moderately positive impact' option for the overall impact of both accreditation processes. Of the two interview participants who were only engaged in the programme accreditation, one selected the 'moderately positive impact' option for the overall impact of this process while the other (Respondent 02) selected the 'no impact' option.

(1) Interview findings of the perceived benefits of accreditation to the institutions

The perceived benefits of accreditation centred round some main themes identified from the survey data. In the interviews, the theme 'is seen as a catalyst for changes within the institutions' was most cited by the respondents. There was a common belief among the respondents that the process was an external driver that forced the institutions to self-review all their practices in a structured way and motivated them to improve quality.

> *The process of finding and dealing with evidences is the incentive for changes in our college. The process allows institutions to self-realise and self-correct their shortcomings* (Respondent 28 - Administrative leader)

> *Accreditation has provided a framework for us to self-review our performance. It is an opportunity for us to learn and motivates us to change. We have to improve our activities if we want to gain accreditation certification* (Respondent 16 - College leader).

> *Before accreditation, we might think we are number one. However, thanks to accreditation, we can identify what we are not good at or have not done yet* (Respondent 30 - Academic leader)

The second most cited theme was the positive effects of accreditation on staff's awareness of QA and its link with their own work. It is noted that Respondent 02, though selecting the 'no impact' option regarding the overall impact of programme accreditation, acknowledged this positive aspect of accreditation. Respondent 12 perceived the increased awareness of QA among the lecturers as the most positive aspect of accreditation. He observed that the process had provided opportunities for the lecturers to understand the policies and procedures of QA

and, as a result, they became more responsible and committed to their work. Two interviewees highlighted that accreditation motivated staff to focus more on professional development. The following quotes are representative of the respondents' thoughts:

> *I agree that there were positive effects on thinking and awareness. Before accreditation, I did my work as a habit or with an old routine of thinking. The accreditation helped me understand about conditions for QA and forced me to self-reflect on my work* (Respondent 02 - Academic leader)

> *Before accreditation, teachers felt that some specific policies and procedures were not necessary. However, now they have recognised that there must be such policies and procedures and they then respond to them in a more cooperative way* (Respondent 12 - Academic leader)

> *To meet the requirements of accreditation on academic qualifications, many staff applied for attending the in-service training courses, both short-term and long-term* (Respondent 28 - Administrative leader)

The third most cited outcome of accreditation refers to the contribution of accreditation to a more systematic approach to goal setting and strategic planning within the institutions. Four interviewees held a view that the process forced the institutions to set clear objectives to direct the operations as well as to enable better monitoring of the performance progress. This can be seen in the following statement:

> *After accreditation, our schools focused more on setting clear goals before proposing solutions and the detailed action plan* (Respondent 12 - Academic leader)

Interviewees were also positive about the effects of accreditation in the other areas of management in the accredited institutions. Three respondents considered the changes in documentation at all levels within their institution as the most direct result of accreditation on the institution. Two respondents cited the establishment of a unit with QA function as evidence for the impact of accreditation on the governance structures. One also linked the formation of inspection teams to cross-check the activities within the institution with the outcomes of accreditation. Additionally, some respondents observed that the development of some new policies and procedures and the transparency of the policies and procedures at the institutional level were the consequences of accreditation. Additionally, although the supporting evidence was weaker, accreditation was perceived to have led to evidence-led decision making within the accredited institutions. Consider the following quote:

Before signing the lecture notes for this year, I checked both lecture notes he/she prepared last year and the new one to find out if he/she did make some necessary adjustments (Respondent 12 - Academic leader).

(2) Interview findings of the perceived problems and challenges entailed with accreditation

(2.1) Negative perceptions towards the impact of accreditation

It is rather surprising that although the survey results indicate that most of the interviewees selected 'as much accountability as the improvement' option for the purpose of accreditation irrespective of each type of this process, and most of the interviewees had positive perceptions towards to the overall impact of accreditation, the interview findings did not provide strong evidence to support these survey results. Instead, there are indications from the interview data of the respondents' cynicism to varying degrees towards the real value of accreditation on the core areas of the institutional practice, i.e., teaching and learning. Respondent 16 said:

The process did not have direct impact on teaching and learning quality. It mainly leads to comprehensive changes in organization and management which will inform the improvements in teaching and learning (Respondent 16 - College leader)

More negative perceptions towards the effects of accreditation were indicated in the responses of Respondent 02 who selected the 'no impact' option for the overall impact of this process in the survey. Respondent 02 explained that they did not feel any significant changes in general in the accredited programme or the faculty in charge.

I found that the accredited faculty did not act as a good mirror for the other faculties and everything seemed to be as usual after accreditation (Respondent 02- Administrative leader).

Although Respondents 18 and 47 did not directly indicate the limited value of accreditation on the teaching and learning activities, their perception that the process was somewhat just a formality illustrated this. In their explanations, they referred to different issues amongst which the bureaucratic approach of the processes, the input and processes focus of quality evaluation, and the lack of priority policies for successful results of accreditation, were most highlighted. Of the eight interviewees, six reported that they did not see the clear effects of accreditation on the institution's reputation. The following view of Respondent 18 is representative:

Some institutions advertised the status of "accredited" to attract students however due to the limited awareness of stakeholders, no one care about it and is interested in (Respondent 18- College leader).

The current study provided evidence that programme accreditation was perceived to have a more direct impact on accredited programmes than institutional accreditation. The reason for this, cited by most of the respondents refers to the fact that the programme accreditation directly targets the programme level while the institutional accreditation targets the institutional level. However, the study did not provide strong support for the direct impact of programme accreditation on the teaching and learning than on the management practices.

(2.2) Difficulties and challenges entailed in accreditation

The first challenge explicitly indicated in the interview data is a lack of motivation among the staff to engage with the process. The most cited reason for this attitude was that the staff did not see any rewards or policy priorities for the institutions which gain quality certificates. At the same time, most of the respondents thought the certification label seemed to make no differences to the image of the institutions in the market place. Further, the principals of the two colleges under study complained about the lack of policies and mechanisms relating to budget for undertaking self-study and the allowances for staff involved in this process. In the views of the respondents, this resulted in staff thinking that accreditation brought additional work without benefits, and consequently they were not actually committed to the process. The following quotations were representative of those perspectives:

> *The list of forty institutions selected to receive the Government grants for upgrading to become high quality vocational training institutions to 2020 includes both certified and non-certified ones. The list even includes those which have not involved in accreditation. Some staff members might think that accreditation is only for form's sake. They, thus, did not want to involve in this process or did not do with high responsibilities* (Respondent 18 - College leader).

> *Some accreditation systems overseas offer preferential policies for certified institutions. Our system did not have such incentives to motivate staff to join the process* (Respondent 02 - Academic leader).

> *I doubt that whether any of the schools which were certified in 2008 become more well-known than the others. In fact, the public even did not know what accreditation means* (Respondent 16 - College leader).

> *No one wants to do more without additional financial support. However, the policy stipulating the budget for accreditation and the allowances for staff directly involved in self-study activities are still ignored* (Respondent 16 - College leader).

The second perceived challenge refers to the fact that the self-study related work requires the involvement of many staff, however, only a limited number of staff members were assigned to participate in these processes. This difficulty was well highlighted by some interviewees when they linked to the fact that only a limited number of staff trained in the self-study training course and that not all of those limited trained staff became involved in the process.

> *Only few staff members were directly involved in the self-study. These individuals had to contact and cooperate with others in preparation for the site visit. This took time as the persons they contacted with did not understand the indicators, so they did not know what evidence was suitable* (Respondent 45 - Academic leader).

> *Only 15 people participated in the training course, only half of whom were involved in the accreditation* (Respondent 02 - Academic leader).

The third challenge raised by the majority of interviewees refers to the gaps in the IQA procedures of the institutions. The interviewees shared a view that as the IQA procedures of the institutions were not well-established before implementing accreditation, their institutions faced many difficulties in meeting the requirements of the accreditation processes. Specifically, there was strong criticism among the respondents of the disorganised record keeping in the institutions. One complained that many documents demonstrating his institution's commitment to QA have been lost due to this problem. Many respondents also highlighted the inadequate IQA procedures related to the implementation of self-review in each unit, cross-checking at different levels on the regular basis, and implementation of surveys and feedback practices. In terms of the difficulties related to the implementation of survey and feedback mechanisms, Respondent 18 acknowledged that the survey and feedback mechanisms were not effectively carried out or were mainly a reaction to the requirements of accreditation because the staff lacked knowledge and experience in undertaking these activities. He also mentioned the lack of time and financial resources needed to implement such activities systematically. Notably, according to Respondent 18, the gaps in the IQA systems, and the fact that the staff members were not well aware of the purpose of accreditation, might lead to lack of authenticity in the data reported on the institutional performance. He argued that as a result of this, some areas of the institutional practices needing improvements might be not detected during the self-study. This is illustrated in the following quote:

> *A faculty recognised some shortcomings in their performance but they did not want to reflect them in the report which was then sent to the QA unit. They solved the problems just for formality by themselves before the panel's site visit. There has been*

no feedback mechanism or cross-check to monitor those issues. The performance of the mentioned faculty as indicated in the self-study report was always perfect and thus nothing was improved. The leaders did not know about that. (Respondent 18 - College leader)

The argument that the staff might manipulate the data in the self-study report was also taken up by Respondent 45 (Academic leader). Elaborating on this point, he also gave an additional reason underpinning this issue that some shortcomings could not be rigorously solved within a limited period of time while any institution wants to gain high scores to be certified.

It sometimes takes time and efforts to make changes and correct shortcomings, so the information in the report is just the information while realities are realities. The manipulation of the data in the self-study report might occur as anyone wants to get the best results of accreditation (Respondent 45 - Academic leader).

The respondents' concerns about the bureaucratic approach of accreditation are also evident in the interview data. Most of the respondents complained about the unnecessary administrative demands of accreditation processes. As one commented:

A lot of procedures and documents were required. To prepare for accreditation, we had to do a lot of paperwork (Respondent 45 – Academic leader).

For many interviewees, the reason for a huge amount of paperwork is because the process seemed to be over-reliant on input and process indicators and to focus on documentary evidences. However, Respondent 28 argued that the DVT's guidelines were not specific enough and this made staff believe that they had to prepare all the documentary evidences as shown in the guidelines. This can be seen through the following quote:

The guidelines of identifying evidence are still general. Those guidelines were also misunderstood as the legal regulations forcing the external reviewers and the institutions to follow. Thus, the institutions tried to make things and they used documents to cope (Respondent 28 - Administrative leader).

The indifference of leaders to accreditation was only referred by Respondent 2 in the interviews but this insight was also mentioned by some other survey respondents when asked about the problems and challenges associated with accreditation. From Respondent 2's point of view, the main reason behind the 'no impact' she saw in the overall impact of accreditation referred to the leadership's commitment with accreditation.

I often made a joke that accreditation should be done by only one person - the Dean….Actually, changes should begin from the top management's thinking as staff only did their work as assigned (Respondent 2 - Administrative leader).

It should be noted that, though some interviewees acknowledged the lack of time in conducting self-study, they did not regard time as a big issue. The following view of Respondent 12 clarifies this:

Actually we lacked time for the self-study in 2012 but I think if our IQA system had been better before participating in accreditation, and the guidelines for self-study had been more specific, two months for self-study would have been still enough (Respondent 12 - Academic leader).

4.4. Suggestions for enhancing the effectiveness of accreditation (Research question 3)

Similar to their responses when asked about the purpose and impact of institutional and programme accreditation, the respondents referred to 'accreditation', as a general term for the two accreditation processes when making suggestions for further developments of the two processes. Thus, in this section, the interview data concerning those suggestions will be reported together for both processes while the survey findings will still be reported separately for each process.

Survey findings of staff suggestions for improving institutional accreditation

Survey data indicate that only eight participants wrote their suggestions for further improvements of institutional accreditation. Some of those only gave one suggestion while the others referred to several points. Their suggestions are summarised in Table 4.6 below:

Table 4.6: Suggestions of improvement towards institutional accreditation

Suggestions related to internal factors
▪ Ensuring the good documentation in different units (n=2)
▪ Ensuring the staff engagement with the process (n=1)
▪ Clarifying the responsibilities of each unit and staff in undertaking the self-study (n=1)
Suggestions related to external factors
▪ Adjusting the set of criteria and standards of accreditation (n=4)
▪ Training the whole staff of QA and accreditation (n=2)

- ▪ Providing the policy priorities for certified institutions (n=2)

- ▪ Providing better guidelines for self-study implementation (n=1)

Suggestions related to both internal and external factors

- ▪ Monitoring and keeping track of the institutional practices on a regular basis (n=2)

- ▪ Enhancing the awareness of the institutional staff and the public of accreditation (n=2)

All proposed solutions focused on addressing the perceived problems and challenges associated with the institutional accreditation which were identified in the previous sections. Of these recommendations, the need to adjust the set of criteria and standards of accreditation was most cited by the respondents. Of the eight respondents, four mentioned this issue while only one or two referred to the other suggestions for improvement.

Survey findings of staff suggestions for improving programme accreditation

Twelve participants provided feedback to the survey question which requested them to make recommendations for further developments of programme accreditation. Table 4.7 summarises the participants' responses:

Table 4.7: Suggestions of improvements towards programme accreditation

Suggestions related to internal factors

- ▪ Ensuring the staff engagement with the process (n=2)

- ▪ Improving the IQA procedures before participating in the accreditation (n=2)

- ▪ Being honest in reporting the self-study results (n=1)

- ▪ Address the shortcomings identified from the accreditation (n=1)

Suggestions related to external factors

- ▪ Adjusting the set of criteria and standards of accreditation (n=3)

- ▪ Allowing more time for self-study (n=3)

- ▪ Providing more detailed training on self-study (n=3)

- ▪ Providing better guidelines for self-study implementation (n=2)

- ▪ Clarifying the policy priorities for the certified institutions (n=2)

- ▪ Tailoring the contents and schedule of the panel's site visit to different institutions (n=1)

- ▪ Enhancing the quality of external reviewers (n=2)

Suggestions related to both internal and external factors

- ▪ Training more staff of QA and accreditation (n=3)

- ▪ Enhancing the awareness of the institutional staff and the public of accreditation (n=2)

Table 4.7 reveals some 'new' themes compared to those indicated in Table 4.6. Of those 'new' themes, the suggestions 'allowing more time for self-study' and 'providing more detailed training for self-study' were most cited by the respondents.

Interview findings

The respondents were requested to propose solutions that they perceived to be most important for further developments of vocational training accreditation. The data analysis shows that, of the suggestions given, the need for policy priorities for certified institutions and more communication of the list of the certified institutions to the public were highlighted. These comments reflect these suggestions:

> *The Government should have policy priorities for schools that gained the quality certificates to encourage institutions to implement accreditation* (Respondent 18 - College leader).

> *When the DVT has accredited an institution or a programme, they should have a pathway to advertise and widely communicate the results of the certified ones* (Respondent 16 - College leader).

The second most cited recommendation refers to the budget-related issues for accreditation activities. In this regard, one respondent highlighted the need to be granted funding for undertaking self-study annually while most of the others only referred to the importance of having a legal document regulating the accreditation budget issues for accreditation activities.

Some interviewees highlighted the importance of improving the effectiveness of the panel's site visit. Their recommendations included providing further training for the external review before the site visit, the demand for external reviewers themselves to improve their knowledge and skills for accreditation, having strict regulation related to the responsibilities

of the external reviewers, closer monitoring from the DVT to the external reviewers' practices, and adjusting the site visit schedule.

Two interviewees suggested the need to adjust the set of criteria and standards. Additionally, one interviewee from the perspective of a college leader argued that a vocational training college should have a specialised QA unit with full-time staff. She said:

> *Accreditation like other functions should have its own department to further promote its positive aspects* (Respondent 16 – College leader).

While all other seven interviewees focused on the recommendations for the DVT, Respondent 47 highlighted the efforts of the institutions themselves in ensuring effective accreditation. Respondent 47's suggestions covered several issues raised by some respondents in their open feedback in the survey:

> *The schools should be honest themselves. The institutions should realise that they have to communicate widely and deeply about the objectives of accreditation. After accreditation, they have to continuously make efforts in improving the training quality* (Respondent 47 – Administrative leader).

4.5. Chapter summary

The findings of both the quantitative and qualitative strands of data in this study have been presented in this Chapter. Though generally, the quantitative data indicated the positive perceptions and attitudes of institutional staff towards the overall impact of institutional and programme accreditation, it also revealed some perceived problems surrounding the implementation of these processes. The qualitative data not only aided better understanding of the quantitative data but also provided important information that was not reflected by the quantitative data. The next chapter will combine both these strands of data so as to draw full and exact conclusions of how institutional and programme accreditation was perceived to affect the two vocational training colleges under study.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1. Chapter overview

In this chapter, the findings will be summarised by drawing on both quantitative and qualitative strands of data so as to provide a complete understanding of the research questions. An outline of the limitations of the study will be then presented before a discussion of the key themes emerging from the study. The chapter will next discuss the implications of the study results and suggest a conceptual framework of the key factors for effective accreditation. The recommendations for future research will finish the chapter.

5.2. Summary of the research findings

This section will summarise the key findings of the study with reference to the three research sub-questions.

5.2.1. Research question 1: What are the staff's perceptions and experiences of the key policies and practices of institutional and programme accreditation in the two Vietnamese vocational training colleges?

Five aspects relating to the key policies and practices of accreditation examined in research question 1 were the self-study training course, criteria and standards for accreditation, self-study, site visit of the external review panel, and decision making and follow-up. The findings pertaining to these themes are summarised below:

Staff perceptions of the self-study training course in institutional and programme accreditation

The participants shared similar views and experiences for the two self-study training courses in the two accreditation processes. There was positive support among participants concerning the lecturers, the quality of instruction and the training materials of the training courses. The major perceived drawback of both courses related to the training schedule, specifically, the shortage of time for discussions and practice. Other limitations of the courses included the limited number of staff trained in the courses and the lack of suitability in assigning staff to the courses. These issues were mentioned again by many other respondents when they were asked to reflect about the key policies and practices of self-study in institutional and programme accreditation, and the problems and challenges encountered with the two accreditation processes.

Staff perceptions of the criteria and standards for institutional and programme accreditation

The participants had both positive and negative perceptions towards the two set of criteria and standards for institutional accreditation as well as the set of criteria and standards for programme accreditation. Three major strengths concerning the criteria and standards for institutional accreditation included the covering of all aspects of institutional practices, the balance between quantitative and qualitative indicators at the overall level, and the suitability of the requirements of the indicators in general. Limitations of this set included its complexity with a large number of indicators and overlaps in the indicators, many unrealistic indicators and the over-reliance on input and process indicators. In terms of the set of criteria and standards for programme accreditation, the participants were more positive as there was less repetition among the evidence required for some specific indicators. However, the respondents still highlighted the existence of a number of unrealistic indicators as well as the lack of output and outcome indicators.

Staff perceptions of self-study in institutional and programme accreditation

The respondents indicated their satisfaction with the regulations of a self-study committee and the DVT's feedback on the drafts of the self-study reports in both institutional and programme processes. However, they expressed concerns with the guidelines for self-study implementation, the requirements from some unrealistic indicators and the duplication of the required evidence for proving some indicators in both accreditation processes. From their perspectives, the main variability between institutional and programme accreditation was the issue of time. Time was not perceived to be a big issue for undertaking self-study in the institutional accreditation in 2008 while it was for the programme accreditation in 2012.

Staff perceptions of the site visit of the external review panel in institutional and programme accreditation

The similarities among the respondents' perceptions towards the institutional and programme accreditation are again underlined with regard to the external review panel's site visit. Most of the respondents had positive opinions about the number of members as well as the composition of an external panel in both accreditation processes. Respondents had concerns mainly with the panel's work agenda during the site visit. Most of the respondents believed that the site visit was too short and this might have affected the evaluation results of the panel. Many respondents did not see the value of the panel's interviews, especially those with the enterprises, the students and the alumni. The panels for programme accreditation were perceived to perform better than for institutional accreditation. However, some respondents

expressed their dissatisfaction with the rigid performance of some panellists in both accreditation processes. The data also revealed the perception that some panellists did not prepare well for the interviews and some did not assess seriously because they did not want to break the harmony with their colleagues at the institutions accredited.

Staff perceptions of decision making and follow-up in institutional accreditation

As the programme accreditation in 2012 was a pilot study, the participants were only asked to reflect on the decision making and follow-up in the institutional programme that was implemented in 2008. Consistent and positive opinions concerning the procedures of appraisal, approval and publishing of the institutional accreditation results were found in the feedback of most participants. However, most participants identified problems with the policies and practices after the accreditation results had been published. These were about the lack of priority policies for the colleges which gained successful accreditation results, the DVT's insufficient interest in advertising the accreditation results for society and the inadequate monitoring from the DVT on the colleges accredited in the follow-up.

5.3.2. Research question 2: What are the staff's perceptions and experiences of the purposes and impact of institutional and programme accreditation in their colleges?

The study data revealed no significant differences between the institutional and programme accreditation in terms of the perceived purposes and impact of these accreditation processes. However, concerning both these processes, the qualitative interview data seemed to reveal more critical perceptions than from the survey data. The survey data indicated that the majority of the respondents selected 'as much improving as accountability' option for the purposes of two different accreditation processes; however, the interview data provided evidence for the view that accreditation seemed to be more geared to accountability. Similarly, though the quantitative survey data indicated that the majority of the participants believed the accreditation had a 'moderately positive impact' on their institutions; the qualitative data (from the survey and interviews) revealed many doubts about the effects of the process.

Combining both strands of data, the study found support for the view that accreditation had increased awareness of QA among the staff and made them more accountable for their work. Respondents strongly agreed that the process had provided the extrinsic motivation for the institution to reflect on their practices and identify the areas needing improvements. Many believed that accreditation contributed to better managerial practices within the institutions including a more systematic approach to goal setting and strategic planning, the transparency of the decision-making and the improvement of IQA system. However, on a negative note,

accreditation was perceived not to have made a significant contribution to teaching and learning, the reputation of the institutions, or the programme accredited. Respondents raised a number of difficulties and challenges facing their institution when implementing accreditation. These included the inadequate guidelines for self-study, limited staff trained in accreditation, the unrealistic requirements from some indicators, the complexity of the set of standards and criteria for accreditation, and the rigidity in the performance of some external reviewers. Additionally, the respondents cited the lack of motivation and engagement among staff (including both front-line staff members and leaders) towards the process, the bureaucratic approach of accreditation, and the gaps in the IQA system before implementing accreditation as the factors that reduced the effectiveness of the process.

5.3.3. Research question 3: What suggestions do the staff members offer to improve the policies and practices of vocational training accreditation in Vietnam?

Few participants wrote suggestions for more effective institutional and programme accreditation in the survey. In the interviews, the respondents gave two to three suggestions which they saw as most important for more effective accreditation. The most common suggestions for the DVT were the need to clarify priority policies, more communication of the successful accreditation results, the need of adequate guidelines for self-study, the adjustment of the set of criteria and standards of accreditation, and the improvement of the panel site visits effectiveness. Suggestions for their institutions included more focus on increasing staff engagement with accreditation, improvement of the IQA policies and procedures before undertaking accreditation, and addressing the problems identified in accreditation. Respondents also suggested both the DVT and their institutions should pay attention to providing training for more institutional staff in QA and accreditation, enhancing the awareness of different stakeholders of vocational training about these areas, and continued monitoring of the implementation of the process.

5.3. Limitations of the study

Although this study was carefully designed to best address the research questions, there are some limitations. First, the findings of the study are only based on the respondents' perceptions and experiences. As accreditation is still a new concept in the area of vocational training in Vietnam, the lack of experience of this process amongst staff members might affect their perceptions and attitudes towards the process. The second limitation relates to the purposeful sampling employed in the study. Purposeful sampling was used to select the staff members who would be a rich source of data. However, one drawback of this sampling method is the limited ability to generalise the study results from the sample to a wider

population. Thirdly, the sample size of the study, which was limited to 60 institutional staff in the two vocational training colleges, might not be representative enough despite the diverse characteristics of the participants in the sample. As a result of this limitation, the scope of generalisation of the study findings is rather limited. Additionally, though a number of ethical procedures were undertaken to ensure that the role of the researcher as a staff of the accrediting body would not affect the information provided by the participants, there is still a possibility that some participants might have felt uncomfortable to share openly and honestly what they actually thought about accreditation. As Stensaker (2003) indicated, a methodological problem with studies investigating the impact of EQA is that stakeholders tend to develop a successful image of their own efforts. Despite these limitations, the study has still produced meaningful results which will be discussed in the next section.

5.4. Discussion of research findings

Though this study did not aim to compare institutional and programme accreditation in terms of staff perspectives toward the two processes, emerging from the dataset of the study are numerous similarities between the two processes. As this finding yields important implications for practice, this section will analyse this issue before discussing staff perceptions and attitudes towards accreditation as a whole.

5.4.1. Similar results with regard to staff perceptions towards institutional accreditation and programme accreditation

The findings of this study revealed many similarities in the perceived effects of institutional accreditation and programme accreditation on institutional practices. Though the staff perceptions towards the impact of programme accreditation were overall more positive than institutional accreditation, this difference is relatively small. This result is especially evident in the interview data. The interview respondents referred to accreditation as a whole when they discussed the impact of the two accreditation processes. This is rather surprising as institutional accreditation and programme accreditation target different levels within an institution, and programme accreditation is expected to address the teaching and learning more directly than institutional accreditation (see Stensaker et al., 2011). These similar perceived effects of the two processes, however, are consistent with Stensaker et al.'s study which revealed that institutional accreditation and programme accreditation have nearly identical effects although the latter process is expected to be much closer to teaching and learning.

Drawing on the study findings, different reasons might be suggested for the perceived similar effects of the two accreditation processes in this study. One reason might be that the two sets of criteria for quality evaluation are very similar. For instance, both sets might focus on 'process' rather than 'outcomes', leading to similar reactions from the institutions. The other explanation may be that, the regulations and guidelines could be changed, or to use Stensaker et al.'s (2011) term, 'softened' during practices (p.475). For instance, the external review panellists might still focus too much on evaluating the quality processes rather than the quality of the programme itself, even though they were trained to do the reverse.

As the pilot of the programme accreditation in vocational training in Vietnam in 2012 was carried out four years later than the first accreditation of institutions, the mistakes made in the institutional accreditation should basically be avoided in undertaking programme accreditation. However, findings of the study revealed little differences between these two accreditation processes regarding respondents' perceptions towards both strong and weak points of the two processes. This indicates that the accrediting body has not paid sufficient attention to evaluating the effectiveness of the policies and practices of accreditation.

5.4.2. Staff perceptions towards the impact of accreditation (both institutional accreditation and programme accreditation)

Perhaps the most important finding of this study is that although the participants had positive attitudes towards the overall impact of accreditation and acknowledged some distinctive benefits of this process, they were also aware of the deficiencies in the policies and practices of accreditation. It is interesting to find that staff attitudes towards accreditation in this study were more positive than the 'resentment' amongst academics in Blythman's (2001) study or the 'at best ambivalent and at worst hostile' attitudes of the academics in Cartwright's (2007) study towards EQA, but less positive than some studies which mainly indicated the perceived benefits of EQA rather the challenges and barriers (e.g., Mertova & Webster, 2009; Rosa, Tavares, & Alberto, 2006; Shah, Nair & Standford, 2011).

Perceived benefits of accreditation

The three most cited benefits of accreditation included the increased awareness amongst staff of quality and quality improvement; the role as a catalyst for institutions' change and enhancement; and the improvements in managerial practices within the institutions. The present study confirmed the findings of Monnapula-Mapesela and Moraka (2008), Cheng (2011) and Shah, Nair, and Wilson (2011), in revealing that accreditation helped staff to better understand QA and this made staff become more responsible and accountable for their work.

Linked to this, the study revealed the view that accreditation seemed to have made staff members, especially lecturers, more focused on professional development. This finding might help illuminate why the respondents had more positive attitudes towards accreditation compared to some other previous studies. Previous studies have not explicitly reported this positive effect.

Another perceived benefit cited is that EQA was seen to be a catalyst for the institutions' changes and improvements. The study revealed the perception that accreditation provided the institutions with a framework that allowed them to self-review and help them identify their strengths as well as the shortcomings. A respondent acknowledged that before accreditation, their institution did not know what criteria they should use to evaluate their performance as well as how to evaluate in a systematic manner. Accreditation was also perceived to stimulate the institutions to address the shortcomings before the panel's site visit. These findings were in agreement with those in previous studies (e.g., Carr, Hamilton, & Meade, 2005; Harvey, 2002; Law, 2010; Shah, Nair, & Wilson, 2011). For instance, drawing on a number of studies conducted in different countries that reviewed quality audits in universities, and the result of their own empirical study, Shah, Nair, and Standford (2011) suggested that changes within the university would happen anyway; however, the external audits acted as "a catalyst with an urgency to act on various areas" due to "fears of further scrutiny and public report" (p.95). However, this current study found further support for the standpoint that improvements within the institutions resulted from efforts to deal with high quality standards so as to gain the accreditation certification. This perhaps reinforces the view that accreditation based on good quality standards not only forces institutions to maintain or assure quality but also stimulates them to strive for further quality.

In terms of the impact of accreditation on institutions' managerial practices, the process was seen to have led to a more systematic approach to goal setting and strategic planning, better record keeping, improvement in policies and procedures, and especially a greater focus on IQA processes. These findings were in agreement with those of previous empirical studies. For instance, results of Shah, Nair, and Wilson's (2011) study indicated that audits were perceived to have led to the integration of strategic planning and quality into a single framework, and improvements in review processes within the institution. In a more recent study on the effectiveness of external quality audits in 30 Australian universities, Shah (2013) reported that the audits "have led to an improvement in systems and processes in Australian universities" (p.358).

Perceived problems and challenges associated with accreditation

The study provided evidence for the view that the process seemed to have been geared towards accountability rather than improvement. Linked with this, from the respondents' perspectives, accreditation did not significantly improve student learning outcomes. These findings appeared to corroborate those of similar research (e.g., Cartwright, 2007; Harvey, 2004; Huusko & Ursin, 2010; Newton, 2002) who reported the academics' view that EQA is associated with an unnecessary degree of control/accountability, and therefore has little contribution to teaching and learning activities. In the same vein, Shah's (2013) study did not report about the perceived balance between accountability and improvement purposes of external quality audits but revealed that the external audits had not improved the student experience. Notably, accreditation, in the observations of some respondents, has led to temporary adjustments rather than lasting improvements. In this respect, Harvey (2002) reported the view of the attendants of the End of Quality Seminar that if quality monitoring is seen as an event rather than a process, it is likely to lead to performance and game-playing rather than long-term impact. Indeed, 'game-playing' attitudes amongst some staff members were also indicated in this current study.

The different perceived reasons behind such negative perceptions are synthesised and discussed under the six following main themes:

(1) Lack of stakeholder engagement with accreditation

One of the most difficult challenges facing the institutions during accreditation was that the process did not engage the majority of staff members. From the views of some respondents, some staff did not see value in accreditation so they did not take it seriously. Respondents observed that the lack of staff commitment made the progress of self-study implementation much slower and less effective. Some respondents particularly complained about the lack of commitment amongst some institutional leaders toward the process. They believed that due to the indifference of institutional leaders to accreditation, no shortcomings identified from the accreditation seemed to have been addressed and thereby this process did not make a difference to their institution. Arguably, the lack of leadership commitment might be one of the reasons why the leadership did not assign a large number of staff to participate in the process as well as not focus on enhancing the coordination among the staff and units in implementing self-study. These findings confirmed the view that the success of EQA depends on the extent to which the key internal constituencies 'buy into' the processes and become committed to the outcomes of the processes (see Botha, 2008; Jones & Saram, 2005).

While in many previous studies (e.g., Cartwright, 2007; Newton, 2002), the reasons for the lack of staff commitment to EQA were mainly associated with the accountability/control-focused approach of the system, in this study, the most cited reason refers to the lack of linking between accreditation and reward policy. Several respondents also mentioned this issue in their recommendations for improving the accreditation system. In this respect, despite the fact that accreditation in some systems such as the US or Chile, is currently linked with funding, linking EQA with funding is a controversial issue and has been highly criticised. Drawing on the US accreditation system experience, Harvey (2004) suggests that accreditation linked with funding will drive institutions to conceal weaknesses rather than engage in self-evaluation and improvement. Kis (2005) highlighted that a direct link between EQA with funding might generate a compliance culture among the institutions and skew the system to follow the money. To address this problem, Ewell (cited in Kis, 2005) suggested the best linkages between results and consequences should be indirect. Interestingly, the other cited reasons for the lack of staff engagement with accreditation in this study referred to the indirect link between accreditation and reward policy, (i.e., the support from the DVT in communicating the successful results of accreditation). Many respondents believed that as the successful results of accreditation as well as the information of accreditation in general were not widely communicated and promoted by the DVT, the process did not help improve the image of the institutions. The results are similar to those of Shah, Nair, and Wilson's (2012) study, which reported that positive audit reports are only known by the university or in some cases not even known by the institutional members.

It can be inferred from the data findings that not only the majority of institutional staff but some panellists were not engaged with accreditation. These findings support Shah's (2013) study in revealing that some panellists did not seem to prepare carefully for the site visits. Also, some panellists were perceived to not assess the institutions or programme seriously as they wanted to keep harmony with staff members in the institutions accredited. This helps explain why some respondents highlighted the need to have strict regulations regarding the responsibilities of the panellists as well as closer monitoring from the DVT of panels' practices. Additionally, the study provided evidence for the lack of engagement amongst enterprises, students, and alumni towards accreditation. Many respondents complained about the difficulties in inviting the enterprises or alumni to the institutions to attend the interviews with the panel, and commonly sensed that students, enterprises and the alumni tended to give only positive comments about the institutions when interviewed by the panel. The only reason the respondents cited for this problem lies in the way that the interviews between the panel and stakeholders were organised. However, the participants' responses to the other issues may

suggest some other possible reasons. For example, the low awareness of these actors of the purposes of accreditation and/or the lack of involvement of these stakeholders in the IQA processes before accreditation may also explain why they tended to give only positive comments in the interviews with the external review panel.

(2) Accountability focus

The results of the current study were in line with those of previous research (e.g., Cartwright, 2007; Harvey, 2004; Huusko & Ursin, 2010) in reporting the staff's criticisms about the greater focus of EQA on accountability over improvement. The main reason for this relates to the fact that accreditation was seen to have put emphasis on input and process rather than output and outcomes. Many respondents believed that the emphasis placed on 'process' in quality evaluation has led to increased bureaucracy with a huge amount of unnecessary administrative requirements for their institutions to prepare before external review. Some respondents even saw accreditation as just paperwork that did not add value to their institutions. These findings were in accordance with many past studies (e.g., Cartwright, 2007; Jones & Saram, 2005; Teelken & Lomas, 2009). Teelken and Lomas (2009) identified a common point made by the academics in the QA systems of the UK and Netherlands that the quality approach in their systems concentrated on processes rather than on content; and as result of this, emphasis was placed on the correct paperwork and managing quality processes rather than enhancing quality. Similarly, Cartwright (2007) revealed the institutional staff's criticism towards the QAA subject review approach, which focused on the administration of the quality processes rather than teaching and learning. A noteworthy point reported in Cartwright's study is that the process-focused approach of evaluation might lead to "the manipulation of the truth" to demonstrate their institution's commitment to quality assurance (p.296). Notably, similar experiences were also implied in some responses of the interviewees in this current study.

Aside from the process-driven approach of accreditation, the current study indicated that the rigidity of the external evaluation was also a contributor to the accountability focus of the process. Respondents criticised the focus being on documented evidence of external validation, the lack of flexibility of the panel in evaluating the eligibility of the evidence provided, the performance of a few panellists as inspectors, and the ritualistic agenda of the panel's site visit (the tight schedule of the site visit and the organization of the panel's interviews with different stakeholders). Not all, but some of these aspects were also found in previous studies. Stensaker (2003) revealed criticisms of academics towards the rigidity of

assessors that made them feel as though they were being inspected. More recently, Botha (2008) reported the doubts of institutional staff regarding the value of the QAA site visits.

However, unlike previous studies which only reported criticisms towards the accountability associated with accreditation, this study indicated both negative and positive perceptions on this issue. Some respondents, who on one hand criticised the greater focus of accountability over improvement, also saw some value in this aspect of the process. They acknowledged that accountability helped the institution become organised and improved the transparency in policies and procedures. This perhaps might be the reason why the staff's tone towards accountability seemed to be less negative compared to other studies.

(3) Gaps in IQA system before accreditation

Another perceived challenge facing the institutions when implementing accreditation refers to the gaps in their IQA systems before embarking on the accreditation trail. The most severe criticism from the respondents in this study was towards the disorganised record keeping within their institution that caused many difficulties in gathering evidence as required by the process. They also reported gaps in self-review procedures, especially those related to implementing the survey and feedback mechanisms with enterprises, alumni and students. They acknowledged that these gaps made it hard for them to implement self-study effectively in a limited time. In particular, this study had indications that the disorganised IQA systems along with the low awareness of the real purpose of accreditation might lead to the lack of authentic compliance within institutions, which made the process valueless. Although these findings have not been explicitly reported in previous empirical research, they are consistent with the findings of some conceptual studies. In his study, Kristensen (2010) suggested that the effect of EQA will be dependent on how well developed the IQA of the institution in question is. Similarly, Harvey (2002) highlighted the need to establish the internal procedures before taking any EQA process further. Harvey also indicated that there was considerable anecdotal evidence for the view that the initial impact fades away quickly if there is no significant linkage between internal and external processes.

(4) Inadequate training and guidelines

An additional perceived challenge associated with accreditation refers to inadequate training and guidelines for implementing this process. Previous studies (e.g., Botha, 2008; Shah, 2012) mentioned the need for more training and information sessions with the staff associated with implementing EQA. This aspect was confirmed by the findings of this study; however, it was examined in more depth compared to previous studies. The current study points out that the self-study training course was perceived to have inadequate discussions and practices in the

training course schedule (especially those for gathering evidence). This helps explain why the staff had many complaints about difficulties in identifying and gathering evidence. The other perceived drawbacks of the course pertained to the limited number of staff allowed to be trained in the course.

It is evident that, while the training course was perceived to provide insufficient guidelines for implementing self-study, the guidelines from DVT in the form of legal documents, or handbook, and manuals, would be expected to be sufficient and specific. The study, however, accords with Huusko and Ursin's (2012) study in pointing out staff's complaints about inadequate guidelines for self-study. The guidelines for gathering evidence were perceived to be not specific enough and seemed not to be tailored to different institutional contexts. The lack of guidelines for budget issues and cost norms of expenditures relating to accreditation was also strongly highlighted.

It is important to note that the respondents' suggestions relating to training and guidelines also include those aimed at enhancing the staff capacity in general so as to better implement QA processes. This becomes more evident when linking these suggestions with their complaints about difficulties associated with the low capacity and experiences of staff in conducting quality processes, such as in designing questionnaires, and analysing data. It is noted that these issues have not been indicated in past studies which were based on university experience. One possible reason is that universities' staff might have more experience in doing research than those in vocational training colleges which often places an emphasis on training vocational skills for students rather than doing research. Due to this, some staff in universities may be more skilled in carrying out quality processes including designing and conducting surveys and feedback mechanisms which are similar to research.

(5) Limitations of the set of criteria and standard for accreditation

From the perspectives of many study respondents, the limitations of the set of criteria and standards for accreditation are one of the key barriers of this process. In addition to the over-emphasis on input, and process rather than output and outcomes, the respondents highlighted the existence of unrealistic indicators in both sets of the accreditation processes. For example, one respondent complained that the technical specifications employed to check the training equipment in the accreditation were technologically out of date. Arguably, though 'quality' is a complex concept, and it seems impossible to develop a set of indicators that satisfies every stakeholder, it is, however, completely possible to avoid indicators that clearly conflict with the current related policies as well as practical conditions. It is evident that the unrealistic indicators might make staff doubt the results of quality evaluation and this might lead to their

lack of commitment with the process. The respondents also complained about the large number of indicators and the overlaps among indicators for institutional accreditation, leading to unnecessary work. This aligns with the findings of Monnapula-Mapesela and Moraka's (2008) study which indicated that the audit criteria were too many and labour intensive.

In summary, the data revealed both positive and negative perceptions towards accreditation. While some previous studies (e.g., Cheng, 2011; Monnapula-Mapesela & Moraka, 2008) seemed only to highlight the cynicism amongst only academics towards EQA, this study revealed some negative views towards accreditation held by institutional college leaders and administrators. However, in the current study, many academics acknowledged some distinct benefits of accreditation. This promises the prospect of more effective accreditation implementation in the future. As Stephenson (2004) noted, the improvements will only be achieved if the key actors - the academics - are convinced that the value of EQA is worth the effort. Another interesting point is that although the study was conducted in the vocational training context, most of the results of the study were supported by similar findings in different studies based on higher education or university experience. This finding, coupled with similarities between VET and higher education in terms of EQA (as discussed in the literature review chapter of this study) suggest that higher education and VET are very similar in terms of the EQA area.

5.5. Implications for policy and practice

The findings of this current study have a number of important implications for vocational training accreditation in Vietnam at both national and institutional levels.

5.5.1. Implications at national level

The following implications at national level should be considered.

First, the similar staff perceptions towards the two processes (institutional and programme accreditation) demonstrated the need to design institutional and programme accreditation for the specific purposes of each process. This issue becomes more urgent considering accreditation is a time-consuming, labour intensive and costly process (see CEDEFOP, 2009).

Second, study results suggest that further supports should be provided for the institutions to increase effective implementation of accreditation. It should be noted that while a careful consideration should be given in deciding direct linkages between accreditation and reward, it is important for the DVT to actively communicate successful accreditation results as a form of indirect linkages between accreditation and reward. As discussed in the literature review chapter, quality certificates in accreditation are expected to help enhance the image of

institutions at a higher level compared to other methods of EQA. Evidently, such an expectation only becomes true if the successful results of accreditation are deeply and widely communicated. Additionally, information relating to accreditation, especially its purpose, should be well communicated to various stakeholders so as to increase their awareness of this process. Also, it is crucial to provide further adequate training and guidelines for the institutions not only to prepare for accreditation but also to implement IQA processes effectively. With a larger number of attendants, a greater focus on discussions and practice, and more specific guidelines, the training course will be useful for institutions. The study especially suggests an urgent need for regulations on cost norms of expenditure relating to accreditation.

Third, evidence from the study suggests that a greater focus on quality improvement as opposed to quality accountability will be the key to successful accreditation. The nature of accreditation in vocational training in Vietnam is voluntary and the predominant aim is to stimulate continual improvement; therefore, an improvement-led approach in this process should be an important focus. To obtain this objective, the system should not be over reliant on input and process indicators in quality evaluation. It is also critical that the requirements of accreditation be meshed with the internal processes so that they can encourage the improvements in the internal processes. Concurrent with this is the need to further improve the effectiveness of the panels' site visits. In this regard, the external evaluation approach that mainly focuses on documented evidence should be avoided. The data infer external reviewers play a critical role in ensuring the improvement of accreditation and thereby, enhancing the quality of external reviewers. External reviewers should be better trained and there should also be more specific regulations on their responsibilities as well as closer monitoring from the DVT. The working agenda of the panel's site visit should also be reviewed so as to ensure value of external evaluation. Additionally, study findings implied that monitoring from the DVT of institutional changes made after accreditation is important to ensure continuous improvement within institutions.

 Fourth, the study suggested the need to adjust the set of criteria and standards for both institutional and programme accreditation. Adjustments should not be limited to ensuring the balance of the four types of indicators (input, process, output and outcomes) but also avoiding overlaps amongst the indicators (especially in the case of institutional accreditation) and unrealistic indicators.

Lastly, study findings suggest the need for more effective reflection on accreditation policies and practices. Based on the results of this study, it is argued that while reviewing of these policies and practices takes place, the voices of institutional staff regarding accreditation

should be taken into account. In this way, gaps between policy embedded intentions and the reality may be detected and addressed in a timely manner. It is also necessary to pay attention to the lessons learned from the EQA systems. As higher education and VET are much similar in terms of EQA, lessons about EQA can be learned from both VET and higher education systems. In this way, some mistakes made by these systems can be avoided.

### 5.5.2. Implications at institutional level

The most important implication at the institutional level is the need to clarify the purpose of accreditation with different stakeholders who are involved in the process. It is important to make the stakeholders understand that a quality label or a reward is not the ultimate objective of participation. Instead, involvement in the process should be seen as an opportunity to identify the success and shortcomings of institutional practices. For staff members, good communication of the accreditation purposes will encourage engagement with the process despite difficulties they may face when implementing this process. This will also help avoid the 'game playing' attitude amongst institutional staff as well as the temptation to conceal the weaknesses of the institutions in the self-study report to demonstrate high satisfaction levels. For the other stakeholders such as students or enterprises, clarity about the purposes of accreditation would help them better understand their roles in this process.

It is also inferred from the study that leadership plays a critical role in the effective implementation of accreditation in institutions. This is clearly demonstrated through two main aspects. First, the leaderships' commitment to this process will decide the success of introducing this process as well as organising implementation of self-study effectively. Second, more importantly, the long lasting positive impact of accreditation requires leaders' commitment to the continuous improvements within the institutions.

Additionally, data findings imply that the institutions with a disorganised IQA system may face many difficulties in implementing accreditation and may struggle to meet requirements that promise positive accreditation results. Therefore, the study suggested the need to well establish IQA processes before accreditation. It is also worth noting that the involvement of different actors including staff member, students, employers, alumni is crucial in IQA processes.

5.5.3. Conceptual framework of the key factors for effective accreditation

The main implications of the study for policy and practice are visualised under a conceptual framework for the key factors for effective accreditation as shown below:
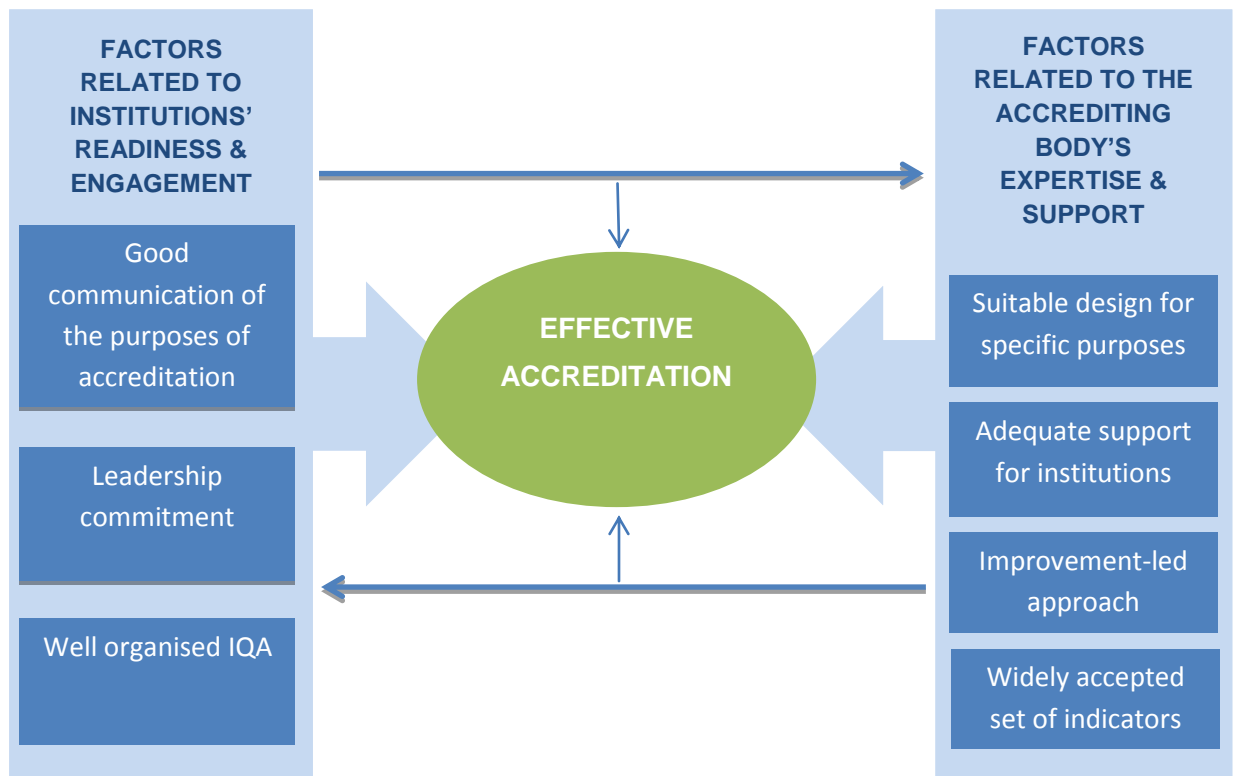
Figure 5.1: Conceptual framework for the key factors for effective accreditation

The framework highlights that the effectiveness of accreditation depends on the expertise and efforts of both institutions and the accrediting body. The framework also shows the direct relation between the institutions and the accrediting body in terms of their efforts towards effective accreditation. Specifically, institutions' readiness and engagement with accreditation, to some extent, are affected by the accrediting body's policies and supports and vice versa. Policies related to accreditation issued by the accrediting body should be based on institutions' current readiness and engagement with accreditation. As an example, leadership commitment in the institutions is a key factor for effective accreditation. When the accrediting body provides adequate supports for institutions, leaders within institutions may feel that the benefits of accreditation outweigh the drawbacks and therefore may become more motivated and committed to accreditation. On the other hand, if the accrediting body find that the leaders do not seem to be engaged with accreditation, the accrediting body may need to have appropriate solutions to address this issue. In either case, institutions and the accrediting body must have a responsive relationship with each other.

5.6. Recommendations for further research

This current study provides the following insights for future research. First, given the impact of context on accreditation outcomes, and the fact that the accreditation policies are subject to change during practice, further research will help build our knowledge in this area. Similar research could expand the scope of this current study by including a greater number of participants from other institutions to allow better generalization of the data findings. Additionally, it would be interesting to assess the impact of accreditation from perspectives of different stakeholders such as institutional staff, students, enterprise and the state agencies. This would provide a comprehensive picture of the extent to which the purposes of accreditation have been achieved. This current study has also shown the need for further exploration of the IQA processes. Evidence from the study indicated that IQA processes seem not to have been well established in the institutions; therefore, future research might investigate this issue in more depth. In fact, EQA alone cannot be credited for improving quality of institutions (Shah, 2013). Past literature (e.g., Harvey, 2002) also highlighted the need of maintaining harmony and connection between IQA and EQA processes. In light of this, future research which examines the IQA processes would not only provide direction for more effective IQA but also for designing accreditation that best suits with IQA processes and encourages the improvements of IQA processes.

5.7. Conclusions

This study is the first reported empirical research investigating the perceived impact of accreditation by institutional staff in vocational training institutions in Vietnam. It conveys how institutional staff in the two Vietnamese vocational training colleges valued and responded to the impact of the two accreditation processes on their institutions. The study finds that the institutional staff had positive attitudes to the overall effects of the accreditation irrespective of each type of accreditation. However, the study also provides evidence for a mismatch between the intentions embedded in the policies and the measures implemented. The study contributes to a limited body of literature on vocational training accreditation in Vietnam. More importantly, the study suggests a number of important implications for policy and practice. It is inferred from the study that enhancing the effectiveness of accreditation requires sustained efforts at both the national and institutional levels. As Law (2010) highlighted, it is likely that the development of QA systems will be a long journey. However, for the significant intended outcomes of accreditation, it seems well worth the effort.

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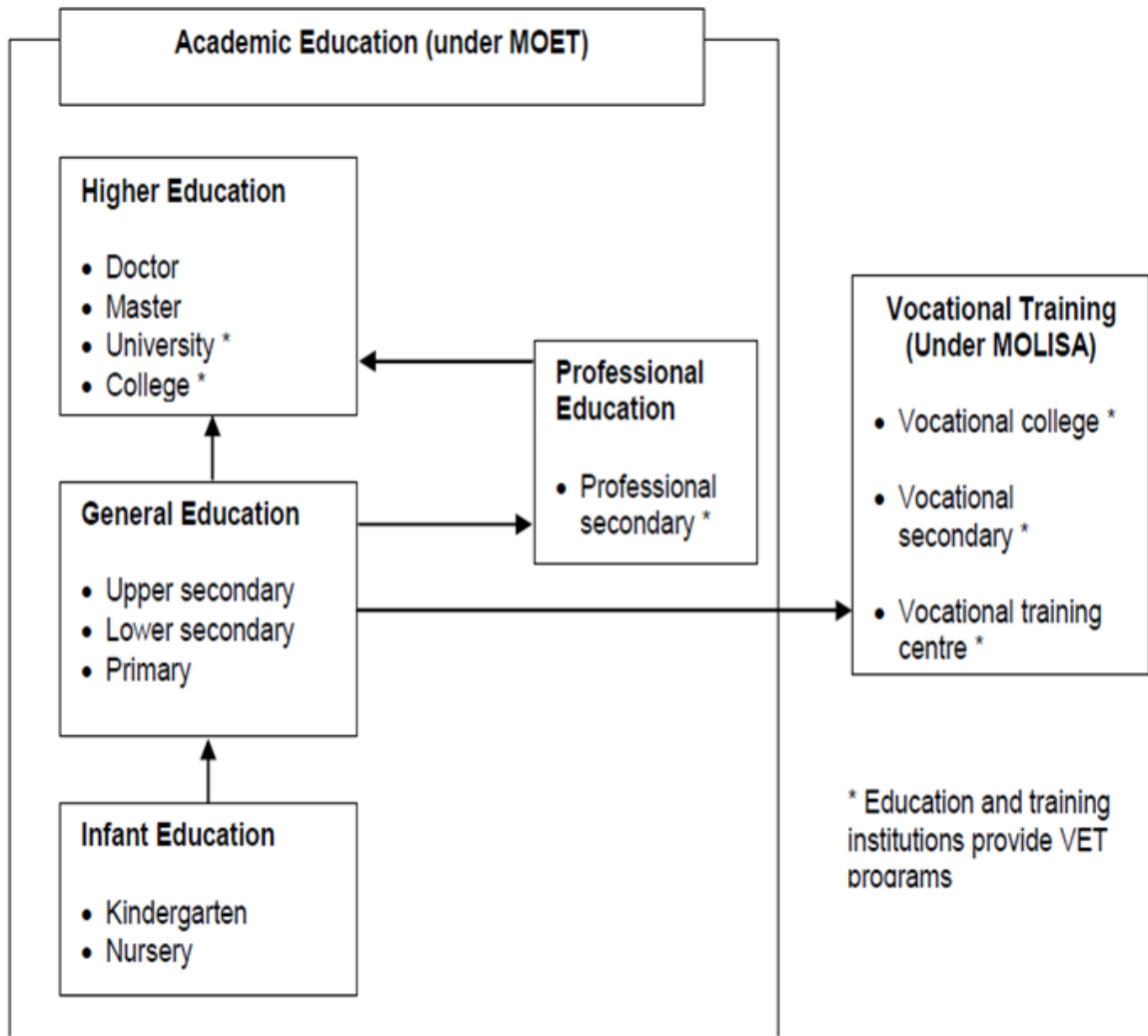
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Educational system in Vietnam

Academic Education (under MOET)

Higher Education
- Doctor
- Master
- University *
- College *

General Education
- Upper secondary
- Lower secondary
- Primary

Infant Education
- Kindergarten
- Nursery

Professional Education
- Professional secondary *

Vocational Training (Under MOLISA)
- Vocational college *
- Vocational secondary *
- Vocational training centre *

* Education and training institutions provide VET programs

Source: Education Law (2005) and the Law on Vocational Training (2006).

Appendix B: Letter to Principals of College A, B to ask for permission to conduct research

<div align="center">

Letter to the Principal of College A, B

Subject: Asking for permission to conduct research

</div>

Date:…………................

Dear Sir/Madam (insert Name),

My name is Pham Thi Minh Hien. I am working for the Division of Vocational Training Accreditation - Directorate of Vocational and Training, and currently studying a Master of Education at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. As part of this degree, I am required to undertake a research project leading to a thesis. I am writing this letter to ask for your permission in order to conduct my research in your institution from June 2013 to July 2013.

The purpose of the research is to explore the institutional staff perceptions of the impact of institutional and programmatic in two Vietnamese vocational training colleges. More specifically, the research aims to examine the staff members' perspectives of the benefits of accreditation, the difficulties facing the institutions when implementing accreditation, and their recommendations for improving the effectiveness of accreditation. It is hoped that the results of the study will significantly contribute to improving the policies and practices of accreditation in vocational training in Vietnam.

The research process will be undertaken in the following manner.

- *Selecting participants*: If you agree to grant me the permission to conduct the research in your institution, I would like you to provide me with a list of staff members who were directly involved in either the institutional accreditation or programme accreditation, or both processes in your institution. The list should include all members of the two self-study committees and those who were not members of the two self-study committees but participated in the self - study processes or worked with the external review panels during their site visits to your institution. I will then directly contact and invite them to participate in my research. They will be fully provided with the necessary information about the research for their consideration to participation. No staff will be

pressured to participate in the study and the decision to participate will be left to the individuals. They may withdraw from the study at any time before the final analysis of data without having to give reasons or without any disadvantage to themselves of any kind. I plan to have data analysis completed by October 2013.

- *Collecting data:* Data will be collected for the research in two phases. In the first phase, all the participants will be asked to complete a structured questionnaire which takes up to 30 minutes. After initial analysis of the results of the first phase, I will invite you or the Vice Principal, Dean or Vice Dean of the accredited programme, the coordinator of the institutional accreditation, and the coordinator of the programmatic accreditation in your institution, to participate in one-to-one, face-to-face interviews in the second phase. Each interview will last for about one hour and will be audio recorded. All the interviews will be arranged at a time that is convenient for the interviewees.

I would like to inform you that Victoria University of Wellington requires ethical approval to be obtained for research and this research has been approved by the Faculty of Education Human Ethics Sub-committee under delegated authority from the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee.

I can assure you that I will make every effort to protect the identity of your institution and the participants. All the information the participants provide will only be used for research purposes and will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of any identifying details. The audio recordings will be kept secure for a period of up to 2 years before being deleted. All research data will be securely stored both in password protected files and in locked cupboards and will be destroyed both using a pager shredder and electronically wiped within two years after the completion of the research. When completed, the thesis will be submitted to the Victoria University Library and will be available online. The study may also be used for publication of one or more related articles in scholarly journals.

If you have any ethical concerns about this research, you should contact the Chair of the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee, Dr. Allison Kirkman at Allison.Kirkman@vuw.ac.nz. If you have any questions or would like to receive further information about the project, please contact me at + 84 912770258 (Vietnam)/ + 64 221 633 508 (New Zealand)/ or email me at HienThiMinh.Pham@vuw.ac.nz> or pminhhien0609@yahoo.com. You can also contact my supervisor, Dr. Liz Jones at Liz.Jones@vuw.ac.nz

I really appreciate your permission to conduct this research in you institution. If you are willing to grant permission to conduct the study in your institution, could you please sign the

two copies of the consent form enclosed (one to return to the researcher, and one for your record). Please be aware of the fact that, like the participants, you also have the right to withdraw the institution and the institutional staff from undertaking this study at any time before the final analysis of the data.

Thank you very much for your support.

Yours sincerely,

Pham Thi Minh Hien

Appendix C: Principal consent form

FACULTY OF EDUCATION TE WHĀNAU O AKO PAI

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON PO Box 17 310, Karori, Wellington 6012, New Zealand
Phone +64-4-463 9500 Fax +64-4-463 9561 Website www.victoria.ac.nz/education

PRINCIPAL CONSENT FORM

(*to grant permission to conduct the research in his/her institution*)

Title of project: Institutional staff views on the impact of institutional and programme accreditation in two Vietnamese vocational training colleges.

- I have been given information about this project and discussed the research project with Pham Thi Minh Hien. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

- I understand what would be required of the participants from this college who take part in the research.

- I understand that no staff will be pressured to participate in the study and the decision to participate will be left to the individuals. Participants may withdraw from the study at any time before the final analysis of data without having to give reasons or without any disadvantage to themselves of any kind. The researcher plans to have data analysis completed by October 2013.

- I understand that if any participant withdraws from this study before the final analysis of data, the data that has already been provided before he or she withdraws will be destroyed.

- I understand that every effort will be made by the researcher to protect the identity of the college and the participants and that I may not know the identity of the participants, (or if I do I will keep their identity confidential).

- I understand that all research information will be stored in password protected files and will be destroyed within two years after the completion of the research.

- I understand that the data collected from my college will be used for the research purpose of this Masters thesis and may also be used for publication of one or more related articles in academic journals.

Please tick one box to indicate your alternative, and then sign and date the consent form

I consent to the researcher conducting her project in this college.

□   Yes

□   No

Signed:…………………………..   Name: ………………………..

Date:……………………………......

Appendix D: Information sheet for the staff members invited to answer the questionnaire

FACULTY OF EDUCATION TE WHĀNAU O AKO PAI

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON PO Box 17 310, Karori, Wellington 6012, New Zealand
Phone +64-4-463 9500 **Fax** +64-4-463 9561 **Website** www.victoria.ac.nz/education

Information sheet

(*For the participants invited to answer the questionnaire*)

Date:…………............

Research topic: **Institutional staff views on the impact of institutional and programme accreditation in two Vietnamese vocational training colleges.**

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Pham Thi Minh Hien. I am working for the Division of Vocational Training Accreditation, Directorate of Vocational and Training and currently studying a Master of Education at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. As part of this degree, I am required to undertake a research project leading to a thesis. The purpose of my study is to explore the institutional staff views on the impact of institutional and programmatic accreditation in two Vietnamese vocational education and training colleges. It is hoped that the results of the study will significantly contribute to improving the policies and practices of accreditation in vocational training in Vietnam.

The participants of the project will be the institutional staff who were directly involved in either institutional accreditation or programme accreditation, or both two processes, from two selected colleges. The participants may include all the members of the two self-study committees and those who were not the members of the two self-study committees but participated in the self - study processes or worked with the external review panels during their site visits in the institutions.

I would like to invite you to participate in the study and believe that your cooperation will be valuable for my research. If you agree to participate in the project, you will be invited to complete a questionnaire which will take up to 30 minutes. The questionnaire will ask you about how you view the benefits of accreditation, the difficulties facing the institution when implementing accreditation, the policies and practices of accreditation and about your recommendations for improved policies and practices of accreditation.

I would like to inform you that Victoria University of Wellington requires ethical approval to be obtained for research and this research has been approved by the Faculty of Education Human Ethics Sub-committee under delegated authority from the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee.

I would like to assure you that your responses and feedback will be used for research purposes only and I will make every effort to protect your identity. Your identity will be protected through the use of a pseudonym names and through the removal of any identifying details. All research data will be securely stored in password protected files and in locked drawers and will be destroyed within two years after the completion of the research. When completed, the thesis will be submitted to the Victoria University Library and will be available online. The study may also be used for publication of one or more related articles in academic journals.

If you have any ethical concerns about this research, you should contact the Chair of the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee, Dr. Allison Kirkman at Allison.Kirkman@vuw.ac.nz. If you have any questions or would like to receive further information about the project, please contact me at + 84 912770258 (Vietnam)/ + 64 221 633 508 (New Zealand)/ or email me at HienThiMinh.Pham@vuw.ac.nz> or pminhhien0609@yahoo.com. You can also contact my supervisor, Dr. Liz Jones at Liz.Jones@vuw.ac.nz

If you are willing to answer the questionnaire, please kindly:

- Sign the two copies of the consent form enclosed (one to return to the researcher and one for your record);

- Respond to the questionnaire enclosed;

- Return the completed questionnaire and one signed consent form in the envelope provided to Collection Box in the Administration Unit of your college within one week from the day you received this letter.

If you are not willing to answer the questionnaire, you do not need to return any documents.

Please be aware that you may decide not to take part in the study and you may withdraw from the study at any time before the final analysis of data without having to give reasons or without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind. I plan to have data analysis completed by October 2013.

Thank you very much for your support

Pham Thi Minh Hien   Signed: …………………

Appendix E: Information sheet for the staff members invited to participate in the interviews

FACULTY OF EDUCATION TE WHĀNAU O AKO PAI

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON PO Box 17 310, Karori, Wellington 6012, New Zealand
Phone +64-4-463 9500 Fax +64-4-463 9561 Website www.victoria.ac.nz/education

Information sheet

(For the Principal, Dean of the accredited programme, the coordinator of the institutional accreditation, and the coordinator of the programme accreditation in each selected institution who will be invited to answer the questionnaire and participate in the follow - up interviews)

Date:…………..........

Research topic: **Institutional staff views on the impact of institutional and programme accreditation in two Vietnamese vocational training colleges.**

My name is Pham Thi Minh Hien. I am working for the Division of Vocational Training Accreditation, Directorate of Vocational and Training and currently studying a Master of Education at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. As part of this degree, I am required to undertake a research project leading to a thesis.

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of institutional staff of accreditation at both institutional and programmatic levels in two Vietnamese vocational education and training colleges. It is hoped that the results of the study will significantly contribute to improving the policies and practices of accreditation in vocational training in Vietnam.

The participants of the project will be the institutional staff who were directly involved in either institutional accreditation or programme accreditation or both two processes in two selected colleges. The participants may include all the members of the two self-study committees and those who were not the members of the two self-study committees but participated in the self - study processes or worked with the external review panels during their site visits in the institutions.

 I would like to invite you to participate in the study and believe that your cooperation will be valuable for my research. If you agree to participate in the project, you will be invited to answer a questionnaire that will take up to 30 minutes to complete and to participate in a one-to-one, face-to-face interview that will last for about one hour. The questionnaire will ask you about how you view the benefits of accreditation, the difficulties facing the institution when implementing accreditation, the policies and practices of accreditation and your recommendations for improved policies and practices of accreditation. The follow-up

interview will take place a few days after you answer the questionnaire. The follow-up interview will examine your perceptions of accreditation in more detail and will also be a time to discuss the initial findings from the questionnaires administered to all the participants of the study. The interview will be arranged at a time that is convenient for you at your office/college. The interview protocol will be sent to you about two days before the interview. The interview will be audio recorded and will later be transcribed, and you will have the opportunity to check your transcript for accuracy and suggest any changes. Your feedback will be highly valued.

I would like to inform you that Victoria University of Wellington requires ethical approval to be obtained for research and this research has been approved by the Faculty of Education Human Ethics Sub-committee under delegated authority from the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee, N^0..................

I would like to assure you that your responses and feedback will be used for research purposes only and I will make every effort to protect your identity. Your identity will be protected through the use of a pseudonym names and through the removal of any identifying details. All research data will be securely stored in password protected files and in locked drawers and will be destroyed within two years after the completion of the research. When completed, the thesis will be submitted to the Victoria University Library and will be available online. The study may also be used for publication of one or more related articles in academic journals

If you have any ethical concerns about this research, you should contact the Chair of the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee, Dr. Allison Kirkman at Allison.Kirkman@vuw.ac.nz. If you have any questions or would like to receive further information about the project, please contact me at + 84 912770258 (Vietnam)/ + 64 221 633 508 (New Zealand)/ or email me at HienThiMinh.Pham@vuw.ac.nz> or pminhhien0609@yahoo.com. You can also contact my supervisor, Dr. Liz Jones at Liz.Jones@vuw.ac.nz

If you are willing to both answer the questionnaire and participate in the follow - up interview, please kindly:

- Sign the two copies of the consent form enclosed for the survey and the two copies of the consent form enclosed for the interview (one copy to return to the researcher and one for your record);

- Respond to the questionnaire enclosed;

- Return the completed questionnaire, one signed consent form for the survey and one signed consent form for the interview in the envelope provided to Collection Box in the Administration Unit of your college within one week from the day you received this letter.

If you are only willing to answer the questionnaire, please return the completed questionnaire and the signed consent form for the survey. If you are only willing to participate in the interview, please return the signed consent form for the interview.

Please be aware that you may decide not to take part in the study and you may withdraw from the study at any time before the final analysis of data without having to give reasons or without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.I plan to have data analysis completed by October 2013.

Thank you very much for your support

Pham Thi Minh Hien   Signed: …………………

Appendix F: Questionnaire

QUESTIONNAIRE

INSTITUTIONAL STAFF PERCETPIONS ON THE IMPACT OF INSTITUTIONAL ACCREDITATION AND PROGRAMME ACCREDITATION IN VOCATIONAL TRAINING

The purpose of this questionnaire is to explore the institutional staff perceptions and experiences of the impact of institutional and programme accreditation in vocational training. The information that is provided will be used for research purposes only and will be kept entirely confidential.

SECTION A: BASIC INFORMATION

1. What is your current position at this institution?

Please tick one box

□ Principal

□ Vice Principal (academic)

□ Vice Principal (administrative)

□ Dean of the accredited programme

□ Vice Dean of the accredited programme

□ Academic (including academic leaders, researchers and lecturers)

□ Administrator

2. How long have you been working in the field of vocational training?

(Fill in blank) ....years

3. How long have you been working for this institution?

(Fill in blank) ....years

4. Your involvement in the accreditation processes:

Please tick one box

□ Both the institutional accreditation in 2008 and the pilot programme accreditation in 2012 →*If you ticked this box, please answer QUESTION 5, QUESTION 6,*

SECTION B, and SECTION C of the questionnaire (i.e. the whole questionnaire)

☐ Only the institutional accreditation in 2008 →*If you ticked this box, please only answer QUESTION 5 and SECTION B.*

☐ Only the pilot of programme accreditation in 2012 →*If you ticked this box, please only answer QUESTION 6 and SECTION C.*

5. How were you involved in institutional accreditation?

*Please tick appropriate boxes (you may tick **more than** one box)*

☐ I was the coordinator of the institutional accreditation in 2008

☐ I was a member of the self - study committee

☐ I participated in the self- study process

☐ I worked with or was interviewed by the external review panel during their site visit

☐ Other → Please specify (*Fill in the blank*) ……………………………..

6. How were you involved in the pilot of the programme accreditation in 2012?

*Please tick appropriate boxes (you may tick **more than** one box)*

☐ I was the coordinator of the pilot of programme accreditation in 2012

☐ I was a member of the self - study committee

☐ I participated in the self- study process

☐ I worked with or was interviewed by the external review panel during their site visit

☐ Other -> Please specify (Fill in the blank) ……………………………..

SECTION B: YOUR PERCEPTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL ACCREDITATION

B.1. YOUR PERCEPTIONS OF THE KEY POLICIES AND PRACTICES OF INSTITUTIONAL ACCREDITATION

7. This section refers to how you perceive the training course onself-study for the institutional accreditation in 2008

Did you participate in this training course?

☐ Yes ->If you ticked Yes, please *tick one box for each item* in the table below.

☐ No ->If you ticked No, please go to question 8.

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)	Don't know (6)
7.1. The training schedule was suitable						
7.2. The lecturers were knowledgeable about vocational training accreditation						
7.3. The quality of instruction was good						
7.4. The training materials were useful						
7.5. The training objectives were met						

7.6. Please indicate the limitations of the training course.

8. This section refers to how you perceive the set of criteria and standards for institutional accreditation.

Please tick one box for each item.

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)	Don't know (6)
8.1. The indicators cover all the aspects of the institutional practices						
8.2. The content of the indicators is clear						
8.3. A balance among four types of indicators (*input, process, output, and outcomes*) is ensured						
8.4. A balance between quantitative and qualitative indicators is ensured						
8.5. The requirements from the indicators are realistic and suitable (*not too high and not too low*)						

8.6. Please indicate the limitations of the set of criteria and standards for institutional accreditation

9. This section refers to how you perceive the key policies and practices relating to self-study in the institutional accreditation.

Please tick one box for each item

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)	Don't know (6)
9.1. The regulations on a self-study committee were suitable						
9.2. The time for conducting self-study was appropriate (*not too long, not too short*)						
9.3. The requirements for self-study implementation were appropriate						
9.4. The DVT's feedback about the draft of the self-study report was useful						
9.5. The guidelines for self-study implementation were adequate						

9.6. Please indicate the limitations of the policies and practices relating to the self-study in the institutional accreditation.

10. This section refers to how you perceive the key policies and practices relating to the site visit of the external review panel in the institutional accreditation.

Please tick one box for each item.

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)	Don't know (6)
10.1. The number of the external review panellists was appropriate						
10.2. The composition of the panel was appropriate						
10.3. The working agenda of the site visit was suitable						
10.4. The atmosphere in the panel's interviews was friendly and comfortable						
10.5. The panel completed their duties well						

10.6. Please indicate the limitations of the policies and practices relating to **the site visit of the external review panel** in the institutional accreditation.

11. This section refers to how you perceive the key policies and practices relating to the follow-up *(after the external review panel's site visit).*

Please tick one box for each item

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)	Don't know (6)
11.1. Policies and practices relating to the appraisal and approval of the accreditation results are appropriate						
11.2. Policies and practices relating to publishing the accreditation results are appropriate						
11.3. Policies and practices after the accreditation results being published are appropriate						

11.4. Please indicate the limitations of the policies and practices relating to the follow-up (*after the site visit of the external review panel*).

B.2. YOUR PERCEPTIONS OF THE PURPOSES AND THE IMPACT OF INSTITUTIONAL ACCREDITATION

12. This section refers to how you perceive the purposes of the institutional accreditation

12.1. Based on your experience of the institutional accreditation in 2008, how do you perceive the purpose of this process?

Please tick one box

☐ Only accountability

☐ Mainly accountability

☐ As much improvement as accountability

☐ Mainly improvement

☐ Only improvement

☐ Don't know

    12.2.   Could you please explain your choice in the question 12.1?

13. Overall, what kind of impact do you believe the institutional accreditation has on your institution?

Please tick one box

☐ Highly positively impact

☐ Moderately positive impact

☐ No impact

☐ Moderately negative impact

☐ Highly negative impact

☐ Don't know

14. What kind of impact do you believe the institutional accreditation has had at/for your institution concerning the following areas?

Please tick one box for each item

	Highly positive impact	Moderately positive impact	No impact	Moderately negative impact	Highly negative impact	Don't know
14.1. Impact on objectives and duties						
14.2. Impact on governance structures						
14.3. Impact on new routines and procedures						
14.4. Impact on internal quality assurance						
14.5. Impact on the quality of teaching and learning						
14.6. Impact on the improvement of curriculum and syllabus						
14.7. Impact on facilities, and training equipment						
14.8. Impact on learner support service						

14.9. Impact on internal resource allocation						
14.10. Impact on the reputation of the institution						

15. Could you please identify the five most significant benefits of institutional accreditation?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

16. Could you please identify the five most significant problems and challenges associated with the institutional accreditation?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

17. Please give your suggestions to make institutional accreditation work more effectively for your institution?

18. Please give any ideas that you would like to add for me to think about?

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR COMPLETING THE QUESTIONNAIRE

_____

If you also get involved in the programme accreditation in 2012, please proceed with the questions in Section C as below:

SECTION C: YOUR PERCEPTIONS OF PROGRAMME ACCREDITATION

C.1. YOUR PERCEPTIONS OF THE KEY POLICIES AND PRACTICES OF PROGRAMME ACCREDITATION

19. This section refers to how you perceive the training course on self-study for the programme accreditation in 2012

Did you participate in this training course?

☐ Yes ->If you ticked Yes, please *tick one box for each item* in the table below.

☐ No ->If you ticked No, please go to question 20.

Please tick one box for each item.

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)	Don't know (6)
19.1 The training schedule was suitable						
19.2 The lecturers were knowledgeable about vocational training accreditation						
19.3 The quality of instruction was good						
19.4 The training materials were useful						
19.5 The training objectives were met						

19.6. Please indicate the limitations of the training course

20. This section refers to how you perceive the set of criteria and standards for programme accreditation.

Please tick one box for each item.

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)	Don't know (6)
20.1 The indicators cover all the aspects of the institutional						

	practices						
20.2	The content of the indicators is clear						
20.3	A balance among four types of indicators (*input, process, output, and outcomes*) is ensured						
20.4	A balance between quantitative and qualitative indicators is ensured						
20.5	The requirements from the indicators are realistic and suitable (*not too high and not too low*)						

20.6 Please indicate the limitations of the set of criteria and standards for programme accreditation.

21. **This section refers to how you perceive the key policies and practices relating to self-study in the programme accreditation.**

Please tick one box for each item

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)	Don't know (6)
21.1. The regulations on a self-study committee were suitable						
21.2. The time for conducting self-study was appropriate (*not too long, not too short*)						
21.3. The requirements for self-study implementation were appropriate						
21.4. The DVT's feedback about the draft of the self-study report was useful						
21.5. The guidelines for self-study implementation were adequate						

21.6. Please indicate the limitations of the policies and practices relating to self-study in the programme accreditation.

22. **This section refers to how you perceive the key policies and practices relating to the site visit of the external review panel in the programme accreditation.**

Please tick one box for each item.

	Strongly agree (1)	Agree (2)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (4)	Strongly disagree (5)	Don't know (6)
22.1. The number of the external review panellists was appropriate						
22.2. The composition of the panel was appropriate						
22.3. The working agenda of the site visit was suitable						
22.4. The atmosphere in the panel's interviews was friendly and comfortable						
22.5. The panel completed their duties well						

22.6. Please indicate the limitations of the policies and practices relating to **the site visit of the external review panel's site visit** in the programme accreditation.

C.2. YOUR PERCEPTIONS OF THE PURPOSES AND THE IMPACT OF PROGRAMME ACCREDITATION

23. **This section refers to how you perceive the impact of institutional accreditation on your institution?**

23.1. Based on your experience of the programme accreditation in 2012, how do you perceive the purpose of this process?

Please tick one box

☐ Only accountability

☐ Mainly accountability

☐ As much improvement as accountability

☐ Mainly improvement

☐ Only improvement

☐ Don't know

23.2. Could you please explain your choice in the question 23.1?

24.   Overall, what kind of impact do you believe the programme accreditation has on your institution?

Please tick one box

☐ Highly positively impact

☐ Moderately positive impact

☐ No impact

☐ Moderately negative impact

☐ Highly negative impact

☐ Don't know

25.   What kind of effects do you believe the programme accreditation has had at/on your institution concerning the following areas?

Please tick one box for each item

	Highly positive effect	Moderately positive impact	No impact	Moderately negative impact	Highly negative impact	Don't know
25.1. Effects on objectives and duties						
25.2. Effects on governance structures						
25.3. Effects on new routines and procedures						
25.4. Effects on internal quality assurance						
25.5. Effects on the quality of teaching and learning						
25.6. Effects on the improvement of curriculum and syllabus						
25.7. Effects on facilities, and training equipment						
25.8. Effects on learners' support services						
25.9. Effects on internal resource allocation						
25.10. Effects on the institution's reputation						

26. **Could you please identify the five most significant benefits of the programme accreditation?**

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

27. **Could you please identify the five most significant problems and challenges associated with the programme accreditation?**

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

28. **Please give your suggestions to make programme accreditation work more effectively for your institution**

29. **Please give any ideas that you would like to add for me to think about**

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR COMPLETING THIS QUESTIONNAIRE!

Appendix G: Participation consent form (for survey participants)

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

(to participate in the research by answering the questionnaire)

Title of project: Institutional staff views on the impact of institutional and programme accreditation in two Vietnamese vocational training colleges.

I have been given information about this project and discussed the research project with Pham Thi Minh Hien. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

- ▪ I understand that I am not under any pressure to participate in the study and I may withdraw myself from this project before the final analysis of data without having to give reasons or without any disadvantage to myself of any sort. The researcher plans to have data analysis completed by October 2013.

- ▪ I understand that if I withdraw from this study before the final analysis of data, the data that has already been provided before I withdraw will be destroyed.

- ▪ I understand that I will be asked to participate in a paper questionnaire. The questionnaire completion will take about 30 minutes.

- ▪ I understand that the researcher will make every effort to protect my identifyand the published results will not use my name, and that no opinions will be attributed to me in any way that will identify me.

- ▪ I understand that all data will be stored in password protected files and will be destroyed within two years after the completion of the research.

- ▪ I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for the research purpose of this Masters thesis and may also be used for publication of one or more related articles in academic journals.

  Please tick one box to indicate your alternative, then sign and date this form:

  I consent to participate in the research by answering the questionnaire

  - ☐ Yes

☐   No

I would like a copy of the summary of findings of this research forwarded to me at the conclusion of the research.

☐   Yes

☐   No

Signed:………………………….. Name: ………………….…..

Date:……………………….......

Appendix H: Participation consent form (for interview participants)

FACULTY OF EDUCATION   TE WHĀNAU O AKO PAI

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON   PO Box 17 310, Karori, Wellington 6012, New Zealand
Phone +64-4-463 9500 Fax +64-4-463 9561 Website www.victoria.ac.nz/education

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

(to participate in the interview)

Date.............................

Title of project: Institutional staff views on the impact of institutional and programme accreditation in two Vietnamese vocational training colleges.

I have been given information about this project and discussed the research project with Pham Thi Minh Hien. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.

- I understand that I am not under any pressure to participate in the one-to-one, face-to-face interview and I may withdraw myself from this project before the final analysis of data without having to give reasons or without any disadvantage to myself of any sort. The researcher plans to have data analysis completed by October 2013.

- I understand that I may withdraw myself from this project before the final analysis of data without having to give reasons or without any disadvantage to myself of any sort.

- I understand that if I withdraw from this study before the final analysis of data, the data that has already been provided before I withdraw will be destroyed.

- I understand that I will be given an interview protocol before the interview begins. The interview will last for about one hour will be audio recorded and then transcribed and I will have the opportunity to check the transcript for accuracy and adjust any content if I want.

- I understand that the researcher will make every effort to protect my identifyand the published results will not use my name, and that no opinions will be attributed to me in any way that will identify me.

- I understand that all data will be stored in password protected files and will be destroyed within two years after the completion of the research.

- I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for the research purpose of this master thesis and may also be used for publication of one or more related articles in academic journals.

Please tick one box to indicate your alternative, then sign and date this form:

I consent to participate in the interview

☐ Yes

☐ No

Signed:………………………….. Name: ………………….…..

Date:……………………………......

Appendix I: Letter of ethic approval

20 May 2013

Hien Thi Minh Phan
MEd
Victoria University of Wellington Faculty of Education
C/- School of Educational Psychology and Pedagogy
Donald Street
Wellington

Dear Hien

RE: Ethics application SEPP/2013/35 RM 19848

I am pleased to advise you that your ethics application **'Institutional staff's perceptions of external quality assurance in two selcted vocational education and training colleges in Vietnam'**, with the required changes, has been approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Faculty of Education Ethics Committee. Please note that the approval for your research to commence is from the date of this letter.

Best wishes for your research.

Yours Sincerely

Dr Sue Cornforth

Co-Convener
Victoria University of Wellington Faculty of Education Ethics Committee

Appendix J: Transcriber and translator confidentiality agreement

FACULTY OF EDUCATION TE WHĀNAU O AKO PAI

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON PO Box 17 310, Karori, Wellington 6012, New Zealand
Phone +64-4-463 9500 Fax +64-4-463 9561 Website www.victoria.ac.nz/education

TRANSCRIBER AND TRANSLATOR CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

I, Luong Thu Hien, agree:

- To transcribe the interviews between the researcher and the intervieweesin the research "Institutional staff views on the impact of accreditation: A study in two Vietnamese vocational training colleges" and translate the interview transcripts from Vietnamese to English;

- To maintain the confidentiality of all the related information and documents and not to release to any third party the names of the colleges and the research participants as well as other identifying information;

- To make sure that all the documents related to the interview data are disposed of and all the related electronic files are deleted after one day of the delivery of the translated documents to the researcher.

Signature of the transcriber and translator:

Name of the transcriber and translator: Luong Thu Hien

Date   : 15/6/2013