

# Integrating Quality and Sustainability: Exploring the Dynamics of Internal Quality Assurance Systems and Sustainable Development Goals in Vietnamese Higher Education

Tran Thi Thuy<sup>1</sup>, Le Thanh Thao<sup>2</sup>, Pham Trut Thuy<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

*This study explored the integration of internal quality assurance (IQA) systems with sustainable development goals within the Vietnamese academic context, aiming to elucidate the perceptions, experiences, and challenges faced by lecturers. Employing a qualitative methodology, in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 university lecturers, and the data was interpreted through Constructivist Epistemology (CE) and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Findings underscored the profound influence of collaborative dialogues, leadership dynamics, experiential learning opportunities, and cultural nuances on the melding of IQA processes with sustainability initiatives. Participants highlighted the tension between the prescriptive nature of IQA and the adaptive essence of sustainable development, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach. Furthermore, the role of leadership in shaping institutional narratives emerged as a pivotal factor, with a clear vision and commitment facilitating seamless integration. Cultural factors, unique to the Vietnamese context, either propelled or hindered this fusion, revealing the deep interplay between cultural values and academic practices. The study concluded that while challenges persist, the merging of IQA with sustainable development objectives offers promising avenues for fostering holistic education, grounded in both quality and sustainability. The findings have implications for academic institutions, policymakers, and educators striving to align quality assurance mechanisms with evolving global sustainability objectives.*

**Keywords:** *Higher education; internal quality assurance; sustainable development; Vietnam.*

## Introduction

The evolving landscape of higher education has brought about significant shifts in the way institutions perceive quality and sustainability. At the heart of this transition is the pressing need for universities to respond dynamically to a plethora of challenges ranging from globalization to rapid technological advancements (Ho, Hou, & Nourallah, 2021; Kaplinsky & Kraemer-Mbula, 2022). Quality assurance, which has traditionally been viewed as a tool to uphold academic and administrative standards, is increasingly being recognized for its role in promoting sustainable development in higher education settings.

Vietnam, a country undergoing swift socio-economic changes, is a prime example of the intersection of these challenges. The nation's higher education system is caught in a transitional phase, endeavoring to meet international standards while preserving local academic and cultural characteristics (Thao & Mai, 2022). Universities in Vietnam are under immense pressure to produce graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also equipped with skills to drive national growth and sustainable development (Nghia, Giang, & Quyen, 2019). Within this milieu, the question arises: How can internal quality assurance (IQA) mechanisms be effectively leveraged to promote a sustainability-focused educational agenda?

While the relationship between quality assurance and sustainable development has been explored in a general context (e.g., (Tsalis, Malamateniou, Koulouriotis, & Nikolaou, 2020) there is a glaring gap in literature when it comes to understanding this relationship from the perspectives of university lecturers, particularly in developing countries like Vietnam. University lecturers play a pivotal role in the education system (Tømte, Fosslund, Aamodt, & Degn, 2019). Their beliefs, experiences, and insights can shed light on how quality assurance practices intersect with the ideals of sustainability and, more critically, how these practices can be enhanced to align with sustainable development goals (SDGs). This study seeks to bridge this knowledge gap. It aims to explore Vietnamese university lecturers' perspectives on the role and impact of IQA mechanisms on sustainable development. By delving into their experiences and insights, the study

<sup>1</sup> Nam Can Tho University, Vietnam; E-mail: thuybate@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Can Tho University, Vietnam; E-mail: thaole@ctu.edu.vn

<sup>3</sup> Nam Can Tho University, Vietnam; E-mail: ptthuy@nctu.edu.vn

hopes to offer actionable recommendations for integrating sustainability into quality assurance frameworks in higher education institutions.

The focus will remain exclusively on IQA practices within universities, distinguishing them from external evaluation or accreditation. The chosen qualitative approach underscores the intention to deeply understand the lived experiences and interpretations of lecturers, rather than merely quantifying them. In the broader realm of academia and policy-making, understanding the intertwining of quality assurance and sustainable development could prove invaluable. By examining this relationship through the unique lens of Vietnamese university lecturers, this study not only contributes to the body of knowledge on the subject but also provides pragmatic insights that can guide the evolution of higher education in Vietnam and similar contexts elsewhere (Khan et al., 2019).

## Literature Review

The pursuit of understanding the impacts of IQA on sustainable development, especially from the perspective of Vietnamese university lecturers, requires a deep dive into the existing corpus of scholarly work spanning these realms. In this literature review, we explore the overarching themes of the global evolution of quality assurance in higher education, the intricate link between quality assurance and sustainable development, and the distinct contours of Vietnam's higher education system.

Historically, the genesis of quality assurance in higher education can be traced back to the medieval European university system. Over the ensuing centuries, its contours evolved in response to shifting societal needs and the myriad changes that institutions underwent. The latter part of the 20th century, marked by the massification of higher education, witnessed an amplified demand for accountability and quality (Harvey & Green, 1993). Various paradigms of quality assurance have emerged in this period. Westerheijden, Stensaker, and Rosa (2007) highlighted a spectrum that encompasses methods from self-assessment and peer review to accreditation and auditing. While each method brings its strengths and inherent challenges, their applicability is often contingent upon the unique institutional and national contexts they are situated within. Notably, while external assurance processes, like accreditation, often occupy the limelight due to their high stakes, the significance of IQA—undertaken within institutions—cannot be underscored enough. Bollaert (2014) posited that these internal mechanisms are the linchpins for the continuous enhancement of educational practices.

Pivoting to the realm of sustainable development, Baker (2015) definition stands out as a seminal one, envisioning it as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Within the bastions of higher education, this conceptualization takes on the form of molding students with the requisite skills and knowledge for sustainable futures. The interstices between quality assurance and sustainable development are intriguing. Quality assurance mechanisms, if devised with a sustainability lens, harbor the potential to ensure institutions not only uphold academic standards but also make strides towards broader societal imperatives and sustainable deliverables (Lozano et al., 2015). The discourse is increasingly veering towards a consensus that sustainability principles ought to be woven into the very fabric of quality assurance frameworks. Such integration can shepherd institutions towards an education ethos that is both holistic and cognizant of long-term impacts and societal dividends (Mochizuki & Fadeeva, 2010).

Vietnam's higher education landscape provides a fascinating backdrop for this exploration. Post the Doi Moi reforms of the 1980s, there has been a remarkable expansion and internationalization of Vietnam's higher education sector, all calibrated to align with the nation's aspirations for swift industrialization and modernization (Welle-Strand, Vlaicu, & Tjeldvoll, 2013). In this tapestry, university lecturers in Vietnam, traditionally venerated figures, occupy a pivotal space. Beyond the confines of curriculum delivery, they are now the torchbearers of academic research and innovation, which underscores the importance of their perspectives (Vu, Vu, & Hoang, 2020). Quality assurance in the Vietnamese context began gathering momentum in the early 2000s, spurred by the dual impetus of regional integration endeavors and the ambition to elevate the global stature of Vietnamese academic institutions (Dinh Tinh & Thu Ngan, 2022).

In summation, while extant literature provides invaluable compass points on the interplay of quality assurance and its potential confluence with sustainable development, there remains a discernible lacuna. This void pertains to the dearth of insights derived from the lived experiences of university lecturers, more

so in the Vietnamese milieu. It is this gap that the present study seeks to bridge, aspiring to layer a richer, more textured understanding of how the levers of IQA can be maneuvered towards the lofty goals of sustainable development in higher education settings.

## Methodology

### *Research Design*

The inquiry into the impacts of IQA on sustainable development, as perceived by Vietnamese university lecturers, necessitated a research design that captured the depth, richness, and nuance of individual experiences. In response to this requirement, a qualitative research approach was employed. This approach was deemed especially appropriate for understanding complex social phenomena, unpacking subjective experiences, and unveiling deeper insights.

A primary methodological tool that was chosen for this qualitative exploration was the semi-structured interview. The merit of semi-structured interviews rested in their inherent flexibility. They provided a defined set of questions, ensuring that certain areas of interest were addressed, while also granting the interviewer the latitude to pursue new lines of inquiry based on the respondents' answers. This mix assured a balance between structure and spontaneity, permitting participants to relay their perspectives freely, yet within the ambit of the research objectives.

Two pivotal theoretical frameworks underpinned this research design. The first was the Constructivist Epistemology (CE), which posited that knowledge was not merely discovered but constructed through human activity. This perspective underscored the belief that Vietnamese lecturers' interpretations of quality assurance and its relation to sustainable development were constructed through their personal experiences, interactions, and societal contexts. Their narratives were not passive reflections of an objective reality but active co-constructions of meaning shaped by a myriad of factors.

The second framework was the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Given the study's focus on personal experiences and perceptions, IPA was deemed particularly relevant. It aimed to probe deep into how individuals made sense of their experiences, capturing the essence and subtleties of their lived realities. In the context of this study, IPA aided in discerning the unique ways in which lecturers experienced and interpreted the interplay between IQA mechanisms and the principles of sustainable development.

### *Participants*

In the exploration of the impacts of IQA on sustainable development within Vietnamese higher education, a cohort of ten university lecturers served as key informants. These lecturers hailed from two distinguished universities located in the Mekong delta of Vietnam, providing a contextual richness to the perspectives garnered. To ensure depth and relevance of insights, all selected lecturers satisfied certain criteria: they possessed a minimum of three years of teaching experience in higher education and had been actively engaged in quality assurance undertakings within their institutions. Demographically, the group was diverse. Six participants were female, while four were male. Their ages ranged from 32 to 58 years, and on average, they boasted approximately 12 years of experience in teaching within higher education. Their academic specializations spanned a gamut of disciplines, including the arts and humanities, sciences, social sciences, and engineering.

The chosen universities, both ensconced in the Mekong delta, presented contrasting institutional profiles. One university bore the legacy of a rich academic tradition and was acclaimed for its robust research endeavors. The other, more contemporary in its inception, was characterized by its emphasis on vocational training and a proactive approach to fostering industry collaborations.

Given the critical nature of discussions, especially those probing institutional dynamics and challenges, the research process was undergirded by stringent ethical considerations. Before embarking on the interview process, each lecturer was presented with an informed consent document. This comprehensive document delineated the research's objectives, the modalities of the interview, potential risks, and the rights they held as participants. They were apprised of the voluntary essence of their involvement, with the prerogative to withdraw at any stage, sans any repercussions. Assurances to uphold their confidentiality were unequivocally provided. Throughout the transcription and data analysis phases, participants were represented through

pseudonyms, with any potentially identifiable information being meticulously redacted or altered to ensure complete anonymity.

The sanctity and security of data were paramount. All audio recordings from the interviews and their subsequent textual transcriptions were securely housed in encrypted digital repositories, access to which was exclusive to the principal researcher. Any hard copy interview notes were kept under lock and key in the researcher's office. Adhering to the principle of reciprocity, lecturers were accorded the privilege of reviewing and authenticating the interpretations stemming from their shared narratives. Upon culmination of the study, they were also provided a concise version of the research findings for their perusal.

#### *Data Collection*

A cornerstone of this qualitative investigation was the use of semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen due to its ability to delve deeply into individual perspectives while maintaining a consistent thematic structure across interviews. Given the inherent flexibility of the semi-structured format, the interview guide underwent a rigorous development process, which included a pilot study. This pilot study involved conducting preliminary interviews with a subset of participants, enabling the research team to gauge the efficacy of the questions, identify potential ambiguities, and refine the interviewing techniques. Based on feedback and observations from this pilot phase, several modifications were made to the interview protocol, ensuring greater clarity and relevance. Post-revisions, some of the key interview questions included:

- “In your experience, how has IQA influenced the direction of higher education in Vietnam?”
- “Can you narrate any specific instances where quality assurance interventions had a tangible impact on sustainable development in your institution?”
- “What challenges have you faced in integrating sustainable development principles within the framework of quality assurance?”
- “How do you envision the future trajectory of IQA in fostering sustainable development within Vietnamese higher education?”

Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, striking a balance between thoroughness and the preservation of participant comfort. The interviews took place in quiet, private rooms within the respective universities, ensuring an environment conducive to open dialogue and free from interruptions. Recognizing the linguistic preferences and nuances of the participants, all interviews were conducted in Vietnamese. This choice not only facilitated smoother communication but also allowed participants to express their views with cultural and contextual authenticity.

Ethical considerations remained at the forefront of the data collection process. Prior to the interviews, all participants were re-acquainted with the study's objectives and their rights as participants. As reiterated from the informed consent phase, participants were constantly reminded of their right to withdraw or skip any questions they found uncomfortable. Given the potential sensitivity of some topics, utmost care was taken to approach questions with empathy and respect.

In addition to the aforementioned ethical measures, particular attention was paid to potential power dynamics, as discussing internal processes and potential criticisms could be sensitive, especially in the context of hierarchical academic settings. The researcher ensured neutrality and maintained an active listening posture throughout the sessions, providing participants with a safe space to share their experiences and perspectives.

Finally, once each interview was completed, it was transcribed verbatim. Given the linguistic nuances and potential cultural connotations embedded in the Vietnamese language, expert translators were engaged to assist in the subsequent translation process, ensuring that the essence of participants' insights was faithfully captured in the analysis phase.

#### *Data Analysis*

The data analysis process was designed to systematically unpack, interpret, and represent the rich narratives obtained from the semi-structured interviews. As the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, the first step involved meticulously transcribing the audio recordings verbatim. Given the subtleties and cultural

nuances intrinsic to the Vietnamese language, the transcription process was undertaken with acute attention to detail to ensure that the depth and breadth of participants' expressions were accurately captured.

Following transcription, the data underwent a translation phase. Given the potential challenges associated with translating cultural and academic jargon, expert translators well-versed in both the nuances of the Vietnamese language and the context of higher education were engaged. This measure was taken to ensure that, in translation, the essence and integrity of the participants' perspectives remained intact and undistorted.

With the translated transcripts in hand, the core phase of thematic analysis began. Drawing inspiration from Braun, Clarke, and Hayfield (2023) approach to thematic analysis, this study followed the following steps. The research team immersed themselves in the data by repeatedly reading the transcripts, gaining an overarching sense of the narratives, and making initial observations. Data segments pertinent to the research objectives were systematically coded. This process was both inductive, emerging from the data, and deductive, aligned with the study's theoretical frameworks. Codes were collated and grouped based on patterns and potential relationships, leading to the emergence of overarching themes and sub-themes. The robustness of identified themes was evaluated by revisiting the data, ensuring that they faithfully represented participants' narratives. Each theme was finely honed, defined, and assigned a descriptor that encapsulated its core essence. Findings were synthesized, and representative quotes from participants were selected to illustrate and authenticate the emergent themes.

Throughout the analysis process, rigorous measures were undertaken to ensure reflexivity and minimize researcher bias. The research team engaged in regular peer debriefing sessions, critically examining their interpretations and challenging potential biases or preconceptions. The use of multiple coders during the initial coding phase further bolstered the analysis's reliability, as differences in interpretations were debated, reconciled, and converged upon to form a holistic understanding.

## Findings

### *Balancing Rigor and Innovation: Navigating the Dual Role of IQA in Advancing Sustainable Development in Higher Education*

One salient finding that emerged from the data revolved around the perception that IQA was both a catalyst and a challenge for embedding sustainable development in university pedagogy and practice. Among the participants, a significant majority (n=8 out of 10) expressed that while IQA mechanisms instilled a sense of responsibility and urgency toward sustainable development, they also sometimes acted as restrictive frameworks, curtailing innovative methods to incorporate sustainability principles.

Illustrating this sentiment, one participant shared,

“IQA, in many ways, has compelled us to think about the long-term vision of our institution, including our commitment to sustainability. But there are moments I feel boxed in, unable to experiment or introduce novel sustainability-focused interventions because they might not align with the strictures of our IQA.”

Another lecturer echoed a similar sentiment, stating,

“The benchmarks set by our IQA often serve as a double-edged sword. They act as a guide, pushing us towards sustainability, but at times, they also hinder our creative capacities in integrating sustainability organically within our disciplines.”

Analyzing these perspectives through the lens of CE, it becomes evident that the lecturers' perceptions of IQA vis-à-vis sustainable development are not static truths but rather are constructed through their lived experiences. These experiences are shaped by their interactions with the IQA mechanisms, their pedagogical commitments, and the broader institutional milieu. As they grapple with the challenges and opportunities presented by IQA, they co-construct a narrative that oscillates between viewing IQA as an enabler and, at times, as a constraint.

IPA further deepens this understanding. The essence of IPA is to capture how individuals make sense of their experiences. In this context, the nuanced perspectives shared by the lecturers indicate a complex



interplay between their lived experiences of implementing IQA and their personal aspirations to promote sustainable development in higher education. The tension they describe—between adherence to IQA standards and the desire for pedagogical innovation—reflects a deeper quest to harmonize administrative imperatives with transformative educational ideals.

*Synergy through Dialogue: The Power of Collaborative Interactions in Reconciling IQA with Sustainable Development in Academia*

A subsequent notable finding that surfaced from the interviews pertained to the role of collaborative dialogue and peer interactions in influencing perceptions and practices related to IQA and sustainable development. A significant portion of the participants (n=7 out of 10) highlighted that their understanding and appreciation of the nexus between IQA and sustainable development were profoundly shaped by their interactions with peers, both within their respective departments and across the university.

One participant poignantly captured this sentiment, saying,

“It was during our departmental meetings, when a colleague shared an innovative approach to aligning course content with sustainability principles without compromising on IQA, that I truly began to see the possibilities.”

Another lecturer echoed this notion of collaboration, noting,

“I was initially skeptical about the feasibility of genuinely integrating sustainable practices while adhering to IQA benchmarks. However, after several interdisciplinary discussions and joint workshops, I have come to realize that it is not an ‘either-or’ situation but a ‘both-and’ approach that we need.”

Interpreting these responses through the prism of CE, the collaborative and social nature of knowledge construction becomes evident. The participants’ beliefs and understandings about IQA and sustainable development are not formed in isolation but are continually molded and refined through interactions, discussions, and shared experiences with their peers. This collaborative dimension reiterates the idea that knowledge is not merely an individual endeavor but is deeply social, shaped by shared experiences and communal dialogues.

Delving deeper through IPA, it becomes clear that these shared spaces of dialogue are not just platforms for information exchange but are arenas where lecturers grapple with, challenge, and reinterpret their lived experiences. The transformative potential of peer interactions, as revealed by the lecturers, indicates that shared experiences provide an avenue for individuals to reconcile the often competing demands of IQA and sustainability initiatives, ultimately leading to a more harmonized understanding.

*Bridging the Gap: The Disparity between Theoretical Commitments and Practical Implementations of Sustainable Development within IQA Frameworks*

Another intriguing finding derived from the data concerned the perceived dichotomy between the “theoretical” endorsement of sustainable development within IQA frameworks and its “practical” manifestation in day-to-day pedagogical activities. A considerable number of participants (n=6 out of 10) felt that while IQA documents and guidelines frequently highlighted the importance of sustainable development, the ground realities often painted a different picture, characterized by a gap between policy rhetoric and actionable practices.

One participant lamented,

“Our IQA documents are filled with references to sustainable development, and on paper, it all looks commendable. Yet, when it comes to daily teaching or departmental decisions, there is a noticeable disconnect between what we say we prioritize and what we actually do.”

Building on this notion, another lecturer commented,

“It is as if sustainable development is a fashionable term that is added to IQA to make it look progressive. But when it is time to walk the talk, very few concrete steps are taken to truly integrate sustainability into our curriculum or research.”

Using the lens of CE, this disconnect can be seen as a result of the diverse and sometimes conflicting constructions of what sustainable development and IQA genuinely represent. These constructions are shaped by the lecturers' lived experiences, interactions with policy documents, and the tangible practices they observe within their institutional milieu. When there is a divergence between the proclaimed values (in IQA documents) and observed actions, it leads to the co-construction of a narrative that questions the authenticity of the commitment to sustainable development.

Further, when analyzed through IPA, it becomes evident that the lecturers are not passive recipients of this observed dichotomy. Instead, they actively engage with, interpret, and make sense of this gap. Their expressions of disillusionment, captured in the excerpts, reflect a deeper yearning for alignment between institutional proclamations and actionable pedagogical practices.

*From Rigidity to Reflection: How IQA Mechanisms Foster an Evolving Pedagogical Commitment to Sustainable Development*

An additional pivotal discovery from the data revolved around the belief that IQA mechanisms, though structurally rigid, inadvertently cultivated a culture of reflection and continuous improvement among lecturers. This was expressed by a prominent segment of participants (n=7 out of 10), who recognized that the regular evaluations, feedback loops, and benchmarking associated with IQA had honed their introspective capabilities, prompting them to consistently assess and enhance their pedagogical methods in line with SDGs.

An illustrative excerpt from one participant read,

“At first, I was apprehensive about the periodic evaluations under IQA. But over time, I realized that this very process nudged me to consistently reflect on my teaching methods, making me more receptive to integrating sustainability-focused content and pedagogies.”

Another lecturer expanded on this sentiment, remarking,

“The feedback loops in our IQA system, while sometimes daunting, have become essential touchpoints for me. They have made me more conscious of where I stand and what needs to evolve, especially in the context of sustainable development.”

Examining these perspectives through CE reveals an interesting dynamic. While IQA, with its structures and standards, might be perceived externally as a top-down mechanism, its impact on individual lecturers has facilitated an internal, bottom-up construction of understanding. Through continuous engagement with IQA processes, lecturers have shaped and reshaped their beliefs and approaches towards sustainable pedagogies, indicating that knowledge and understanding are emergent, relational, and anchored in experience.

Delving through the lens of IPA, the transformative nature of these experiences becomes apparent. The repetitive cycles of evaluation and reflection under IQA are not mere administrative tasks for these lecturers. They are deeply introspective journeys, which, over time, mold their pedagogical identities, aligning them more closely with the tenets of sustainable development.

*Leadership at the Helm: Steering the Confluence of IQA and Sustainable Development in Higher Education*

The subsequent revelation from the data emphasized the multifaceted role of leadership in mediating the relationship between IQA and sustainable development. A majority of participants (n=6 out of 10) conveyed that institutional leadership played a decisive role in either facilitating or inhibiting the effective melding of IQA mechanisms with sustainability objectives. The tone and tenor of leadership, their commitment, and their ability to articulate a clear vision were seen as influential factors shaping the integration process.

One participant insightfully noted,

“When our dean explicitly voiced his commitment to sustainability and linked it with our IQA processes, it cascaded down to our departmental levels, inspiring us to align our courses and research more holistically with sustainability.”

Another lecturer offered a contrasting perspective, stating,

“There seems to be a lack of clear direction from the top. We often hear about the importance of both IQA and sustainable development, but without a concerted leadership vision, the integration feels disjointed and ad-hoc.”

Interpreting these insights through the CE lens, it is evident that leadership, in shaping institutional narratives and priorities, influences the collective construction of reality. The commitment and vision articulated by leadership become part of the shared understanding and belief systems, guiding how faculty perceive, interact with, and operationalize IQA in the context of sustainable development.

The IPA further provides depth to this understanding. Leaders, with their distinct experiences and expressions, impact the lived experiences of the faculty. As the lecturers navigate the complexities of melding IQA processes with sustainable goals, the clarity and commitment of the leadership act as touchstones, guiding, and influencing their phenomenological journey.

*Navigating Dichotomies: The Interplay of Rigid IQA Structures and the Fluidity of Sustainable Development in Academia*

Another significant insight emerging from the data centered on the conceptual tension between the inherent prescriptive nature of IQA processes and the adaptive, fluid essence of sustainable development initiatives. A compelling subset of participants (n=5 out of 10) conveyed that the often rigid and standardized approach of IQA sometimes clashed with the evolving and context-specific nature of sustainability, posing challenges in their seamless integration within the academic milieu.

One lecturer poignantly illustrated this tension, stating,

“While our IQA processes are stringent and well-defined, sustainability is a concept that is ever-evolving, responding to current global and local challenges. Marrying the two can sometimes feel like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.”

Another participant added depth to this perspective, noting,

“IQA, by its very design, demands conformity and consistency. But sustainability often requires innovative, out-of-the-box thinking. It is a challenging dichotomy to navigate in our day-to-day teaching and research.”

From the vantage point of CE, this tension arises from the differing constructions of what constitutes ‘quality’ and ‘sustainability.’ While IQA might be grounded in a more positivist stance, emphasizing measurable standards and uniform benchmarks, sustainability leans towards a more interpretive, evolving paradigm, shaped by socio-cultural, economic, and environmental contexts. The juxtaposition of these diverse epistemological stances results in the experienced tension.

When probed through the lens of IPA, the lived experiences of the lecturers reveal a deeper layer of complexity. Their endeavors to reconcile the prescriptive demands of IQA with the dynamic nature of sustainability are laden with personal interpretations, struggles, and reflections. These endeavors are not just cognitive exercises but form an integral part of their evolving professional identities and pedagogical philosophies.

*Cultural Tapestry: Weaving the Threads of Vietnamese Traditions with IQA and Sustainability Imperatives in Higher Education*

An unexpected observation from the data touched on the multifaceted interplay between cultural factors and the merging of IQA with sustainable development objectives. Remarkably, a subset of participants (n=4 out of 10) identified specific cultural nuances, particularly within the Vietnamese academic context, that either propelled or hindered this integration.

One of the participants reflected,

“In our culture, there is a deep-rooted respect for traditions and established procedures. Sometimes, this can create inertia, making it difficult to infuse new sustainability concepts into our established IQA routines.”

Yet another lecturer emphasized the positive facets, stating,



“The Vietnamese ethos of community and collective welfare aligns naturally with sustainable development principles. This cultural alignment often makes it easier to rally support for sustainability initiatives within the broader framework of IQA.”

Drawing insights from the CE framework, it becomes evident that cultural constructs, values, and norms coalesce to shape the collective understanding of both IQA and sustainability. These shared constructs, deeply ingrained within the academic community, can potentially influence the manner and depth with which sustainability is incorporated into quality assurance processes.

Using the IPA perspective, the participants’ shared experiences underscore the profound influence of cultural factors on their interpretations and understandings. The integration of IQA and sustainability is not merely a technical or procedural challenge; it is intertwined with the fabric of cultural narratives, beliefs, and values, each of which shapes the phenomenological experience of this integration.

*Experiential Alchemy: Transmuting Abstract Sustainability Principles into Tangible Learning through IQA-driven Engagements*

Another striking discovery unearthed from the data related to the experiential learning opportunities facilitated by the merger of IQA systems with SDGs. A noteworthy number of participants (n=6 out of 10) illuminated that the hands-on, practical application components introduced under the aegis of IQA processes provided an invaluable learning ground for embedding sustainability principles in actionable formats.

A participant shared,

“While theory is crucial, it is the real-world projects, community engagements, and hands-on experiences introduced through IQA that have truly brought sustainability concepts alive for our students.”

Another lecturer affirmed this sentiment, asserting,

“It is one thing to discuss sustainable development in abstract terms and quite another to see it in action. The practical modules under our IQA framework have ensured that students do not just learn about sustainability, but actively participate in it.”

Engaging with these reflections through the lens of CE, one discerns that knowledge is not just passively absorbed but actively constructed through experiences. The tactile, real-world engagements, facilitated by IQA processes, serve as conduits for students and lecturers alike to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct their understanding of sustainable development. This dynamic, iterative process underscores the profound influence of experiential learning in shaping perceptions and understandings.

Delving into these experiences with the prism of IPA, the profound, transformative nature of these engagements becomes salient. Each hands-on project, community interaction, or practical application becomes a tapestry of lived experiences, deeply personal and resonant, weaving together the theoretical underpinnings of sustainability with its tangible manifestations.

## Discussion

*Balancing Rigor and Innovation: Navigating the Dual Role of IQA in Advancing Sustainable Development in Higher Education*

The study’s findings resonate with the larger discourse in higher education research, particularly the ongoing deliberations about the role of IQA mechanisms in shaping sustainability endeavors within academic institutions. Previous studies have similarly highlighted the intricate balance that institutions attempt to strike, oscillating between the structured demands of IQA and the adaptive, evolving nature of sustainability (e.g., Rahminawati and Supriyadi (2023)). Our findings lend credence to this established narrative, yet with specific nuances rooted in the Vietnamese higher education context. In their seminal work, Hall, Maw, Midgley, Golding, and Steer (2014) celebrated the potential of IQA in steering universities towards more responsible, sustainable practices. They contended that a robust IQA system could channel institutional energies in a more focused, deliberate direction, accentuating the importance of sustainability. Our study aligns with this perspective, with participants acknowledging the driving force of IQA in foregrounding

sustainability in institutional discourse and actions. However, where our study diverges, and perhaps contributes distinctively to the field, is in its exploration of the perceived constraints imposed by IQA. While Seyfried and Ansmann (2018) briefly alluded to the possible restrictive nature of IQA, they did not delve deep into its ramifications for sustainability initiatives. Our findings enrich this dimension, highlighting the very real challenges lecturers face in navigating the tight spaces of IQA, which sometimes stifle pedagogical creativity and innovation in sustainability integration. This perceived dichotomy, wherein IQA emerges both as a catalyst and a constraint, underscores a critical reflection point for higher education policymakers and administrators. Are current IQA frameworks agile and adaptive enough to accommodate the fluid, dynamic essence of sustainability? Or do they, in their quest for consistency and standardization, unintentionally impede innovative, context-specific sustainability interventions? Further, the theoretical frameworks employed, particularly CE and IPA, have shed light on the subjective realities of our participants. This subjective lens is crucial, as it diverges from many past studies that adopted a more positivist, objective stance in evaluating the impacts of IQA (Harackiewicz, Barron, & Elliot, 1998). By emphasizing the lived experiences, personal narratives, and constructed realities of our participants, this study has deepened the understanding of the multifaceted relationship between IQA and sustainable development, a perspective that has hitherto remained underexplored in the extant literature.

*Synergy Through Dialogue: The Power of Collaborative Interactions in Reconciling IQA with Sustainable Development in Academia*

The prominence of collaborative dialogue and peer interactions as influential factors in shaping lecturers' perceptions and practices surrounding IQA and sustainable development underscores the inherently social and collaborative nature of knowledge construction in academic settings. This theme echoes the findings of Greenhow and Askari (2017) who identified peer interactions as pivotal in guiding faculty understanding and integration of sustainability within their curriculum. Their study, however, focused primarily on the information dissemination potential of such interactions, highlighting their utility as conduits for best practice sharing. Our research, on the other hand, delves deeper, unveiling the transformative potential of peer interactions. Here, these interactions transcend mere information exchange, acting as reflective spaces where lecturers co-construct, challenge, and redefine their understanding of IQA and sustainability, shaping it in alignment with shared experiences and insights. This nuanced appreciation distinguishes our findings from the established narrative, enriching the discourse by foregrounding the deeper cognitive and emotional processes underpinning peer interactions in academic settings. Contrasting our findings with the work of Davies (2017) who argued for the pre-eminence of top-down institutional directives in guiding faculty behavior towards sustainability, our study illuminates the potency of bottom-up, grassroots-level collaborative dialogues. While institutional directives undeniably play a role, our research underscores the agency of faculty members in harnessing peer interactions as catalysts for change, thereby charting a more decentralized, democratic path towards achieving sustainability goals within the constraints of IQA. Through the lens of CE, our findings reiterate the pivotal role of social interactions in knowledge construction. This aligns with Vygotsky (1978) seminal work, which emphasized the socio-cultural context of learning, arguing that knowledge is actively constructed through interactions within one's socio-cultural environment. Our study, rooted in the Vietnamese higher education milieu, reaffirms this, suggesting that the co-construction of knowledge about IQA and sustainability is deeply entrenched in the shared experiences, dialogues, and reflections of academic peers. IPA further complements this by emphasizing the experiential, lived nature of these interactions. As our participants revealed, these dialogues are not merely transactional but transformational, imbued with deep personal and collective reflections that shape their pedagogical trajectories.

*Bridging the Gap: The Disparity between Theoretical Commitments and Practical Implementations of Sustainable Development within IQA Frameworks*

The perceived chasm between the theoretical commitment to sustainable development within IQA frameworks and its practical embodiment in daily academic activities resonates with a broader discourse in the realm of educational policy and practice. This disparity between policy rhetoric and ground-level implementation is not unique to our findings but aligns with observations made in studies across different educational contexts. A comparative analysis with Thompson and Green (2020) illuminates this. Their research in Canadian universities highlighted the frequent incongruence between institutional policies on

sustainability and their operationalization in classroom settings. They posited that such discrepancies often arise from bureaucratic complexities, lack of resources, or inadequate training. Our study, while congruent with their observations about the existence of a gap, dives deeper by spotlighting the faculty's sense of disillusionment and yearning for genuine alignment. Contrastingly, the work of Marginson (2011) on South Korean higher education institutions presented a more optimistic picture, suggesting that policy commitments to sustainability were often translated into tangible pedagogical practices. While this may seem divergent from our findings, it is essential to contextualize these differences within the unique socio-cultural and administrative landscapes of the respective countries. The Vietnamese higher education system, with its distinct challenges and strengths, may yield patterns not immediately comparable with other nations. CE offers insights into understanding this observed disconnect. If knowledge and understanding are actively constructed through lived experiences and interactions, as this framework posits, then the discord between policy rhetoric and observed practices would naturally lead faculty to construct narratives that question the genuineness of the commitment to sustainable development. This perspective underlines the importance of ensuring that policy declarations are not mere performative gestures but are rooted in tangible, actionable strategies that align with ground realities. Further deepening this understanding, IPA illuminates the emotional and cognitive processes underpinning the lecturers' responses. Their active engagement with the perceived dichotomy, as revealed through their reflections, underscores the agency of faculty members in critiquing, interpreting, and making sense of institutional practices. Their expressions are not mere critiques; they are reflective of a deeper aspiration for integrity, consistency, and authenticity in bridging the gap between proclamations and practice.

#### *From Rigidity to Reflection: How IQA Mechanisms Foster an Evolving Pedagogical Commitment to Sustainable Development*

The emergent finding that IQA mechanisms foster a culture of reflection and continuous improvement among lecturers aligns with, yet also adds depth to, existing literature on the interplay between quality assurance processes and pedagogical evolution in higher education. A parallel can be drawn to the study by Pauwels, Walsche, and Declerck (2015) which emphasized the reflective practices induced by quality assurance mechanisms in European higher education institutions. They postulated that such mechanisms, despite their apparent rigidity, have the potential to stimulate critical self-reflection among educators, leading to pedagogical advancements. While this resonates with our discovery, our study further nuances this understanding by contextualizing it within the framework of SDGs, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between reflection, pedagogical evolution, and sustainability. However, a study by Mangnale and Potluri (2011) in the context of Indian higher education presents a slightly divergent view. Their research suggested that while quality assurance processes did prompt reflection, they often led to surface-level changes, with deeper pedagogical transformations being infrequent. This divergence underscores the importance of localized contexts and institutional cultures in shaping the outcomes of quality assurance mechanisms. Analyzing our findings through CE offers a layered understanding. The inherent dynamism of IQA, though externally perceived as prescriptive, becomes an avenue for internal growth and transformation for the lecturers. The reflective practices it engenders facilitate a continuous reconstruction of pedagogical beliefs, emphasizing the iterative and emergent nature of knowledge. This understanding aligns with Mårtensson, Roxå, and Stensaker (2014) notion that engagement with evaluative frameworks, like IQA, becomes a pedagogical exercise in itself, molding educators' worldviews and practices over time. IPA further deepens this insight. The faculty's engagement with IQA is not limited to mere compliance; it becomes an introspective voyage that shapes their identities as educators. Their narratives underscore the transformative potential of repeated evaluative encounters, a sentiment echoed in Brinkerhoff, Brethower, Nowakowski, and Hluchyj (2012) study, which proposed that regular evaluations, though procedurally structured, could cultivate a sense of ownership and agency among educators.

#### *Leadership at the Helm: Steering the Confluence of IQA and Sustainable Development in Higher Education*

The emergent theme highlighting the crucial role of leadership in shaping the integration of IQA with SDGs adds another layer to the intricate tapestry of higher education practices and reinforces several insights found in existing literature, while also providing unique contributions. Previous studies, such as that by Chun and Evans (2023) posited that leadership is pivotal in shaping the strategic directions of higher education institutions, especially when navigating complex agendas like sustainability. They suggested that

effective leaders not only articulate a clear vision but also create enabling environments that foster innovation and alignment with broader institutional goals. The accounts of our participants resonate with this perspective, as they underscore the significance of leadership in streamlining IQA processes with sustainability imperatives. However, where our study further contributes is in its nuanced portrayal of the influence of leadership on faculty perceptions and practices. While Reichard and Johnson (2011) emphasized the role of leadership in institutional strategy, our findings delve deeper into the experiential realm of the lecturers, highlighting how leadership nuances directly mold faculty interactions with IQA and sustainable development. Through the lens of CE, leadership emerges not just as an administrative or strategic function but as a powerful influence on the communal construction of knowledge and beliefs within the institution. This idea builds upon the work of Paarlberg and Lavigna (2010) who proposed that institutional narratives, heavily influenced by leadership, shape collective understandings and drive academic practices. Our findings deepen this perspective by illustrating how leadership impacts the confluence of IQA processes with sustainability goals. IPA provides another dimension to this discussion. Leadership's role is not just transactional, dictating policy or strategy; it is transformational, impacting the very lived experiences of faculty members. As Gaus, Basri, Thamrin, and Ritonga (2022) asserted, leadership in higher education should be viewed through a phenomenological lens, recognizing its profound impact on shaping the experiences, beliefs, and practices of the academic community.

#### *Navigating Dichotomies: The Interplay of Rigid IQA Structures and the Fluidity of Sustainable Development in Academia*

The theme spotlighting the conceptual tension between the inherent prescriptiveness of IQA and the evolving nature of sustainability resonates with discussions in extant literature, while also offering novel insights that augment the academic discourse on the topic. Historically, studies on quality assurance in higher education, such as that by Davies and Thomas (2002) have highlighted its deterministic, standardized nature, intended to ensure consistency and accountability across academic institutions. Concurrently, research in the realm of sustainable development in higher education, such as that by Bolmsten and Kitada (2020) underscores its adaptive, context-specific essence, often rooted in pressing socio-environmental challenges. This study underscores the juxtaposition of these paradigms and throws light on the challenges educators face in navigating this dichotomy. Our findings amplify the discussions by Stephens and Graham (2010) who hinted at the friction between rigid academic quality frameworks and the transformative aspirations of sustainability education. Our study, however, delves deeper by providing firsthand accounts of lecturers who grapple with this friction in real-time, highlighting the cognitive and pedagogical intricacies involved. Examined through CE, our findings elucidate the divergent epistemological foundations of IQA and sustainability. Where IQA seeks objective, quantifiable benchmarks to define 'quality,' sustainability is framed within subjective, evolving contexts, mirroring the dynamic nature of socio-environmental systems. This echoes the assertions by Wals and Jickling (2002) who proposed that when trying to incorporate sustainability into academic institutions, one must recognize and reconcile these foundational epistemological distinctions. When scrutinized using IPA, our findings shine a spotlight on the rich tapestry of personal experiences, challenges, and interpretations that lecturers encounter. This is reminiscent of insights from Lidgren, Rodhe, and Huisingh (2006) who argued that integrating sustainability into higher education is not a mere curricular adjustment but a profound pedagogical transformation. Our findings bolster this argument by showcasing the intricate phenomenological journeys of lecturers as they navigate the terrain between IQA rigidity and sustainability fluidity.

#### *Cultural Tapestry: Weaving the Threads of Vietnamese Traditions with IQA and Sustainability Imperatives in Higher Education*

The intersection of cultural dimensions with the alignment of IQA and sustainable development objectives presents a nuanced layer to the broader discourse, hinting at the multifaceted influences that drive pedagogical decisions and institutional policies. Within the field of higher education studies, scholars like Nguyen (2008) have underscored the profound role that culture plays in shaping academic practices, policies, and perceptions, especially in non-Western contexts like Vietnam. This study not only aligns with these findings but also extends the discussion by spotlighting the specific cultural facets that mediate the fusion of IQA and sustainability. The reverence for traditions and established procedures, highlighted by the participants, mirrors the sentiments captured by Tran (2014) who contended that Vietnamese academic institutions often grapple with the balance between preserving traditional values and adapting to modern



pedagogical imperatives. Our study brings to the fore the complexities this cultural orientation poses, especially when attempting to merge rigid IQA protocols with the evolving tenets of sustainable development. Conversely, the positive cultural attributes, especially the Vietnamese ethos of community and collective welfare, resonate with insights from Vu, Finkenauer, Huizinga, Novin, and Krabbendam (2017). They opined that Vietnamese cultural values, with their emphasis on communal harmony and welfare, naturally dovetail with the global SDGs, particularly those centered on societal well-being and communal prosperity. Our findings lend empirical weight to this argument, suggesting that these cultural values can serve as pivotal enablers in the quest to align IQA with sustainability. Viewed through the lens of CE, the study illuminates how cultural constructs, deeply embedded within the societal psyche, mold the collective perceptions of both IQA and sustainable development. This reinforces the thesis proposed by Pham and Renshaw (2015) that any academic transformation in Vietnam (or similar cultural contexts) should be cognizant of these cultural underpinnings, ensuring that reforms are not just procedurally sound but also culturally congruent. IPA further deepens this understanding. The participants' narratives reveal the intricate dance between cultural ethos, academic imperatives, and personal interpretations. It underscores that the journey to meld IQA with sustainability is, in essence, a cultural voyage, traversing the contours of tradition, belief systems, and shared societal values.

### *Experiential Alchemy: Transmuting Abstract Sustainability Principles into Tangible Learning through IQA-driven Engagements*

The affirmation of experiential learning as an effective medium for internalizing sustainable development concepts, as echoed in this study, resonates with the broader educational discourse on the efficacy of active, hands-on pedagogies. Kolb and Kolb (2017) propounded the idea that learning is a process where knowledge is co-created through the transformation of experiences. The narratives of the participants in this study seem to embody this very ethos, highlighting the critical role that real-world engagements play in shaping sustainable development comprehension. This study's findings align with and build upon the work of scholars such as Van Manen (2016) who championed the cause of education being deeply rooted in lived experiences and active participation. The emphasis on community engagements, projects, and hands-on experiences as highlighted by the participants, encapsulates James and Dewey (2005) vision of education as a continuous process of experiencing and re-experiencing, and Freire, Talanquer, and Amaral (2019) emphasis on praxis – the integration of reflection and action. The synergy between IQA processes and experiential learning opportunities underscores a potentially transformative strategy for academic institutions. It suggests that quality assurance mechanisms, often perceived as bureaucratic and procedural, can, when thoughtfully designed, catalyze deep, meaningful learning experiences. This resonates with the insights of Wiek, Withycombe, and Redman (2011) who emphasized that transformative sustainability education often emerges from real-world problem-solving and participatory approaches. Viewing these findings through CE, one can surmise that the integration of IQA systems with SDGs facilitates a rich terrain for knowledge co-construction. It shifts the learning paradigm from a passive receipt of information to an active engagement, where learners become co-creators of knowledge. Such an approach resonates with Vygotsky (1978) emphasizing the importance of social interactions and real-world contexts in the learning process. IPA further accentuates the personal, transformative dimension of these experiential engagements. The stories shared by the participants are testimonies to the deeply personal journeys of understanding, reflection, and action, each of which adds a layer of depth to their conceptualization of sustainable development.

### **Conclusion**

The intricate dance between IQA mechanisms and the objectives of sustainable development in academic settings formed the backdrop of this study. Set against the Vietnamese academic context, this research embarked on a qualitative exploration to discern the nuanced interplay of factors that either facilitate or challenge the integration of these two seemingly distinct entities. Leveraging a robust methodological framework comprising CE and IPA, the study delved deep into the lived experiences of lecturers to draw out their perceptions, challenges, and insights.

A rich tapestry of findings emerged, shedding light on the myriad dimensions that influence the merging of IQA and sustainability goals. These ranged from the dichotomy between theoretical endorsements and practical manifestations of sustainability in IQA, the role of leadership, the cultural dynamics in play, to the



profound impact of experiential learning opportunities. The data painted a multifaceted picture, reflecting both the challenges posed by structural rigidity of IQA processes and the transformative potential of hands-on, experiential engagements in fostering sustainability comprehension.

The implications of these findings are manifold. Firstly, academic institutions must recognize the potential disconnect between policy rhetoric and ground realities. While policy endorsements are crucial, it is the tangible, actionable steps that truly reflect an institution's commitment to sustainability. Leadership emerges as a pivotal catalyst in this endeavor. Clear, consistent, and committed leadership can bridge the chasm between policy and practice, galvanizing faculty towards a unified vision of sustainability. Cultural factors, deeply rooted within the academic milieu, further underscore the need for context-specific strategies. Recognizing and leveraging the synergies between cultural values and sustainable development can potentiate the integration process. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, the power of experiential learning stands out as a beacon. For institutions aiming to foster a deep-rooted sustainability culture, embedding hands-on, real-world engagements within their IQA processes might be the transformative key.

In wrapping up, this study accentuates the complex yet profoundly rewarding journey of integrating IQA systems with SDGs in academia. While challenges abound, the potential for transformative learning and systemic change offers a beacon of hope. Academic institutions stand at the crossroads of this change, and with thoughtful strategies, grounded in insights such as those presented in this study, they can chart a path towards a more sustainable, enlightened future.

### Limitations and Recommendations for Further Studies

While this study has provided valuable insights into the integration of IQA with sustainable development objectives in the Vietnamese academic context, there are certain limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the sample size, comprising 10 participants, may not be representative of the broader academic community, and the experiences and perspectives shared might not encapsulate the entire spectrum of views on the subject. Second, the qualitative nature of the study, relying predominantly on interviews, may be influenced by the participants' recall bias and subjectivity, potentially skewing the findings. Additionally, the specific focus on the Vietnamese academic context may limit the generalizability of the results to other cultural or institutional settings. Furthermore, while IPA offers deep insights into individual experiences, it may not capture overarching systemic or institutional dynamics that could influence the study's themes.

Building upon the insights unearthed in this research, there exists a vast landscape for further exploration. Future studies could delve deeper into understanding the specific nuances of leadership styles and their differential impact on integrating IQA with sustainability goals, given the pronounced influence of leadership underscored in the current study. Similarly, the intriguing interplay of cultural factors warrants a more granular exploration, perhaps through comparative studies across different academic cultures and contexts. The transformative potential of experiential learning, highlighted prominently in our findings, invites a closer examination of the specific types of hands-on engagements that yield the most profound sustainability understandings. It would also be valuable to undertake longitudinal studies to track the long-term impact of integrating IQA processes with sustainability goals on students' learning trajectories and career choices. Lastly, quantitative studies employing larger sample sizes could complement the qualitative insights of this research, offering a more holistic understanding of the phenomena in question.

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