

Research article

Challenges of Implementing Outcome-Based Assessment in Vietnamese Higher Education – A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract: This qualitative study investigates the key challenges faced by university lecturers in implementing outcome-based assessments (OBA) in higher education institutions in Vietnam, a country currently undergoing significant educational transformation. Utilizing a qualitative research design, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 lecturers from diverse academic fields in a institution. The data were thematically coded and interpreted through the lenses of Constructivism, Institutional Theory, and Diffusion of Innovations Theory. Nine major challenges emerged from the findings, including pedagogical hurdles, lack of training and resources, institutional constraints, and technological limitations. These challenges are contextualized within the existing theoretical frameworks and related literature. The study offers critical insights that are deeply rooted in cultural, institutional, and structural variables. These findings are pertinent for educators, administrators, and policymakers in Vietnam and potentially for those in similar educational settings, and they hold broader implications for professional development, institutional policies, technological infrastructure, and cultural shifts within the educational landscape.

Keywords: outcome-based assessment; higher education; Vietnam; qualitative study; challenges

1. Introduction

Higher education globally is undergoing significant transformation, and Vietnam is no exception to this trend. The shift toward quality assurance has led many educational systems to explore outcome-based assessment (OBA) as an alternative to traditional education paradigms that focus primarily on inputs like curriculum and teaching methods (Cao et al., 2022). OBA aims to evaluate educational programs by what students should learn, know, and be able to do upon completion, thereby aligning educational goals more closely with societal needs and employability (Rao, 2020).

In Vietnam, a country striving to modernize its educational system and elevate its global standing, the notion of OBA has garnered considerable attention. Despite this, implementation remains a challenge on several fronts, especially as perceived by the university lecturers who are on the front lines of this transformation (Le, 2016). As a result, this qualitative study aims to investigate the specific challenges of implementing OBA in Vietnamese higher education institutions, focusing on the perspectives of university lecturers. University lecturers are at the heart of the educational process (Wong & Chiu, 2019); their viewpoints provide invaluable insights into the limitations and challenges of implementing OBA within this specific context. By concentrating on the experiences and perceptions of lecturers, this study aims to unearth challenges at the ground level that may not be apparent in policy documents or administrative discourse.

The study is guided by the singular research question: *“What are the key challenges, according to university lecturers, in implementing OBA in Vietnamese higher education institutions?”*

Given the focus on the perspectives of university lecturers, the scope of this study is deliberately narrow but deep. Data will be collected through in-depth interviews with lecturers from various higher education institutions in Vietnam. By zeroing in on this specific group,

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the study aims to offer a nuanced view of the complexities and practical challenges involved in adopting OBA.

2. Literature Review

2.1 General Principles and Goals of OBA

OBA stems from the broader educational philosophy of outcomes-based education, where the focus shifts from teaching-centered methods to learning outcomes (Alonzo et al., 2023). Central to OBA is the notion that assessments should be aligned with desired learning outcomes, often articulated in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that a student should possess upon completion of a program (Biggs & Tang, 2011). OBA aims to produce graduates who are not just academically competent but also equipped with soft skills like critical thinking and adaptability, essential for succeeding in the workplace (Raihan & Azad, 2023).

2.2 Challenges in Implementing OBA in Higher Education

Numerous studies have documented the challenges associated with implementing OBA in higher education. These include institutional resistance (Boud & Falchikov, 2006), lack of faculty training (Yasmin & Yasmeen, 2021), and resource constraints (Sun & Lee, 2020). Moreover, it has been argued that OBA can lead to ‘teaching to the test’, thereby undermining educational quality (Broadfoot & Black, 2004). These challenges are heightened in resource-poor settings and countries undergoing educational reforms, where implementation often requires systemic changes in curriculum design, faculty development, and assessment methods.

2.3 Cultural Considerations in OBA

The effectiveness of OBA can also be influenced by cultural norms and practices within a specific educational context. Several researchers have explored how cultural dimensions like power distance (Lee & Lee, 2018), individualism versus collectivism (Zhang & Yin, 2020), and uncertainty avoidance (Thao & Mai, 2020) can impact educational practices. In the context of OBA, this could translate to reluctance among faculty and students to adapt to new assessment strategies that conflict with traditional educational norms (Kumar & Lauermaun, 2018).

2.4 OBA in Vietnam’s Higher Education

Research on OBA within Vietnam is relatively nascent but growing. Phuc et al. (2020) conducted a study that highlighted institutional and administrative challenges in implementing OBA in Vietnamese universities, such as bureaucratic hurdles and lack of expertise. Another study by Huynh (2022) discussed the need for faculty development programs to facilitate the transition to an outcome-based curriculum. These studies generally concur that the adoption of OBA in Vietnam faces challenges not just at an administrative level but also at the level of teaching faculty who are required to change their assessment practices.

2.5 The Role of University Lecturers

Faculty or university lecturers play a crucial role in the successful implementation of OBA (Jadhav et al., 2020). As the individuals responsible for curriculum design, teaching, and assessment, their attitudes, competencies, and willingness to change are key determinants in the adoption and success of OBA (Saroyan & Trigwell, 2015). However, existing literature on OBA in Vietnam rarely focuses specifically on the challenges as perceived by university lecturers, indicating a significant gap in the research.

In short, OBA is widely recognized as a potentially transformative approach to higher education assessment, offering a more holistic view of student competencies. However, its implementation is fraught with challenges related to institutional culture, resource constraints, and faculty preparedness. Cultural aspects further complicate its adoption, especially in non-Western settings like Vietnam. While some studies have begun to explore these complexities in the Vietnamese context, the literature remains scant on the specific challenges faced by university lecturers. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on the experiences and perceptions of university lecturers in Vietnam as they grapple with the complexities of implementing OBA in their educational practices

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

The qualitative nature of this study allows for an in-depth exploration of the complexities and nuances of implementing OBA. Qualitative research is particularly suited for investigating subjective experiences and social phenomena, making it apt for examining the perspectives of university lecturers (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

There are three theoretical frameworks underpinning this study, including Constructivism, Institutional Theory (IT), and Diffusion of Innovations Theory (DoIT). First, the study leans on the constructivist paradigm, which posits that individuals construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiences and reflections (Piaget, 1970). Within this framework, university lecturers are seen as active agents in the educational process, contributing to the construction and dissemination of knowledge, as well as to the formation of assessment methods. In addition to constructivism, IT serves as another guiding framework. This theory provides valuable insights into how institutional structures and cultural norms influence individual behavior (Scott, 2008). In the context of this study, IT helps to explore how existing norms and structures in Vietnamese higher education institutions may affect the adoption of OBA. Finally, the DoIT by Rogers et al. (2014) is utilized to understand the factors affecting the adoption rate of OBA among lecturers. This theory offers a lens to examine how innovations are communicated and adopted within a social system.

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study consist of 15 university lecturers currently employed at higher education institutions in Vietnam. These lecturers come from a diverse array of academic disciplines and offer valuable insights into the challenges of implementing OBA in Vietnamese higher education settings. The selection of participants aims to provide a comprehensive perspective, accounting for the multidisciplinary nature of higher education as well as the complexities and nuances related to the role of lecturers as assessors.

The participant group includes 8 males and 7 females, thereby ensuring a balanced gender perspective for the study. The average age of the participants is 42.8 years, and they have an average teaching experience of 17 years. The maturity and extensive professional experience of the participants are expected to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the intricacies involved in the adoption and execution of OBA. Among the 15 lecturers participating in the study, 11 hold Ph.D. degrees, while the remaining 4 are currently enrolled as Ph.D. candidates. This high level of academic achievement not only indicates substantial subject matter expertise but also implies a solid grounding in research methodologies, which is expected to enrich the quality of the data collected. The participants represent a broad spectrum of academic fields, including sciences, social sciences, humanities, and professional studies. This interdisciplinary representation aims to capture the multi-faceted identities of teacher assessors across varying academic disciplines, thus providing a well-rounded view of the challenges and considerations involved in implementing OBAs in Vietnam's higher education landscape.

Participants were chosen using a purposive sampling strategy, specifically designed to represent a wide range of academic fields and teaching experiences. While the primary selection criteria were their roles as university lecturers and assessors within higher education institutions in Vietnam, additional considerations were also made to ensure diversity in terms of gender, age, and academic qualifications.

3.3 Data Collection

The primary method for data collection in this study was the use of semi-structured interviews. This approach was chosen for its flexibility and capacity to yield in-depth, qualitative data (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The interview protocol was carefully designed to facilitate a comprehensive discussion of the challenges involved in implementing OBA in higher education institutions in Vietnam. While the interviews were guided by predetermined questions, there was also room for probing and follow-up questions, thereby allowing participants to express their thoughts fully and elaborate on specific points.

Before commencing the main data collection, a pilot study was conducted with two university lecturers who met the study's participant criteria but were not part of the main study sample. This pilot was instrumental in refining the interview protocol and gauging the estimated time required for each interview. Feedback from the pilot study was incorporated to ensure that the interview questions were clear, unambiguous, and relevant to the study's objectives.

Some of the key questions included in the interview protocol were: "Can you describe your experience with OBA in your institution?", "What challenges have you faced in

implementing OBA?”, “How does institutional culture affect the adoption of OBA?”, and “What are your recommendations for overcoming the identified challenges?”

Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, a duration deemed sufficient for the participants to share their insights while minimizing fatigue. The interviews were conducted either in person at the participants’ respective institutions or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on the preference and availability of each participant.

All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to ensure participants could express themselves as naturally and accurately as possible. The recorded interviews were later transcribed and translated into English for analysis, with care taken to preserve the nuances and context of the original responses.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the data collection process. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before initiating the interviews. They were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, with all data securely stored and accessible only to the research team. Any identifiable information was removed or coded to protect the participants’ identities.

3.4 Data Analysis

Prior to the actual analysis, each interview was transcribed verbatim and then translated into English. Translation was cross-verified by bilingual research team members to ensure that the original meanings and nuances were preserved. Transcripts were carefully reviewed for accuracy, and any potentially identifying information was anonymized to protect participants’ confidentiality.

Thematic analysis was employed as the main analytical technique, as outlined by Braun et al. (2023). This method is particularly well-suited for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns or themes within qualitative data. Thematic analysis consists of six phases: familiarization with the data, initial code generation, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and report production.

The first step involved a thorough reading and rereading of the interview transcripts to familiarize the research team with the data. Initial open coding was then performed to label sections of the text that appeared to capture key thoughts or concepts. The coding process was guided by both the study’s research question and new insights gained from the data. An initial codebook was developed, describing the meaning and context of each code. After initial coding, similar codes were grouped together to form potential themes. Each theme was reviewed and refined to ensure it represented a distinct aspect of the data, avoiding overlap. Themes were then compared against the dataset to ensure they adequately captured the nuances and complexities of the participants’ experiences and perspectives.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the analysis, several techniques were employed. First, member-checking was conducted, where summaries of the findings were shared with a subset of participants to confirm the accuracy and resonance of the themes. Second, peer debriefing was carried out among research team members to scrutinize the coding and thematic processes. Any discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Resistance to Change

Twelve participants (n=12 out of 15) highlighted resistance to change as a key challenge. One participant remarked, “I have been teaching for 20 years and have developed my own methods. It is difficult to switch gears at this stage.” Another added, “Institutional mandates for OBA seem disconnected from our daily teaching practices.” From the perspective of Constructivism, this resistance can be linked to the difficulty of assimilating new methods into long-standing teaching paradigms. IT further suggests that this resistance is embedded within organizational cultures and structures, making it difficult to shift to new assessment paradigms. Lastly, DoIT identifies complexity and lack of perceived benefits as barriers to adopting new ideas. This resistance to change resonates with previous studies on educational reform (Yilmaz & Kılıçoğlu, 2013; Gratz & Looney, 2020), but it takes on added significance in the Vietnamese context due to specific institutional cultures and governmental regulations (Benedikter, 2016).

4.2 Lack of Training and Resources

Eleven participants (n=11 out of 15) cited a lack of training and resources as a major obstacle. “We never really had a comprehensive training on how to implement OBA,” said one participant, while another noted, “Resources are always tight. The administration wants improvements but does not provide

the means to achieve them.” According to Constructivism, the absence of adequate training inhibits the construction of new knowledge and teaching methodologies. IT would ascribe this lack to organizational constraints, such as budgetary limitations or competing priorities. DoIT emphasizes that a lack of training and resources hinders the perception of new methods as advantageous, thereby affecting their adoption rate. These findings align with existing studies on the barriers to educational reform (e.g., Zajda, 2003; Karami Akkary, 2014) but highlight the specific challenge of limited localized training programs in Vietnam (Hoang et al., 2023).

4.3 Inadequate Collaboration

Nine participants (n=9 out of 15) identified the lack of collaboration as another critical issue. One participant lamented, *“The departments function in silos. There is little exchange of ideas or sharing of best practices.”* Another cited inter-departmental politics as a barrier: *“Inter-departmental politics often get in the way of constructive collaboration.”* In the frame of Constructivism, the absence of collaboration undermines the collective construction of knowledge and best practices. IT implicates the organizational culture that fosters departmental silos instead of cross-collaboration. According to DoIT, poor collaboration can impede the successful diffusion of new and beneficial practices like OBA. While inadequate collaboration is not a new finding in the field of educational research (Andrews et al., 2007), it is notably intensified in the hierarchical and departmentally segregated context of Vietnamese higher education (Nguyen & McDonald, 2019; Phuong & McLean, 2016).

4.4 Conflicting Assessment Goals

Ten of the participants (n=10 out of 15) voiced concerns about conflicting goals between institutional mandates for assessment and individual pedagogical objectives. One participant stated, *“We are expected to comply with institutional guidelines, but sometimes these are at odds with what we believe would truly benefit the students.”* Another mentioned, *“The pressure to produce high test scores often conflicts with deeper, long-term learning objectives.”* In terms of Constructivism, these conflicts may create cognitive dissonance for lecturers, leading to resistance against the new assessment system. IT suggests that conflicting objectives can arise from a lack of alignment between institutional policy and classroom practices. DoIT highlights that this misalignment can be a significant barrier to the acceptance and adoption of new practices. While conflicting goals in educational assessment are well-documented in existing literature (Beerkens, 2015; Bergh & Wahlström, 2018), the Vietnamese context provides a specific scenario where policy and practice are particularly misaligned (Ngo, 2022).

4.5 Technological Constraints

Eight participants (n=8 out of 15) brought up the limitations imposed by existing technological infrastructures. One participant stated, *“Our tech resources are outdated, which makes it difficult to employ modern assessment tools.”* Another commented, *“We have intermittent internet connectivity, which complicates online assessments.”* Through the lens of Constructivism, inadequate technology limits the tools available for constructivist teaching and assessment. IT offers the understanding that technological constraints are often a symptom of broader institutional limitations, such as budgets. From the perspective of DoIT, the technological constraints impact the ‘trialability’ and ‘observability’ features of innovative assessment practices, thereby limiting their adoption. Previous studies have also pointed out the role of technology in educational assessments (Clarke-Midura & Dede, 2010; Ferdig et al., 2020), but the issue appears to be exacerbated in Vietnam due to underfunding and outdated infrastructures (Tien, 2019; Tran, 2015).

4.6 Unclear Communication and Guidelines

Seven participants (n=7 out of 15) noted that unclear or inconsistent communication from institutional leadership added to their challenges. *“The guidelines for OBA are often vague,”* one participant noted. Another stated, *“We receive mixed messages from the administration, making it hard to implement any consistent assessment strategy.”* Through the framework of Constructivism, unclear guidelines inhibit the lecturer’s ability to adapt and implement new teaching strategies. IT would consider this an organizational failure, indicative of larger structural issues within the institution. The DoIT highlights how such inconsistencies make it challenging to perceive new initiatives as reliable or beneficial. The issue of unclear communication resonates with broader educational literature (Wudthayagorn, 2016) but is particularly problematic in

Vietnam, where administrative directives play a significant role in educational practices (Truong et al., 2017).

4.7 Student Resistance and Lack of Engagement

Nine participants (n=9 out of 15) mentioned that students often resist new assessment methods, preferring traditional approaches. One lecturer said, “*When I try to use new assessment methods, the students are resistant because they are not used to it.*” Another remarked, “*Students do not seem to engage with OBA as much as traditional methods.*” From a Constructivist perspective, this resistance might be due to the students’ pre-established schemas about what assessments should look like. IT would view this as a product of a larger educational culture that has historically favored traditional methods. DoIT would posit that new assessment methods have not crossed the ‘tipping point’ where they become broadly accepted by the student population. Previous studies have addressed the issue of student resistance (Moreira et al., 2020; Oreg, 2003), but this finding is crucial in the Vietnamese context where students have a significant influence on teaching methods due to cultural respect for their role in the educational process (Truong et al., 2017).

4.8 Time Constraints for Implementation

Seven participants (n=7 out of 15) brought up the issue of time constraints. One stated, “*Incorporating new assessment methods is a time-consuming process, and with our workload, it is nearly impossible.*” Another commented, “*I want to try new things, but the semester is so packed, there is simply no room to experiment.*” Constructivism might view this as an environmental constraint that hinders the active experimentation needed for lecturers to develop new strategies. Through the lens of IT, this issue could be seen as an organizational problem where the institution has not allowed faculty the time needed for pedagogical innovation. According to the DoIT, the time needed for full adoption and implementation is a common barrier for many innovations. This aligns with other educational contexts, such as the United States (Griffith & Altinay, 2020), Malaysia (Mustapha & Ghee, 2013) or China (Wang, 2022), but may be more acute in Vietnam due to high faculty workloads (Nguyen et al., 2014; McCornac, 2012).

4.9 Limited Administrative Support

Six participants (n=6 out of 15) felt that there was limited support from their administration in transitioning to OBAs. One participant said, “*We hear a lot of talk about innovation from the administration, but when it comes to practical support, it is lacking.*” Another noted, “*The upper management is disconnected from classroom realities.*” Constructivism would interpret this as a lack of scaffolding from the institution, which hampers teachers’ ability to construct new teaching and assessment practices. IT might suggest this is an issue of misalignment between institutional goals and the resources or support allocated to achieve those goals. From a DoIT perspective, administrative support is crucial for the successful adoption of any innovation, and its absence can be a significant barrier. While limited administrative support is not unique to Vietnam (Painter, 2003; Mai & Thao, 2022), the issue may be compounded by hierarchical structures in Vietnamese institutions (Phuong et al., 2018).

5. Conclusions

The objective of this qualitative study was to unearth the complexities and challenges faced by educators in Vietnamese higher education institutions in implementing OBA. This focus was particularly pertinent given the increasing global momentum towards outcome-based educational models, coupled with Vietnam’s unique position as a rapidly transforming educational landscape.

To gain a nuanced understanding of these challenges, the study employed a qualitative research design, anchored by semi-structured interviews. Fifteen lecturers from a range of academic disciplines were purposively sampled to ensure a breadth of perspectives. Data were then analyzed using thematic coding, and the results interpreted through three theoretical frameworks: Constructivism, IT, and DoIT.

The findings of the study revealed nine principal challenges to the effective implementation of OBA in Vietnam. The lecturers highlighted the difficulty in moving away from traditional pedagogical methods, signaling a deep-rooted resistance to change. Additionally, the lack of adequate training and resources compounded the difficulties faced by the lecturers.

Departmental isolation and the absence of interdisciplinary cooperation also emerged as noteworthy barriers. Other issues such as conflicting goals between institutional mandates and pedagogical ideals, technological limitations, unclear guidelines, student resistance, time constraints, and limited administrative support were also reported. These findings are notably intricate, influenced as they are by a web of cultural, institutional, and structural variables specific to the Vietnamese context.

The study makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on outcome-based education by providing a localized understanding of its challenges in the Vietnamese setting. The complexities revealed are neither minor nor easily rectifiable, being deeply entwined in the educational, institutional, and even cultural fibers of the nation. As Vietnam seeks to position itself in the global educational landscape, understanding and addressing these challenges are vital steps toward meaningful reform.

6. Implications

One of the critical findings from this research was the gap in training and resources for lecturers, highlighting an immediate need for professional development programs. Higher education institutions in Vietnam might find it beneficial to invest in extensive training focused on the nuances of OBA. Such programs could ease the transition for lecturers accustomed to traditional pedagogical methods and provide them with the tools necessary to implement new strategies effectively. Moreover, the study's emphasis on the challenges posed by departmental silos underscores the potential value of fostering interdisciplinary collaboration. Creating platforms or forums where faculty can share insights and best practices could mitigate some of the identified challenges and lead to a more integrated approach to OBA.

The lack of clear guidelines and the inadequacy of administrative support pinpoint the necessity for institutional reform. Educational authorities should consider drafting comprehensive and clear policies to guide educators in the transition to OBA. Additionally, institutions may need to revisit their resource allocation strategies to make the implementation of such assessments feasible. A commitment from higher-level administration, both in terms of material and moral support, could be the lynchpin in successful transitions to newer pedagogical methods.

The study's findings on technological limitations signal a broader issue that extends beyond the realm of educational assessments. It may be prudent for institutions to invest in improved technological infrastructure. This investment should be complemented by digital literacy training programs for faculty and students to ensure that technological advancements are optimally utilized.

The resistance to change, noted both among faculty and students, seems indicative of a deeper cultural reluctance to deviate from established norms. Institutions may thus need to invest in broad cultural shifts that promote openness to innovative approaches. Such a shift could be facilitated through awareness campaigns or even institution-wide dialogues that highlight the benefits and necessity of moving towards OBA.

7. Limitations and Recommendations for Further Studies

This study, while providing valuable insights into the challenges of implementing OBA in higher education institutions in Vietnam, has some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research is based on a small sample size of 15 lecturers from a single institution, which may not be fully representative of the diversity and complexity of higher education across the country. Additionally, the study focuses solely on the perspectives of university lecturers, thereby excluding the viewpoints of other key stakeholders such as students, administrators, and policy-makers. Finally, the qualitative nature of the study limits the generalizability of the findings, as the insights are deeply rooted in the personal experiences and perceptions of the participants.

Given these limitations, there are several avenues for future research. Expanding the sample size and including multiple institutions would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced in implementing OBA. Research that incorporates the perspectives of other stakeholders, including students and administrators, could offer a multi-dimensional view of the issues. Moreover, quantitative studies could complement the qualitative findings of this study, providing data that could be generalized to a broader population.

Longitudinal studies may also be beneficial to understand the temporal aspects of implementing change in educational settings, particularly in assessing the long-term effectiveness and adaptability of OBA.

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