

## Thesis abstract

# Achieving change in student assessment in Vietnamese teacher training institutions

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The role of student assessment in shaping learning outcomes is well established. In Vietnam, there is a developing consensus at official levels that reform of student assessment practices in higher education institutions is required. In 2006 and 2007, the Ministry of Education and Training issued Decisions seeking to encourage higher education institutions to make more use of student assessment methods likely to support activity-based and self-directed approaches to learning. To date, however, Vietnamese universities and colleges have been remarkably slow to respond. They continue to rely on traditional standardised tests that promote rote learning and do little to develop critical thinking or problem-solving skills among learners.

The present investigation seeks to provide an understanding of the beliefs, values and attitudes towards student assessment of a group of lecturers and educational managers from three teacher training universities in Vietnam. Its purpose is to throw light on the conditions affecting their ability and willingness to reform student assessment practices at their institutions. Theoretical perspectives on student assessment from empirical research in developed higher education systems inform the investigation, and three theories of educational change are drawn upon in seeking to identify the factors that might impact on

the student assessment reform process in higher education institutions in Vietnam.

An ethnographic approach is taken to the collection of data, and Naturalistic Inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) provides a methodological framework for the investigation. Ethnographic interviews were conducted with 24 experienced members of academic staff from across the three site institutions. These participants were selected using a 'snowball' sampling technique whereby each was recommended by a colleague as being interested in and experienced with issues in student assessment. The interview data were analysed by means of thematic analysis, with particular regard taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings.

Three distinct groups of participants are identified. For three of the participants, attitudes to teaching and student assessment were strongly teacher-centred, supportive of traditional standardised methods of student assessment, and shaped by beliefs that students should be obedient, passive learners. These participants had a limited understanding of the range of approaches to student assessment: they were unwilling to make any changes in terms of how they assessed student learning. For 13 of the participants, however, there was recognition of the need to reform student assessment practices: these participants expressed a

willingness to change their own assessment practices, but they felt constrained from doing so because of a perceived lack of expertise and because they saw that many more hours of work would be required to do so effectively. This group, therefore, had not implemented any significant changes. The third group of eight participants aspired to reform the ways in which students were assessed: they actively implemented measures intended to achieve effective reform. They were more inclined than any of the other participants to value their students as learners. They also claimed to be strongly supportive of the role and importance of formative assessment.

The investigation points to the importance of achieving an alignment between policy, leadership and practice in order to achieve enduring educational change. This alignment requires persistent effort to be directed at ensuring that all relevant stakeholders are properly informed about the goals and objectives of desired change. It also requires them to have the resources needed to

engage meaningfully in the change process by implementing continuous assessment and formative feedback to learners about their learning progress. They must also have opportunities to converse collaboratively with their peers about why and how assessment practice needs to be improved.

Achieving a more enlightened approach to student assessment on a national scale in Vietnam's higher education system appears for the time being to remain a distant prospect. This investigation does, however, provide insights into what might need to be done to make the aspiration more achievable, more rapidly.

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