Achieving Change in Student Assessment in Vietnamese Teacher Training Institutions

Luong Thi Hong Gam

BA (University of Pedagogy, HCMC), MEd (La Trobe University)

School of Education
Southern Cross University

Thesis submitted to fulfil the requirements of

Doctor of Philosophy

January 2016
I certify that the work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged in the text, and that the material has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

I acknowledge that I have read and understood the University's rules, requirements, procedures and policy relating to my higher degree research award and to my thesis. I certify that I have complied with the rules, requirements, procedures and policy of the University (as they may be from time to time).

Signed:  
Date:  

April 22, 2016.
Abstract

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

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

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

Three distinct groups of participants are identified. For three of the participants, attitudes to teaching and student assessment were strongly teacher-centred, supportive of traditional standardised methods of student assessment, and shaped by beliefs that students should be obedient, passive learners. These participants had a limited understanding of the range of approaches to student assessment: they were unwilling to make any changes in terms of how they assessed student learning. For 13 of the participants, however, there was recognition of the need to reform student assessment practices: these participants expressed a willingness to
change their own assessment practices, but they felt constrained from doing so because of a perceived lack of expertise and because they saw that many more hours of work would be required to do so effectively. This group, therefore, had not implemented any significant changes. The third group of eight participants aspired to reform the ways in which students were assessed: they actively implemented measures intended to achieve effective reform. They were more inclined than any of the other participants to value their students as learners. They also claimed to be strongly supportive of the role and importance of formative assessment.

The investigation points to the importance of achieving an alignment between policy, leadership and practice in order to achieve enduring educational change. This alignment requires persistent effort to be directed at ensuring that all relevant stakeholders are properly informed about the goals and objectives of desired change. It also requires them to have the resources needed to engage meaningfully in the change process by implementing continuous assessment and formative feedback to learners about their learning progress. They must also have opportunities to converse collaboratively with their peers about why and how assessment practice needs to be improved.

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

It would have been impossible to complete this investigation without significant support from many people. I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge my sincere gratitude to all those concerned.

I acknowledge my debt to the Government of Vietnam for providing financial support for my studies in Australia. I also gratefully acknowledge the additional financial support provided by Southern Cross University during the four years of the present investigation.

My wholehearted appreciation goes to my wonderful supervisors. I am deeply indebted to Assoc. Prof. Sharon Parry and Prof. Martin Hayden for their tireless support, invaluable guidance and inspiring supervision through this challenging journey. They have taught me to be a real researcher. They had faith in me and empowered me to accomplish my research goals. I am fortunate to have had them as my supervisors. Without their wisdom, generosity, and committed support, this research would never have been possible.

I also wish to express my deep gratitude to Dr Chris Morgan. Dr Morgan supported, encouraged and guided me through the process of identifying and articulating themes from the data. He was generous with his time and his advice was invariably wise.

I owe a great debt to the Rectors of the three site institutions in Vietnam, and especially to the 24 participants from these institutions. Many of the participants gave up a considerable amount of their time to provide me with a depth of understanding about their experiences of student assessment. The insights provided by the participants greatly enriched the research process and contributed enormously to the eventual conclusions from the investigation. Their candour also gave me much enjoyment. I thank them deeply.

My sincere thanks goes to Ms Tracey for being a great language advisor, particularly in the early stages of my research when I needed to improve my writing skills. I also wish to acknowledge the important role played by Dr Dao Van Khanh, a Research Fellow at Southern Cross University, who, as an independent auditor of my research, helped me to identify the need for corrections to sections of the translations of my interview transcripts. I would like to deeply thank Mr Robert Lingard, who spent his valuable time on guiding me how to use NVivo to manage and analyse my qualitative research data. I am also most grateful to Ms Di Davies.
who, in the final throes of writing before submission, provided me with valuable advice on the style and presentation of my thesis.

The Library staff members at Southern Cross University were exceptional for their friendly and professional support. I deeply thank them. I also owe a special thanks to the kind and friendly University security officers who attended to my safety when I needed to work well into the night in my office at the University.

I am appreciative also of the kind support and assistance provided by my colleagues and fellow PhD candidates in the School of Education at Southern Cross University. I would especially like to express my deep gratitude to Assoc. Prof. Marilyn Chaseling, Dr Brian Kean, Dr Wendy Boyd, Dr Tony Yeigh, Mr Alan Foster, Ms Jubilee Smith and Dr Marianne Logan for their great support. They have given me valuable time during my pilot interviews and helped me to enrich my assessment knowledge and interview experiences. I warmly thank Hieu Huynh, Chinh Nguyen, Thi Tran and Anh Le, my Vietnamese fellow PhD candidates, who have been sharing the ups and downs through my research journey.

I gratefully acknowledge the endless support and caring of Duy Nguyen and Linh Nguyen who have tried to find different ways to encourage me to overcome challenges during my research journey. I owe a special debt to Kate Neale for her emotional support and encouragement, particularly towards the end of my candidature. I am also most appreciative of the timely support provided to me by Leslie Browell.

Completing this thesis has required a huge amount of patience and support from my loving family. I would like to thank my parents, my parents-in-law, my sisters’ families, my brother-in-law’s family, my nephews and my nieces who were a wonderful source of encouragement for me to overcome the various obstacles encountered.

Last but by no means least, I wish to express how much I have appreciated my husband, Tien, and my daughter, Duong, for their love, their resilience and their belief in me throughout the period of my candidature. They have been magnanimous in their support for my research.
Preface: A Practitioner’s Journey

I was born, grew up and was educated in Vietnam, where an examination-oriented culture dominates every level of the education system. For my entire education in Vietnam, I was expected to absorb instruction passively and then reproduce it faithfully in end-of-unit or end-of-year examinations. Passing examinations became an obsession, contributing to anxiety and dependence as a learner. It also contributed to the suicide of two of my friends who were so ashamed of having failed their university entrance examinations that they felt that they had no future.

Parents and teachers are also affected by the examination-oriented culture of assessment. Parents in Vietnam typically feel a deep sense of shame when their children fail to succeed in examinations. This sense of shame is projected onto their children, at times resulting in punishments for the children and complaints about the teachers. Teachers are directly affected by the performance of their students in examinations, because poor examination performance is frequently interpreted as implying a deficiency in their professional skills. In these circumstances, many students in Vietnam resort to cheating in examinations; teachers often enough collude in this practice.

As a fresh university student in Vietnam about 18 years ago, I observed how, even in higher education, examinations dominated the curriculum. The teaching style was authoritarian and lecturers were viewed as the font of all knowledge. In classes, students stood up when the lecturer entered the room, and they spoke only when invited to do so. An ‘information transmission’ model of teaching was rigorously applied, and performance in the end-of-unit examination was the only form of motivation applied. I cannot forget the anxiety I felt when waiting for examination results. Academic staff members would post the results on a noticeboard and I would scramble to find my name and my grades among hundreds of others. If the results of my examinations were satisfactory, then my mission was accomplished. If I failed, I would be required to re-sit the relevant examination at a later date. I had no opportunity to review what I had written in my examination papers, and I never once, except when I completed my graduation thesis, ever received any written feedback on my work. During my entire studies, I never heard any mention of the concept of formative assessment.

After graduating from university, I was employed as a lecturer at a teacher training college (now a university). As with many such institutions in Vietnam, it was poorly equipped and its
facilities were inadequate. There was an absence of useful learning resources. The official salary was low: a full-time salary 14 years ago was about $50 AUD per month, which was not enough to pay for rent, utilities and food. Like most of my colleagues, therefore, I sought extra teaching elsewhere, simply to achieve an income level on which I could survive. Though committed to being a good teacher, I faced many difficulties: there were scant written training materials; and textbooks were, in most cases, written by teachers who had studied in the former Soviet Union, which meant that they were theory-oriented and weighed down by content that was supposed to be memorised. My colleagues and I suffered intense pressure to implement an overcrowded syllabus within the prescribed classroom time. My students had a limited amount of time and little incentive to go to the library, do research, or undertake any independent or self-directed learning. Their focus was to learn whatever needed to be reproduced in order to pass the end-of-unit examination.

I also faced difficulties because I had never been taught how to design an examination or how to write an examination question. Summative assessment, using traditional standardised tests, was only assessment option available, and so skills in developing the kinds of short-answer, true-false and multiple-choice questions required had to be developed, mostly by learning from the example of more experienced lecturers. These formats, together with a practical examination and an oral viva, focused entirely on students being able to remember and reproduce knowledge and skills. This culture placed enormous stress on new lecturers. We wanted to change the way in which students were assessed, but we did not know how to achieve any form of change. There were no professional reading materials available, and professional development, if it was available, was not encouraged.

In 2005, after working for four years as a lecturer, I was given the opportunity to complete a Master of Education at La Trobe University in Melbourne. For the first time in my life I encountered an alternative student assessment model. I experienced ‘formative assessment’, ‘peer-assessment’ and ‘self-assessment’, and I came eventually to understand the nature of a ‘learner-centred’ approach to curriculum, whereby the teacher is a facilitator rather than an undisputed authority. At first, aspects of this new learning environment felt uncomfortable because I had no experience of assessing my own work or of commenting on work completed by my peers. At the same time, it was exhilarating to have the freedom to learn for myself without the pressure of having to learn for the sake of reproducing knowledge in an examination. Picking up my completed assignments became a joy because I received so much valuable feedback. Eventually, I also found The experience of learning: Implications for teaching and studying in higher education, edited by Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle (1984).
This book stimulated my thinking about teaching and assessment and it entirely reshaped my approach as a professional educator. It provided evidence that students’ interests in study, their attitudes to study and their approaches to learning are all driven by how assessment tasks are perceived.

Returning to Vietnam in March 2007, I shared what I had learned in Australia with my colleagues. I decided to change my approach to teaching and to classroom assessment practice by using formative assessment to provide feedback to my students. I asked students to complete assignments and engage in teamwork. The response from my students was extremely positive, but my new approach to teaching was also quite demanding to implement because of large class sizes. The effort required implementing group tasks and peer feedback, together with formative assessment for individual students in very large classes, was extremely onerous. More worrying to me was that my attempts at ‘learner-centred’ teaching might not ultimately be effective because Vietnamese students are disinclined to express their opinions, beliefs and feelings openly and directly. Therefore, they are reluctant to contribute their own views and ideas in class.

Since 2006, and more recently, lecturers in universities and colleges in Vietnam have been given increased freedom to employ alternatives to the traditional forms of student assessment. Regulations have been introduced whereby student assessment of a study unit must take account not only of performance in a final examination but also performance in the learning process, including matters related to practical application, attendance, attitudes and commitment, and test results for modules. The final examination for a unit of study must count for no less than 50% of the marks available.

These regulations provided for the first time a remarkable opportunity for the implementation of continuous assessment, and, eventually, of formative assessment. In general, however, the rate of change is very slow. Though the regulatory environment had become more supportive of the adoption of new forms of student assessment in higher education, it is not entirely clear how lecturers were supposed to implement them, and no professional development is provided to enable teaching staff to learn more about alternative purposes and forms of student assessment. Lecturers in the higher education system cannot make improvements to student assessment practices without having some guidance and inspiration, and access to relevant resources.
In 2011, I was given an opportunity to return to Australia, this time to Southern Cross University, to complete a PhD. The obvious topic for me to investigate was how to speed up the adoption of a more research-based and liberating set of student assessment practices across the higher education system in Vietnam.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ ii
Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................................... iv
Preface: A Practitioner’s Journey .................................................................................................. vi
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................................ x
List of Figures .................................................................................................................................... xiii
List of Tables .................................................................................................................................... xiv
Acronyms ......................................................................................................................................... xv

1.1 The Setting ................................................................................................................................. 1
1.2 The Research Problem ............................................................................................................... 6
1.3 Conceptual Framework ............................................................................................................. 10
1.4 Methodology ............................................................................................................................ 12
1.5 Organisation of the Thesis ........................................................................................................ 13

Chapter 2 - Approaches to Student Assessment ......................................................................... 15

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives on Student Assessment ..................................................................... 15
2.2 Formative Assessment ............................................................................................................. 23
2.3 Student Assessment in Vietnam ............................................................................................... 29
2.4 Concluding Remarks ............................................................................................................... 32

Chapter 3 - Educational Change ................................................................................................. 33

3.1 Theory of Complex Adaptive Systems ..................................................................................... 33
3.2 Fullan’s Theory of Educational Change ................................................................................... 38
3.3 Communities of Practice ......................................................................................................... 44
3.4 Concluding Remarks ............................................................................................................... 49

Chapter 4 - Methodology ............................................................................................................. 50

4.1 Research Design ....................................................................................................................... 50
4.2 Sites and Participants ............................................................................................................... 54
4.3 Data Collection ....................................................................................................................... 58
4.3.1 Semi-structured interviews ............................................................................................... 58
4.3.2 Documentary data ............................................................................................................. 62
4.4 Data Analysis ........................................................................................................................... 63
4.5 Trustworthiness ....................................................................................................................... 65
4.6 Ethical Considerations .............................................................................................................. 68
4.7 Concluding Remarks ............................................................................................................... 68

Chapter 5 - Beliefs, Values and Attitudes about Student Assessment ........................................ 69

5.1 The Adaptive Implementers .................................................................................................... 69
5.1.1 Perceptions of the role and purposes of assessment ......................................................... 70
5.2 The Defending Denialists ..................................................................................................... 79
5.2.1 Perceptions of the role and purposes of assessment ......................................................... 80
5.2.2 Perceptions of their teaching role ..................................................................................... 81
5.2.3 Typical student assessment methods employed ................................................................. 83
5.2.4 Employing formative assessment and feedback ............................................................... 84
5.3 The Changing Pragmatists .................................................................................................... 86
5.3.1 Perceptions of the role and purposes of assessment ......................................................... 87
5.3.2 Perceptions of their teaching role ..................................................................................... 88
5.3.3 Typical student assessment methods employed ................................................................. 89
5.3.4 Employing formative assessment and feedback ............................................................... 91
5.4 Concluding remarks ............................................................................................................... 92
9.6 Concluding Remarks ........................................................................................................ 167

References ............................................................................................................................. 169

Appendices ............................................................................................................................ 179

Appendix 1: Letter of Recommendation for PhD Candidate to conduct data collection........... 179
Appendix 2: Email Introduction to Experienced Lecturers and Educational Managers......... 180
Appendix 3: Participant Information Sheet ............................................................................ 181
Appendix 4: Informed Consent ............................................................................................. 183
Appendix 5: Auditor Report .................................................................................................. 186
Appendix 6: Ethics Approval ................................................................................................. 187
List of Figures

Figure 2.1. A Hierarchy of Verbs that may be used to Form Intended Learning Outcomes ............................................. 17
Figure 5.1. The Spectrum of Beliefs, Values and Attitudes about Change in Student Assessment ............................... 93
Figure 9.1. An Adaptive Model for Effective Student Assessment at ................................................................. 156
Vietnamese Teacher Training Universities .................................................................................................................... 156
List of Tables

Table 4.1. Participant Profile........................................................................................................57
Table 4.2. Interview Questions and their Intended Purpose.........................................................59
# Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MoET</td>
<td>Ministry of Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PISA</td>
<td>Programme for International Student Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOLO</td>
<td>Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes (Taxonomy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1 - Introduction

If we wish to discover the truth about an educational system, we must first look to its assessment procedures. (Rowntree, 1987, p. 1)

It is well established that the quality of student assessment is pivotal to the realisation of a successful teaching and learning system. As Bryan and Clegg (2006, p. 2) state, student assessment plays a vital role in framing learning, forming learning activity, and orientating all aspects of learning behaviour. This fact was demonstrated empirically many decades ago when important discoveries were made about how student perceptions of assessment requirements informed both their approaches to learning and the quality of their learning achievements (see, for example, Marton et al., 1984). Klenowski (2009c, p. 77) asserts that student assessment is an integral part of curriculum and is a driver for educational change. Reforming student assessment, according to Leiding (2009, p. 134), provides a basis for setting more appropriate learning targets, framing the professional development of teachers, inspiring curriculum reform and improving instructional quality.

In Vietnam, the need to reform student assessment practices is now regarded as one of the national strategies for education development, as indicated in Decision No. 711/2012/QĐ-TTg, 13th June 2012 (Chính Phủ, 2012). Student assessment practices in universities and colleges remain, however, predominantly summative in nature, with examinations dominating the curriculum. The present investigation addresses this topic from the perspective of lecturers and educational managers. More specifically, it seeks to explore why achieving change in the culture of student assessment in the higher education system in Vietnam is so difficult. Even among senior public officials in Vietnam, there is concern about the adverse effects of current approaches to student assessment in the higher education system, yet change proceeds at a remarkably slow pace. This chapter introduces the investigation.

1.1 The Setting

In this investigation the experiences of 24 lecturers and educational managers from three universities in Vietnam that specialise in teacher training are explored in depth. Borg (2006, p. 275) observes that: “the social, institutional, instructional and physical settings in which teachers work have a major impact on their cognitions and practices”. A suitable point of departure, therefore, is to begin with an outline of the setting for the investigation.
The World Bank describes Vietnam as “a development success story” (2015, p. 1). Whereas in the mid-1980s, Vietnam was the second-poorest country in the world, experiencing food shortages and widespread poverty (Glewwe, 2004, p. 1), Vietnam today has a vibrant export-oriented economy with a consistently high rate of economic growth and a rapidly declining incidence of poverty. Its gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, which in 2014 was US $2,052, is safely above the level set by the World Bank for classification as a ‘low income’ economy (World Bank, 2015, p. 1). A turning point for Vietnam was a policy decision taken in 1986 by the Communist Party of Vietnam (hereafter referred to as the Party) to abandon Soviet-style centralised economic planning in favour of a regulated market system. The new policy, known as đổi mới (economic reform), created the conditions required for a major transition in the economy – one that made Vietnam less economically dependent on agriculture and that facilitated the development of a strong industrial base. Vietnam is now approaching a state of full integration with the global economy (Australian Government, 2015), though, as reported by Harman, Hayden and Pham Thanh Nghi (2010, p. 1), its rapid economic growth remains heavily reliant upon the availability of a low-skilled workforce and the exploitation of natural resources, which could limit its long-term development.

With increased national prosperity, Vietnam is now also experiencing widespread social change. Though not yet highly urbanised – in 2014, only 33% of the population of 90 million lived in urban areas (World Bank, 2015) – a process of rapid urbanisation is well under way. People from rural areas are moving in large numbers to cities such as Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Hai Phong, Can Tho and Da Nang, where there are more employment opportunities. These cities are also fast becoming sites for an expanding middle class, with tastes that include more and better educational services.

However, Vietnam’s culture remains fundamentally traditional in outlook. Scholars such as McCornac and Phan Thuy Chi (2005, p. 82) and Pham Lan Huong and Fry (2011, p. 22) refer to Vietnam as being deeply rooted in the communal values of a Vietnamese village (tình cộng đồng người Việt). Vietnam is also said to have a “peasant thinking style” (tâm lý tiểu nông) (Cao Thi Sinh, 2013, p. 1; Nguyen Thanh Tinh, 2007, p. 1), characterised by a high level of protectiveness of its national identity and a general reluctance to embrace change.

Vietnam’s education system is the product of many influences. A Confucian system of education, deriving from China, became well established in Vietnam during the 11th century. In 1076 AD, the Temple of Literature (Văn Miếu) was built in Thăng Long, the site of modern-day Hanoi, in honour of Confucius. An associated Imperial Academy (Quốc Tử Giám) was also
Nguyen Xuan Thu (1997, p. 137) reports that Confucianism came to dominate the education system in Vietnam up until the early 20th century. According to London (2011, p. 6), its influence was most strongly felt at the village level, where Confucian scholars prepared local boys who wished to sit for examinations conducted by the Confucian academies for the purposes of selecting future teachers, government officials, and imperial court mandarins. These examinations, according to Nguyen Dang Tien, Ho Thi Hong and Doan Tri Nguyen (1996), were conducted at three levels: the provincial (thi hương), the national (thi hội) and the imperial (thi Đình). They required the completion of written tests and oral vivas in which candidates reproduced their knowledge of traditional (mainly Confucian) teachings. Success rates were low, and the select few who achieved eligibility to sit for and who passed an examination at the national level were rewarded with the title of doctor (Tiến sĩ). The imperial level exam was to classify and to rank the doctors.

The Confucian education system disappeared under the French, who governed Vietnam as a colony for almost 100 years up to 1954. The French also introduced a Western-style education system. According to Nguyen Xuan Thu (1997, p. 138), and London (2011, p. 9), this system developed to meet the needs of the colonial authorities rather than to serve the educational needs of the population. London (2011, p. 11) also reports that 95% of Vietnamese people were illiterate during the French colonial period. As in the Confucian system, the French colonial education system was highly selective, with success dependent upon performance in highly competitive examinations.

After 1955, the Soviet Union provided a model for the development of the education system in the north of Vietnam, while, in the south, the French model was retained, though with an American system of education also becoming influential. Reunification in 1975 led to the Soviet model being implemented uniformly across the country. London (2011, p. 15-17) notes that this model was strongly focused on achieving a high national level of basic literacy and numeracy. The model was also distinctive for the extent to which it centralised policy decisions. Following đổi mới, departures from this model began to be permitted, mainly in the higher education sector (Nguyen Xuan Thu, 1997, p. 139).

Though Confucian academies disappeared under the French, Confucianism continued to exert a powerful influence on perceptions about education in Vietnam. Within the Confucian tradition, teachers are authoritative sources of knowledge and wisdom, and students are expected to display an unquestioning acceptance of what they teach (Nguyen Kim Dung &
McInnis, 2002, p. 152). Social formalities at the classroom level reinforce this hierarchical relationship. As described by Nguyen Phuong Mai, Terlouw, and Pilot (2006, p. 5), students are, for example, expected to stand up when a teacher enters the classroom, and they are never permitted to ask questions to the teacher unless invited to do so. Pham Thanh Nghi (2010, p. 54) observes that teachers in Vietnam want their students to listen to and obey them, and so students readily assume a passive disposition in relation to their teachers. A high “power distance”, as described by Hofstede (1997, p. 28), also exists between people in higher and lower positions of authority, and is accepted as the norm. Teachers are subject to the authority of, and must be respectful towards, their education managers, just as students are subject to, and must be respectful towards, their teachers.

A preoccupation with examinations also persists in Vietnam. There is a deep-rooted cultural commitment to the importance of examinations, in schools as well as in universities and colleges. Hayden and Le Ngoc Lan (2013, p. 337) refer to the “tyranny of testing” that exists across the education system in Vietnam. Even at a young age, children are required to sit for multiple tests during the school year, and then for a final test at the end of the school year to determine their eligibility to progress to the next grade level. To succeed in these tests, children must follow exactly the instructions given by their teachers, and their success is a function of their ability to reproduce whatever they have been taught. This pressure is commonly accepted as contributing to students becoming fearful, nervous and dependent as learners (Hayden & Le Ngoc Lan, 2013; Nguyen Thi Phuong Hoa, 2009, p. 135). As reported by Hayden and Le Ngoc Lan (2013, p. 337), teachers are also affected because they risk being ‘warned’, and hence shamed, by the school principal if their students do not achieve good marks. Pressure to succeed in school examinations has given rise to the widespread prevalence of after-school (or ‘extra’) classes, to such an extent that, according to London (2011, p. 89), these classes are almost as significant as the formal school system itself.

This culture of teaching and assessment has serious consequences. First, it induces a form of learning that is heavily reliant on memorisation, and that is not well suited to addressing situations requiring the application of knowledge, the discovery of new knowledge, or the exercise of creativity. Second, because of the emphasis on the attainment of high scores in examinations, teaching and learning activities in Vietnam tend to focus only on whatever is likely to be assessed in examinations. Nguyen Thi Phuong Hoa (2009, p. 135), Harman and Le Thi Bich Ngoc (2010, p. 71), and UNESCO-IBE (2011, p. 22), all assert that this preoccupation with learning for the purposes of reproducing knowledge in an examination results in students achieving lower-order learning outcomes and becoming passive learners. It also encourages the
adoption of ‘surface’ approaches to learning, the detrimental effects of which for the quality of learning were documented as long ago as the early 1980s (Marton et al., 1984). The influence of these teaching and learning traditions in Vietnam cannot be overestimated because they encourage, through socially embedded pressures, the widespread adoption of norm-referenced assessment approaches that require learners to memorise what is expected to be on final examinations. In turn, the dominant learning culture is one that involves the adoption of ‘surface’ approaches to learning, which will be explained more fully in the following chapter.

Nguyen Kim Dung and McInnis (2002, p. 152) also address such socially embedded traditions, reporting that the unconditional nature of the respect given to teachers limits critical thinking, self-confidence and the development of communication skills by students; and that it impedes the development of creativity because knowledge conveyed by a teacher is not supposed to be questioned. Other researchers (see, for example, Tran Quang Trung & Swierczek, 2009; Tran Thi Tuyet, 2013) have observed also the pressing need for Vietnamese graduates to be better prepared to meet the labour-market needs by being better at critical thinking, problem-solving and communication skills, and by being less dependent as learners.

These areas of weakness in Vietnam’s education system have been officially recognised, and national policies intended to achieve change have been introduced. In relation to higher education, the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) has issued two Decisions that focus on the need for the reform of student assessment practices. These are Decision No. 25/2006/QĐ-BGD&ĐT, dated June 26, 2006, regarding school-year training, and Decision No. 43/2007/QĐ-BGD&ĐT, dated August 15, 2007, regarding the credit-training system. These Decisions introduced requirements that student assessment for a unit of study should take account of more than the knowledge demonstrated in a single examination. They imposed on academic staff members a need to assess a wide range of student attributes, including attitudes to study, class attendance, an ability to apply knowledge, the quality of contributions to group discussions, and cumulative performance on modules within a unit of study. In particular, they required that the final examination for a unit of study should count for no less than 50% of the marks available for the unit. The purpose of these Decisions was to encourage lecturers to adopt more varied approaches to student assessment. The Decisions also opened a door for the use of formative student assessment methods in the higher education system.

The Government of Vietnam seems committed to achieving reform in terms of how higher education students have their academic performance assessed, but, as reported in Chapter 2, the Decisions that announced in 2006 and 2007 are not as far-reaching nor as well backed up with guidelines and professional development programs as they might have been. The system
remains in need of a great deal of pressure in order to shift from its current domination by summative examinations.

1.2 The Research Problem

This investigation addresses the problem of how to achieve an enduring change in the culture of student assessment in teacher training universities in Vietnam. Teacher training universities are important because of their influence on all levels of the education sector. Culture is understood here to refer to beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours, in this case relating to student assessment practices that are well-informed by an extensive body of robust empirical research. The kind of change that is envisaged is one that moves these universities away from their current heavy reliance on summative forms of student assessment, particularly summative examinations.

In 2011, the most recent year for which reliable data have been reported, Vietnam had 14 universities focused on teacher training, 19 universities with faculties of education, 56 colleges focused on teacher training, and 6 junior teacher training schools (UNESCO-IBE, 2011, p. 23). Universities offer four-year degrees, and colleges offer three-year diplomas. Except at the two national universities, which have autonomy in the development of their study programs, curriculum frameworks for all degrees and diplomas offered by higher education institutions in Vietnam must comply with MoET’s curriculum framework requirements. In general, these require that there should be a foundation component of units that address general knowledge and skills, a core component of units that address subject matter knowledge, and a professional application component of units that address applied knowledge. Curriculum frameworks for teacher training adopt this structure, with the professional application component consisting of units that address professional practice needs. These include a six-week period of work-based training during which time student teachers observe and may possibly engage in classroom teaching practices.

Since the MoET Decisions of 2006 and 2007, more progressive approaches to student assessment in higher education in Vietnam are being encouraged, but various scholars have observed how student assessment policies and practices across the education system as a whole need to be significantly reconstructed (Hayden & Lam Quang Thiep, 2010, p. 30; Nguyen Thi Phuong Hoa, 2009, p. 135; Vu Thi Phuong Anh, 2006, p. 6). Vietnam’s ambition is to establish highly competitive and internationally recognised higher education institutions by 2020. First, though, as Harman and Le Thi Bich Ngoc (2010, p. 68-70) proposed, Vietnam needs to produce
a new generation of teachers with the ability to develop in their students a capacity for independent and deep approaches to learning that connect learning with real life situations. According to Carless (2015, p. 3), “students are best served when they develop meaningful learning from the assessments they undertake.” Therefore, the role and purposes of assessing student learning in higher education in Vietnam now need to be given appropriate consideration in line with global assessment practices and academic standards. In this context, the development by teachers of skills in formative assessment and standards-based assessment is essential.

Because teaching, learning and assessment practices are so closely entwined, the traditional student assessment culture in Vietnam generates many unintended outcomes. Hamano (2008, p. 402), for example, notes how programs for teachers in training in Vietnam devote too much time to the study of theory-laden subject matter knowledge, assessed in traditional ways, and an insufficient amount of time to the development of professional practice skills. Nguyen Thi Phuong Hoa (2009, p. 135) reports also that lecturers in teacher training programs are more likely to be attending to the transmission of knowledge than to the development of teaching skills. In this vein, Nguyen Duc Chinh (2008, p. 1) and Nguyen Minh Hong (2011, p. 244) report that student assessment practices in universities in general are dominated by traditional standardised tests that require the reproduction of knowledge and that are far removed from the use of authentic applications of knowledge relating to real life and the world of work. Current student assessment approaches, according to Le Thi Lieu and Huynh Xuan Nhat (2009), pay little attention to the learning process or to how students will learn after they have finished their final assessment task in a unit. In teacher training programs, the teaching approaches that are most commonly adopted do not encourage an active engagement by student teachers in their own learning, and neither do they facilitate the self-monitoring of learning or the practice of independent learning.

Some obvious obstacles to progress must be acknowledged. One of these is that the higher education system continues to be over-regulated (Hayden & Lam Quang Thiep, 2010; Pham Thanh Nhi, 2010; Pham Thi Ly, Nguyen Tat Thang & Hayden, 2015). Hayden and Lam Quang Thiep (2010, p. 19-20) describe how ministries and State instrumentalities continue to line-manage higher education institutions as if they were extensions of the State bureaucracy. MoET also retains a tight control over national higher education policies, curriculum frameworks, financial planning, quality assurance and personnel management. According to Pham Thanh Nhi (2010, p. 55), the high level of State control of higher education institutions is counter-productive, resulting in conservatism, inflexibility and the discouragement of innovation.
Significant steps have recently been taken to reduce the control of the State of the higher education system. The recent *Higher Education Law* (Quốc hội, 2012, Article 32) has proposed, for example, that certain higher education institutions should enjoy much more institutional autonomy. According to Pham Thi Ly et al. (2015, p. 150), though, the process is slow because of most higher education institutions are not well prepared to make good use of the additional autonomy.

Another obstacle concerns the inadequate resourcing of the education system. Various scholars (see, for example, Harman & Le Thi Bich Ngoc, 2010, p. 75; Pham Thanh Nghi, 2010, p. 53) have documented the impact of the poor resourcing of the higher education system. Salaries for academic staff members are poor; staff-to-student ratios are high; teaching venues are poorly equipped; and teachers are engaged in heavy teaching loads. The higher curriculum is also excessively theory-oriented (Harman & Le Thi Bich Ngoc, 2010, p. 75). This situation is the product of many factors, including the low qualifications of academic staff and the lack of research experience (London, 2011, p. 39; Nguyen Thi Phuong Hoa, 2009, p. 138), a limited understanding of contemporary student assessment approaches, and a dominant belief that student assessment consists solely of conducting examinations and grading student performance (The Institute for Educational Research, 2005, p. 1). There is also a shortage of a wide range of rich learning resources, which makes it difficult for teachers to encourage more independent learning (Hayden & Le Ngoc Lan, 2013, p. 337)

Yet another obstacle concerns the lack of a comprehensive quality accreditation mechanism for the higher education system as a whole. In 2003, a General Directorate for Educational Testing and Accreditation was established within MoET, with responsibility for establishing a quality accreditation process for the higher education system. Since then, according to Pham Thi Ly et al. (2015, p. 155), a quality accreditation system involving institutional self-reviews, followed by external peer reviews, has been implemented. The process of implementing quality accreditation is, however, beginning very slowly, the main obstacle being the length of time it takes individual higher education institutions to complete effective institutional self-reviews.

These obstacles are routinely acknowledged by officials responsible for the higher education system, but change is slow to be achieved as far as reform is concerned (Dao Van Khanh & Hayden, 2015, p. 315-16). Although the culture of student assessment is only one aspect of the higher education system in Vietnam, it is a critical aspect because, as Klenowski (2009c, p. 77) states, assessment “is central to good education and is at the heart of the teaching-learning dynamic.” Empirical research in developed higher education systems has found that student
assessment directly influences students’ perceptions of their learning needs, their approaches to addressing those needs, and the quality of their learning outcomes (Marton et al., 1984). Learning outcomes can, in turn, according to Harman and Le Thi Bich Ngoc (2010, p. 67), “be transferred into goods and services and greater institutional capacity, a more effective public sector, a stronger civil society and a better investment climate”. Student assessment is, therefore, a vital area in which to have reform. As Torrance (1996, p. i) has observed, “real change will not take place in schooling until significant change happens to assessment.”

The need for reform regarding student assessment practices is, however, not unique to Vietnam. Its nature has been addressed in various other constituencies. Obstacles to reform, however, have also been documented. In Australia, Orrell (2005) has argued that what is needed is an improvement in assessment literacy, and she has indicated that a missing aspect of assessment reform has been in its leadership and management. In the United States, Tierney (2006, p. 259) has argued that if researchers wish to improve education by changing assessment practices, then the belief system underpinning student assessment practices must be both explicit and well understood by practitioners. She goes on to argue that professional development in effective student assessment practice should not be confined to workshops on the topic, but concerns socially-embedded knowledge among communities of practitioners.

The importance of values and attitudes that are socially embedded is also central to Fullan’s theory of educational change. He argues that beliefs and values provide the “foundations for lasting reform” (Fullan, 2007, p. 37), though he also cautions (Fullan, 2007, p. 85) that real change tends to be difficult to achieve because it is subject to the extent of the change achieved in both the beliefs and practices of the professional communities concerned. Sahlberg (2003) similarly argues that a more comprehensive understanding about the theoretical and practical aspects of change processes can lead to more productive methods of implementation. These statements are relevant to Vietnam, where there is limited experience with innovation and where resources for facilitating change are constrained, as Harman et al. (2010), identified.

In the present investigation, different theories of educational change are considered in order to provide a framework for understanding the nature of assessment reform in teacher training universities in Vietnam and for identifying obstacles and enablers to its achievement. Three research questions are pertinent to operationalizing the investigation. First, what are the beliefs, values and attitudes of lecturers and educational managers at representative teacher training institutions, and how do these influence their approaches to student assessment? Second, to what extent do these lecturers and educational managers perceive the need for reform in student
assessment practices, and what would they like to change? Third, what do these lecturers and educational managers believe might be the necessary conditions for stimulating the development of more well-informed and contemporary student assessment practices?

The investigation adopts the view that meaning is made in the social context in which it is created, a view frequently adopted in relation to academe (see, for example, Becher, 1989; Parry, 2007). Concerning leadership and change in higher education, Volet (1999) argues similarly to Fullan (2007) that in any society the context of learning is shaped by the cultural values shared by the participants in that culture.

The present investigation seeks, therefore, to address the general question of what might be required to shift cultural values, in this case concerning the matter of how to assess student learning in Vietnamese teacher training universities. While observations about the difficulties are not hard to locate, there has to date been no empirical research conducted on this topic in Vietnam. There is, therefore, an opportunity for the first time to begin to shed light upon how effective reform in the culture of assessment in teacher training universities in Vietnam might be achieved.

1.3 Conceptual Framework

The present investigation bears on two general concepts, one concerning the culture of student assessment and the other educational change. To understand these concepts, a comprehensive search of the literature was required, the results of which are reported in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively. The following account seeks only to introduce these reviews.

Regarding the ‘culture of student assessment’, it is important to acknowledge the major shift that has occurred internationally over the past 30 years or so in higher education systems from a ‘testing culture’ to a ‘learning culture’ (Shepard, 2000b, p. 1-3). In a testing culture, student assessment was based on a scientific measurement paradigm that came into play only at the end of the learning process and for the sole purpose of determining certification (Serafini, 2000, p. 385). In contrast, student assessment in a learning culture, which is the one of interest in this investigation, regards student assessment to be at the core of the process of learning. Various scholars have worked to refine the parameters of this culture, for example, Marton et al. (1984), Rowntree (1977, 1987), Biggs and Collis (1982), Biggs (1996), Boud (2000, 2009), and Black and Wiliam (1998a, 1998b). At its core is the principle of alignment between intended learning outcomes, teaching activities and assessment requirements. Student assessment is thus
perceived to be integral to the student learning experience. Of special importance is the role of a formative approach to student assessment, the value of which has been extensively reported in the relevant literature after its importance was first identified in research by Black & Wiliam (1998a, 1998b).

Regarding ‘educational change’, three separate bodies of literature, each rich and complex, are pertinent to understanding the main considerations in any major educational change, such as is suggested by student assessment reform in Vietnam. First, there is the theory of complex adaptive systems, as described by Stacey (1995, 1996, 2007), which conveys the need to understand educational change as a process that involves a vast number of adaptive interactions between individual agents within a larger, complex organisational system which is itself a part of a larger cluster of complex interacting systems, all faced with the challenge of adapting to change. In this perspective, the human element inevitably gives rise to uncertainty and unpredictability; to be successful, change leaders need to understand the necessary social and contextual conditions likely to bring into equilibrium new patterns of behaviour that are more conducive to the desirable shared values and goals of the organisation.

Second, there is Fullan’s perspective on educational change (Fullan, 1993, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2007, 2010, 2011; and Fullan, Cuttress & Kilcher, 2005). This perspective is especially relevant to the present investigation since its focus is upon achieving educational change that is transformative of a pedagogical culture in terms of both beliefs and behaviours. Fullan (2007, p. 25) points out that any educational reform needs to “struggle directly with existing cultures within which new values and practices may be required.” Leaders with particular “change knowledge” are required (Fullan et al., 2005, p. 58) to identify the key drivers for change, which concern: a moral purpose; a transparent and coherent change process; capacity building; a culture of learning; a culture of evaluation; leadership; and the cultivation of tri-level development. Fullan’s theory of educational change highlights the importance of a shared ‘moral purpose’ driving change strategies at different levels of an educational system.

Third, there is a need to view educational organisations such as Vietnamese teacher training universities as social settings, in which meanings are made among those interacting in the social context. In this perspective, human organisations are presented as social settings in which people learn from and commit to one another. Lave and Wenger’s theory of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998a, 1998b, 2000; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002; Wenger & Snyder, 2000) gives life into such an understanding. According to Wenger (1998b), Wenger and Snyder (2000), and Wenger et al. (2002), communities of practice are
repositories of knowledge generation, knowledge sharing and knowledge creation within organisations, and are, therefore, promising sources of innovation.

The complementarity of these three theoretical foundations to educational change enables a socio-semiotic understanding of educational organisations and systems to illuminate the complex human issues, claims and concerns of individual lecturers in Vietnamese teacher training universities. The theories are, therefore, separately, but more so in combination, important in seeking to identify factors that might impact on the student assessment reform process in higher education institutions in Vietnam.

1.4 Methodology

The methodology of *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) is employed in the present investigation. This methodology fits well with the researcher’s intention to document the issues, claims and concerns of a selected group of lecturers and educational managers regarding student assessment practices at teacher training universities in Vietnam. It is an approach that involves the collection of data in the natural setting of the participants, and which adopts an ethnographic approach to data collection and analysis. The present investigation is essentially constructivist, intended to provide an initial, emic portrayal of the experiences of academic staff, both lecturers and educational managers, in Vietnamese teacher training universities. The methodology of *Naturalistic Inquiry* also has a particular strength among constructivist methodologies: it requires a range of trustworthiness criteria to be met in order to demonstrate the rigour of the investigation and its reported findings.

The investigation was implemented at three universities offering teacher education awards in Vietnam. These included two large universities, one from each of the north and the south of Vietnam, and a smaller regional university from the south. These universities were adopted as sites for the investigation because, in combination, they appeared likely to provide a sample that is fairly representative of other similarly focused institutions in Vietnam. In particular, the three universities concerned were likely to yield information-rich cases from which to learn about the existing culture of student assessment and about the drivers of and constraints on change in that culture. Across the three sites, a total of 24 lecturers and educational managers were selected for interview using a ‘snowball’ sampling technique (Patton, 2002, p. 237). The participants were recruited from across a range of academic disciplines on the basis of having extensive experience in implementing student assessment in the setting of a teacher training university. Participants needed to be familiar with the relevant regulations; they needed to be
able to describe their experiences in implementing their own student assessment practices; and also they needed to be willing and able to give expression to their values, beliefs and assumptions underpinning their own practices, together with those concerning their own colleagues’ in their own communities of practice within their institutions. The focus of data collecting was on the identification of the issues, claims and concerns of these participants regarding the implementation of new student assessment practices at their institutions, and about student assessment practice generally.

This investigation sought explicitly to be emancipatory for the participants by giving voice to their views about their student assessment practices and by sharing those experiences with other participants. Semi-structured interviews were the main method of data collection. These were normally of one hour in duration, and they were followed up by further interviews where necessary. Interview schedules were designed in light of valuable insights provided by Spradley (1979, p. 86-91) with respect to ethnographic interviewing. For the purposes of triangulating the findings, course outlines, current assessment tasks, grading books and relevant institutional student assessment policies were also examined. The interview data were analysed by means of thematic analysis, using the constant comparative method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 105). The software package, Nvivo*9, was employed to help manage the data, and to assist in coding and retrieval processes. Further details are reported in Chapter 4.

1.5 Organisation of the Thesis

This thesis is presented in nine chapters, of which this chapter has been the first. Chapter 2 reviews a range of contemporary student assessment theories that relate to the attainment by students of a high quality of learning. It also reviews empirical research about the impact of student assessment on learning. Its purpose is to provide a foundation for understanding the importance of the role played by student assessment in the advancement of the student learning processes. The role formative assessment might play in the curriculum of a teacher training university in Vietnam is also considered.

Chapter 3 focuses on a body of literature that relates to the notion of educational change. Three theoretical frameworks, including the theory of complex adaptive systems, Fullan’s theory of educational change, and Lave and Wenger’s theory of communities of practice, are examined for their relevance to an understanding of how educational change concerning student assessment practices in universities engaged in teacher training in Vietnam might be achieved. Key elements in educational change are identified for further investigation.
Chapter 4 presents the research design for the investigation. It explains the choice of Naturalistic Inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) as a methodology, and it reports on how the investigation was implemented. Particular attention is given to issues of trustworthiness as a basis for ensuring the credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability of the findings.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 report the findings from the investigation. Chapter 5 documents the beliefs, values and attitudes underpinning the approaches to student assessment of the lecturers and academic managers who participated in the investigation. Chapter 6 documents their perceptions about the need for change in the ways that their students are assessed. Chapter 7 documents their experiences concerning opportunities for and obstacles to changing student assessment practices in the context of teacher training universities in Vietnam. Also explored in this chapter are conditions that may be necessary to achieve change in student assessment practices in these universities.

Chapter 8 provides an opportunity to discuss the key findings from the investigation, particularly in light of the theories and practices reported in Chapters 2 and 3. The chapter seeks especially to show how the findings from this investigation are informed by and may also inform the relevant research literature.

Chapter 9 concludes this investigation. It provides an overview of the main findings from the investigation, proposes a model for the attainment of effective student assessment in teacher training universities in Vietnam, reviews some of the methodological issues associated with the investigation, and makes recommendations for further research.
Chapter 2 - Approaches to Student Assessment

It is widely accepted that student assessment impacts strongly on the lives of students. As Boud (2006, p. xix) observes, while students may be able to escape poor teaching, they cannot escape poor assessment. The higher education system in Vietnam remains steeped in a culture of rote learning and summative assessment practices that typically result in passive approaches to learning by students. Therefore, if Vietnamese universities are intent upon promoting independent learners who adopt ‘deep approaches’ to their learning, an assessment culture that supports this kind of development is fundamental.

This chapter provides a foundation for understanding the role that student assessment plays in the advancement of student learning. The chapter commences with an account of theoretical perspectives on student assessment based upon empirical research in developed higher education systems. It then addresses the question of how students might become better engaged in learning through the use of formative assessment practices. Finally, the available literature on student assessment in Vietnam, though limited, is reviewed.

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives on Student Assessment

For much of the first half of the 20th century, and probably up until the 1970s, student assessment was not considered to be integral to the teaching and learning process. Serafini (2000, p. 385) describes student assessment during this period as being largely concerned with measurement. Shepard (2000a) traces the roots of this situation back to Thorndike’s publication in 1904 of An Introduction to the Theory of Mental and Social Measurements, which popularised an approach to assessment that principally involved measuring student abilities and achievements relative to norms in a population. The measurement of skills and abilities was considered to be an objective and scientifically justifiable pursuit.

In the late 1970s, the way of viewing student assessment took a different course. Rowntree (1977, p. 1) presented a persuasive case for student assessment to be seen as an important driver of student learning and as a powerful form of “de facto curriculum”. A group of scholars at the University of Gothenburg, using phenomenographic research methods, then sought to explore how students experience learning and assessment (see, Marton et al., 1984). Using ethnographic interviewing, Marton et al. (1984) developed a survey of approaches to learning that involved finding out from the students themselves what they perceived their assessment tasks required from them. The researchers overwhelmingly found that students’ perceptions of an assessment
task determined the approach they adopted towards their learning. Some kinds of assessment tasks were more likely to elicit a ‘deep approach’ to learning, with students seeking to understand the meaning of a text or phenomenon and to relate this understanding to their prior knowledge. Other kinds of assessment tasks were more likely to elicit a ‘surface approach’, in which the focus was on mastering knowledge without necessarily understanding it deeply and simply for the purpose of reproducing it in the context of an examination. These findings, which were widely accepted as being robust, had a powerful impact on notions about how student assessment should be perceived. A huge body of international literature subsequently developed in which student assessment, and students’ approaches to assessment, became pivotal to a new understanding of what constitutes good practice in teaching and learning. Rowntree’s earlier views on the importance of student assessment to the quality of learning were confirmed. It subsequently became essential to reappraise student assessment practices from the perspective of their impact on learners’ approaches to their learning.

The ways in which teaching practices could be better aligned with student assessment practices also became an important area for research. Biggs (1996) made a considerable contribution to an understanding of the power of student assessment when he proposed the need for a ‘constructive alignment’ between intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and student assessment practices. The term, ‘constructive’, was meant by Biggs to refer to how students construct meaning that relates to their own experiences and prior knowledge, thereby giving expression to Shuell’s (1986, p. 429) view that it is “what the student does” that leads to learning outcomes. The term, ‘alignment’, was meant by Biggs to refer to the need for teaching practices and learning activities to be aligned with both the intended learning outcomes and the student assessment methods applied. According to Biggs (1996), what students were intended to learn, and how they would demonstrate that the learning was achieved, needed to be clearly stated well in advance of an assessment task being undertaken so that students could be confident about what and how they needed to learn. Further, Biggs argued that teaching practices should then engage the students in learning activities to enable them to achieve the intended learning outcomes for a unit or course of study, and that assessment practices, in turn, had to address how much of and how well the intended learning outcomes had been achieved by the students.

Constructive alignment is a powerful conceptual framework for teaching and learning in higher education, and indeed in any educational setting. It enables teachers to understand the component parts of the teaching and learning process, and to manage students’ perceptions of the nature of learning tasks in a way that is more likely to achieve a richer and deeper form of
learning. Entwistle (2000) explains that, without constructive alignment between intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and student assessment tasks, students can easily misunderstand what is required of them, making the fall-back strategy one of memorising what they think is needed for success in an assessment task, thereby engaging more in a surface approach to learning. Though coming from different research perspectives, Marton et al. (1984) and Biggs (1996) turned the focus in understanding the teaching and assessment process to what the learner does in approaching learning tasks.

The notion of constructive alignment was underpinned by a taxonomy, developed by Biggs and Collis (1982), and later elaborated by Biggs and Tang (2007). This taxonomy, reproduced in Figure 2.1, was referred to as the structure of observed learning outcome (SOLO) taxonomy.

Figure 2.1. A Hierarchy of Verbs that may be used to Form Intended Learning Outcomes

![SOLO Taxonomy Diagram](image)

Source: Biggs and Tang (2007, p. 79)

The SOLO taxonomy was based on the idea that there are increasing levels of structural complexity in the understanding that a student may have in relation to a topic. These levels are referred to as: pre-structural, uni-structural, multi-structural, relational and extended abstract. The pre-structural level refers to a situation in which a student attempts to assimilate a concept or skill without having much understanding of it. The uni-structural level refers to a situation in which the student assimilates a concept or skill but without seeing how it relates to other concepts or skills. The multi-structural level refers to a situation in which the students assimilates a related network of concepts or skills but does not see the relationship between them. The relational level refers to a situation in which the student assimilates a related network of concepts or skills and can see the relationship between them. The extended abstract level
refers to a situation in which the student is not only able to see the relationship between the skills or concepts assimilated, but is also able to apply this understanding to new contexts.

Biggs and Tang (2007) proposed that the uni-structural and multi-structural levels in the SOLO taxonomy represented surface or reproducing forms of learning, while the relational and extended abstract levels represented deep forms of learning. They also proposed that, with a constructive alignment between intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and forms of assessment, and with a focus on higher-order levels of learning outcomes, as identified by the SOLO taxonomy, then students would more naturally adopt deeper approaches to their learning, in large part through their engagement with the assessment tasks.

As an appreciation of the power of student assessment grew internationally in higher education, a related theme in the relevant literature emerged: the different purposes that student assessment may serve. Various scholars (for example, Black & Wiliam, 1998a; Boud, 2000, 2009; Joughin, 2009; Rowntree, 1987) addressed this matter. Gipps (1994) drew an important distinction between student assessment for formative and summative purposes, drawing on Scriven’s (1967) articulation of a distinction between formative and summative educational program evaluation, where formative evaluation referred to program evaluation for the purposes of giving feedback to bring about improvement, and summative evaluation referred to program evaluation for the purposes of appraising an end product. Black (1998, p. 35) also referred to formative assessment, observing that it sought to support learning by informing students about their progress, whereas summative assessment was described as being about “review, transfer and certification as well as accountability to the public.” Black and Wiliam (1998a, p. 61) reported gains in learning that were triggered by formative assessment; and Black and Wiliam (1998b) argued, on the basis of an extensive review of the available research about the effects of formative assessment in classrooms across several countries that formative assessment, when well implemented, made a discernible and positive impact on student learning processes and outcomes. They found that it provided opportunities for students to become more actively engaged in the learning process, and it assisted low-achieving students to improve their learning (p. 139-144). Although the work of Black and Wiliam (1998a, b) about formative assessment focused mainly on school level, its applicability at the higher education level has never been challenged.

These insights are important. According to Black and Wiliam (1998b, p. 1-2), “formative assessment […] is at the heart of effective teaching”. They identified four conditions impacting on the extent to which formative assessment supported learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998b, p. 9).
First, students must clearly understand the criteria and standards for success, be able to relate their own achievements to those criteria and standards, and be provided with the opportunity to close the gap. Second, feedback to students must focus on providing students with an understanding of what they need to do to improve. Feedback, they asserted, was beneficial only when utilised by the teacher, the students and peers to advance learning outcomes. Third, self-assessment and peer assessment must routinely be integrated with the instructional process. Fourth, teachers need to believe that all of their students have the potential to learn and to be successful because learners need to perceive that they have the capacity to do so. In short, Black and Wiliam were arguing that if students are not offered an opportunity to monitor, evaluate and make decisions about their learning, then they are less likely to engage with the learning process at a deep and meaningful level.

Formative assessment is a powerful tool, but summative assessment also has a considerable impact on learning and learners, though, as Boud (2000) reports, summative assessment is more likely to encourage passiveness because the learner cedes the locus of control to the teacher to make judgements about performance. Boud (2000) further argues that summative assessment undermines the ability of learners to appreciate fully the performance standards required of them. It therefore constrains the independent learning capacity of students as well as their ability to diagnose independently their own learning progress. In a more recent article, Boud (2007, p. 17) adds that summative assessment may result in learners becoming “passive subjects” for others to measure and classify, and thus the dominance of summative assessment may well undermine the formative assessment purpose of supporting student learning. These are strong arguments for ensuring that formative assessment is an integral part of any learning process. Sambell, McDowell, and Montgomery (2013), in their recent book, obviously confirmed that improving student assessment for learning purposes is inseparable from making important changes to teaching.

Formative assessment should, however, complement summative assessment, rather than replace it. Black and Wiliam (1998a), in their meta-analysis of the research on formative assessment, claimed that formative assessment was responsible for better support for learning, but they had excluded summative assessment from their review, which according to Broadfoot (2000, p. i), seemed to put summative assessment in “a position open to abuse”. In a subsequent investigation, however, Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, and Wiliam (2003) identified the formative use of summative assessment as being one of four practices that teachers reported to be effective as a way of implementing a formative framework. Black and Wiliam (2003, p. 623-4) went on to argue the need for a better alignment between formative and summative
assessment practices, so that, in their words, “teachers’ formative work would not be undermined by summative pressures and indeed, so that summative requirements might be better served by taking full advantage of improvements in teachers’ assessment work.”

One another important aspect in student assessment literature is the issue of fairness and appropriateness. Fairness in student assessment has been discussed in a broad way as a socio-cultural issue. Fairness has been defined as “a qualitative concern for what is just” (Stobart, 2005, p. 275). Gipps and Stobart (2009) argue that 21st century assessment will need to take ever more account of the social contexts of assessment and to continue the movement away from seeing fairness simply as a technical concern with test construction. Gipps and Stobart (2009) report that the work of Glaser (1963) on criterion-referenced testing was a landmark in the development of a new type of assessment that moved away from classical testing based on psychometric theory. The work of Glaser (1963) established the point that norm-referenced testing developed from psychometric work that focused on aptitude, selection and prediction. In contrast, a criterion-referenced approach aimed to devise tests that looked at the individual as an individual, rather than in relation to other individuals’ performances. It also used measurement to identify strengths and weaknesses individuals might experience in learning and achievement. Thus, according to Gipps and Stobart (2009), the development of a criterion-based approach, rather than one based on norms, was not driven by fairness but can be seen as a fairer approach.

In this regard, Morgan, Dunn, Parry, and O’Reilly (2004, p. 22) explain that in norm-referenced assessment students’ grades are determined on the basis of their ranking within a particular cohort based on a pre-determined distribution. When all of the grades of the cohort of students are awarded, the cohort is then redistributed to fit a normal distribution (bell-curve) of grades of performance. On the contrary, criterion-referenced assessment relies completely on informed professional judgement of performance against clearly stated standards of performance or criteria for learning outcomes. It determines a student’s grade by comparing his or her achievements with preordained, explicit performance criteria and standards. Morgan et al. (2004) further clarify that if it is not possible to specify all of the criteria in sufficient detail, assessors may identify standards of performance, thereby giving rise to a process referred to as standard-based assessment in which preordained standards or band of performance are described to students in an ascending scale (e.g. fail, pass, credit, distinction and high distinction), and exemplars of these bands are made available. Students’ performance on an assessment task is then categorised according to those standards or bands. Morgan et al. (2004, p. 24) go on to argue that when the assessment of students’ learning outcomes is measurement
oriented, it is still subjective. They question, therefore, the rigour of student assessment using a norm-referenced assessment approach. Morgan et al. (2004, p. 25) argue that it is valuable to identify performance criteria or standards in advance for students because assessment is also a powerful learning tool. They admit that even though judgement is benchmarked, it is subjective, but it does not mean that professional judgements are arbitrary. Moreover, they argue that in standards-based assessment, the teaching goals, teaching activities and assessment task link coherently. They assert that in order to ensure fairness in student assessment, professional judgement about student performance should be well informed about the knowledge base, about the appropriateness of levels of skills and knowledge, and about the professional culture in which the judgements occur. They further suggest that benchmarking assessment practices with colleagues in the profession is the best way to foster confident and appropriate professional judgement.

Fairness is an important issue in student assessment. Stobart (2005), and Gipps and Stobart (2009), utilise the term ‘equity’ interchangeably with ‘fairness’. They argue that without fairness in access to resources and in the curriculum, it is difficult to see how there can be fair assessment. Fairness in assessment comprises both what precedes an assessment task, such as accessing and resources issues, and its consequences. Klenowski (2009b) argues that equity or fairness in assessment involves much more than a consideration of the specific design of a test or a task. Also important, she says, are matters relating to whether all students have access to learning, how the curriculum and standards are defined and taught, and how achievement in the curriculum is interpreted. According to Gipps and Stobart (2009), a broadening of assessment approaches will offer the students alternative opportunities to demonstrate achievement if they are disadvantaged by any one particular assessment in a classroom or program. The more important thing is that, as Klenowski (2009b) suggests, a fair educational and assessment environment is required and teachers need to have a sense of social and ethical responsibility to promote equity. This, in some extent, resonates with what Gipps (1999) argued for the distribution power of the teacher with their students in the teaching process.

Gipps and Stobart (2009) state that achieving fairness in assessment in the formal setting of the classroom is perhaps difficult because there are many complex issues. They describe that teachers’ assessments may be perceived as being biased because of a lack of clarity and variability in standards or criteria. They also mention that the teachers’ cultural values and attitudes are likely to result in bias in the assessment. Bliem and Davinroy (1997), for example, investigated teachers’ existing beliefs about assessment and their connection to instruction in literacy with fourteen teachers at three elementary schools. The results indicated that teachers
Achieving Change in Student Assessment in Vietnamese Teacher Training Institutions

held beliefs more consistent with traditional principles of scientific measurement, or norm-referencing. In order to ensure fairness, these teachers believed that assessments had to be uniformly administered, so they were reluctant to conduct more intensive individualised assessments with only below-grade-level readers.

Among fairness issues in student assessment, grading fairness is a significant component of pedagogy. Gordon and Fay (2010), argue that, grades provide an incentive to learning for many students. Flint and Johnson (2011), state that students judge the fairness of an assessment by the relationship between the received grade and teacher access and feedback. The students believe that if they have not been provided with chances to demonstrate their capabilities or if their capabilities have not been recognised through the grades or marks they receive, then the assessment is unfair. This raises the important issue of norm-based assessment, known as norm-referencing. Contemporary student assessment practice employs standards-based assessment in grading students’ work based upon merit. However, norm-referencing may be seen as unfair because students are ranked according to a pre-determined distribution of grades for their cohort. In an attempt to ensure an expected or ‘normal’ distribution of grades in a particular cohort, fair assessment based on merit is subverted by cohort referencing.

The issue of fairness and appropriateness in student assessment and the shift from norm-referenced assessment to criterion-referenced and standards-based assessments have required more attention to be given over the past three decades to the concept of assessment literacy. Stiggins (1991) stated that assessment literates basically understand the meaning of high- or low-quality assessment and are able to apply that knowledge to various measures of student achievement. According to Stiggins (1991, pp. 534-35), assessment literates often ask two crucial questions: what does this assessment tell students about the achievement outcomes we values? and what is likely to be the effect of this assessment on students? Stiggins (1995, p. 5) later pointed out that assessment literates understood that sound assessment should: arise from and serve a clear purposes; arise from and reflect clear and appropriate achievement targets; rely on the use of a proper assessment method that relates to purpose and the target; sample student achievement appropriately; control for all relevant sources of bias and distortion.

In summary, student assessment is elemental to the student learning experience, and students’ perceptions about what an assessment task requires them to do have an important impact on the approaches they adopt to learning. Student assessment, for formative purpose, appears to be particularly well suited to the adoption of ‘deeper’ approaches to learning (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and Wiliam, 2004; Ruston, 2005; Gijbels & Dochy, 2006), and so the matter of
how formative assessment can support a better quality student learning experience is more fully discussed in the following section.

2.2 Formative Assessment

Formative assessment essentially involves the provision of considered feedback to learners about their learning progress and about how they might improve. Black and Wiliam (2009, p. 9) define it as:

Practice in a classroom is formative to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited.

Formative assessment is, therefore, “grounded in evidence” (Black & Wiliam, 2009, p. 10). The determining factor in formative assessment is the use made of evidence that has been generated. All activities used for eliciting evidence of learning must result in advice about the strengths and weaknesses of student work, together with advice and suggestions about how to improve with regard to an intended learning outcome. Thus, formative feedback is designed to yield information about student learning that is potentially useful to the teacher, the student and the peers in a particular cohort.

Since formative assessment occurs through interaction involving the teacher, the student and the student’s peers in the cohort, it is thus highly embedded in the instructional process. Aiming to offer a reasonable theoretical basis for formative assessment, Wiliam and Thompson (2007) proposed that formative assessment involved three steps: first, identifying where learner is going; second, identifying where the learner is situated currently; and third, identifying how the learner might achieve the intended learning outcome. They also identified three kinds of actors: the teacher, the learner and the learner’s peers. Using this framework, they distinguished five key strategies in formative assessment: first, clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success; second, engineering effective classroom discussions, questions, tasks, and activities that elicit evidence of learning; third, providing feedback that moves learners forward; fourth, activating students as learning resources for one another; and fifth, activating students as owners of their own learning. According to Carless (2011, p. 8), these strategies also represent facets of good teaching, because good teaching and formative assessment are inseparable.
Formative assessment functions as a feedback loop in which effective feedback is the centrepiece in supporting student learning and encouraging student involvement in learning tasks. According to Sadler (1989, pp. 120-1), this feedback loop enhances learning most effectively when: first, the learner obviously comprehends the standards and criteria to be utilised in making judgements about a work; second, the learner accurately perceives a gap between the intended learning outcome and his or her existing level of attainment; and third, the feedback loop is complete when the learner acts in a considered manner based on the feedback provided in order to move closer to achieving the intended learning outcome. In this vein, Black and Wiliam (2009, p. 7) observe that in formative assessment “the responsibility for learning rests with both the teacher and the learner” [original emphasis]. The teacher’s responsibility is to design and implement a learning context that is conducive to learning, and the learner’s responsibility is to reflect upon and monitor his or her own learning progress. There is, in these circumstances, a distribution of power and responsibility between the learner and the teacher.

Biggs’ (1996) notion of constructive alignment is exemplified by effective formative assessment. The pivotal strategy in effective formative assessment is for the teacher to specify clear intended learning outcomes and the specific criteria for achieving and expressing these outcomes. Black and Wiliam (1998b) found substantial evidence to demonstrate that when learners clearly internalise the criteria for success, and when they know what they need to do to meet these criteria, learning can proceed more effectively. Price & O’Donovan (2006, p. 100) also argue that good assessment must be transparent in criteria and standards. A knowledge of standards informs students about the quality of their work, assists them with self-assessment, and enables them to be more autonomous as learners. Torrance and Pryor (2001) observe that these criteria need to be made explicit to learners, not only at the beginning of a unit of study or a course, but also in a continuing dialogue as the learning and learning processes unfold. Such a continuing dialogue, according to them, supports the development of insights about learning strengths and weaknesses regarding the intended learning outcomes. Arguing that trust is essential in educational change in relation to student assessment, Carless (2009, pp. 84-6) asserts that the transparency of the assessment process is likely to enhance trust between teachers and students. He notes that when students are clear about assessment criteria, standards and shared expectations about the assessment process, they are likely to be confident in it.

Using information from formative assessment tasks, teachers can make informed decisions about how to flexibly adjust their teaching and learning activities to suit a cohort’s learning needs. As Cowie and Bell (1999, p. 32) note, teaching is planned for, yet learning tends to occur
unpredictably, and so teachers need to be flexible in adjusting to learners’ needs. Shepard (2000, p. 10) suggests various assessment methods that may be helpful in capturing important information about learning progress, including continuous assessment tasks, diagnostic assessment tasks, and self-assessment tasks. Heritage (2010) notes that evidence about learning from both planned and ad hoc classroom interactions needs to be elicited in systematic ways in order to be useful for teachers and learners. In this regard, Carless (2015) also proposes to design learning-oriented assessment tasks that could encourage students to demonstrate various understandings and learning skills; engage students in deep learning activity; and foster students’ timely efforts. These assessment tasks include written assignments, open-book exams, group work, oral presentations, grading students’ classroom participation, and portfolios. Carless (2015, p. 66) recommends that these learning-oriented assessment tasks should be coherently, cooperatively and cumulatively designed in order to foster students’ evaluative expertise and their engagement with feedback.

Findings such as those mentioned above bring into focus the importance of flexibility in developing formal and informal learning experiences, and the importance of using multiple sources of feedback to inform both learners and their teachers. Black and Wiliam (1998a) described formative assessment as being contextual in nature: it is impacted upon by the situations in which the learning takes place; by the specific instructional activities implemented by the teacher; by the teacher’s knowledge of the students; and by the teaching session’s purpose.

Feedback on their learning progress is an indispensable resource for students in being able to take active steps to self-assess and then improve their own learning. Rowntree (1987, p. 24) describes feedback as the “life-blood of learning.” Orrell (2006, p. 442-4) argues that, instead of treating feedback as a postscript that offers a grade number or letter, a correction, or a statement of criticism or praise that justifies the assessor’s judgement, feedback should be regarded to be pivotal in the instructional process. Hattie and Timperley (2007) and Hounsell (2007) suggest that the provision of feedback is most useful when it helps students to identify strengths as well as weaknesses in their work, and when it helps them to identify areas for further development. Heritage (2007, p. 142) also suggests that teachers should provide students with effective feedback which is “clear, descriptive, criterion-based information” that helps students to recognise their current level of learning progression, the differences of their understanding with the intended learning goal, and the way their learning can move forward. In this sense, feedback clearly needs to enable students to self-assess their work. Feedback provided to students needs, therefore, to be timely, but also, students need to be given sufficient
time to act on it (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Formative feedback is also beneficial to student learning when it is given separately from grades (Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Butler, 1988). Black (2013, p. 170) noted that where judgement in the form of grades is avoided, the purpose of the interaction is more clearly formative, and thus feedback might be understood as ‘instructional action’.

The role of the teacher in providing supportive feedback is highly important if learners are to believe that they are capable of knowledge mastery. Recognising the importance of supportive formative feedback to learners, Black & Wiliam (1998b, p. 9) recommended that teacher feedback should concentrate on specific qualities of students’ work and should avoid comparisons with work completed by others. Because criticism may so easily be taken personally, it is important that teachers guide their students towards considering their mistakes as a natural part of the learning process. Heritage (2011, p. 1) suggests that teachers should encourage learners to regard mistakes as useful sources of new learning, and to accept feedback about mistakes without fear of being diminished as a person by either the teacher or classroom peers. Taking this matter further, Orrell (2005) suggests that if institutions expect first-year students to be self-regulated learners who take responsibility for their own learning, then universities need to take responsibility for supporting them to master ‘learning literacies’. According to Nicol (2010), for effective learning, students must interpret the message underpinning the feedback, understand it, and utilise it to make judgements about their own work. Two decades ago, Boud (1995, p. 5) defined self-assessment as “the involvement of students in identifying standards and/or criteria to apply to their work and making judgements about the extent to which they met these criteria and standards.”

The notion of students becoming responsible for monitoring, and eventually correcting and improving their own learning progress, is central to formative assessment because it gives the learner agency and independence, both of which are empowering. Klenowski (1996), for example, conducted a case study in both England and Hong Kong, where lecturers adopted portfolio assessment and provided opportunities for students to develop self-evaluation skills, to investigate the impact of the processes of student self-evaluation and portfolio assessment on student learning. The results showed that the student self-evaluation process increased student motivation, engagement with learning, and ability to provide critique. Students reported that they were taking greater responsibility for their learning and their organisation skills were developed. Clark (2011) also asserts that engaging in self-assessment helps students to think critically about their own learning. In this way, they engage in metacognitive activity, which is, according to Heritage (2011, p. 2), a “hallmark of effective learning.” Heritage (2011) proceeds
on to explain that self-assessment allows students to generate internal feedback that informs them when their learning strategies need to be adjusted. In other words, self-assessment assists students to clarify the learning goals and thus to develop a useful plan to close the learning gap.

As with self-assessment, peer-assessment also has considerable potential in the context of formative assessment. Falchikov (2007, p. 132) defines peer-assessment as involving processes that require students to “provide either feedback or grades (or both) to their peers on a product, process, or performance, based on the criteria of excellence for that product or event which students may have been involved in determining.” Several studies, however, argue that, in order to support student learning, peer-assessment should not involve student grading. Drawing on a large-scale questionnaire survey of tertiary students and academics in Hong Kong, supplemented by interview data about peer feedback, Liu and Carless (2006), for example, found that a significant number of academics and students resisted peer assessment using grades due to issues of reliability, perceived expertise, power relations and time. They argued that the dominance of peer assessment processes using grades might undermine the potential of peer feedback for improving student learning. They recommended strategies for promoting peer feedback, through engaging students with successful criteria and for embedding peer involvement within normal course processes, where students could learn from each other. In their model of formative assessment and self-regulated learning, Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006), argued that peer dialogue helps students to develop self-control over their learning in diverse ways. By giving comments on their peers’ work, students also developed a deeper, awareness of the required standards, thus helping them gain insight into their own performance. Indeed, Moore and Teather (2013) found from their empirical study that involvement in a peer-assessment process enabled students to interact and collaboratively discuss with their peers about their reviewing, to clarify their ideas, and to provide meaningful feedback. Clearly, through engaging in the self-assessment and peer-assessment processes, students have an opportunity to reflect on their own learning and to utilise the feedback to improve their learning.

Finally, to promote student learning, formative feedback on learner progress has to be used by both the learners and their teachers. As Boud (2000) argues, the learners need to complete the feedback loop: where students are unable to utilise formative feedback to advance their work, such as redoing the same learning task, neither the teacher nor the learner will know whether learning has been effective. As Black (2015, p. 169) explains, when learners respond to the teacher’s formative comments and feedback by redrafting or correcting their own work, they establish a learning dialogue. If a learning dialogue does not develop, he goes on to argue, the impact of a study course on learning may be quite unpredictable. Black & Wiliam (1998b) point
out that teachers to adjust their instruction process must also use formative feedback, obtained from either planned or spontaneous evidence. That is an effective way that the teachers could support student learning.

In general, it is useful to view formative assessment as being neither an event nor an instrument. It is instead a process for using information collected in the teaching and learning process to improve both teachers’ teaching and students’ knowledge about the learning progress of the learner. It is a tenet of teaching and learning that the provision of effective feedback on learning progress is indispensable to the teaching process because it is the decisive factor in driving students’ approaches to making learning progress and in moving students forward to meet their learning goals.

Black & Wiliam’s research on formative assessment has inspired assessment reform in the United Kingdom and elsewhere (see, Berry, 2011; Berry & Adamson, 2011; Klenowski, 2009a), but other researchers have warned that the successful implementation of formative assessment remains an ongoing challenge because implementing formative assessment is heavily resource-intensive and time-consuming (Brown & Glasner, 1999; Carless, 2006; OECD, 2005; Torrance & Pryor, 2001). Its effective implementation also requires teachers to develop continuously their understanding of student learning (see, for example, Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Trumbull & Lash, 2013; Yorke, 2003). Yet another issue concerns the culture of testing and accountability in higher education, which is seen by some researchers as constraining teachers from implementing formative assessment (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, and William, 2003). Further, Black (2015, p. 171) claims that adopting formative assessment may also be plagued by the difficulties it raises because it challenges teachers to change in both the perceptions of their role as teachers and their understanding of pedagogy and routine classroom practices.

In Confucian cultures, implementing well-informed formative assessment practices involved additional challenges. In a case study of two Chinese universities, Chen (2011) found, for example, that factors such as teacher authority, a hierarchical teacher/student relationship, a culture of attachment to examinations, and deficiencies in training about formative assessment resulted in teachers making minimal changes to their assessment practices. Further challenges of this nature and in the setting of two Chinese universities are reported by Chen, Kettle, Klenowski and May (2013), and Chen, May, Klenowski, and Kettle (2014). Brown, Kennedy, Fok, Chan, and Yu (2009) and Kennedy, Chan, Fok, and Yu (2008) have also reported that
achieving change in student assessment practices in a Confucian culture is not a simple technical issue of presenting different assessment tools.

2.3 Student Assessment in Vietnam

Student assessment has for many years attracted little official attention in Vietnam. Lam Quang Thiep (2006) reports that the assessment format for much of the period from 1975 onwards was entirely summative in orientation, involving multiple-choice tests, oral vivas, and short-answer tests. Since 1999, however, there have been some reforms.

In Regulation No. 04/1999/ QĐ-BGD&ĐT, dated February 12, 1999 (Bộ giáo dục và Đào tạo, 1999), MoET issued its first official policy statement regarding examinations for full-time students in universities and colleges. It prescribed that student assessment in a unit of study should involve one mid-term examination and one end-of-unit examination. If students passed the mid-term examination, they could sit for the end-of-unit examination. No mention was made about the need to adopt a wider range of student assessment methods, but reference was made in passing to assessment forms such as written essays, oral vivas, practical exercises, small projects and minor theses, which went some way towards recognising officially that they might have a role in the assessment process.

In 2001, MoET issued a policy statement, Decision No. 31/2001/QĐ-BGD&ĐT on Organising the Pilot Training, Assessment and Graduated Recognition following the Credit-based system for Full-time students, dated July 30, 2001 (Bộ giáo dục và Đào tạo, 2001), requiring the higher education system to move to a credit-based learning system. Despite the reformist spirit of this initiative, there was no change made to the structure for the implementation of student assessment. Subsequently, in Decision No. 201/2001/ QĐ-TTg, dated December 28, 2001 (Chính Phủ, 2001), which approved a national strategy for educational development over the period from 2001 to 2010, the Government admitted that its training curriculum in higher education was traditional, involving exam-based summative student assessment, intended solely to allow for the grading of student performance.

Concerns began to be expressed, particularly by Vietnamese scholars who had become familiar with student assessment practices in other countries (see, for example, Hoang Tuy, 2005; Le, 2005; Nguyen Kim Dung, 2006; Vu Thi Phuong Anh, 2006). Of main concern was the inauthentic nature of the assessment tasks set in examinations, and also the extent to which the whole of the examination system had become so burdensome for students. There was also concern that a great many lecturers in higher education institutions had little or no knowledge
about how to design and construct an examination. Much of what they knew was based on their own experience as students.

In 2005, in Resolution No. 14/2005/NQ-CP, dated November 2, 2005, a far-sighted and ambitious document that gave expression to a reform agenda for the higher education up to 2020, it was proposed amongst other things that the curriculum in higher education institutions in Vietnam should be more internationalised. This aspiration implied that student assessment procedures in universities and colleges would also need to be brought up to date.

There followed in 2006 Decision No. 25/2006/QĐ-BGD&ĐT, dated June 26, 2006, on training Full-time students at Universities and Colleges (Bộ giáo dục và Đào tạo, 2006), and in 2007 Decision No. 43/2007/QĐ-BGD&ĐT, dated August 15, 2007, on training Full-time students at Universities and Colleges following the Credit-based system (Bộ giáo dục và Đào tạo, 2007). These Decisions authorised some reforms regarding student assessment. They prescribed, for example, that end-of-unit examinations should account for no less than 50% of the total marks for a unit and that the total marks for a unit should be earned cumulatively, with cumulative assessments take the form of appraisals of student attitudes to study, of student engagement with learning, and of class attendance rates.

In addition, lecturers in higher education institutions were given some encouragement to make more use of practice-based tests, group-based assignments, and essays, in their student assessment approaches. Freedom was also given to lecturers responsible for units to determine appropriate assessment methods for their units and to weighting cumulative assessment tasks according to their own teaching priorities – though approval by the rector of a higher education would need to be provided for any changes proposed.

These Decisions appeared to suggest that MoET was paying more attention to the importance of student assessment as a driver of student learning. The Decisions were not, however, supplemented by additional information, guidelines or examples for lecturers concerning how new assessment approaches might be adopted. There were also some embedded limitations, such as that any new assessment requirements needed to be approved by the institution’s rector. Le Thi Lieu and Huynh Xuan Nhat (2009) observe that alternative assessment tasks, such as oral vivas and written assignments, are rarely introduced in higher education institutions in Vietnam because they are unlikely to be approved by rectors. Rectors in Vietnam are acutely aware of the workload implications of a shift away from traditional summative assessment approaches, based on examinations, and would be reluctant to approve changes under these
circumstances. Nguyen Kim Dung (2006) observes that the algorithm for calculating payment for workloads in support of practice-based teaching in schools also discourages lecturers from making changes to their traditional teacher-centred approaches to student assessment.

In 2012, the Government approved a further extension of the national strategy for educational development, to cover the period from 2011 to 2020 (see Decision No. 711/2012/QĐ-TTg, dated June 13, 2012) (Chính Phủ, 2012). In this document, the Government, much more openly than ever before, acknowledged the need for reform of the education system, with a view to developing more of a capacity among all students for independent, critical and creative thinking. The document explicitly encouraged the development in students of an increased ability to self-monitor their learning needs and performance. Schools and higher education institutions were also urged to adopt continuous assessment practices, whereby student grades were determined not only on the basis of end-of-unit assessment tasks but also on the basis of assessment tasks completed during a teaching semester. This document again highlighted the Government’s wish to see more use in schools and higher education institutions of ‘learner-centred’ approaches to curriculum and student assessment.

In general, however, higher education institutions in Vietnam have been slow to make any changes. Nguyen Thi Hong Tham (2013) conducted a comparative case study about student assessment practices in the social sciences and humanities at a university in the United Kingdom and a university in Vietnam. The results showed that some individual lecturers at the Vietnamese university were implementing changes in their student assessment practices, such as requiring group presentations and individual portfolios for the mid-term assessments, and requiring the completion of mini-projects and written assignments for the end-of-unit assessments. Traditional standardised tests were, however, mainly required for the end-of-unit assessments, and these examinations dominated the curriculum at the Vietnamese university. Le Thi Lieu and Huynh Xuan Nhat (2009) also noted that examination formats in Vietnam make little use of authentic ‘real life’ assessment tasks that call for the demonstration of ‘real life’ skills, knowledge and understanding.

The slowness of reform in student assessment approaches in Vietnam has attracted attention in several recent research reports. Nguyen Thi Hong Tham (2013) has identified four major constraints facing Vietnamese lecturers to be: low salaries, overcrowded classes, the lack of professional development, and a lack of support from different levels within the university. Pham Thi Hong Thanh and Renshaw (2015), in a study using ‘third space’ as a frame of reference to understand how Vietnamese lecturers combine traditional and contemporary
influences to adjust formative assessment practices in their classrooms, reported on some local cultural and institutional constraints (such as heavy workloads) that hindered the implementation of formative assessment practices in Vietnam. They suggest that these constraints need to be overcome if formative assessment practice is ever to become widely adopted in Vietnam. Nguyen Thi Hong Tham and Walker (2014), in a comparative study on sustainable student assessment practices at one university in the United Kingdom and one university in Vietnam, analysed Boud’s approach to assessment and reframed Boud’s framework to better support students’ lifelong learning and improve practices. These authors suggested that in order to change student assessment to better support lifelong learning, the sustainable assessment model should be adapted to the different education contexts.

2.4 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has presented a discussion of theoretical perspectives on student assessment based upon empirical research over several decades in developed higher education systems. It has also addressed the importance of formative assessment practices to student engagement and learning progress. Against this background the context of student assessment in Vietnamese higher education has been reviewed. It is now necessary to turn to the construction of a lens for understanding how educational change might take place in the context of Vietnamese higher education institutions and in teacher education universities in particular.
Chapter 3 - Educational Change

As indicated in Chapter 1, three conceptual frameworks that are socio-semiotic in nature, when considered in combination, provide a comprehensive basis for understanding educational change in the context of student assessment in teacher training institutions in Vietnam. This chapter introduces these frameworks.

The first framework concerns complex adaptive systems, as described by Stacey (1995; 1996; 2007). Complex adaptive systems theory is a branch of complexity theory (Tosey, 2002, p. 4), which, according to Fullan (1999, p. 68), provides “the best orientation” to an understanding of change in social settings. It shows how intricate the process of educational change can be. It also highlights certain conditions that are necessary to the attainment of educational change.

The second framework concerns Fullan’s own theory of educational change (1993; 1999; 2001; 2007; 2010; 2011; and Fullan, Cuttress & Kilcher, 2005). This theory provides insights about the social conditions under which educational change may be managed. These insights are highly pertinent to the question of the reform of student assessment policies and practices in Vietnam. The third framework concerns the powerful role communities of practice may have in influencing educational change, as conceptualised by Lave & Wenger (1998), and then developed by Wenger (1998; 2000), and Wenger et al. (2002). This framework is complementary to perspectives from complex adaptive systems theory and from Fullan’s theory of educational change. It also fits well with a distinctive aspect of the culture of higher education in Vietnam, that is, its Confucian tradition.

There are some similarities between the three frameworks, in that all argue that the process of making meaning happens through human interaction in the social contexts. However, there are also different emphases and variations among the perspectives, and so it is their combination that provides the filter required to develop a conceptual understanding of the complexities of educational change in Vietnam. In aggregate, the frameworks serve to show how critical elements interact with one another in affecting change. They also point to conditions likely to support enduring educational change in relation to student assessment in Vietnam’s higher education.

3.1 Theory of Complex Adaptive Systems

Stacey (1996, p. 10) describes complex adaptive systems as human organisation systems that are comprised of “agents that interact with each other according to sets of rules that require
them to examine and respond to each other’s behaviour in order to improve their behaviour and thus the behaviour of the system they comprise.” These systems are ‘complex’ in that they involve an intricate web of interactions between multiple agents (Tosey, 2002, p. 5); and they are ‘adaptive’ in that the rules of behaviour observed by individuals are constantly being renegotiated in order to accommodate the rules of behaviour of others, as well as to ensure that the organisational system that binds them together remains capable of evolving. Three underpinning constructs of complex adaptive systems theory concern the human agents, the notion that humans in an organisation are inherently self-organising, and that from instability a new state of coherence and stability is emergent. Stacey (2007, pp. 195-6) describes these three features in full. They are now introduced, with reference to the context of educational change, specifically in terms of student assessment practices in universities.

According to Stacey (1996, pp. 19-20), agents in an organisational system are the people who interact with one another in negotiating rules of behaviour that will enable progress to be made, both individually and organisationally. Organisational systems interact with other organisational systems, and in the process form even larger organisational systems. Within these larger systems, agents are drawn into an even more complex network of interactions. As Stacey (1996, p. 21) reports, the larger system affects how all of the agents involved interact with one another, and the accumulation of these interactions also shapes how the larger system evolves. Stacey (1995, p. 490) reports that these interactions may often be unpredictable, contradictory, and even prone to conflict – in other words, ‘complex’; and so how an organisational system evolves may well be non-linear in nature, in the sense of having an element of unpredictability. Tosey (2002, pp. 9-10) makes a similar point.

In the context of a university, the agents are the students and staff members who interact to determine sets of behaviours likely to be optimal for them and consistent with the needs of the university and also of the broader higher education system to which the university belongs. The number of these interactions, including interactions between staff members, of staff members with students, and of students with other students, during the course of a year, is immense. Considered in this way, the process is remarkably complex.

Organisational systems, to evolve, must interact with other organisational systems, often forming a larger organisational system. Universities, for example, interact with one another, and they also form part of a larger higher education system that shares values, standards and aims. Interactions between agents are not confined, therefore, to one institution alone, but may occur at many levels across the whole of the larger organisational system. Stacey (1995, p. 487)
asserts that in this kind of system, a complex dynamic of adaptive processes is at work, the outcome of which is evolutionary change, both for the individual organisational system and for the larger organisational system to which it belongs.

Agents within organisations tend to self-organise around certain agreed priorities in order to respond to internal and external influences. Stacey (1996, p. 20; 2007, p. 196) describes self-organisation as a process that occurs naturally when agents within an organisational system interact with one another based on certain principles or rules, termed schemas by Stacey. The schemas that guide an individual agent’s behaviours are constantly prone to readjustment in response to the schemas of other agents in the system as agents engage interpersonaly with one another over time and are influenced by new ideas and values over time. This process is said to be self-organising, in the sense that a new state of stability is found once a schema becomes shared by the majority of the agents. Stacey (2996, p.36) argues, that the shared schema then provides a basis for a more stable pattern of interactions. Stacey (1996, p. 36) explains that it is through this process of adjustment concerning the behavioural rules guiding the individual actions of agents that behaviour within an organisation becomes more adaptive to the organisation’s needs being exerted from within and from outside the system. Stacey (1995, p. 481; 1996, p. 21) thus sees complex adaptive systems as forming ‘learning systems’ within in which non-linear feedback networks occur to contribute to the establishment of self-organising patterns.

Self-organisation may also apply to the interactions between organisational systems. Processes involving self-organisation are evident in many aspects of university life. Advancing the notion of self-organisation, Macdonald and Joughin (2009) observe, for example, that self-organising principles apply to the negotiation of behaviour patterns that result in sets of rules and values that promote the importance of research in universities. Naturally, institutions seek to behave autonomously in developing schemas to guide their own behaviour in a country’s higher education system, but institutions must also engage in a larger system that includes all other universities, and so must adjust their schemas to take account of the needs of the larger system to which they belong. Bain, Walker, and Chan (2011, p. 704) refer to this process of institutional self-organisation as embodying “an emergent functional and natural order”.

The theory of complex adaptive systems also provides a variation in explaining how change results through a process of emergence. Instead of making the assumption that the implementation of change initiatives will result in intended outcomes, emergence in complex adaptive systems theory allows that there are considerable limits to predictability because they
involve human behaviours. Stacey (1996, p. 287; 2007, p. 196) explains emergence as referring to the new patterns of behaviour that are created from interactions between agents, each following its own schema of behaviour, within an organisational system. Stacey (2007, p. 195) asserts that “no individual agent, or group of agents, determines the patterns of behaviour that the system as a whole displays.” Change is, therefore, considered likely to be non-linear in its pattern, and the processes of change, based as they are on a myriad of interactions between multiples of agents, may have a powerful element of unpredictability.

All things considered, then, the theory of complex adaptive systems provides a basis for viewing how the processes of change may occur in the student assessment culture of teacher training institutions in Vietnam. Higher education in Vietnam differs from higher education in many Western settings in the extent to which authority is centralised, whether with the Government at a system-wide level, or with the rector at an institutional level. Hayden and Lam Quang Thiep (2010, p. 20) draw attention to this important characteristic. Marginson (2011, p. 595) further suggests that centralised authority is a tendency that is typical of educational management in countries with Confucian traditions, deriving from the importance attached in these countries to maintaining a social and institutional hierarchy. Pham Thanh Nghi (2010, p. 54) also refers to the high “power distance”, drawing upon Hofstede (1997, p. 28), in describing the hierarchies in social relations involving the exercise of authority in Vietnamese universities. In effect, Vietnam’s higher education system, and its constituent universities and colleges, are strongly ‘top-down’ in terms of the authority structure and the typical forms of social interaction. Higher education institutions in Vietnam need, however, to be seen as complex adaptive systems that accommodate the dynamism and interconnectivity of all the elements in the organisation and the broader system. The process of change in student assessment practices is, thus, best viewed holistically, and as being non-linear and potentially unpredictable rather than linear and simply top-down.

By viewing universities as complex adaptive systems, all aspects of the university and the relationships within and between them need to be considered if initiatives to encourage change are to be successful, according to Macdonald and Joughin (2009, p. 210). In particular, the theory of complex adaptive systems affords considerable importance to the participatory role of the agents involved in the change process. It also allows people to understand and value the rules, principles and conventions informing how each agent behaves and interacts with others, and also how agents might adapt and change to be consistent with the beliefs and the actions of other agents. It also suggests that change emerges from the actions and interactions of multiply inter-connected agents, rather than being a response to a set of schema established at one level.
within a higher education system. Considering the immensity of the interactive complexities, simple solutions are not likely to work effectively in complex adaptive systems, such as universities in Vietnam. Rather than simply focus on a specific initiative and expect predictable outcomes, all of the necessary elements for change in a university system would need to cooperate with each other in order for successful and meaningful change to occur. In this vein, Tasaka (1999, p. 121) argues that a knowledge of co-evolution teaches about the importance of combining both a horizontal and a vertical integration strategy when managing change: “neither top-down nor bottom-up” mandates alone are likely to make change happen because they do not take into account the complexities of agents’ interactions or the extent of them.

The application of complex adaptive systems theory to effecting change in student assessment practices in higher education settings is not new. Based on the principles of complex adaptive systems theory, Macdonald and Joughin (2009) developed a model in support of institution-wide improvement in student assessment, in which they identified four principal levels at which change needs to occur if it is to be effective. The first concerns the unit of study, where learning and assessment actually happens. The second concerns the overall learning experience, the program design, and the degree of faculty commitment to innovation and improvement. The third concerns the availability of professional development to staff, together with the existence of a supportive departmental culture and departmental procedures to reinforce professional development activities. The fourth concerns the existence of institutional conditions that support learning, teaching and assessment, including resource allocation decisions and whether there are processes for acknowledging positive achievements. Their model therefore acknowledges the vital role of the external influences impacting on universities, so it is able to accommodate the context of Vietnamese universities aspiring to world-class academic standards in student assessment practices, and therefore academic standards. It also addresses the importance of leadership, management and quality assurance to the achievement of such practices and standards, which have considerable impact on all four levels.

Macdonald and Joughin’s (2009) model suggests that change may be promoted by identifying critical elements of the university system and the key relationships between these elements. Their model emphasises the role of agents in relation to the elements, including both individuals and units involved in or likely to be affected by change. It therefore recognises the complexity of interactions between agents, along with the agents’ essentially self-organising nature. In light of complex adaptive systems theory, Macdonald and Joughin (2009, p. 205) argue for a socio-semiotic perspective on educational change, or “change as conversation”. They argue that meaning derives from the quality of conversation among academic staff members, teaching
teams, and departments. They found that the key element precipitating positive change was the calibre of the conversations among faculty members, teams and departments that allowed the effective improvements in student assessment practices to emerge. They emphasised the importance of seeking to create contexts for conversations and learning in order to bring about change. The notion of agents’ conversations being pivotal has very considerable implications for the social context in which meaning is made in universities generally, and particularly in Vietnamese teacher training institutions. It suggests that within organisations are communities of practice, a term coined by Lave and Wenger (1991) in relation to the social context in which learning occurs. The role of communities of practice is examined later in this chapter.

It is important to recognise that the theory of complex adaptive systems seeks to illuminate a holistic system whose parts are constantly interacting with other parts, and agents with other agents, rather than to act on a part of a system in isolation from other parts and the broader context. The theory is thus able to shed light on how complex but meaningful interactions among agents work in an organisation and how change may be facilitated within it. However, Fullan (1999, p. 25) cautions that, “Change means facing the unknown. Facing the unknown means anxiety.” It is therefore essential to recognise that such change-related anxieties always accompany change. In this regard, Fullan’s theory of educational change is useful in pointing to necessary conditions to support educational change which, in the present investigation, concerns developing more effective student assessment practices in teacher training universities in Vietnam.

3.2 Fullan’s Theory of Educational Change

Drawing on complexity theory, Fullan (2001, p. 44) argued that meaningful change is a complex process requiring what he refers to as the ‘reculturing’ of a pedagogical culture. The process of reculturing a pedagogical culture requires, according to Fullan (2007, p. 25), challenging people’s beliefs, values and ways of thinking, with a view to, where necessary, advancing better-informed values, beliefs and practices. He argues (2007, p. 88-9) that significant cultural change is more likely to occur in circumstances where the need for change has been clearly understood, and where the individuals concerned are well informed about how it will be achieved. Fullan (2001, p. 51; 2007, p. 97) also adopts a socio-semiotic perspective in that he argues that the key to successful change is the improvement of collegial relationships. Fullan’s theoretical perspective holds that the social settings are essential in shaping beliefs, values, ambitions and learning about higher education. In this regard, Fullan (2001, pp. 112-115) argues that the leader must be a ‘context setter’ who deliberatively establishes conditions
for change and then guides the people through the complexities of change. Fullan et al. (2005, p. 54-8) refer to the importance of educational leaders having “change knowledge”, defined as “understanding and insight about the process of change and the key drivers.” They argue that these drivers include: a moral purpose; a transparent and coherent change process; capacity building; a culture of learning; a culture of evaluation; leadership; and the cultivation of tri-level development. These drivers are now discussed individually.

A key tenet in Fullan’s (2007) framework is that an organisation must believe in the importance of a particular organisational change, because as Fullan (2007, p. 37) argues, the outcomes of educational change depend on “what people do and think” [original emphasis]. According to Fullan (1993; 1999; 2007), educators will accept change more readily if they perceive the need for it. He identifies the importance of educational change having a moral purpose. When applied to student assessment practices in Vietnam’s teacher training institutions, this moral purpose would concern a desire to make a positive impact upon the lives of students; on a broader level, it would concern enhancing education’s contribution to the development of society and democracy. Fullan (1994, p. 12) regards teaching to be, at its core, a “moral profession,” requiring educators to remain closely attached to the needs of their students. Fullan (1993, p. 18) argues, therefore, that harnessing and managing a moral purpose for educational change is essential because, as he states: “Without moral purposes, aimlessness and fragmentation prevail.” Fullan (2001) proceeds to explain that when the moral purpose is generated and shared among an organisation’s agents, it is likely to enhance their commitment and motivation for change. In terms of student assessment change, Deneen and Boud (2014, pp. 579-80) stated that if educators perceived change processes to be about implementing accountability tasks rather than as efforts to promote student learning, then there would be a high possibility of resistance.

While a shared belief in the need for change is essential in fostering people’s commitments to and support of change, vagueness about the goals, objectives and implementation strategies for educational change can undermine any moral purpose. Introducing an unclear or unclarified change may result in confusion, anxiety, frustration and, ultimately, resistance, according to Fullan (2007). There is, therefore, also a need for a transparent change process, in relation to the goals, and the means and guidelines for achieving the goals (Fullan, 2007, p. 89). Fullan (1994, p. 284) argues that where an organisation’s members all share a vision, it permeates the entire organisation with shared values and purpose; in turn, the shared values and purpose provide a particular direction for the organisation and a shared commitment to its development. In particular, those expected to participate in change must be able to understand what will be
involved, how they will be impacted, and what the likely outcomes will be. Fullan (2001, p. 117) further observes that the moral purpose precipitates the organisational context because it encourages the institution’s members to aspire to greater accomplishments. The standards in relation to outcomes are also a significant driver for achieving coherence. Fullan (2001, p. 118) explains that focusing on outcomes clarifies for an organisation’s agents what they are trying to accomplish and drives backward through the process toward moral purpose. It thus helps an organisation to produce more coherent action plans. Due to such complexities, Fullan (2007, p. 89) asserts that oversimplifying change processes is especially problematic, because it may give rise to a “false clarity” among agents regarding the purpose and scope of the change process.

When an organisation’s agents clearly understand and are committed to the moral purpose, the means of achieving it, and the necessary goals along the journey towards effective change, they may then be equipped with sufficient knowledge, skills and competence to implement the changes successfully. Many researchers (see, for example, Elmore, 2002; Guskey and Yoon, 2009; Heritage, Kim, Vendlinski, and Herman, 2009; Kane and Khattri, 1995; Snow, 1989) report that change initiatives, at both the personal and organisational levels, require new knowledge and skills to enable change agents to successfully implement them. Snow (1989), nearly three decades ago, found that teachers tended to fall back on their experience when they were not provided with effective and sustained support in terms of knowledge, skills, resources, and managerial capacity. In terms of applying these principles to improving student assessment in Vietnamese teacher training institutions, there is yet to emerge any empirical evidence about the extent to which these conditions could be met, nor is there any understanding of the extent of knowledge of means or intermediate goals. Fullan (2007) asserts that these requirements are fundamental, and thus, there must be purposeful, targeted and sustained capacity building, or else educational change will not be sustained.

Capacity building, as defined by Fullan et al. (2005, p. 55), is an extremely complex endeavour that includes the need to develop: individual and collective skills, knowledge and competencies; resources; policies; commitment; and a new shared identity. It is, therefore, a complex and comprehensive endeavour. On this basis, Fullan (2007) argues that responsibility for capacity building needs to be a collective responsibility, involving whole institutions, districts and systems. In this regard, it is of note that Hong Kong, Shanghai, South Korea and Singapore, which have four of the top-performing school systems in the world as indicated by the OECD’s PISA assessments, have each invested heavily in capacity building among their teachers. By way of example, Jensen and colleagues (see, Jensen, Hunter, Sonnemann & Burns, 2012) report that these countries have invested in teacher education programs; developing teaching and
learning resources for use by teachers; and the provision of compulsory professional development for the entire teaching workforce.

In keeping with the socio-semiotic lens on educational change, capacity building, according to Fullan et al. (2005, p. 56) requires the development of a culture of learning. In this vein, Fullan (2007, p. 97) goes on to argue that, since change concerns learning to do new things, both the interpersonal interactions that take place and the social settings in which those interactions occur are essential for learning to take place. In adopting this particular socio-semiotic perspective, Fullan et al. (2005, p. 58) observes that creating opportunities for lecturers to learn in everyday social situations, referred to as “learning in context”, is important. Further, learning from peers as well as from the early implementers of new ideas, is very powerful driver of change. Making meaning through the social contexts in which agents interact, according to Fullan (2007, p. 139), creates opportunities for people to “converse about the meaning of change” [original emphasis]. When applied to student assessment practices, Orrell (2005) further argues that whenever there is pressure on an institution to reform a student assessment culture, it is essential for the institution to develop its capacity to engage in professional and intelligent conversations in which a more critical spirit is also welcomed. Fullan’s argument about the importance of a collegial culture of learning within institutions is consistent with Stacey’s (1996, p. 280), view on the importance of dialogue:

It is true dialogue in which people engage with each other, not to be in control but to provoke and be provoked, to learn and contribute to the learning of others, to change their own minds as well as the minds of others.

Fullan takes the notion of the social setting much further, arguing that in a collegial learning culture, the quality of relationships is central to success. Within collegial relationships, Fullan (1999, p. 37-8) argues, success is only possible when organisational agents develop trust and compassion for each other and support each other during the processes of implementing change. In this way, the organisation fosters a shared moral purpose, at the same time offering emotional support for the organisation’s agents in the search to settle on a shared moral purpose.

Another key condition for successful educational change concerns developing a culture of continuous evaluation of progress towards shared aims. Building “evaluation cultures”, as Fullan (2010, p. 66; 2011, p. 8) named them, based on “intelligent accountability” systems, appears to be instrumental in fostering people’s willingness and commitment to implementing change. Fullan argues that intelligent accountability “involves building cumulative capacity and responsibility that is both internally held and externally reinforced.” He emphasises that
Achieving Change in Student Assessment in Vietnamese Teacher Training Institutions

Intelligent accountability relies on incentives more than on punishments, though he acknowledges the importance of both in order to precipitate investment in capacity building and collective responsibility among members. Fullan (2011, p. 8-9) argues that “capacity building, engagement and trust building” within an organisation and its agents are fundamental steps toward intelligent accountability and the development of strong mutual responsibility, all of which are essential for educational reform. However, accountability appears to be absolutely essential to successful reform. Bain et al. (2011) go so far as to argue that accountability is an emergent and intelligent expression of the interaction among agents. In the case of Finland, Sahlberg (2007; 2010) reports that intelligent accountability policies were based on professional trust, responsibility and togetherness. Sahlberg (2010, p. 57) regarded Finland as “a model in successful educational change.”

Encouraging and cultivating multiple sources of leadership within an organisation is also significant for successful change to take place. Fullan et al. (2005, p. 57) argue that effective leadership needs to be distributed throughout the organization. Fullan (2007, p. 298) goes on to observe that leadership derives from many sources, and from many levels, including at the teaching level:

The teacher […] who contributes to the success of peers is a leader; the mentor, the grade-level coordinator, the department head, the local union representative are all leaders if they are working in a professional learning community.

In relation to change in student assessment practices in Vietnam, it is likely that when leadership is distributed within teacher training institutions, it can be a powerful driver: individual agents with authority can take responsibility for achieving goals towards the pursuit of their organisation’s moral purpose. In this vein, Fullan (2007, p. 296) argues that successful leading and managing is not only for “one’s own success but about fostering success in others.” Distributed leadership, therefore, provides multiple sources of guidance, direction and support for individuals to successfully implement change through mutual collaboration and collegiality (Harris, 2004, p. 6). At the faculty or department level, Carless (2009, p. 86) suggests that distributed leadership could be an essential way to foster trust in the student assessment process. Carless argues that distributed leadership implies a trustful way of working together. When the decision-making process is shared among organisational agents, it exhibits trusting relationships. With distributed leadership, the expertise of the ‘assessment leader’ may be more relevant than his or her hierarchical image when individuals develop expertise by working collaboratively on a shared moral purpose.
Both complex adaptive systems and Fullan’s (2007) educational change theories argue that it is necessary for the whole system to be working together as a collective system in order to achieve deep educational change. Indeed Stacey (1996, p. 21), adopting a complexity theory perspective, asserts that, the total system brings with it an inestimable set of connections in which the parts interact continually to reconstruct the whole; the whole in turn affects how the parts interact, thereby stimulating their mutual development. Similarly, Fullan (2007) points to the importance of purposeful collaboration and a mutual influence among agents across the system. However, Fullan (2007) also argues for the importance of purposeful conversations with the broader parts of the system in which the educational institution is located: local, district and national levels. He refers here to the value of tri-level development. Fullan (2007, p. 236) also specifically suggests the development of both top-down and bottom-up strategies in managing educational change, which he refers to a “permeable connectivity.” Nevertheless, he does not undervalue the potentially powerful role of government as a key driver of change and reform, because government has the capacity to achieve large-scale reform through legislation, guidelines and incentives.

In conjunction with the theory of complex adaptive systems, which emphasised that the disorderly dynamics of contradiction, conflict, tension, irregularity and dialogue are key drivers for changeability and the creativity of organisations (Stacey, 1995, p. 490), Fullan (1999) argues that deep educational change may also provoke resistance because it is inconsistent with people’s habits and strong beliefs. Fullan (1999, pp. 36-7) asserts, however, that resistance, contractions and conflicts, rather than being negative outcomes, may just be the opposite; they potentially could make a positive contribution to educational change. He recommends that leaders need to listen to and respect those who have different ideas because that is how different perspectives may be brought to bear on complex problems. Understanding that the process of deep change is complex and unpredictable, and also acknowledging that the education hierarchy is unlikely to bring about an effective change, Fullan (2009, p. ix) stresses that effective leaders guide people through their differences and enable differences to surface.

Fullan’s notion of seeking to avoid forcing change by issuing orders, by welcoming different perspectives and by respecting opposite points of view would seem to be contradictory in a setting such as Vietnam where Confucian traditions emphasise the importance of a “power distance” between those leading and those being led (Nguyen Hung Tuong, 2002, p. 2; Nguyen Phuong Mai, Terlouw & Pilot, 2005, p. 410). In terms of achieving educational reform in the student assessment culture in Vietnam’s teacher training institutions, however, it is clear that changing the context, including the structure and culture, within which organisational agents
work is essential. In particular this section has been shown that a socio-semiotic lens on educational change enables a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. However, in order to have analytical bite, it is also necessary to consider how individuals learn through interacting with their social contexts because this is what happens in universities. Academics learn from their internal and external networks. Fullan’s framework is silent about this essential element of academic working lives. Attention is now, therefore, directed to the nature of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) to address this gap and to complete the theoretical platform for understanding how student assessment practice may be reformed in Vietnam.

3.3 Communities of Practice

The notion of communities of practice complements both the theory of complex adaptive systems and Fullan’s theory of educational change because it allows organisations, such as teacher training institutions, to be seen as social settings where people formally and informally interact with one another on many levels and for many purposes. The notion of communities of practice is also a socio-semiotic construct, but more importantly, it is highly consistent with the values of collectivism in Confucian-heritage cultures such as Vietnam. Hofstede (1997, p. 51) explains this collectivism as follows: “people from birth onwards […] are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.” However, the notion of communities of practice specifically addresses the social learning processes through which support, engagement, challenge and accountability occur. In particular, it is through the learning processes of communities of practice that individual and organisational identities are formed.

The concept of ‘communities of practice’ was first coined by Lave and Wenger (1991), and then developed by Wenger (1998). Notions such as the calibre of interpersonal interactions and of agents having a shared moral purpose are highly consistent with Wenger’s (1998, p. 45) definition of communities of practice as groups of people who are “created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise.” Wenger et al. (2002, p. 5-6) assert that communities of practice exist everywhere: they can be physical or virtual. A community of practice usually comprises a small core group assumed to comprise the community leadership, a small active group that includes frequent participants, and a larger group that includes peripheral participants. These groups knit the whole system together around core knowledge requirements.
A community of practice may be easily distinguished from other communities in that it has a shared sense of identity and its membership is committed to a knowledge domain, or shared endeavour, or set of commitments. According to Wenger et al. (2002, p. 27-9), communities of practice are characterised by three elements which need to be developed simultaneously: the domain, the community itself, and the practice in which members of the community are engaged. First is the domain, which is comprised of a set of key problems, issues or concerns that the community’s members are commonly experiencing, and which Wenger et al. (2002, p. 32) referred to as the “complex and long-standing issues that require sustained learning.” A domain of knowledge serves to bind the community together. Second is the community of members who voluntarily choose to share values, a domain and a set of commitments with other practitioners or groups of learners. These people are interested in and care about a particular knowledge domain; they regularly interact and engage in shared information, activities and discussions; and they help each other based on mutual respect and trust. The practice is the shared repertoire of resources and experiences that community members develop, share and maintain over time through their regular interaction. Such resources and experience include stories, reference materials, tools, ways of doing things, approaches to thinking and addressing difficult problems or approaches to learning, routines and particular concepts that allow members to achieve their joint purpose.

Sharing a socio-semiotic view of learning and educational change with Fullan et al. (2005, p. 56), the very notion of communities of practice signifies that knowledge-sharing and the development of collective identity are powerful forces towards positive change. In this regard, Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 98) argue that the primary place of learning is not the individual mind but the processes of social participation in a setting of shared practices. Wenger et al. (2002, p. 4) explain that, through regular interaction within communities of practice, the members typically share information, insight and implementation practices. Such processes of sharing knowledge also enable members to be informally bound by the value or moral purpose that these agents or community members share, through their interactions, which are collaborative learning processes. Mutual engagement and a deep involvement in activities within the community allow the members to establish norms and to build collaborative relationships that enable them to learn from one another. Thus, they become capable of contributing to and developing the common goals of the community.

The theory of communities of practice highlights the importance of the community with which one identifies to the development and negotiation of an individual’s identity, including their status within that community. Indeed, Wenger (1998, p. 5) states that “identity is learning as
becoming”, which is “a way of analysing how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the contexts of our communities.” Lave and Wenger (1991) explain that, within communities of practice, less experienced members learn and actively construct their identities from social interactions with more experienced members and experts in a specific knowledge domain, through the process of ‘legitimate peripheral participation.’ As the newcomers move from the periphery of the community to its centre, they become more active and engaged within the culture and thus assume the role of expert or elder. As Wenger (1998) notes, people continuously create a shared identity through engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities and by being highly motivated to become a more central participant in a community of practice. Such a motivation therefore provides a powerful incentive for learning.

An essential feature of communities of practice is that they enable members to learn not only from explicit messages and communications with other members but also by tacit learning through shared aspirations, values, conventions and traditions. Indeed, they are exemplars of a socio-semiotic understanding of how learning takes place. In this regard, Wenger et al. (2002, p. 9) state that communities of practice are in the best position to generate knowledge because they produce not only explicit knowledge but also tacit knowledge. Polyani (1966, p. 4), an early observer of tacit knowledge and communication in higher education, states that tacit knowledge is difficult to explain or communicate because it is intuitive and embedded in a particular context. However, as Wenger et al. (2002, p. 11) explain, interaction and informal learning process, such as daily conversations, dialogues and storytelling in the communities of practice, are particularly important for sharing tacit knowledge and embodied expertise. Wenger et al. (2002, p. 35) further emphasise that a diversity of views and expertise amongst members allows learning to be distributed throughout the communities of practice, and makes learning processes richer as well as more creative. In effect, learners are benchmarking their learning progress and their approaches to learning with each other. Through the social context, successful communities of practice usually encourage differentiation among members (Wenger et al., 2002). Clearly, engaging in communities of practice allows members to exchange collectively both explicit and tacit knowledge related to their practices, and to learn from different perspectives, therefore, building in members the capacity for change.

Notwithstanding their importance to learning in higher education, communities of practice cannot survive without the strong support of and understanding from their leaders. It is essential for the leaders, according to Wenger & Snyder (2000, p. 140), to understand that the workings of communities of practice cannot be mandated; they are voluntary human endeavours. As
complex adaptive systems, communities of practice are ‘self-organising’ because they manage themselves, set their own leadership, and self-select their membership (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p. 142). Wenger (2000, p. 143) further explains that, although communities of practice are self-sustaining, they “benefit from cultivation” through several identifiable strategies. An obvious first step is to identify potential communities of practice and their potential. Wenger (2000) notes that in most cases, informal networks of people with the ability and the passion to further develop an organisation’s core competencies already exist. However, leaders need to identify such groups in order to help them come together as a community of practice through a shared domain. A second strategy is to provide infrastructure and resource support to enable communities to apply their expertise effectively. In a third strategy, known as ‘cultivation’, leaders systematically collect member’s stories and anecdotal evidence in order to ensure that the whole organisation is aware of the specific outcomes that the community has achieved, thus reinforcing the community of practice.

The theory of communities of practice explains how people interact, collaboratively share knowledge, and learn within their organisations. It therefore provides a useful perspective for understanding how people learn in such settings as teacher training institutions in Vietnam. Proudford (2003, p. 2), in this vein, advocates the notion that considering universities as learning organisations or communities of practice is a powerful formula for successful curriculum reform. Proudford (2003, p. 2) states:

Central to the process of reculturing is promotion of organisation learning […] creating professional learning communities to generate organisational learning and organisational capacity.

By viewing institutions as communities of practice, they may essentially be seen as the “social learning systems”, as described by Wenger (2010, p. 1). In social learning systems, members of an organisation cooperate, learn from one another and co-construct meaning in their own particular community context. Through interpersonal interactions, members of an organisation, such as a teacher training departments or universities in Vietnam, organise themselves, evolve and keep changing to adapt to the their external influences. Applied in the context of change in student assessment in Vietnam’s teacher training institutions, building communities of practice would seem to be essential to consider due to their capacity to generate the momentum for and commitment to change using the multiplicity of social interactions and networks.

Drawing upon the notion of communities of practice, ‘teacher learning communities’ would seem to be appropriate sites for the collection of data about attitudes towards student assessment
reform. Wiliam (2006; 2012) reports that realistic implementation of classroom formative assessment practices took time and long-term support, and required new ways of learning in the United Kingdom. Wiliam (2012, p. 3) found that professional staff development was essential to supporting well-informed assessment cultures in these settings. However, in terms of the trickle-down effect, Wiliam (2012, p. 29) found that ‘teacher learning communities’ were able to support teachers in changing their practices by promoting teachers’ everyday learning and regular interactions. In this regard, Carless, (2011, p. 188-202) suggest that ‘teacher learning communities’ would be appropriate settings for supporting educational change both through developing professional dialogue and through promoting collaborative learning. Promoting learning within communities of practice might thus be one key factors illuminating how student assessment reform might be achieved in Vietnam.

In summary, the combination of the theory of complex adaptive systems, Fullan’s theory of educational change, and the communities of practice theory, offers a comprehensive and conceptual understanding of the complexities of educational change in relation to student assessment practices in Vietnam’s higher education. In theory, when confronting change, organisational agents may experience stages that show the extent of their commitment to change. Carnall (1995) suggests a ‘change equation’ model that illustrates how people experience change and what stages they pass through. The first stage is denial, when people try to deny the need for change and defend their present situation. The second stage is defending, when people see the inevitability of change but try to convince themselves and others that change is not suitable for them. The third stage is discarding, when people start to discard of the past and to recognise the new reality. They feel positive about the future and begin adapting accordingly. The next stage of adaptation happens when people start trying out a new pattern of behaviours. They then discover approaches to make the new system work. Finally there is the stage of internalization, when people have generated a new set of behaviours. Change, thus, becomes the norm and part of the routine. Carnall describes that these stages do not always occur sequentially, and they may also be affected by the nature of change. People may get stuck at any stage, even the first stage of denial, and some may take longer to pass through different stages. Carnall suggests that institutions thus need to have practical interventions to support people to go through these stages.

How organisational agents respond to change may vary, according to personality type, amongst other things. Drawing upon a literature in organisational psychology, Musselwhite and Ingram (1999) developed a change style indicator theory that offers an explanation of preferred style of initiating and dealing with change. Three personality types are identified: named conservers,
pragmatists and originators. When facing change, conservers generally appear deliberate, disciplined, and organised. These people honour tradition and established practice. They accept structure and prefer change that is incremental. The pragmatists may appear practical, reasonable and flexible, but they are also noncommittal. They prefer change that emphasise workable outcomes rather than change focused on structures. The originators, may appear impractical, unorganised, undisciplined and unconventional, but they are original thinkers. These people will likely challenge accepted assumptions, and they enjoy risk taking and uncertainty. They prefer change that is expansive, quick and radical.

3.4 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has established a theoretical for understanding how comprehensive change in student assessment might be achieved in teacher training institutions in Vietnam. In particular, it has described three theoretical perspectives on educational change. Each indicates particular elements of change that might usefully be examined in the present investigation in relation to teacher training institutions in Vietnam, specifically in relation to the culture of student assessment. Through understanding these three theoretical perspectives, it is evident that the following matters should be investigated: the beliefs and values of lecturers and educational managers at teacher training institutions, and how these influence their approaches to student assessment; the extent to which lecturers and educational managers perceive the need for reform in student assessment practices, and the nature of what it is that they would like to see changed; and what these lecturers and educational managers believe might be the necessary conditions for stimulating the development of more well-informed and contemporary student assessment practices.
Chapter 4 - Methodology

This chapter explains the research methodology adopted for the present investigation. It also reports on how the investigation was conducted. As explained in Chapter 1, Naturalistic Inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) provides a suitable methodology for the investigation because it accommodates the need to document the issues, claims and concerns of a selected group of lecturers and educational managers regarding student assessment practices at teacher training universities in Vietnam. Naturalistic Inquiry involves the collection of data in the natural setting of the participants, and it adopts an ethnographic approach to data collection and analysis. Of special importance is that it provides for the application various trustworthiness criteria that are essential to demonstrate the rigour of the investigation and its reported findings. The chapter begins with a review of the research design for the investigation. It then addresses matters related to its conduct.

4.1 Research Design

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that human research should be conducted in natural settings and they proposed a logical methodology, referred to as Naturalistic Inquiry, for the conduct of human research. Schwandt (1994, p. 118) notes that the focus in Naturalistic Inquiry is the “world of lived reality and situation-specific meanings.” It is a methodology that is constructivist, that is, it subscribes to a view of knowledge in which there is seen to be no objective, single reality concerning perceptions of human experiences. Indeed, Lincoln and Guba have more recently expressed a preference for the methodology to be referred to Constructivist Inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Naturalistic Inquiry is interpretivist in its theoretical orientation, that is, it is based on a view that in order to understand the social world under examination, it must be interpreted. To this end, the researcher endeavours to find meaning in a social context by becoming immersed in the complex web of relations that define the situation. This interpretivist approach is essentially socio-semiotic, that is, it seeks to document “culturally derived and historically situated interpretations” (Crotty, 1998: 67).

Five key assumptions relating to research involving human experiences are fundamental to Naturalistic Inquiry as a methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37). These fit neatly with the theoretical basis for the present investigation. First, human experience is assumed to consist of multiple realities, none of which exists until constructed, and none of which can be properly understood in isolation from the context of its parts. Second, meaning is socially constructed,
and so the relationship between the researcher and the researched is interactive and inseparable. Third, research must rely only on working hypotheses that are bound by time and context. Fourth, it is not possible to differentiate between cause and effect, because all entities simultaneously and mutually shape each other. Finally, value-free research is not an attainable goal in researching the human condition because inquiry is value-bound, and so the values of the researcher are an integral part of the research process.

Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 39-43) identified as many as 14 interlinked characteristics of research conducted within the framework of Naturalistic Inquiry. Some that are most relevant to the present investigation are briefly reviewed here.

The first is that Naturalistic Inquiry favours natural settings for the conduct of research. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 189), there is no single, tangible reality to human experience and so no social phenomenon can be understood outside of its relationship to the “time and context that […] supported it.” Lincoln and Guba (1985) also suggest that reality is holistic and cannot be studied in isolated and fragmented situations. A deductive stance involving generalised ‘truth statements’ that are free of time and place is, therefore, considered to be unsuitable (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 142). In the present investigation, the experiences of the participants with student assessment were explored in the context of their workplace settings. The intention of the researcher was to capture the authenticity of their experiences and to achieve the fullest possible understanding about the phenomenon of interest to the present investigation. To this end, the researcher was acquainted with each of the university sites, in order to be able to present an emic perspective.

The second characteristic of naturalistic research the human researcher is considered to be the primary data-gathering instrument. Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that only humans are capable of coping with and responding appropriately to the variable situations of field research concerning social phenomena, and that, while there are always biases in social research, “only the human is in a position to identify and take into account those […] biases” (p. 40). Further, according to Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993), the human being, as the primary instrument for the research, can use all of the senses and human intuition in the data-gathering process. Thus, the naturalistic researcher can be adaptive to complex situations and change research question or sources of data as particular themes emerge that need to be followed up. In the present investigation, the researcher was the instrument for all of the data collection. Because the investigation mainly involved the use of interviews and documentary analysis, the researcher had to accommodate the needs of each of the participants in terms of availability and
preferences regarding the location of interviews. The researcher also needed to build trust with each participant and establish positive rapport. During the data collection process, the researcher kept data memos and notes about non-verbal communications and tacitly communicated cues from participants, such as tone, gesticulation, body language, facial expressions and intonation. Another technique was to record details of interviews and other encounters as soon as possible after they occurred, and then go back to the participants to clarify the researcher’s preliminary understanding at a later date, but certainly within a couple of days.

The third and related characteristic is that in *Naturalistic Inquiry*, the documentation of tacitly communicated cues is considered to be essential, just as it is essential to check interpretations of meanings with each participant. The importance of tacit knowledge in higher education was first recorded by Polyani (1966) and it is now threaded through many different higher education literatures. More recently, Botha, Kourie, and Snyman (2014, p. 23) refer to tacit knowledge as the personal values, beliefs, attitudes and mental models that are intuitive for the participants and which are largely context-dependent. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 40), in explaining *Naturalistic Inquiry*, argued that revealing tacit knowledge is an essential part of the research process involving social phenomena. They observe that it is impossible to capture by language alone all of the meaning being conveyed about human experience (Lincoln & Guba, p. 195), and so the naturalistic researcher must draw on all senses and on intuition to gather, analyse, interpret and construct realities from qualitative data. In the present investigation, tacit knowledge was important in two respects. First, the researcher herself had to be clear about her tacit knowledge, in terms of her values and beliefs about student assessment. These values and beliefs almost certainly influenced her approach to the research, including how research issues were identified, and how questions were framed. It is certainly the case that the researcher declares a commitment to learner-centred learning and learner independence in the process of learning. Second, the tacit knowledge of the participants, in terms of their values and beliefs about student assessment, had to be elucidated. When participants expressed views about student assessment practices, it was important to try to understand not only what was being said but also to deduce what was being assumed, implied and at times, left unstated. In this regard, each participant’s individuality had to be properly appreciated, valued and authentically reported.

The fourth characteristic is that qualitative methods are necessary, but not necessarily sufficient, depending upon the nature of the investigation, to conducting Naturalistic inquiry because of their flexibility and adaptability to the human instrument. It is worth noting that positivist methods were not appropriate to the present investigation.
Lincoln and Guba also assert (1985, p. 40) that qualitative methods are more open to “mutual shaping and exposing the relationship of the researcher to the participants.” In the present investigation, semi-structured interviews and document analysis were the two forms of data collection employed. Semi-structured, ethnographic interviews enabled the researcher to document and richly describe multiple issues, claims and concerns regarding the experiences of student assessment cultures reported by the participants in relation to student assessment. The interviews also provided a means of exploring any contextual conditions reportedly affecting participants’ perceptions regarding their ability and inclination for reforming student assessment practices at their higher education institutions. Of note is that ethnographic interviewing has its roots in anthropology. As Spradley (1979, p. 3) explains, the ethnographic interviewer, like the anthropologist, seeks to generate an understanding of “another way of life from the native point of view”, without any preconceived assumptions. Documentary analysis was employed as a means of examining individual student assessment practices, including the provision of formative feedback to students on their individual learning progress, the maintenance of grade-books, and the construction of assessment tasks.

The fifth characteristic is the implementation of purposive sampling, which is, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), fundamental due to the need to identify multiple realities of phenomena by achieving a maximum variation across the range of participants sampled for an investigation. Patton (2002, p. 230) further explains that: “the power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth.” Purposive sampling increases the opportunity of being exposed to rich, thick, descriptive data from which emergent themes may be identified and, in turn, from which grounded theory may be developed. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, pp. 233-4), the process of selecting participants purposefully is completed when a point of data saturation (or information redundancy) is reached. In the present investigation, the sites and the participants were purposively selected. A ‘snowball sampling’ technique (Patton, 2002, p. 230) was employed to extend the size of the group of participants, and ‘convenience sampling’ (Patton, 2002, p. 241) was also utilised to assist with the manageability of the investigation, especially given the context of data collection being Vietnam. These procedures are explained in more detail later in this chapter.

The sixth characteristic is that Naturalistic Inquiry involves inductive data analysis, which means that the researcher gathers data to build themes, hypotheses or theories. In attempting to understand the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved, the naturalistic researcher builds
A theory from observations and intuitive understandings gleaned in the field. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 40) note that in naturalistic research, inductive data analysis allows best for the identification the multiple realities. They explain also that inductive analysis is more likely to generate a full ‘rich’ description of the research setting, thus providing a stronger basis for being able later on to transfer insights from an investigation to other similar settings. In the present investigation, the opportunity to work inductively with the data was an important feature of the research. Refinements of insights are possible when the researcher can develop a rich data set to the point where no new themes are emerging, and especially when it is also possible to go back to participants to confirm understandings and enquire further about particular issues, claims or concerns reported.

One other important characteristic of Naturalistic Inquiry is that theory is developed from the data up, hence, grounded theory. Drawing on Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) framework of grounded theory, Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 205) argue that theory is grounded in the data because no a priori theory is likely to embrace the multiple realities that are possibly encountered in a research setting. In the present investigation, the researcher established herself as being neutral and as not having a fixed understanding of student assessment practices or on educational change. While declaring her preference for well-informed student practice, she remained open to new knowledge and insights throughout the investigation and she allowed participants to develop her understanding of the world using information supplied and confirmed by them. A framework for understanding current student assessment culture in Vietnam was thus developed from the ground up. This framework was grounded entirely in the insights that emerged from the perspectives of the participants.

Other characteristics of Naturalistic Inquiry, including emergent design, negotiated outcomes, idiographic interpretation, tentative application of developing theories, focus-determined boundaries, and special trustworthiness criteria, are not specifically addressed here but are referred to as appropriate later in this and later chapters.

### 4.2 Sites and Participants

Of interest to this investigation, for reasons identified in Chapter 1, were particular types of universities in Vietnam that specialise in teacher training. To achieve some geographic spread in terms of the institutions selected, it was decided to approach three universities to obtain permission to conduct research. One of these (University A) was a large national university of pedagogy in the north of Vietnam. Another (University B) was an equivalent, large national
Achieving Change in Student Assessment in Vietnamese Teacher Training Institutions

University of pedagogy in the south. The third (University C) was a smaller, regional teacher training university which has a faculty of education, located in the southeast of the country. The two large universities are officially recognised as being leading universities in Vietnam. The smaller regional university was once a well-established teacher training college that had since been given university status. The rectors of these institutions were formally approached, seeking their approval for the research to be conducted at their institutions (see Appendix 1). In all cases, fortunately, permission was granted. A brief introduction to each of the institutions is as follows.

University A was officially established in 1951. It is a public university of pedagogy that serves as one of the nation’s leading institutions for the training of teachers, lecturers and educational managers. It awards degrees up to and including the PhD level. It is a source of professional development programs for teachers and of textbooks on teacher education. It plays a key role in educational research and innovation.

University B was established in 1976. It is to the counterpart university in the South to University A in the North. It is a public university that awards degrees and diplomas up to and including PhD level. Its programs are broadly comparable with those of University A.

University C is a public university located in an industrial province in the Southeast. It was established as recently as 2009, based on the upgrading of a teacher training college. It awards degrees up to and including the Master’s level. University C’s goal is to become a leading centre for the training of human resources, including school teachers, for its province in the southeast of Vietnam.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants for the present investigation. A total of 24 participants were selected, including two educational managers and six lecturers from each of the three teacher training institutions. Although there was no strict guideline followed for deciding on the size of sample group, it was considered to be essential that there should be a sufficient number of participants to enable the generation, over an extended period of time, of ‘thick’ description (Patton, 2002, p. 230) that would enable an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of interest to the investigation. Many more than 24 participants would have been willing to participate in the investigation, but it became unnecessary to increase the size of the group because a point of data saturation was reached with the sample group initially selected.

The participants were recruited using a ‘snowball sampling’ technique, as described by Patton (2002, p. 237). Patton (2002, p. 237) refers ‘snowball sampling’ as “[…] an approach for
locating information-rich key informants or critical cases”. According to Patton (2003, p. 243), the ‘snowball sampling’ process begins by asking well-situated people to refer other people who fit with the research requirements and preferably might be interested in contributing to the investigation. The number of participants then increases, or snowballs, as participants recommends new contacts. The present investigation also employed ‘convenience sampling’ (Patton, 2002, p. 241) because the researcher was acquainted with and had ready access to participants at one of the site institutions.

For the present investigation, the lecturers selected were staff members who were responsible for the development of the teaching skills of trainee teachers. The educational managers selected included several senior executive staff members (vice-rectors) and a number of less senior academic managers (deans and departmental heads). It was important that the educational managers should be persons who were responsible for the implementation of curriculum programs, quality management processes, and academic staff supervision because these individuals are influential leaders in teaching and learning activities, including student assessment practices.

In recruiting the participants, the principal criterion was that they should have had a depth of experience with student assessment practices in higher education, and that they were, at least, inclined to engage in making an attempt to implement a change in their assessment practices along the lines of the recent regulations. There was also an expectation that some very good practices would be described. These participants were also expected to be able to describe their experiences and perceptions of implementing change in their own assessment practices. Though it was not central to the investigation, as far as possible, the participants were drawn from the four broad disciplinary teaching areas of science, social science, the applied professions and the humanities – in order to see whether any particular differences in experience or perception emerged. There is some evidence that disciplinary differences have an impact on university student assessment practices (Neumann, Parry & Becher, 2002). The participants were also selected to achieve a balance of males and females.

Once identified, each participant received a letter (see Appendix 2) inviting participation in the investigation. All invitees agreed enthusiastically to participate, whereupon contact was made with them by email (see Appendix 3) to provide more details about the investigation. Participants were also provided with a copy of the proposed interview schedule (see Table 4.2 below) and they were invited to complete an Informed Consent document, as required by the Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix 4).
Appointments were subsequently made, having regard to when the researcher could be in Vietnam and would be able to spend an extended period of time at each site institution. Flexibility in setting appointment times was essential because it could reasonably be anticipated, given the low salary levels for academic staff members in Vietnam, that many of the participants would have second jobs away from the site institution at which they were mainly employed.

Table 4.1 presents a profile of the 24 participants, having regard to their academic positions (EM for educational manager and L for lecturer), gender, site university (A, B or C), discipline, location of acquiring highest qualification, and years of teaching experience. Each participant is given an identification code for the purposes of the present investigation.

Table 4.1. Participant Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Academic Position</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Place for Highest Qualification</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
<th>ID Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Literature</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Social work</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Tuan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>EM</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Management</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Kien</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Huyen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Social work</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Huong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>EM</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Information Technology (IT)</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Hong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Tran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Toan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Tien</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>EM</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Management</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Duyyen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>My</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Maths</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Vy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Chemist</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Han</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>EM</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Vuong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>EM</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Luc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Hien</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.3 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis were employed for this investigation, with semi-structured interviews being the main data collection method. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 269), questions and answers in semi-structured interviews conducted within a framework of Naturalistic Inquiry must evolve over time as new themes emerge for investigation following information provided by participants. Patton (2002, p. 348) also notes that open-ended questioning enables the researcher to capture better the participants’ own accounts of their experiences. It provides participants with an opportunity to explain their own understandings in their own words and disclose their personal thoughts, feelings and perspectives. Thus, semi-structured interviews provided interviewees with maximum flexibility in providing candid responses. Further details about the interview approach and documentary research are provided below.

4.3.1 Semi-structured interviews

Consistent with Naturalistic Inquiry, the investigation’s research design emerged during the course of the investigation. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), it is impossible for even interim outcomes to be known ahead of time. It is also not possible to prescribe the multiple realities that are likely to be encountered, especially as it is virtually impossible to predict the interactions between the participants and the researcher, or to influence the outcomes of a naturalistic research investigation. Therefore, while the interview schedule was given to the participants in advance, the emergent design of the research meant that the questions asked in the interviews often arose spontaneously. For example, during the interview, the participants were expected to share details of their assessment practices, and issues as well as concerns about
student assessment at their universities, but some aspects of these issues and concerns required more detailed explanations by the participants, and these accounts became important in the context of the interview. Over the three-month interview period, the questions being asked in the interviews evolved and progressively became more specific as identifiable themes emerged.

The interview schedule was constructed on the basis of an expectation that the participants would be able to articulate the beliefs and assumptions underpinning their own student assessment practices, and that they would be able to comment knowledgeably on the beliefs and assumptions underpinning the student assessment practices of their colleagues. The interview schedule consisted of ten questions, as presented in Table 4.2, which shows the relationship between each question and the researcher’s intended purpose.

Table 4.2. Interview Questions and their Intended Purpose

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Please tell me how long have you been working in this institution and what the role or responsibilities do you have regarding teaching and assessment at this institution?</td>
<td>This question provided a basis for understanding each participant’s role and responsibilities, as well as their working experiences. This general question also helped relax participants and sought to make them feel that they were engaging in a conversation related to their interests and experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What units do you teach currently, and could you please tell me how you assess student learning in each of them?</td>
<td>Having established the participants’ role and responsibilities, the researcher then attempted to understand how the participants usually assessed student performance. This question sought to encourage the participants to describe their own assessment practices and to share insights with the researcher about their beliefs and assumptions of student assessment. To create a willingness to engage in the discussion, and to have time to think and then fully describe the way students in certain units are assessed, the researcher asked three of these mini-tour questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. What do you want to assess and how do you do this?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. How do you grade a group of students?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. And how often and how do you provide feedback to your students?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(And if the participant was an educational manager: What are the main forms of student assessment in your institution? And what forms of student assessment do you prefer as a manager? Why?)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What do you most value, as a lecturer, in student assessment?</td>
<td>This question sought to allow participants to express their own philosophy about student assessment. It also provided participants with an opportunity to explain their personal views on the quality of teaching and assessment. The three mini-tour questions sought to obtain more detailed and richer description from the participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. When implementing student assessment, what are your main assessment purposes?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. What is your understanding of the teacher’s role in the assessment process?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| c. What important learning outcomes do you look for?  
(And if the participant was an educational manager: As an educational manager, what do you value, most in student assessment?  
What main outcomes do you expect from your institution’s student assessment practices?) | understand better the values and beliefs of lecturers about student assessment and about what motivated them to assess their students in the ways they did. |
| 4. In the literature on student assessment, there are many approaches to assessment described. How familiar are you with any of this literature or these models? | This question sought to understand the extent of exposure of the participants to internally and externally published literature and resources on student assessment. |
| 5. How are your student assessment practices different from what you did ten years ago?  
(And if the participant was educational manager: How much do you know about any Government regulations or national protocols for student assessment? And what are your views about them?) | This question aimed to find out the specific practices that participants implemented in student assessment. It also helped the researcher to explore the extent the participants followed the regulations. From that, the research was able to understand how student assessment practices had been changed over periods of times in light of different assessment regulations. |
| 6. If you were to try to improve your assessment tasks, what changes would you make, and why?  
(And if the participant was educational manager: To what extent do you encourage lecturers to implement these regulations?) | This question sought to elicit the important aspects of student assessment that the participants realised were required for change. It also allowed the researcher to better understand the motivation underpinning perceptions of the need for change in student assessment. |
| 7. When you look around within your School, what student assessment practices do you see where you would like to see change? What concerns you most about student assessment in your School? | These questions were designed to help participants to report issues, claims and concerns regarding student assessment at their institutions. From that, the researcher was able to interpret in detail the key issues raised by participants in assessing their students. |
| 8. What practical difficulties do you face with when you implement student assessment?  
(And if the participant was educational manager: If an academic staff member does not fully comply with these approaches, explain why this might be.) | This question sought to identify particular issues or obstacles that might hinder the participants in implementing changes in their assessment practices.  
Question 5, 6, 7 and 8 were designed to explore participants’ perceptions of the need for change and their issues, claims and concerns about their universities’ assessment practices. |
| 9. If you had three wishes for how student assessment practices in your School should change, what would they be? How much ability to affect changes like these in your School do you have?  
(And if the participant was educational manager: How much influence do you have over assessment and grading practices?) | This question intended to gauge participants’ perceptions of the aspects of student assessment that needed to be changed. It also sought to explore the agency of participants in the process of implementing changes in student assessment in their classrooms or universities. The first part of this question helped to triangulate with the question 7. |
Participant interviews required an intensive period of three months, spread across the three site universities. Patton (2002, p. 39) explains that in naturalistic research, participants “are interviewed […] in places and under conditions that are comfortable for and familiar to them.” Therefore, in this investigation, the interviews were in-person, and took place mainly in the offices of the participants during their daily academic routine. Four of the participants were interviewed at coffee shops, and two at their homes, for comfort and convenience. Participants were provided in advance with the interview schedule to enable them to gather their thoughts and to prepare answers ready for their interview. On average, the interviews took at least one hour. Further discussion with many of the participants ensued, though this discussion was less formal in nature than the process of the interview. With permission from the interviewees, all interviews were recorded on a digital audio recorder, and none of the participants expressed any objection to having their interview recorded.

The process of conducting the interviews followed closely the guidance provided by Spradley (1979, p. 58), who states that interviews are a “series of […] conversations into which the researcher slowly introduces new elements to assist informants to respond […]”. Before starting each interview, the researcher greeted the participants to gain good rapport and make them feel at ease. The researcher then explained in more detail the purpose of the investigation, and invited any questions about its aim and methods. Before asking the ‘grand tour’ questions (Spradley, 1979, pp. 86-91), which were intended to elicit information from the participants about the matters of interest to the investigation, the researcher asked participants friendly questions to get to know more about their work and responsibilities. It was essential here that the researcher should take account of cultural sensitivities, particularly relating to the need to save face and to achieve harmony (see, for example, Nguyen Hung Tuong, 2002; Nguyen Phuong Mai, Terlouw & Pilot, 2005). It was important to appreciate, for example, that these sensitivities may make the participants less likely to share openly their concerns about student assessment practices or to be critical of their colleagues. There was the risk that the participants might tell the researcher only the good things that they thought the researcher might wish to
hear. During the interviews, therefore, the researcher sometimes asked different questions to encourage the participants to talk about their professional practices without making any comments or judgments. Also, the researcher later utilised triangulation methods to check the accuracy of the interview data. Moreover, during the interviews, the researcher gave particular attention to the non-verbal aspects of communication, these being important in supporting and adding nuance to the subsequent interpretation of the data.

Over the three-month period of data collection, a great deal of information relating to student assessment practices at the site institutions was obtained – much of it simply could not have been anticipated prior to the interviews. The 24 interviews were fully transcribed from the digital recordings, and the interviews were labelled according to the participants’ site, status, and background discipline. This background information was then coded to ensure the confidentiality of the participants and the anonymity of their universities. Once ready, the interview transcripts were returned to the interviewees so that they could check them, change them, and add or withdraw information as they saw fit. The interview transcripts were then translated into English by the researcher in preparation for data analysis.

The back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1980) was employed in order to ensure the consistency and accuracy of translation. Brislin (1980) describes back-translation as a process of translating from a source language to a target language, and then from the target language back to the source language. The original version is then compared with the back-translated version detect any errors or ambiguities in the process of translation. In the present investigation, the researcher translated the detailed interview transcripts from Vietnamese to English. Then an independent bilingual auditor was invited to check the translation. When the final English version was achieved the agreement between the researcher and the auditor, this version was sent to a bilingual lecturer to translate back to Vietnamese. The original version and the back-translated version were then compared, and then the researcher and the lecturer discussed matters of detail at length to come to an agreement regarding how particular words and phrases might be best reported in the target language, that is, English.

4.3.2 Documentary data

In addition to the ethnographic interviews, documentary materials were also invited from participants as a useful source of additional data and also as a basis for triangulating comments made by the participants. The criteria for selecting relevant documents in this investigation followed suggestions made by Scott (1990, p. 6) that the documents should be: authentic – is
the evidence genuine and of unquestionable origin?; credible – is the evidence free from error and distortion?; representative - is the evidence typical of its kind and, if not, is the extent of its lack of typicality known?; and meaning – is the evidence clear and comprehensible?

Relying on these criteria, different kinds of documents were selected for consideration in this investigation. These included MoET’s Decisions; institutional training policies; undergraduate course outlines and descriptions; examples of assessment tasks, of lecturers’ grading books, and any other documentation of student assessment practice or awarding of grades. These documents provided a wealth of additional information about student assessment practices at the site institutions, and they were often also a useful basis for discussion in the interviews.

4.4 Data Analysis

The two main forms of information available for analysis were the interview transcripts and the documentary materials. Other forms of information included reflective notes and summaries of meetings attended. These other forms of information were useful for the purposes of triangulation, but most of the analysis focused on the interview transcripts and the documentary materials.

The data analysis process was inductive in nature. All interview data were analysed with a view to extracting key themes, using the constant comparative method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 339). Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 105) describe a basic rule of constant comparison as: "while coding an incident for a category, compare it with the previous incidents in the same category." According to Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 105), the constant comparative method incorporates four stages. The first involves the comparison of incidents applicable to each category. The second involves integrating categories and their properties. The third concerns delimiting the theory. The last is the writing of the theory. Based on these steps, the researcher was able to generate, check and further investigate emerging issues, claims and concerns from participants. A qualitative data analysis software package, Nvivo*9, was used to manage the data and to assist with its coding and multiple retrieval. The coding process will now be explained in more detail.

The first stage of coding required the responses to each of the interview schedule questions for each of the 24 participants to be presented as an array of responses. The initial coding of each interview transcript then began with the manual process of close reading, line by line, to highlight each concept in the text. The researcher labelled each concept and wrote a memo on it for each of the responses. In this stage, the researcher coded each incident into as many
categories as possible, using constant comparison as a method to generate themes. Upon conclusion of this process, an initial set of categories was established. The researcher then identified a range of emergent themes, such as, ‘perceptions of assessment purposes’, ‘perceptions of the lecturer’s role’, ‘formative assessment practices’, ‘training decisions’, ‘resources and incentives’, ‘lecturers’ assessment knowledge’, ‘cultural issues’, ‘heavy examination pressure’, ‘graduate attributes lacking’, and so on.

In the second stage, the researcher continued making comparisons, refined and then grouped the categories, as well as their properties, having regard to new ways of seeing connections between the categories. Through this process of integration, relationships became more evident and the category set became more coherent. This process reduced overlap and redundancy among the categories. It also enabled the researcher to identify specific themes or categories that were relevant to the findings. For example, a set of themes, such as ‘perceptions of assessment purposes’, ‘perceptions of the lecturer’s role’, ‘implementing formative assessment’, was grouped into a main theme of ‘beliefs, values and attitudes of lecturers about student assessment’. Another set of themes, such as ‘training decisions’, ‘resources and incentives’, ‘professional development’, ‘cultural issues’, was grouped into the main theme of ‘issues and obstacles for change’.

Through constant comparative analysis, the final stage of coding allowed the researcher to identify three broad themes to emerge from the interview data, these being: ‘positive changes in student assessment’, ‘issues facing participants in implementing changes in student assessment,’ and ‘possible conditions for achieving culture change in student assessment’. This step enabled the researcher to develop a narrative of themes that connected these important categories, which could be checked and re-checked using the constant comparative method described by Glaser and Strauss (1967). These themes subsequently formed the basis of a tentative framework for understanding student assessment practices and how change might be encouraged institutionally, and which is explained in Chapter 9.

In the investigation, the researcher attempted to reconstruct the participants’ perceptions of realities in their own contexts. The initial meanings from the thematic analysis were checked with each individual participant so that, as Patton (2002) suggests, each participant’s data set was a negotiated document over a period of time, in which each participant felt confident that the researcher had fairly represented what they had revealed during the investigation.
4.5 Trustworthiness

A vital element in qualitative research design concerns ensuring rigour. Interpretative studies require considerable care to ensure that unconscious bias and other subjectivities do not intrude in the analysis and interpretation of the data. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 290), refer to the need for investigations to be rigorous in terms of their dependability (consistency), transferability (applicability), credibility (truth value) and confirmability (neutrality).

The importance of these outcomes in qualitative research are also explained by Patton (2002, p. 552-588). Trustworthiness in the present investigation was achieved by implementing specific strategies recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 301), including: triangulation, prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, member checking, ‘thick’ description, the use of a reflexive journal, and the execution of an audit trail. A brief description of how each technique was operationalized is now presented.

The need to develop trust and rapport between the researcher and the participants through prolonged engagement was emphasised throughout the investigation. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 301) contend that sufficient time should be spent in the field to build trust, identify the culture, and test for misinformation. In this investigation, the researcher spent three months engaging with participants – approximately one month spent at each of the three site universities. During this time, the researcher was able to engage socially with each of the participants for at least part of their working days. For example, the researcher shared lunch in the canteen or had a cup of coffee with the participants in the café. Although these interactions were not part of formal data gathering, they enabled the researcher to develop a comfortable rapport with the participants, providing more understanding of their particular circumstances and deeper insights on their experiences. This close engagement helped the participants to view the researcher as an impartial insider, or having an emic view towards their own culture. The researcher also extended contact with the participants by remaining in contact by means of email, Facebook and Skype, so that details and clarifications could be quickly resolved when required and follow-up and further information could be gleaned.

Triangulation methods were employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Lincoln & Guba (1985, p. 305) emphasise the need to verify, to confirm findings, and to avoid misinterpretation. In this investigation, triangulation was undertaken extensively during the data collection and data analysis phases. During the data collection phase, different types of data were collected, including interview data and documentary data. Further, different types of
data were used to refine and substantiate emergent themes. For example, interview data were
triangulated with data from documents. In addition, throughout the study, triangulation ensured
credibility by comparing data from both similar and also differing perspectives, such as by
comparing the responses of educational managers with those of the lecturers. Triangulating data
obtained by different methods and from different sources provided deeper insights into
participants’ perspectives and behaviours.

Peer debriefing involves the review of the data and the research process by professional peers
who are familiar with the research or who have good knowledge of the research area. Its purpose
is to strengthen the quality by enhancing the rigour of the investigation. In the present
investigation, peer debriefing occurred formally through regular discussion with the
researcher’s three academic supervisors. These supervisors advised on and contributed to the
quality of the meanings being made of the data by the researcher. Informal peer debriefing with
other PhD candidates, who are university teachers in the field of higher education from
Vietnam, was also undertaken. Such advice greatly assisted the researcher to sharpen her
writing and interpretations, and to reduce the influence of any researcher bias. Of course, there
was also peer debriefing with the researcher’s supervisors throughout the entire project. This
led to many data elements being queried further as data collection progressed.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 314), member checking is the most important step for
establishing the credibility of a study. Member checking involves sending data and
interpretations back to the participants so that they have an opportunity to confirm the
credibility of the information. In this investigation, member checking was conducted both
informally, during the data collection phase of the research, and formally, after the data
collection was completed. During the interviews, the researcher asked a number of broad
questions in order to revisit or check on the interview content in a holistic way. This technique
is consistent with Spradley’s (1979, pp. 8-9) advice concerning giving voice to participants.
Following the interviews, the researcher contacted all of the 24 participants two more times,
except for three participants. First, a full interview transcript was sent to each participant so that
they could review what they had said and confirm its accuracy. The participants were also
encouraged to add or remove any information from the transcript of their interview. None of
the participants elected to make any modifications to the transcripts, but five participants elected
to provide further details relating to particular points. Later on, an electronic summary of key
findings was sent to participants with a view to eliciting further comment and to check the
extent of their agreement with the themes. All participants replied to agree with the key findings
presented. There were three participants, two in the university A and one in the university C,
with whom the researcher quite often kept in touch via email to seek updates their student assessment practices. The rest of participants were busy with their others commitments, so they declined to be further involved.

In *Naturalistic Inquiry*, ‘thick’ description provides for transferability. It involves describing the findings in such a way that the reader is able to identify any parallels with similar situations or settings. In the present investigation, thick description was developed from the interview data and in relation to the sites of investigation. Through clear and rich description of the culture of assessment, of participants’ issues, claims and concerns, and of their perspectives on key elements for effective student assessment in the context of different teacher training institutions in Vietnam, the reader is provided with a basis for considering the relevance of the findings to a similar context or setting. Therefore, every transcript of interview was transcribed, member-checked with the participant concerned, and further information added as requested by each participant.

In order for an audit trail to be completed, the researcher kept adequate records throughout the investigation, as a basis for assuring its dependability and confirmability. An audit trail, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 319), was established, involving all field notes, all interview transcriptions, all themes identified, a reflective journal and all analytical processes followed. All relevant materials are stored electronically and remain safe and available for examination. Since data were collected in Vietnamese and translated into English, an independent auditor who had proficiency in both Vietnamese and English checked the translated transcripts and undertook a full audit trail for the investigation (see Appendix 5). This auditor was a Research Fellow in the School of Education at Southern Cross University who is a native Vietnamese speaker and who completed his PhD at another Australian university. He had no vested interest in the investigation.

In the present investigation, the researcher was the main instrument of data collection. The potential bias of the researcher also being a practitioner was unavoidable. The researcher’s practitioner knowledge might have influenced the way the researcher interpreted the data. In order to limit this effect, however, the researcher employed a reflective journal strategy, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 327) and by Bradbury-Jones (2007, p. 290). Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 327) described such a journal as “a kind of diary in which the investigator on a daily basis, or as needed, records a variety of information about self […] and method.” In this investigation, the researcher used the journal as an integral part of the research process with an aim to record all the researcher’s emotions, ideas and comments in order to help the
researcher to manage her subjectivity during the research journey. In addition, the researcher attempted to minimise the extent of influence of any personal bias by employing triangulation, prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, member checking and the completion of an audit trail.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethics approval for this investigation was successfully gained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at Southern Cross University prior to commencement of the collection of data. The approval number is ECN-12-150 (see Appendix 6). Before conducting interviews, all participants were informed that all of the data was confidential, and pseudonyms for the three universities and codes for all participants would be employed to provide anonymity.

It was anticipated that there would be a very low risk of discomfort or harm to participants. The research did, however, concern the professional practice and judgment of lecturers and educational managers who are highly respected for their teaching and assessment expertise. A degree of discomfort was to be expected, therefore, when asking them to reveal their professional practices and knowledge base. The researcher was especially sensitive to their feelings and reactions. Of critical importance was that the researcher should made no judgements about participants’ values, attitudes or beliefs, let alone their assessment practices. The methodological purpose of the investigation was to illuminate their experiences and perceptions of their contexts, nothing more.

4.7 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has presented a discussion of the research methodology and of the research methods employed in the present investigation. The focus of the investigation was to obtain a better understanding of the participants’ beliefs, values and attitudes concerning student assessment in the context of the teaching training university at which they were employed. *Naturalistic Inquiry*, as documented by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 231), provided a methodology that allowed for a suitable combination of epistemology (constructivist), theoretical perspective (interpretive) and data Collecting method (ethnographic) for the investigation. *Naturalistic Inquiry* also provided a strong framework within which rigour could be adhered to as a central tenet of the research.
Chapter 5 - Beliefs, Values and Attitudes about Student Assessment

This chapter is the first of three to present outcomes from the data collection phase of the investigation. The focus of the chapter is to identify the beliefs, values and attitudes that most impact upon the student assessment practices of lecturers and educational managers in the sample group. The chapter aims to address the first research question:

What are the beliefs, values and attitudes of lecturers and educational managers at representative teacher training institutions, and how do these influence their approaches to student assessment?

In order to understand the beliefs, values and attitudes of the participants regarding student assessment, it is necessary to explore what they see as being the role and the purposes of student assessment, how they perceive their teaching role, and what their student assessment practices are. When participants express their beliefs, values and attitudes, they reveal hidden assumptions about teaching, learning and student assessment. From the interview data, three very distinct categories of participants emerged. Hereafter these categories shall be labelled: ‘Adaptive Implementers’ (eight participants), ‘Defending Denialists’ (three participants) and ‘Changing Pragmatists’ (thirteen participants). The beliefs, values and attitudes of the three groups of participants regarding student assessment are discussed sequentially.

5.1 The Adaptive Implementers

The first clearly identifiable category was probably called the Adaptive Implementers group. ‘Adaptive’ is a term drawn from complex adaptive systems theory (Stacey, 1995; 1996), which indicates that agents both influence and are influenced by the external environments. Therefore, they have to renegotiate their rules of behaviour in order to accommodate the rules of behaviour of others so as to remain capable of evolving. The term ‘adaptive’ is also taken from the ‘adaptive change’ approach of Heifetz and Linsky (2002), which involves changing both the behaviours and beliefs of people, and so it is change that challenges how people define themselves. Participants who were Adaptive Implementers were those who overcame many practical difficulties such as were presented by limited resources, poor incentives and existing cultural mores. They were willing to give their time to making improvements in assessment practices so that their students could benefit from their changes. Their beliefs, values and attitudes are now addressed.
5.1.1 Perceptions of the role and purposes of assessment

A defining aspect of all the Adaptive Implementers was that they shared an understanding of student assessment’s different roles and purposes. These participants had detailed and progressive perceptions of the role and purposes of student assessment, and about the balance to be struck between formative and summative assessment. There was a high consensus amongst participants in this group that student assessment should be viewed as “an integral part of the teaching and learning process” (Kien). They also considered that “encouraging and supporting students to learn [better]” (Huyen) was the most important purpose of assessment. One participant, for example, explained her viewpoint as an educational manager:

If we merely assess the students one or two times and fail them, we have not got any significant ways to motivate their efforts. I think we would be better to have regular assessment that can motivate and encourage the students to learn constantly through effective feedback rather than failing them in a test […]. (Hong)

This participant expressed the belief that assessment which had a formative purpose was better able to motivate students to engage actively with learning than a mere summative assessment, and hence to develop their potential. She also argued strongly for the importance of providing regular feedback on assessment tasks:

If we assess the students during the learning process, we will have good methods to support them and the students will have more opportunities to improve their learning. (Hong)

This participant felt that continuous assessment was more likely to motivate students to engage more deeply with what they were learning. She perceived there to be a strong link between good teaching and the process of giving feedback.

Overall, the Adaptive Implementers acknowledged that student assessment was also about grading for measurement purposes, and they understood that, for students, grades were often the most important priority. They claimed, however, that their own most important priority as teaching professionals was to ensure that students became better learners. One typical report was:

So far, the learning purpose has been targeted for higher scores rather than for improvement in our higher education. I think that learning for achieving the scores is an understandable purpose, but it does not mean everything. If learning is merely for achieving high marks, it does not challenge the students’ thoughts and it diminishes the students’ attempts. Also, grades do not
assist students to realise their own strengths and weaknesses. I believe student assessment must help students to learn through guidance and feedback. (Duyen)

This participant was referring to a tendency in higher education in Vietnam for students to strive mainly to obtain high grades in their studies. However, she understood that while student assessment could motivate students to achieve high grades, it might not motivate and support students to become better learners. She wanted to help her students to self-assess their own strengths and weaknesses in their learning and therefore assume agency for it.

Another participant argued similarly, asserting that assessment is the most powerful driver of student learning, and so she wanted her students to engage deeply in their learning as a basis for obtaining better grades. She explained:

> During the teaching process, I want my students to know that if they wish to get a better grade, they have to actively engage in different formative assessment tasks and continuously reflect on their learning process to make improvements. (Huyen)

This participant was strongly committed to the value of well-organised, continuous assessment tasks formative feedback provided on learning progress. Through this kind of active engagement with learning materials, she claimed, all students would be better able to develop their skills, capacities and attitudes. This participant was typical of the Adaptive Implementers in that she emphasised the pivotal role of formative assessment in motivating student engagement in the teaching and learning process.

An important belief held by the Adaptive Implementers as a whole was that they also wanted to provide fair and unbiased judgements about their students’ learning. One of these participants commented, for example:

> I believe all students need to be assessed by the same standards. This allows lecturers to provide a fair and unbiased judgement about students’ achievements. (Ngoc)

This participant wanted to ensure that assessment was transparent and fair. She wanted her students to understand clearly the expectations embedded in assessment tasks. In similar vein, another participant referred to the need for each student to get a fair and accurate grade based on the quality of work presented, and she explained that this understanding had been central to her own teaching and assessment practice:

> For group work assessment, I tend to give the students different marks based on their individual contributions. This will prevent the students from passive participation in doing the project and
it makes the students become more responsible for their group work [...]. I do not want students to rely on their friends’ efforts and not be active in their learning. I want to mark students’ work based on their competency. (Hong)

Although she was referring to the role of group work, the participant emphasised the importance of students receiving grades based on merit. She valued students taking an active role in relation to their learning and she wanted to recognise the importance of this kind of engagement with learning through her approach to awarding grades for individual contributions to group work.

All of the Adaptive Implementers expressed a commitment to learning as a process that takes time and effort. They as a group expressed the belief that a focus on the formative purpose of student assessment was able to motivate students to be more actively engaged in their learning and to develop their potential. Another key aspect of their perceptions was that student assessment should be transparent and fair, based solely on merit. Clearly, the Adaptive Implementers perceived teaching, learning and student assessment in a manner that stood in marked contrast with the didactic approach to teaching that is more widely observable in Vietnam.

5.1.2 Perceptions of the teaching role

Closely related to the Adaptive Implementers’ understanding about the role and purposes of student assessment were their perceptions about their role as lecturers. Of note is that all of the Adaptive Implementers saw themselves as facilitators of learning, rather than ‘givers of knowledge’. One typical description was:

Knowledge is now immense, there are many books or references that are inaccurate with information, and thus I always guide the students to access the most appropriate and accurate knowledge. In the early teaching time, I work more than the students in order to guide them to know how to learn properly. For the later teaching time, the students must work harder, […more independently...]. I assign the students specific questions for preparation in groups. Students have to self-prepare the answers at home and then they present them in the class. (Nhi)

This participant clearly wanted her students to be independent learners and thinkers who should think for themselves and question what lecturers presented, rather than accepting knowledge as it is transmitted. She also described how she used student assessment tasks to encourage independent and collaborative learning. She believed her strategies provided opportunities for her students to move their learning forward in engaging ways.
More broadly, all of the Adaptive Implementers had highly progressive beliefs about their roles as lecturers. One typical claim was as follows:

In Vietnam, lecturers decide too many things, and the majority of the students tend to accept the judgments given by their lecturers. It is a fact that most students tend to be fearful of their lecturers, but it does not mean that they always respect them […]. I think lecturers should give the students an opportunity to voice their views, they must understand their students, and respect their students’ points of view, because each student has a different opinion on a certain issue. (Kien)

While acknowledging the continuing authoritarian nature of the role of lecturers in Vietnam, he explained that students would respect their lecturers more if their lecturers provided a good example to follow in terms of how to approach learning. He also reported his view that, in order to teach effectively, and to have an enduring impact on the quality of learning by his students, he needed to know the backgrounds of his students and to respect their individual differences as well as their opinions.

Similarly valuing the learners they taught, another Adaptive Implementer believed that lecturers needed to learn from their students:

I think a good and effective lecturer is a person who openly learns from his or her students […]. I teach the learners who are from various backgrounds, ages, and working experiences in their local settings. Thus, I design learning activities and assessment tasks in a way in which I can learn from my students. (Tuan)

This participant described a process whereby lecturers and students learn from each other. This form of cooperative learning was claimed to create richer life-long learning experiences for students.

The Adaptive Implementers also conveyed a sense that they understood that cultural change was speeding up in Vietnam, and that the younger generation would catch up quickly with values and practices from the West. Therefore, these participants claimed a need to change their way of interaction with their students in order to support their learning. One typical report was:

The value orientation in Vietnamese society has undergone significant changes in recent years since Vietnam integrated with the global economy […]. I see that students tend to be now more confident in express their points of view, they are willing to engage in self-assessment and also require a mutual respect in the relationship with their teachers. Therefore, during the teaching process, I always listen to my students, encourage their critical thinking and welcome various thoughts including wrong answers from them. Based on students’ responses, I can find out why
they have such wrong answers or thoughts, what mistakes they usually make and why there are such common mistakes. Upon that, I am able to adjust my teaching and assessment methods to help students learn better. (Duyen)

This participant predicted that young people would inevitably come to university with different beliefs about the role of lecturer, and that they might want to have a different kind of relationship with their lecturers. More importantly, she was very progressive in respecting her students and in perceiving the role of students not to be passive learners. Therefore, rather than imparting knowledge to the students, this participant reported to create an opportunity that could foster interactive dialogues, which was beneficial for her student learning.

All of Adaptive Implementers further reported that they saw students as ‘a feedback source’ for change. As one representative participant said that “[…] it is necessary to get the students’ feedback about teachers’ teaching and assessment practices in a certain unit. Students’ voice is a feedback source for the educational managers and the lecturers to constantly change” (Hong). It is, therefore, important to note that the Adaptive Implementers were inclined to be flexible and open-minded about change, and in this regard their perceptions of the role of a lecturer represented a huge departure from traditional Confucian beliefs about the role of the teacher.

5.1.3 Typical student assessment methods employed

With a high priority given to supporting and motivating students to learn, a common strategy of all Adaptive Implementers was the use of a diverse range assessment formats and methods. One Adaptive Implementer reported, for example:

I am attempting to use multiple forms of student assessment in the teaching process, such as oral presentations, group work, essay questions and real problem-solving, to assess comprehensively students’ knowledge, skills and attitudes […]. Students with high marks in their mid-session assessment are chosen to write an assignment for the final unit assessment, rather than to sit for an exam. (Huyen)

Similarly, another participant believed that in order to assess student knowledge, skills and attitudes thoroughly and comprehensively, multiple methods of student assessment needed to be flexibly utilised. She explained:

This year I have been assigned to teach the 'Community Health Education' unit. In the process of student assessment, I observed the students’ participation, engaged the students in a group discussion in order to understand their attitudes, and used written essays or required students to do exercises so that I would be able to capture their knowledge, skills and attitudes. (Ngoc)
These two participants expressed the desire to assess the quality of their students’ work more comprehensively, including their students’ knowledge, skills and attitudes, and so they employed assessment tasks that were varied and not confined to the exclusive use of traditional examinations.

The Adaptive Implementers must have developed some knowledge of contemporary assessment and curriculum practice, because they each also reported that when assessing their students they paid close attention to the design of the assessment task. These participants claimed they wanted to enable students to develop higher-order-thinking skills. In particular, they reportedly tended to design assessment tasks “to reduce memorising” (Ngoc) and to enable students to develop their “independent thinking, critical thinking, and logical analysis as well as synthesis skills” (Huyen). The following participant’s comments were representative of comments made more widely by the Adaptive Implementers:

I prefer to use an open-book exam questions and assignments that require the students to analyse and synthesise knowledge […]. Engaging in these assessment tasks, the students must be independent in their thinking and go beyond the basic ideas that I have communicated in the content of the unit. (Nhi)

This participant was clearly abreast of constructs such as higher-order learning because her comments were entirely consistent with the Biggs and Collis’ (1982) SOLO taxonomy. Further, she argued that to achieve such higher-order learning outcomes, her students needed to engage independently with the learning and associated materials.

The Adaptive Implementers’ approaches to assessment represented a significant departure from the more traditional teaching and learning approaches in Vietnam. It was evident that these participants had a refined and contemporary understanding of the power of student assessment to influence the quality of student learning. They attempted to engage students meaningfully in learning tasks where students were encouraged to adopt and develop their own learning approaches.

5.1.4 Employing formative assessment and feedback

Of particular importance is that all eight of the Adaptive Implementers reported being strongly committed to the value of formative assessment. Four of them reported that they had experienced formative assessment first-hand in a Western learning environment. Upon their return to Vietnam, these four had set about revising their teaching and assessment practices in
order to support student learning better through the use of formative assessment. One of the Adaptive Implementers reported:

I employ five assessment tasks […] during the teaching process. These are formative tasks that are mainly implemented through teamwork. In order to encourage students in asking questions and sharing their ideas, and to promote their active participation, I ask the students to have group discussions and then each group presents its results. After each group finishes its presentation, I require other groups to ask questions to this group using the following method: two praises, one comment, one suggestion and one question […]. Finally, I provide each group with constructive feedback. I explained to students what they needed to improve in terms of expressing ideas and how to improve their work. My students enjoy participating in their learning because they know my intention is to encourage them to learn better. (Huyen)

This participant was describing how she had helped her students to create a sharing and collaborative atmosphere within which to engage in formative learning tasks. She wanted to encourage her students to express their ideas and share their opinions. By doing this, she hoped to motivate them to learn to be responsible for their own learning. This participant also explained that when her students worked hard and were assessed in a way that took account of their personal effort, it was extremely motivating for them. She also reported to value the importance role of giving students clearly articulated assessment criteria and standards. However, one thing she reported to be regretting was that she could not implement authentic formative assessment because every assessment task is required to be assigned a grade. She commented:

When assigning my students to work in groups, I often offer clear and specific assessment criteria and standards for performance to my students based on which students’ performance will be graded. I believe that the transparency in assessment criteria is necessary for my students to understand the expectations of their performance in each unit, and they are able to trace their grades to the specific criteria stated in the assessment tasks […]. I grade all five formative tasks. As a result, in each unit I have five marks columns. I add all together and average into one column of marks for the mid-session assessment […]. I understand that in essence, formative assessment is to improve the students’ learning and their academic performance through effective feedback, and it should not be graded. However, I have to provide students’ work with grades according to Decision requirements. (Huyen)

This participant claimed to be mainly concerned about providing detailed formative feedback for students on their learning even though she was required by institutional regulations to award grades to all assessment tasks.
Another Adaptive Implementer, who, had never been abroad, reported that, through his personal learning and sharing knowledge and tips on teaching and assessment from colleagues, he developed his own method of implementing formative assessment, and that he had been working on improvements to his approach over time. He explained:

There is only one assessment task for which I give marks to the students for the mid-session assessment, as required by the University; the rest are formative tasks where students complete group assignments but without providing grades or marks. I give a group of students a plus (+) to encourage if they did well in certain tasks, and I give them detailed feedback. When counting the mid-session grades, I added all the plus signs and convert them into marks (for example, +++++ are equalled to a 1 mark). I then added these marks to the students’ mid-session assessment column of marks. (Tuan)

This participant went on to express a strong belief in the value of providing detailed and constructive feedback to assist students with the further improvement of their learning. He explained how he combined both oral and written feedback during the teaching process:

I believe oral and written feedbacks are both essential for the students’ learning. Oral feedback is provided after the students finish their group work or exercises; I make comments about their work and explain why they have been awarded certain marks. Written feedback is used when the students draw mind maps or write assignments. I comment specifically on their writing and on what they have done well and what they needed to do to improve, such as, ideas expression, mind map structure and logical analysis skills. (Tuan)

Although underestating that providing detailed feedback was time-consuming, this participant reported to try his best to give good feedback to his students to facilitate their learning:

Providing timely feedback to students’ performance progress is actually overloaded work for me. However, I believe that without my constant on-going assessment, guidance and timely feedback, my students will not progress. Therefore, I take every opportunity to provide feedback to my students, even late night at home. My feedback does help the students to identify their strengths and weaknesses as well as to reconsider their ideas. (Tuan)

This participant was passionate about the importance of formative assessment, which he viewed as being essential in making students challenge ideas and diagnose their own learning strengths and weaknesses. Through constructive feedback, he sought to provide his students with the opportunity to self-improve and to become more motivated with respect to achieving their learning goals.
Another Adaptive Implementer who held an educational management position reported that, though she felt she was unable to provide detailed feedback for individual students because of the large size of her classes, she nonetheless tried to provide each group of students with detailed feedback on their performance progress. She explained:

I assign the students to do group projects. During each stage, they must report their projects’ progress. After presenting, I make comments without grading. First of all, I require all students in the class to make comments about their friends’ presentations, and then I will make comments on the overall quality of the students’ work, what they have done well and what they need to improve. I ask students further questions and provide suggestions for improvement. After receiving the comments and suggestions, each group is required to reflect on their learning and make adjustments to their projects with reference to my feedback. (Hong)

This participant had earlier described having very large class sizes. In this context, she describes having found a way of overcoming the constraining impact on formative assessment of having large class sizes. She had adapted formative assessment so that it could be applied regardless of her circumstances. This Adaptive Implementer was also doing what both Boud (2000) and Black (2015) argue are the essential steps in closing the feedback loop in assessment. It was important to her to make sure students could redraft their work, based on her feedback. Through requiring the students to act on feedback, she wanted to help her students to become more independent as learners, which, she believed, would ultimately result in them obtaining better grades.

The Adaptive Implementers all had positive attitudes towards student learning and assessment. Their beliefs focused on assessment designed primarily to motivate and support rather than to control student learning even though they understood the importance of the final exams in their education system. Therefore, although these participants understood that implementing formative tasks properly and providing formative feedback to their students required a huge effort and was time-consuming, they persisted because of their commitment to its perceived value and importance. Clearly, these participants appeared generally to be more insightful about the nature of how young people learn, and they were generally successful in adapting to their circumstances while holding on to formative assessment practices. Without doubt, these participants were exceptional when compared with what happens generally in classrooms in Vietnam.
5.2 The Defending Denialists

A second group of participants was identified as the Defending Denialists. The “Defending Denialists” were, in fact, traditionalists, and might well have been referred to as the “Traditionalists”, but the use of the terminology of “Defending Denialist” relates specifically to Carnall’s (1995) model of coping with change (referred to in Chapter 3). Carnall’s model illustrates how people typically experience change and how they work through certain stages when they have no choice but to face it. Denial is the first stage, where people deny the need for change. Defence is the next stage, where people see the inevitability of change yet actively resist it. The Defending Denialists were participants who, whether or not they saw the necessity of change in student assessment, refused to implement change to student assessment practice because change was threatening to the beliefs they held dear. They also focused in their interviews and emails upon the obstacles to implementing change that they experienced, especially in terms of a lack of incentives and resources.

There were only three Defending Denialists among the participants. It is surprising that there were any. As reported in Chapter 4, an attempt was made when recruiting participants to find participants from the three site universities who had both a depth of experience with student assessment practices in higher education and an inclination to implement change in their student assessment practices. Participants who were Defending Denialists were explicitly disinclined to change their student assessment practices. That this group existed may point to a limitation of ‘snowball sampling’, because participants are recommended to the researcher because a participant believes them to be appropriate and able to shed light on an investigation’s aim.

However, retaining Defending Denialists as participants was useful because it provided an opportunity to explore the attitudes, beliefs and values concerning student assessment of academic staff members who are resistant to change in student assessment practices. It was outside the scope of the present investigation to determine how prevalent Defending Denialists are in Vietnamese higher education with respect to student assessment practice, but clearly they do exist and their views are important. Indeed Defending Denialists may well be more representative than the other groups of participants of the academic profession at large in Vietnam. When interviewing the Adaptive Implementers, it was not uncommon for them to remark on the large proportion of their colleagues who fitted the description provided here of the Defending Denialists. One Adaptive Implementer commented, for example, that:
The current student assessment activities are following a traditional way in nature that focuses more on exams or tests to classify students […]. Many of my colleagues do not seem to have any great concerns about different student assessment purposes. […] Those colleagues merely assess in order to discharge their responsibilities. (Ngoc)

This description characterised well the attitudes, values and beliefs of the three participants identified as being Defending Denialists.

### 5.2.1 Perceptions of the role and purposes of assessment

In marked contrast to the perceptions of the Adaptive Implementers about the role and purposes of student assessment, the Defending Denialists perceived learning, and hence student assessment, as a process requiring only the reproduction of knowledge. One representative spoke for all when he explained:

Normally I teach all necessary knowledge for the unit in my classes, and then I assess them in the mid-term exam and in the end-of-unit exam […]. I expect my students to memorise the knowledge in the unit […]. Through engaging with the exam question, I wish my students to show they have achieved the knowledge that I have conveyed. (Minh)

This participant gave clear expression to a traditional view of teaching and learning in Vietnam, which involves students receiving knowledge passively from teachers (in this case a lecturer), and then reproducing that knowledge in an examination. Active engagement in learning, as valued by the Adaptive Implementers, was foreign to this point of view.

For the Defending Denialists, determining final grades for students was seen to be an important responsibility for lecturers. Indeed, they regarded it as being one of their most important responsibilities. A typical comment was:

[…] giving grades is the most essential part of teaching and learning. Grades are the means that inform lecturers about the student’s level of mastery of knowledge and skills […], from the students’ grades, the lecturers can adjust the teaching content, teaching activities and assessment methods that suit to the learners. (Tran)

This participant appeared to place a high level of reliance on grades to inform him about the success of his instruction. This participant also saw grades as a source of feedback about how he might adjust his teaching practices and the level of emphasis he should give to various topics. He further explained that:
I think the main purpose of assessment is to identify whether students achieve the objectives of knowledge acquired, skills, and attitudes of the unit through grades that students achieved. More broadly, it is used to determine whether the assessment result satisfies the training objective of the University […]. Based on grades given to the students through their exams, I am able to know how effective my students learn. (Tran)

If a sufficient number of his students performed well in the examinations he set, then it meant to him that his instruction had been effective and that his students had generally performed well in grasping the content of his explanations. He saw grades to be the crucial means whereby he and other stakeholders could be informed about the students’ abilities and achievements, which in turn was considered critical to his university’s ability to maintain academic standards.

In general, participants identified as Defending Denialists reported having as their focus summative assessment, and typically the final examination. One Defending Denialist reported:

In our teacher training universities, basically we apply traditional student assessment that is mainly carried out through tests/exams. According to the institutional regulation, there are the mid-term assessment and the final exam. I believe the final exams and the graduation exams are very important and inevitable in order to motivate students to learn and measure the effectiveness of their learning. (Quyet)

The views of these participants were highly consistent with the application of objective measurement techniques, as described by followers of Thorndike (1904), rather than the provision of support for the quality of student learning. Their beliefs were consistent with an approach to student assessment that, as reported in Chapter 2, was influential in many Western higher education systems up until about the 1970s. It was, therefore, a traditional viewpoint.

5.2.2 Perceptions of their teaching role

The Defending Denialists were clear in their belief that lecturers should be authoritative and directive in their approach to teaching and student assessment. One of these participants spoke for all when he explained:

The lecturers must have high prestige in knowledge, have respect from their students, and must be a good example for the students to follow […]. They should have power and authority in the teaching and assessment process. (Quyet)

In other words, lecturers must be exemplars of correct behaviour for their students, and their authority regarding teaching and student assessment must be exclusive of any student viewpoints. A further typical claim that was consistent with this belief was that:
In my opinion, lecturers are people who determine the amount of knowledge in the each unit that the students should gain; decide the content and the assessment criteria and assessment methods. (Tran)

This participant also viewed the lecturers’ role to be essential in the assessment process. As he reported:

Lecturers should assess whatever they teach the students. My responsibility is to impart the required knowledge in the unit study for my students. When I finish my teaching, I give the students outlines for reviewing and limit the area of knowledge might be assessed in order for students to prepare for their exams. After that, the students sat their exams and I would mark their work. (Tran)

In particular, this participant was clearly of the view that lecturers should exercise unquestioned authority in relation to teaching and student assessment practices. He did not consider it appropriate for students to take an active role in their own learning, or to make any suggestions about content or assessment.

The Adaptive Implementers were overall highly critical of colleagues who fitted the description of Defending Denialists. They regarded them as embracing a hierarchical relationship in the teaching and assessment process whereby university students were treated more like children. A typical Adaptable Implementer view, given in confidence, was that:

Many educators, especially of those who have great influence on education policy, still want students to acquire knowledge obediently and even receive unconditionally what are taught. In terms of the lecturers’ attitudes, I give you an example that I observe: once a lecturer is unhappy with his/her students, he/she is ready to use 20 minutes during the teaching period to scold them. This is absolutely unacceptable, but such things happen. (Duyen)

This claim and statement of belief reveals the frustration of Adaptive Implementers with their colleagues’ approaches to teaching, the power differential they expected in the classrooms, and, more than undervaluing their students, a disdain for them. It also shows how important it is to some of the lecturers to continue to exemplify what they see as models of Confucian morality.

It was interesting that one participant, who was classified as Defending Denialist reported that he thought what his colleagues who tried to implement change in student assessment should be highly appreciated. However, he expressed his concern:
I could not accept the students challenge their lecturers’ points of view. It is not respectful. Students can’t be equal with you. If you want students to respect you and if you want students to be serious with their studying, you have to keep a distance with the students. (Quyet)

It was evident from the comments of the Defending Denialists that their dialogue with their students was one-way: from the lecturer to the students. Learner-centred and collaborative approaches to teaching were either unfamiliar to them or were rejected outright.

5.2.3 Typical student assessment methods employed

The interviews with and the assessment documents obtained from the Defending Denialists indicated clearly that they relied either heavily or solely on traditional standardised tests of knowledge in their disciplines. One Defending Denialist reported, for example, that:

For the mid-session assessment, I employ short-answer questions or multiple-choice tests, or a combination of these. In the end-of-unit assessment, I require students to sit exams. I use objective tests to assess student at the final exam because I believe that I could assess all students fairly and comprehensively all the knowledge that I transferred to my students. (Tran)

Another Defending Denialist also used these assessment formats, which he justified on the grounds that it was the format he had experienced as a student:

Currently, I often use methods of student assessment such as short-answer essay questions and multiple choices tests. Before finishing each unit, I review some of the questions in the key parts of the unit which assists the students to prepare for the exam. I want my students to memorise and reproduce the required knowledge in their exams […]. These are assessment methods that my lecturers used to assess students’ learning outcomes when I was at university. (Minh)

In the case of these participants, the end-of-unit examinations were also comprised of short-answer questions and multiple-choice tests. These were familiar assessment methods. There was also an implicit attitude that these formats had ‘stood the test of time’, and so they could be relied upon to determine which students performed better than other students.

Two of the Defending Denialists belonged to ‘hard-pure’ and one belonged to ‘hard-applied’ disciplines, as characterised by Becher (1989). Neumann et al. (2002) argue that the way that teachers assess students’ work always exhibits a standard of educational values that particularly reflect disciplinary characteristics. They found that a preference for examination questions or multiple-choice questions is likely to be commonplace in ‘hard-pure’ and also ‘hard-applied’ disciplines.
It is worth noting at this point that the tests and examinations utilised by the three Defending Denialists were strongly focused on assessing a capacity to memorise knowledge and procedures. There was nothing about them that required students to apply their knowledge to new circumstances, or to give expression to independent point of view. With these assessment methods, the individual differences and the capacity of the students to think independently were unlikely to be taken into consideration.

5.2.4 Employing formative assessment and feedback

The Defending Denialists each reported that they complied with MoET’s policy regarding the need to make use of continuous assessment by in each case ensuring that their end-of-unit examinations accounted for no less than 50% of the aggregate marks for their units of study. Both their mid-term and their end-of-unit assessment processes were, however, entirely summative, and focused on achieving a spread of performance that was suitable for the ranking of students within each cohort. There was no suggestion by any members of this group that student performance was judged against pre-determined performance standards. Instead, these participants reported:

I do not use marking criteria. I think I should assess students what I teach them, and if the students perform well in the assessment tasks and reproduce sufficient required knowledge, I provide them with a good mark. Actually, in my department, we do not have any clearly stated standards of performance or the criteria of learning outcomes. When marking, lecturers make up their own marking criteria by themselves because when they teach each unit, they will know which parts of knowledge is the most important that students should master. (Quyet)

The primary concern of these participants was with obtaining a final list of grades. One commented, for example, that:

I have applied mid-term assessment during my teaching process as required in the training regulations [...]. I assessed the students’ work just to obtain a grade where I would have two columns of marks derived from multiple choices tests or written exams or doing exercises in the class [...]. To be honest, I think when I teach students in certain units, I already know what I expect students to learn and what they should learn. I tell to students my expectations at the beginning of unit. Thus, when marking students’ work, I do not need to refer to any predetermined standards of students’ performance. (Tran)

This participant was compliance-focused, as were the other two Defending Denialists, and he made it clear that it was important to him simply to keep records to show that he had acted in accordance institutional regulations. Like the other Defending Denialists, this participant
expressed little interest in providing formative feedback to his students. As far as he was concerned, feedback to the students involved giving them their grades and making some comments in class after the students had completed a summative test or examination. He stated:

I provide feedback in the form of grades to the students, after assessing them or after the students finish their tests. After giving the grades to students, I then meet the students to discuss if they are satisfied with the way of my assessment. Were the marks that I gave them fair? (Tran)

In Vietnam, according to the three Defending Denialists, it is usual for lecturers to report students’ grades publicly because it supposedly makes the students more competitive. One of the Defending Denialists explained this practice:

Through the marks, we want to inform students about the levels of their achievement in learning. I think grades are very important feedback that must be publicly and widely reported in front of all the students so that they can know each other’s grades. From that, they are motivated to learn better. (Minh)

Indeed, three of the Adaptive Implementers made mention of this practice. Of which they were critical. They reported that many of their colleagues simply used attendance records as a way of satisfying administrative requirements about continuous student assessment. For example, one representative participant described these practices with obvious concern as an educational manager: “Many of the lecturers often consider the ‘students’ diligence’ and grading student participation as a form of cumulative assessment which is assessed via classroom attendance. If students attend classes regularly, they will then get a 10 mark. I am a manager so I fully aware of this problem” (Hong). Carless (2015) critiques this practice of allocating grades of attendance. However, he argues that the grading of student participation has potential in stimulating student learning when the teacher actually assesses the active engagement of the students in group work, their contribution to learning communication and the quality of interaction of the students with their peers.

This participant also claimed that some her colleagues fabricated an additional column of marks for the purposes of indicating that they had implemented continuous assessment, as per the Regulations:

The university regulated how many columns of marks one should have for cumulative assessment, and then many lecturers tended to ensure that they have enough for mid-session assessment columns of mark […]. These lecturers could ask the students to sit one exam. They marked students’ work and then they made up the marks into two or three columns of marks as requested […]. (Hong)
Of particular concern to the Adaptive Implementers was that some of those lecturers who exhibited the values, beliefs and attitudes of Defending Denialists were disinclined to make the effort required to setting assessment tasks that would comply with an institutional policy encouraging continuous assessment, and so they resorted to false reporting as a way of showing that they were complying with institutional policy.

At the moment the lecturers still work and assess with an attempt to satisfy the administrative requirements rather than to be dedicated to change. I say that because in fact if the lecturers want to have one mark column or three columns of marks, is very easy because they do not need to assess the students many times. Just marking one test or exam, and then the lecturers can make up the marks in two or three columns of marks. As I know that there are many lecturers who are lazy in marking and they have done this in their assessment marks. (Huyen)

The participant who reported this practice could not say how widespread this practice was, but there was a sense given that it was a considerable concern.

Participants identified as Defending Denialists held their views on student assessment were along the lines of it being a process focused on producing ‘objective’ scientific measures. Their concern, therefore, was solely focused on producing grades intended to reflect different levels of achievement. These participants reported that student assessment practices should ideally make students more competitive, and hence harder-working. It appeared generally that these participants were not familiar with more contemporary, research-led knowledge about the impact on learning approaches of particular forms of student assessment, and they seemed to have no understanding of the role of formative assessment practices, including closing the feedback loop, in learning.

5.3 The Changing Pragmatists

The term Changing Pragmatists is borrowed from the philosophy of William James, an American philosopher who wrote about the nature of Pragmatism. James (1975) argued that the truth or meaning of an idea or proposition is observable in its practical consequences. Therefore, ideas and beliefs have value only to the extent that they work in practice. Thirteen of the 24 participants were identified as being Changing Pragmatists, meaning that their decisions about implementing changes to their student assessment practices were based largely on their perceptions of how supportive the teaching conditions of their university were of the changes under consideration, and how observable in terms of improved student learning the impact of the changes might be. In general, they claimed that they wanted to make changes, but they
reported that they tended not to make them because of a perceived lack of resources and or because the effort required was considered too great. Their beliefs, values and attitudes about student assessment are now discussed.

5.3.1 Perceptions of the role and purposes of assessment

The Changing Pragmatists generally expressed views about student assessment that were similar to those expressed by the Adaptive Implementers. They reported that the principal purpose of student assessment to be, to judge the quality of student learning in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes that had been made explicit to students in advance as intended learning outcomes. A typical comment was:

I think the main purpose of assessment is to determine what knowledge students have learned, what attitudes students have formed and what skills students are able to perform […]. Student learning outcomes need to be comprehensively assessed in terms of [intended] knowledge, skills and attitudes. (Tien)

As with other Changing Pragmatists, this participant also believed that student assessment played a positive role in assisting students to work towards the attainment of intended learning outcomes. Another participant expressed this slightly differently:

It is unreasonable to require the students to learn by rote memorisation and by following the pattern […]. I want student assessment to be a process to support student learning and the development of higher-order thinking skills, such as, critical thinking capacity, problem-solving skills and communication skills, in order to enable them to satisfy their future work’s requirements. (Thinh)

Integrating student assessment with the instructional process was generally seen by the Changing Pragmatists as a means whereby students were given opportunities to develop their higher-learning thinking skills and develop valuable employment-related capacities.

It was appreciated by many of the Changing Pragmatists that many students were so preoccupied with final marks that they were unable to look beyond them. One of the participants acknowledged this problem, and also indicated how she attempts to counter it. She reported:

When students receive a 10, or 9 marks out of 10, they tend to see these results as high, or even perfect. Thus, when I mark the students’ work, I always provide written feedback to help them to know their strengths and weaknesses, rather than let them to be satisfied with their achieved scores. Through dialogues with students in the teaching process, I also want to let my students know if they have sufficient ability to meet the requirements for future work. (Hien)
In general, the Changing Pragmatists recognised the role played by student assessment and feedback in supporting student learning and in developing their skills and attributes. These participants expressed a strong preference to see assessment tasks closely integrated with learning activities. For example, one representative Changing Pragmatist explained that she understood that effective student assessment to be an inseparable part with the teaching process. Therefore, this participant reported that during the teaching process, she assigned students to do group work in order to foster the active engagement of the students and assess different skills in her students.

In my opinion, the students’ learning needs to be assessed during the learning process. I engage students in different specific assessment tasks that require them to actively participate in their learning. For example, in the narrator of story time, I ask the students to assume the role of narrator. One story may be made up of a number or multiple characters. I ask the students to role-play a character. Each student, therefore, plays a part in the story. This process allows me to assess students’ teamwork ability, their language expression, and communication skills and then provide constructive feedback to the students’ performance. (Nhi)

Generally speaking, Changing Pragmatists progressively recognised the significant role of student assessment and constructive feedback in supporting student learning and in developing their skills and attributes. In particular, these participants valued student assessment to promote students’ active learning and to develop students’ higher-order learning skills.

5.3.2 Perceptions of their teaching role

Ten out of the thirteen Changing Pragmatists claimed that their role was that of a facilitator or guide of student learning. One participant stated, for example, that:

I think the lecturer’s role is to act as an instructor/facilitator who guides and teaches students about the correct ways to find knowledge. Obviously, lecturers should possess professional knowledge in their disciplines and in relation to the student assessment. They should also themselves be lifelong learners. (Long)

Another referred to the primary role of lecturers to be to inspire their students to pursue learning. As he said:

The lecturer’s role is to inspire students with passion and excitement in learning; to help students practice what they have learned; and to develop their self-directed learning, self-assessment, as well as peer-assessment abilities […]. I help my students to develop these aspects through encouraging them to experience group discussions, and to participate in dialogue in class, and to undertake private tuition at home. (Thinh)
Implicit in these and other similar remarks was a view of the teaching role as involving the coaching of students to learn how to pursue independently their own learning. These participants also believed that lecturers played an important role in cultivating in their students a love of learning.

While all of the Changing Pragmatists claimed that it was their role to guide their students towards self-directed and life-long learning, curiously, there was considerable variation in the extent to which these participants also held onto more traditional beliefs about the role of the lecturer as a figure of authority with a formal set of duties assigned by MoET. One participant in effect explained how she was able to accommodate two different views that were frequently at odds with each other:

The lecturer is a facilitator [...] who is also the person to decide which forms of student assessment are used and who also administers the students’ assessment activities and other assessment issues. (Thu)

This participant expressed a contradiction in her values about the lecturers’ role. She reported a shift in her understanding of the progressive role of the lecturer in the teaching process, but she also tended to maintain her directive role in assessment. It was possible that in her deeply held beliefs, the hierarchical and authoritarian role of the lecturers was still significant.

5.3.3 Typical student assessment methods employed

All of the Changing Pragmatists reported that they employed a variety of assessment methods to support student learning and to promote student engagement. Some of them were highly innovative, to an extent that placed them close to the Adaptive Implementers in this regard. One participant, for example, reported how he had started to change his assessment practices some years previously, and that his approach now was to seek to help his students to construct their learning during the teaching process. He explained:

The unit that I am teaching in is the Graph Theory, which includes both Maths and its applications. During the teaching process, I assess student learning by employing group projects and group presentations [...]. I assign the project topics for the group of students on the 2nd or the 3rd week when they become familiar with the unit (account for 30% of the total mark). Each group of students is required to complete their projects and present their project results. For the end-of-unit assessment, I let them sit for an open-book examination (account for 70% of the total mark). (Tien)

This participant proceeded to explain his teaching approach as follows:
I designed an open-book exam so that the students can focus on showing me how they solve a certain problem. For example, I requested my students to solve a practical problem that required them to find an optimal solution for the bus network/routes in Ho Chi Minh City to assist the local inhabitants. This question required the students to obtain a good knowledge base and then to be able to apply to solve practical problems. (Tien)

For all of the Changing Pragmatists, however, the extent of the transition was not so marked. These participants reported that in the long-term, they tended to rely on multiple-choice and short essay questions, but, unlike the Defending Denialists, they did not rely on them entirely. One typical report was:

For cumulative assessment, the forms of student assessment normally consist of written tests such as short-answer questions or multiple-choice tests, or a combination of both short answer questions and multiple choice questions in one assessment task […]. I do not want to assess only the students’ knowledge memorisation, thus, other assessment methods such as group presentations, oral vivas and problem-solving tasks and writing assignments are also used, but limited in different teaching units. (Thinh)

These participants gave various explanations for not wholly abandoning the traditional assessment methods of short-answer and multiple-choice questions. One participant, for example, reported that the passivity of her students was a huge difficulty in terms of her being able to employ group projects as assessment tasks successfully. As she explained:

The biggest difficulty was the passiveness and inertia of students. The students were passive because they were familiar with everything that had already been prepared to provide to them. Most of them did not want to find learning materials for their self-study or develop learning methods for themselves…I realise that not all of the students are actively engaged in their group works. (Hien)

Another reported that assessment tasks, such as, oral vivas, group work and writing assignments were not widely used because: “it takes more time for lecturers to design, to mark and to provide constructive feedback” (Vuong). Another stated: “There are also other parts of assessments such as presentation and writing skills [that need to be assessed] but these still…[only have a] modest [emphasis] because of time constraint and a lack of teaching resources” (Xuan). There was also some ambivalence felt about giving up the use of traditional student assessment methods. One participant explained:

I asked my students to do written assignments in a group. I discovered that some of them simply copied the assignments from my previous students. In this case, they merely revised some parts of the contents […]. They also search, copy and paste online materials without any citations or acknowledgements and independent thinking input. Since then I have returned to the written
In general, the Changing Pragmatists articulated the value of having a more diverse range of student assessment methods that were consistent with their view of themselves as learning facilitators, because they wanted to be perceived as more progressive lecturers, but, when faced with difficulties in implementing change, or with a heavy additional workload burden, they returned to the traditional method of examination-focused assessment, using short-answer and multiple-choice questions.

5.3.4 Employing formative assessment and feedback

As with the Adaptive Implementers, the Changing Pragmatists reported on the use of formative assessment to support student learning. One participant, for example, reported that he was used to employed different assessment tasks during the teaching process, some of which were focused on providing constructive feedback to his students. He explained:

I ask students to work in a group project and write reports, or write mini essays, on which I provide feedback. I interact often with the students by means of their homework. Students are also required to engage in group discussions and presentations, and they are required to solve practical exercise in small groups. Thanks to those opportunities, I am able to correct my students’ mistakes and give them constructive feedback without giving marks, and the students also have opportunities to receive feedback from their peers. (Tien)

He reported, however, that he was constrained in terms of what he could do because there was a culture in his faculty that supported purely summative assessment approaches, and so students questioned why his unit was different, and they felt that they had to do the additional work that formative assessment required of them. He went on to say:

I find it is very hard to encourage students to actively engage in their learning through formative tasks as I expect because of the inconsistency with my faculty’s assessment practice among lecturers. If I ask the student to study hard and require them to engage in different formative tasks, they question me about why, in other units, they learn simply (presumably by memorising and reproducing), while in my unit they have to do a lot of duties. (Tien)

Another participant reported that he implemented formative assessment using ‘Moodle’, where lecturers were encouraged to communicate with students weekly through this learning system. He explained:
I teach a linguistics unit. I act as a facilitator on the learning system, Moodle, where the students are required to do different learning activities, such as group discussions, journals writing or presentations. All of these tasks are graded and the students are provided with constructive feedback. I then average these marks into one column of marks for the mid-term assessment. (Vuong)

This participant also reported that, as a result of his experience with the Moodle learning system, he realised more deeply the value of providing formative feedback for students. However, he also reported that the resources to do this properly were not available to him:

After each week, I ask the groups of students to write their reflections in the database. Then, the next day, I respond to them in the class. I point out their mistakes and show them how they can make improvements. If the students are experiencing problems that need to have my input, I often help them solve the problems prior to the lecture […] I understand that students need individual and written feedback but I could not provide it to them because of my overloaded work. (Vuong)

Another participant also acknowledged the essential value of formative feedback as a support for student learning, but constraints in providing it were also perceived to exist, limiting the capacity of this lecturer to do what he believed was best for supporting his students. He explained:

I also know that providing feedback is important, but I admit that I have not done that well because of a large class size and too much hard work, for which I am not paid. Thus, my feedback is mainly in the form of grades or oral comments. (Thinh)

Changing Pragmatists overall reportedly had a good understanding about the purposes and role of student assessment in supporting student learning. Their stated beliefs, values and attitudes were not, however, always consistent with their actual assessment practices. These participants realised the need to change to promote student learning. However, they were very pragmatic in the way they made those changes when they were faced with a lack of resources. They based their student assessment practices on considerations relating to student characteristics, university support and their own employment conditions. They were, therefore, hesitant to actively engage the students in their learning through formative assessment strategies.

5.4 Concluding remarks

This chapter has presented findings that relate to the beliefs, values and attitudes of the 24 participants who contributed to the present investigation, with a view to establishing how these
influenced their approaches to student assessment. Based on the data collected by means of ethnographic interviews and documentary analysis, three distinctive groups of participants could be identified: the Adaptive Implementers, the Defending Denialists and the Changing Pragmatists. The diversity of the beliefs, values and attitudes of these groups is summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 5.1. The Spectrum of Beliefs, Values and Attitudes about Change in Student Assessment

As shown in Figure 1, the Defending Denialists were closed to change with respect to student assessment practices. Members of this group generally held traditional values, beliefs and attitudes about teaching and learning. The Changing Pragmatists, however, had developed some understanding of the need for student assessment reform and were interested in implementing changes with a view to adopting more contemporary assessment practices. However, their motivation to implement these changes depended on the level of support provided by their employer and also on the extent to which they could see practical results in student learning after implementing changes. The Adaptive Implementers were the most open to change. They reported instigating changes in their assessment practices regardless of the extent of institutional support available. They were strongly motivated by a desire to improve the quality of learning by students, and they were highly supportive of the use of formative assessment methods in this regard. The characteristics of these three groups of participants are further examined in the next chapter.
Chapter 6 - Perceptions about the Need for Change

The previous chapter reported on the beliefs, values and attitudes of the participants that strongly impacted upon their student assessment practices. Upon close examination, it was clear that there were some positive signs of a substantive culture change in student assessment practices at the three selected site institutions. Although a majority of the participants had begun to change their student assessment practices, the changes were uneven in their implementation. This chapter continues to explore the experiences of the participants regarding the implementation of student assessment practices. It aims to document how participants labelled Adaptive Implementers, Defending Denialists and Changing Pragmatists expressed a desire for change in their assessment practices. It seeks to identify what the participants perceived to be the key drivers for change and the aspects of student assessment that they considered to be most in need of change. In particular, the chapter presents the findings relating to the second research question:

To what extent do these lecturers and educational managers perceive a need for change to student assessment practices, and what would they like to change?

6.1 Need for Change

The Adaptive Implementers and the Changing Pragmatists clearly perceived the need for change in student assessment practices. They expressed general dissatisfaction with existing practices, noting amongst other things the impact of these practices in terms of encouraging student passivity in learning and student reliance on rote learning of facts. They also reported on the high level of pressure associated with examinations, and on the lack of sufficient focus on the attainment of graduate attributes that were relevant to workplace requirements. These concerns motivated them to want to alter their student assessment practices in order to be more supportive of student learning and personal development. In contrast, maintaining a more traditional, teacher-centred approach to teaching and student assessment, participants who were identified as Defending Denialists were generally satisfied with their current assessment practices.
6.1.1 The need to promote independent, active engagement and deep learning

All eight of the Adaptive Implementers and ten of the Changing Pragmatists reported being concerned that student assessment practices at their universities tended still to focus on rote learning for grading purposes, and that there was not enough emphasis on the importance of providing formative feedback and advice to support student learning. One Adaptive Implementer, for example, reported that six years ago she had also been committed to summative assessment. She realised, however, that her students tended to learn by heart the lecture contents in order to obtain marks, but without achieving a sufficient understanding. This reason was reported to have motivated her to change her student assessment practices for the benefit of her students’ learning. She explained:

In the past, I assessed in a more traditional way, as did other lecturers. I assessed the students’ work just to obtain a grade, where I would have two columns of marks derived from multiple-choice tests and short essay exams that mainly required students’ rote learning, and a lesser proportion for applying knowledge. My students did not have opportunities to construct their own learning through feedback on their performance. […] My students got high marks in the exams, but after that they soon forgot all that they had learnt […] From that, I realised that the important thing is not the required grades, but how to help the students to learn effectively. So I am trying to change this practice in my classroom. (Hong)

This participant was describing a situation in which a concern about developing students’ capabilities had persuaded her to assess their performance differently. A personal realisation about the inadequacy of existing student assessment practices had led her to change her approach to student assessment.

Another participant, who was Changing Pragmatist, when reflecting on his teaching and assessment experience, reported that during his early years as a lecturer he had implemented student assessment procedures in a conventional manner, drawing mainly on what he himself had experienced as a student. Over time, however, he became disillusioned with this approach to student assessment because he could see that it was not enabling his students to achieve higher-order learning skills, such as an ability to apply knowledge, solve problems, think critically and debate issues. Therefore, in his view, it was important to make a change. He reported:

To be honest, for many years my assessment tasks did not give the learners opportunities to engage in deep learning or promote their higher order learning skills […]. The assessment tasks were usually comprised of questions that students could answer by repeating what they had
learnt rather than by analysing, synthesising and applying knowledge. Thus, my students tended
to be good at memorising, and accepting what I presented to them, rather than thinking
independently, questioning what they learnt and solving real problems […] I believe that I have
to assess the students in a manner that enables them to develop their critical thinking and ability
in applying knowledge, not just relying on textbooks. (Tien)

This participant went on to explain that he now understood the significant impact student
assessment could have on the quality of student learning, and that it was possible for assessment
itself to become a rich learning experience for students. He spoke about how he could use
student assessment tasks to stimulate students to think more critically. He also saw the need to
embed in the assessment process authentic activities that would promote in his students an
ability to apply knowledge, rather than to reproduce details learnt from textbooks.

Five of the Adaptive Implementers and six of the Changing Pragmatists also expressed
dissatisfaction with the assessment practices at their universities. These assessment practices
were regarded as constraining the opportunities for students to take more personal responsibility
for their learning, which was seen as also having adverse repercussions for the students once
they graduated and went into the world of work, where they would need to be able
independently to advance their own learning. One Adaptive Implementer, who gave expression
to the views of many other participants, stated:

I realise our student assessment practices did not offer a variety of opportunities for students to
actively engage in their own learning processes. The assessment criteria and expectations for
success were not clearly stated in advance. The opportunity for the students to interact with their
peers was also limited […]. The way we assessed the students meant that the majority of our
students were unable to reflect on and objectively self-evaluate what they had done and had not
yet done in order to improve their learning […]. These practices resulted in the passiveness and
dependence of the students because they did not know what they were expected to do except
listening and following. Over recent years, many of my colleagues, including me, have tried to
change our assessment practices because we want to encourage students to become actively
involved with their learning. We also want to help them to develop their self-directed learning
abilities. We want to motivate students to learn and to let them know that they have ability to do
that. (Huyen)

In summary, this participant was reporting that her student assessment practices and those of
her colleagues were discouraging student initiative and self-direction in learning. This
discovery motivated her, and in turn, her colleagues, to seek to change their assessment
practices.
The three Defending Denialists provided a markedly different perspective. They were generally comfortable with existing approaches to teaching and student assessment. One of them commented:

I use multiple-choice questions and short essay questions to assess my students, both mid-term and for the end-of-unit assessment […]. I think multiple-choice questions that assess fairly and objectively student learning should be encouraged. However, the proportion of academic staff members using multiple-choice tests still remains limited in teacher training universities […]. At the moment I am content with my student assessment practice and I do not see the reason for changing. (Minh)

This participant, in expressing a preference for multiple-choice and short-answer questions to assess student learning was also confirming a preference for the kind of assessment that focused on testing student recall of details presented in class. The appeal of these formats, from his point of view, was that student performance could be appraised ‘objectively’, suggesting that this was a scientifically defensible approach to assessment. This Defending Denialist wished to stick to the traditional ways of assessing student learning, which meant also sticking to traditional methods of teaching, with a focus on passive learning by his students.

Another Defending Denialist reported that he favoured traditional didactic teaching and assessment methods because they were easier to apply for large classes and more convenient in terms of managing the workload related to student assessment. He reported:

I prefer to use multiple-choice tests because they are suitable for assessing a large number of students. A multiple-choice test does take much time for lecturers to design for the first few times to create the question bank, but once we have a question bank we can easily draw different items from it to create a test […]. I also find it is quicker to mark student work […]. In fact, after students receive their marking results, they never complain about their results. (Quyet)

The apparent simplicity and efficiency of multiple-choice tests also appealed to the other Defending Denialists. Absent altogether from their priorities was a concern about students becoming active and independent learners.

6.1.2 The need to reduce exam pressures and to increase fairness in marking

All of Adaptive Implementers and nearly all of the Changing Pragmatists expressed concern that their students were suffering high pressure from exams. They reported that their students were preoccupied with examination success because of its importance to career opportunities. A representative comment was as follows:
For graduation, my students must pass an examination in their chosen specialisation, and an examination in Marxism-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh’s Thoughts. These exams are usually comprised of questions that students answer by repeating what they have learnt rather than by analysing and synthesising. It is normal to see some of my students fainting before exams. Students are stressed […] because they have to learn by heart a huge amount of required knowledge and reproduce it exactly in their exams. If they fail their graduation exams, they have to wait for another year to resit them. It means they cannot look for a job while their families are expecting them to graduate and find a job to support the family. (Huyen)

One of the effects of the stress induced by sole summative examinations that was widely reported by these participants was that students found it difficult to find the time or to have the opportunity to engage more deeply with the subject matter in units that they were completing. The prevalence of examinations, and the level of stress associated with them, was widely reported by many of the participants, and by all of the Adaptive Implementers, to be highly detrimental to the quality of student learning. Students were reported to be studying simply because of the need to pass exams.

A Changing Pragmatist threw light on what he saw to be the opportunity foregone by the excessive level of stress on passing exams. He commented:

I wish that student assessment could make the students feel comfortable, not stressful and anxious. Assessment tasks should be beneficial for them in their learning process and future work […]. If we merely let the students take exams, we cannot assess objectively and accurately their abilities. In this regard, I think that student assessment should be implemented by means of student learning activities [throughout the teaching session] because it is students’ learning processes that reveal their real capacity. (Tam)

This participant saw the need to assess students at all stages of the learning process both to create additional opportunities for learning and to ease the pressure on students currently brought about by examinations. He also argued for the need for a change to institutional policy at his university because tests and examinations did not allow adequately for lecturers to make holistic judgements about students’ achievements.

A large number of participants referred to a quality-related side effect of the high level of stress associated with examinations. This matter concerned the fact that some participants reported that at their universities, some of their colleagues were deliberately engaging in ‘soft marking’. One of the participants, a Changing Pragmatist, explained at length that he experienced this practice in his official capacity as a member of staff in a support centre within his university:
As I work in the Department of Academic Affairs, I get to know that some lecturers submitted to me the transcripts of their mid-term assessments with a majority of students having scores of 8, 9 and 10 marks [equal to Distinction or High Distinction]. Even in some units all of the students were given a score of 10 marks. I noticed that it is irrational and it is a concern because this practice may become counter-productive in student assessment. If lecturers mark their students’ work very soft, [...], students may be given a false impression about their capabilities or they perhaps think that they do not need to study hard, but they can still achieve a good mark [...]. I think this situation needs to be changed as soon as possible. My desire is how to make the student assessment return to its essence. The real assessment purpose is to support students to learn, not to be distracted by shallow expectations. (Tien)

This participant did not speculate about the reasons for ‘soft marking’, but other participants were more forthcoming. It was reported that some lecturers sought to assist their students in finding jobs after graduation by giving them higher marks than the students deserved. The practice was strongly criticised by those participants who referred to it. These participants claimed, amongst other things, that it undermined the validity of the assessment process, resulted in students becoming even more preoccupied with grades and performance, and distracted students from what should be of main concern to them, that is, the acquisition of a deep understanding of the concepts introduced in the curriculum.

One Adaptive Implementer also reported a concern that how to assess the students’ learning outcomes fairly and create an opportunity for students to learn effectively. This participant stated that:

Currently, my colleagues do not have explicit assessment standards when they assess the students’ learning outcomes. They even do not concern if their students have achieved specified learning standards. What they merely concern is that if students understand all learning materials and are able to reproduce knowledge in exams. I believe that this is not an effective way to help students learn because they do not know what the expectations are for each unit and thus they cannot take responsibility for their own learning. This way of assessing student learning is also not fair for the students because they do not know why they have been given such a certain mark. (Tuan)

This participant believed that when the assessment of students’ learning outcomes was based on clear standards of performance and explicit criteria, it would create opportunity for the students to actively engage in their own learning.
The Defending Denialists recognised the extent of the pressure on students that was associated with examinations, but they remained convinced of the effectiveness of examinations for assessing the abilities of students. A representative comment was:

I agree exams focus more on factual knowledge but I think examinations are necessary to sort out students who should not be doing that subject. Students have to understand that if they engage with a university, they have to do examinations. If they cannot do the work, they should not be there. (Quyet)

Neither this participant, nor the other two Defending Denialists, conveyed any sense of appreciation of the role that interactive dialogue between lecturers and students might play in advancing learning. Neither did any of the Defending Denialists identify any role that student assessment might have in terms of contributing to the improvement of teaching.

6.1.3 The need to develop graduate attributes

Nearly all of the participants made comments to the effect that they believed that student assessment should be a basis for promoting the attainment of graduate attributes. In general, there was a high level of awareness of the fact that employers were complaining frequently that graduates were not sufficiently able to apply their knowledge to solve complex problems in the workplace, and that they were also deficient in terms of their ‘work readiness’ skills, concerning initiative, leadership, communications, and so on. Many participants expressed the view that student assessment practices in universities were contributing to the problem. One participant spoke for most in explaining:

Each year I send my students to secondary schools for internships, and I was concerned that a significant number of them could not put into practice what they had learnt […]. This year there were a number of groups of students who did practicum teaching in the high schools where teachers assessed them and they stated that our students were not good with their professional skills, such as teaching skills, classroom management, and capacities of planning activities or abilities to work with students […]. This concerned me and I believe my colleagues and I need to reconsider the way we teach and assess our students. (Nhi)

Another participant was more explicit in linking current assessment practice to the lack of work-ready skills in graduating teachers, stating also that her students lacked the necessary practical skills to teach effectively in schools because training programs and student assessment practices in teacher training institutions did not pay sufficient attention to developing these skills. This participant reported that universities set highly specific expected outcomes for teacher education graduates in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes, but that the teaching content
was inconsistently implemented and that student assessments were inconsistent in terms of their effectiveness in identifying the achievement of intended learning outcomes. She reported that:

Although there has recently been a trend in teacher training institutions to have training goals that seek to produce graduates who have sufficient knowledge, higher order-learning skills and professional skills, as well as appropriate attitudes, my university’s student assessment practices have mainly concentrated on rote memorisation and the acquisition of knowledge […]. With current student assessment practices in teacher education training programs, it could be said that the students’ knowledge about certain disciplines is quite good because students are provided with a considerable amount of knowledge, but their ability to practise as teachers is limited […]. Employers from the school sector have complained that many of my university’s graduates working in high schools are too weak in their professional and communication skills. (Han)

Both Adaptive Implementers and Changing Pragmatists made comments of this these kinds. Indeed, in most cases, participants were emphatic about these issues. Both of these groups of participants also appeared to share the view that the curriculum in teacher training universities was too far removed from the context of professional practice. There was also a widely held view that the intended learning outcomes for teacher training awards needed to be better aligned with what is taught, and with what is assessed. Surprisingly, suggestions for how this alignment might be achieved were not forthcoming.

The traditionalism of the Defending Denialists was evident in some of their comments about what young people needed to know and be able to do in order to prepare for a career as a teacher. A typical claim made was that:

The students must love their Vietnam Fatherland, love people, protect people and be loyal to the nation, the Communist Party, as well as to the people. They must also maintain the common moral values of humanity, such as being respectful to older people, and maintaining hierarchical relationships. The final element is that student teachers should love their teaching, and be enthusiastic and faithful to their teaching job. These are foundation qualities of Vietnamese education. (Quyet)

Another Defending Denialist made a similar remark, when commenting on the preparation of graduates for teaching:

I also expect that students should develop a good personality. This is because they must be ethical and reputable not only in providing knowledge, but also in educating students in schools. They are people who their students can trust. They can orient students to follow good paths. (Tran)
Achieving Change in Student Assessment in Vietnamese Teacher Training Institutions

The views expressed by these two participants strongly echo a traditional Confucian perspective, as reported in Chapter 1, on the qualities that are essential in teachers. In this perspective, the focus is on the development of moral values, including being respectful to elders, observing power hierarchies and relationships, having an earnest personality, and upholding professional ethics.

It is particularly noteworthy that many Adaptive Implementers expressed concern about their colleagues who revered exactly these kinds of attributes. They were especially critical of the emphasis placed by traditionalists on the development of memorisation skills, at the cost of sufficient attention being given to the development of higher-order learning skills. The Adaptive Implementers reported that their more traditional colleagues tended to expect their students to be highly passive as learners. A typical comment was:

Several of my colleagues generally expect their students to have right answers as indicated in the textbooks. Indeed, correct answers according to the lecturers or textbooks’ answer keys will result in high marks [...]. These lecturers do not like the idea that students challenge the lecturer’s viewpoint [...]. They expect their students to listen and respect the judgements given by them. (Kien)

This participant was giving expression to a frustration shared by the Adaptive Implementers, in particular, that many of their colleagues appeared to be quite satisfied with ensuring that their students were obedient, inclined to strive hard to reproduce supposedly ‘correct’ answers in tests and examinations, and not inclined to engage in any critical thinking. A strong sentiment shared by the Adaptive Implementers was that these attributes were unhelpful in terms of the kinds of skills the students needed to develop to become effective teachers in the 21st century. As one representative participant critically reported that “how can we train our future teachers to master appropriate knowledge, pedagogical skills, to be self-regulated and lifelong learners as well as facilitators by merely imparting knowledge and requiring them to uncritically reproducing the knowledge learned? A passive and dependent learner is unable to be an effective teacher in the future” (Luc).

It was important to note that participants who were identified as Adaptive Implementers and Changing Pragmatists reported being concerned about the current situation in teacher education, which they saw as being concerned mainly with lower-order learning, the pressures associated with examinations, and a lack of sufficient focus on the development of professional and communication skills required for the practice of teaching. They also saw student assessment to be an intrinsic part of the learning process. Therefore, these participants reported
to have a desire to change their student assessment practice. Specifically, all the Adaptive Implementers reported to attempt to engage in some initial changes for the benefits of their student learning. The Defending Denialists expressed a sense of comfort about existing student assessment practices, which they saw as being foundational to their students becoming good citizens, showing obedience and respect to the older people. The expectations of the Defending Denialists were consistent with a traditional, didactic approach to student assessment, and it appeared to blinker them to any sense of the need for a change in student assessment practices.

6.2 Perceptions of Assessment Reform

Each of the participants was invited to express three wishes for how to change their own student assessment practices, and to indicate the extent to which they felt they had the authority to make these changes themselves. Participants categorised as Adaptive Implementers and as Changing Pragmatists were forthright in proposing ways in which their own and their colleagues’ student assessment practices should be reformed. However, three participants identified as Defending Denialists had less to say on the matter.

6.2.1 The purpose of student assessment

All but three of the Adaptive Implementers and Changing Pragmatists expressed a desire to see a change in the role and purpose of student assessment at their universities. These participants claimed that questions related to the purposes of student assessment needed much more attention. One participant reflected the views of many of the participants when claiming:

The first thing […] for the whole country is to change the purpose of student assessment. It means we should not merely focus on assessing the mastery of knowledge, but we should facilitate students to develop their cognitive thinking, independent learning ability, the skills in applying knowledge skills and problem-solving skills. [...]. Currently, it is essential to employ formative assessment during the teaching process in order to help students to achieve the qualities of a future teacher. If the purposes of student assessment were changed, there would be a radical and comprehensive change in student assessment in Vietnamese universities. (Tuan)

This response gave expression to a deeply held view on the part of many participants that student assessment practices in Vietnamese higher education institutions were too heavily steeped in a culture of summative, examination-based assessment, premised on a norm-referenced model of measurement. They wanted to see more of a balance between summative and formative assessment approaches. A typical claim was:
There should be integration between formative and summative assessment so that the assessment of student learning outcomes would be thorough and comprehensive […]. I believe formative assessment has become very important because our higher education system is changing from a school-year-based system to a credit-based system, which is grounded on the concept of student-centred learning. Thus, formative assessment with timely feedback on students’ performance progress would help students greatly to engage actively in their own learning […] (Vuong)

Like many other participants, this lecturer was not arguing for the replacement of summative assessment by formative assessment, but instead for a better alignment between the two approaches.

6.2.2 Constructive alignment

All of the Adaptive Implementers and eight of the thirteen Changing Pragmatists also referred to the need for a better alignment in teacher education programs between intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities and assessment methods, although few participants referred to the term “constructive alignment” coined by Biggs (1996, p. 347). Indeed, a small number of the participants did refer explicitly to the concept of constructive alignment, as developed and articulated by Biggs. One of the Adaptive Implementers explained:

As far as I am concerned, in order to promote effective learning in students, the intended learning outcomes, teaching activities and assessment tasks should be aligned. At the moment, the majority of lecturers merely understand that each unit may have objectives, including knowledge, skills, and attitudes, but the teaching content is inconsistently designed and the assessment activities are inconsistent with the intended learning outcomes. As a result, the lecturers only measure what they have taught […] through requiring their students to sit exams. Regarding the essential role of ‘constructive alignment’, a few teacher training institutions over the past two or three years have attempted to link teaching and student assessment to the objectives of the training program and to the expected learning outcomes, but the result still remains modest. (Kien)

This participant was pointing to the emergence of an appreciation in Vietnamese teacher training institutions of an appreciation of the nature and importance of achieving a constructive alignment, along the lines proposed by Biggs (1996), but the extent of the adoption of constructive alignment to date, he went on to report, was modest. The main issue participants pointed to was that lecturers did not know enough about how to achieve it, and, in any event, the importance of examinations remained unchallenged.
All of the Adaptive Implementers, but only two of the Changing Pragmatists, referred to the importance of teacher training programs having predetermined and clearly articulated learning outcomes. A typical comment from an Adaptive Implementer was:

The biggest challenge for many lecturers is to write the appropriate desired learning outcomes for teaching units and select the appropriate teaching and assessment processes. Most lecturers merely state the learning outcomes in a general way in many units, focusing simply on knowledge, because these lecturers do not know how to write sound learning outcomes in terms of skills and desired attitudes […]. Through the academic departmental meetings in the faculty, I am now trying to discuss with my colleagues how to determine the teaching objectives and how to write soundly the required learning outcomes. (Luc)

A specific obstacle to the more widespread adoption of constructive alignments appeared, therefore, to be a general lack of proficiency in articulating intended learning outcomes for programs and units. This participant, as an educational manager, felt that it was his responsibility to try to educate his colleagues concerning the articulation of intended learning outcomes. This participant also expressed the need to have more available learning materials and professional development to improve his colleagues’ knowledge and understanding about how to design appropriate intended learning outcomes and effective assessment tasks. He reported that “the difficulty of lecturers is that professional development and translation materials in student assessment are unavailable for them to learn about contemporary student assessment approaches.”

Adaptive Implementers who commented on the need for a clear specification of intended learning outcomes also claimed that they wanted their colleagues to be more transparent about their expectations of their students’ learning objectives, which would benefit their students. A typical assertion was:

As far as I am concerned, concrete objectives should be explicitly stated in units regarding the knowledge or skills the unit aims to provide […]. Lecturers should inform students of the required learning outcomes before commencing a new unit so that the students are able to know what the lecturers want them to achieve and what the lecturers want to assess them. (Ngoc)

This comment and others like it indicated that providing students in advance with an explicit statement of expected learning outcomes was not widely practised in the three site universities. Another comment was:

In order to support students to learn effectively, I propose the assessment criteria for performance must be explicitly stated, and then the lecturer must clearly communicate these criteria to the students in the first lecture and during the teaching process. In particular, the
l examiner must negotiate with students that if they are to complete successfully each part of the unit, they have to master certain knowledge, skills and attitudes, and these must be assessed in certain assessment tasks [...]. This would encourage students to work hard to achieve the intended learning outcomes (Hong)

Participants who referred to the need for clearly stated learning outcomes also referred to a need for learning activities and assessment tasks to align properly with the learning outcomes. One Adaptive Implementer reported on his experience of changing his teaching approach, but without making any change to his assessment practice, he had undermined his own teaching by the impact of his assessment tasks, which continued to focus on skills in memorising knowledge. He explained:

I have taught a Social Work unit for many years. In this unit the students are requested not only to have specialised knowledge in this field but also to be able to apply what they have learnt in their work practices, and to communicate, to think and to reason effectively. Thus, I changed my teaching methods from traditional didactic teaching to encourage students to engage in interactive activities and teamwork. However, my assessments did not change. I employed multiple-choice questions and short essays to assess the students’ memorisation of knowledge rather than their performance of practical skills. As a result, the expected learning outcomes for students were not achieved [...]. I realised the importance of changing my assessment approaches to be congruent with the teaching activities and the intended learning outcomes [...]. I think if I continue to use these traditional methods of assessment, I will kill the various capabilities of students. (Tuan)

The account provided by this participant raises the question of how best to start in terms of achieving a constructive alignment in the curriculum of teacher training universities in Vietnam. The experience of this participant was that, without change in the way that students are assessed, the difficulties of trying to implement change in the intended learning outcomes and actual teaching practices may not be so effective. Indeed, this participant was discovering in practice the same insights reported much earlier by Marton et al. (1984). It is how students are assessed that dominates the curriculum, including how students approach the learning task.

Of course, modifying the assessment requirements without making consequential adjustments to the statement of intended learning outcomes and to the way in which a unit is delivered is fraught with problems. A participant who was identified as being a Changing Pragmatist reported:

In the first years of teaching, I did not have enough experience in building appropriate assessment tasks that would closely link with the learning outcomes and teaching activities. I
designed some assessment tasks that made students confused and resulted in them failing their exams because they did not know how to deal with these tasks. For instance, I asked them to solve the following practical problem: “In a network, please design an algorithm to find the most optimal routine for an information packet”. The result was that most students could not visualize the problem and did not know what to do. Obviously, this was my failure. At that time, they blamed me because I did not integrate the knowledge in advance during the teaching process. Gradually, I adjusted the direction of my teaching and the students have now become accustomed to my assessment approaches. (Tien)

This lecturer wanted his students to learn how to apply their knowledge, rather than simply to memorise knowledge, and so had designed an assessment task that focused on the application of knowledge. He had not, however, realised at the time that he needed to also change the nature of his teaching activities. He has clearly learned to align his teaching and content with his assessment approach.

Among Adaptive Implementers and Changing Pragmatists, there was a general view that if lecturers in teacher training programs became more capable in achieving a proper alignment between intended learning outcomes, teaching activities and assessment tasks, then students would have more opportunities to engage actively in constructing their own learning, principally because they would know what to focus on, and understand how to demonstrate their learning achievements. An Adaptive Implementer explained:

Currently, the stated objectives of any given course of study in teacher training institutions cover a wide range of understandings, higher order intellectual skills and values. Therefore, these learning outcomes need to be aligned with the teaching activities and shown in the assessment tasks. If the assessment tasks do not address these learning outcomes, the above statements remain impractical […]. When the teaching and assessment processes themselves are well linked with specific objectives, students are more motivated to engage actively in their learning and to enjoy it because they know what their study purposes are. (Kien)

It was important, therefore, to the Adaptive Implementers and the Changing Pragmatists that lecturers in teacher training institutions should have a better understanding of ‘constructive alignment’ in the training process, including an appreciation of how to implement it and of how to utilise it for the purposes of motivating students to become more self-directing in their studies.
6.2.3 Diversity in assessment methods

Six of the Adaptive Implementers and a majority of the Changing Pragmatists referred to the need for more diversity in the forms of assessment employed at their universities, clearly indicating an overall acceptance that sole summative examinations are not effective drivers of student learning or learning outcomes. They reported a need for the lecturers to implement a wide range of assessment practices besides examinations, in order to promote active and independent learning. One participant explained:

If we only use the form of multiple-choice tests for formative assessment, it remains hard to fully assess the knowledge, professional and higher-order skills and attitudes of students, and students will not have many opportunities to develop their capacities. So it is important for lecturers to utilise various forms and methods of student assessment, such as, portfolio assessment, performance assessment, oral presentation, group discussions, written assignments, problem-solving exercises, interviews, and peer-assessment […] in order for both the students’ learning process and their learning outcomes to be assessed. I also believe these assessment methods will release students from the pressure of exams. (Ngoc)

When expressing a wish to see more of their colleagues experimenting with new forms of student assessment, these participants particularly reported a wish for assessment tasks to be designed in the way that would better support the development of higher-order cognitive attainments by students and the assessment tasks should be closely linked to authentic situations. A typical claim was:

When designing exam papers, lecturers should develop exam questions with different difficulty levels in order to be beneficial to all. The assessment tasks should also be designed to enhance the creativity of the students and relate to practical situations […] I believe that students would benefit from engaging in such assessment tasks. (Nhi)

These kinds of remarks also focused on the need for more authentic assessment tasks, that is, assessment tasks that related to real-life situations and challenges. Although these participants did not express exactly the term “authentic assessment” but they did say similar things like “the assessment of students’ learning outcomes should be based on the practical situations and […] should be associated with real-life situations” (Ngoc) or “the assessment process must be associated with the practical and realistic practice” (Kien). One participant, for example, typically explained why assessment methods that closely related to real life situations should be encouraged. As this participant commented:

I particularly appreciate those students who are able to apply their skills and knowledge obtained in the classroom and transfer these knowledge and skills into real situations. Specially, in the
Social work units, students are requested not only to have specialized knowledge in their fields but they should also know how to apply what they have learnt in their work practices […]. I believe that effective learning must be situated in social contexts. Therefore, lecturers should actively engage the students a learning environment that requires them to construct their own learning and apply what they had learnt in the real life situations. (Tuan)

The suggestions of both Adaptive Implementers and Changing Pragmatists about diversified student assessment methods and designing assessment tasks tended to towards what Carless (2015) recommends about designing learning-oriented assessment tasks that are able to foster students’ efforts and their active engagement in the learning process.

6.2.4 Transparent and consistent criteria for marking

A majority of the Changing Pragmatists reported that their faculties started to implement consistent and basic marking criteria for assessing student work. However, these participants continued reporting that they were faced with difficulties in marking because they did not have specific and detailed marking criteria. One participant described, for example:

There are two lecturers marking independently in each unit. Before marking, both lecturers sit down together and negotiate the general and basis marking criteria. In this regard, they must come to an agreement based on some general criteria […]. During the moderation process, I find it hard to come to a common agreement because each lecturer has a different viewpoint, different values and different beliefs, and we do not have a common marking rubric to follow […]. For example, some lecturers pay more attention to the ideas, whereas others prefer to look at grammar and structure. Each unit should have two assessors, but not all assessors have the same specialized disciplines in all units. I wish our to have marking rubrics to assist lecturers in teaching and marking (Han)

This participant describes an attempt to implement a process of assessment moderation, but in the absence of marking rubrics, she felt that lecturers found it difficult to come to agreement about what constituted quality of completed assessment tasks. It was evident to her that performance criteria needed to be made more transparent prior to the process of marking student submissions.

Another participant reported that, according to MoET’s guidelines, lecturers were permitted to select and allocate weightings to different methods of mid-term assessment. She explained that, because of the lack of marking rubrics, she and her colleagues often made up their own marking criteria in teaching units for the mid-term assessment. She reported on how she graded her students’ work:
I mark students’ work following a 10-point grading system. Normally, I give my students up to 4 marks for mastering the knowledge, up to 3 marks for applying the knowledge, and up to 3 marks for the presentation and explanation of the knowledge […]. Because each lecturer makes up their own marking criteria, differences in marking become inevitable […]. Through sharing from my colleagues from another university, I got to know about a marking rubric and I am really interested in it, but I do not have a sufficiently strong knowledge to design marking rubrics. (Xuan)

Two aspects of this explanation are noteworthy. First is that there is a need for resource materials or professional development in relation to knowledge about marking rubrics. Second, there is not yet any requirement for widespread adherence to them among lecturing staff members. This participant did report on a process of negotiation that takes place between lecturers, but it appeared that the process was subject to the influence of whoever was the dominant personality, or recognised source of expertise, in the faculty. She went on to say:

We always negotiate the criteria for marking students’ exam papers […]. However, the process of negotiation largely depends on who has the power in the faculty or reputation in that unit. These people will decide mainly the criteria […] (Xuan)

In summary, many Adaptive Implementers and Changing Pragmatists expressed a readiness for more transparency in the statement of performance standards for units of study, and a more structured and systematic approach to the articulation of marking criteria. They described the current situation as being one in which individual lecturers were able to grade student assessment tasks without much reference to what their peers valued, or in accordance only with the values and viewpoint of one person with authority or with most influence. There was clearly not a sense of the process of marking criteria being objectively determined and of marking rubrics being systematically developed within a context of collegial discussion and sharing of viewpoints.

### 6.3 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has addressed the question of the extent to which the participants in the present investigation perceived a need for change to student assessment practices, and it has also documented what the most wanted to see changed. All but three of the participants were committed to some form of change to student assessment practices at their universities. The Adaptive Implementers were strongly and consistently committed to the need for change, but so too were many of the Changing Pragmatists. The predominant concerns were that the traditional student assessment culture at their
universities was dominated by anxiety-provoking examinations that focused primarily upon testing the recall of facts and procedures, and that resulted in students becoming dependent and passive as learners.
Chapter 7 – Opportunities for and Obstacles to Change

The previous chapter reported on perceptions of the necessity for change in university assessment practices, and on the aspects of student assessment practices that should be considered for change. This chapter explores the elements of the site contexts that were most likely to influence the Adaptive Implementers, Defending Denialists and Changing Pragmatists in their decisions to adopt, ignore, or not accept changes to their approaches to student assessment. First, the chapter identifies opportunities to motivate these participants to have a positive change in their beliefs and values and to implement more contemporary student assessment approaches. The issues and constraints reported by the participants as being most likely to limit their ability in making changes to their practices are also addressed. Finally, the chapter identifies key conditions suggested by participants that may support lecturers to implement effective assessment practices. This chapter focuses particularly on the third research question:

What are the conditions necessary to stimulate these lecturers and educational managers to adopt more progressive approaches to student assessment?

7.1 Opportunities for Change

This section reports on instrumental conditions eliciting change as seen through the lens of the participants. Five major opportunities could be identified from the data that triggered both Adaptive Implementers and most of the Changing Pragmatists to make certain changes in their student assessment practices. The opportunities for change that were most desired by the participants included: having a mandate in the national and institutional training decisions and regulations; opportunities for professional staff development concerning student assessment research and well-informed practice; support and encouragement to implement well-informed changes to assessment regimes from university leaders and managers, organisational and inter-university opportunities for collegial sharing of good practice and collegial support; and opportunities for personal learning as well as reflection. These elements are now given detailed examination.

7.1.1 Motivation by decisions and regulations

Two Adaptive Implementers and a majority of the Changing Pragmatists reported that the first element motivating them to make changes was the external pressure deriving from recent
Government policies through MoET. These participants said that they were aware that in 2006 and 2007, the MoET had issued two decisions on training, teaching and assessment for full-time students in higher education.

Decision 25/2006/QĐ-BGDĐT and Decision 43/2007/QĐ-BGDĐT stipulated that the assessment for each unit should include both continuous assessment and summative assessment. The continuous assessment is particularly prescribed with a proportion of approximately 30% [in my university training regulation] and lecturers are free to determine the assessment forms. Diversified student assessment methods are also encouraged to be employed […] These Decisions opened opportunities for me to implement different assessment tasks during the teaching process, and thus I am able to provide constructive feedback for my students. (Luc)

This participant reported that, ever since 2006 when the first of the Decisions was announced, he and his colleagues had eagerly begun to explore possibilities for the continuous assessment of their students’ work. Their students now had more opportunities to receive timely feedback on their on-going work before sitting for the end-of-unit examination or completing a small project. He also enthusiastically reported that various student assessment methods could now be employed; including methods that he considered would engage students more with learning than examinations were able to do. He also pointed to the stimulus for introducing new and more varied assessment tasks.

In a similar vein, another Changing Pragmatist reported that he routinely complied with the MoET’s Decisions, and that Decisions 25 and 43, issued in 2006 and 2007, respectively. He explained:

A couple of years ago, I assessed my students through a 45-to-60-minute written test and exam. Now, students I provided students with more opportunities to be involved in the assessment process and to collaborate with their friends in learning through engaging in group work assignments and discussions […]. I changed my assessment practice in accordance with the institutional training regulations in order to encourage my students to actively construct their learning. (My)

MoET’s Decisions had clearly provided this participant with the encouragement he needed to integrate student assessment requirements with his teaching practices. In particular, he found value in being able to make more use of group work and of team-based assessment tasks. He was positive about these changes, reporting that they had created new opportunities for his students to share knowledge, to obtain feedback from their peers, and to be collaborative in constructing their own learning.
The significance of the impact of MoET’s Decisions and institutional training regulations is of note at this point. Its endorsement of student assessment practices that were cumulative in nature clearly had an impact on teaching in universities. Though the Decisions were not far-reaching in terms of what they recommended, their wider impact, as reported by at least by the Adaptive Implementers and the majority of the Changing Pragmatists was to encourage more lecturers to consider the importance of student assessment as a key driver of students’ approaches to learning.

7.1.2 Motivation from staff development

All of the Adaptive Implementers and four of the Changing Pragmatists reported that, in addition to issuing Decisions 25 and 43, MoET had conducted some short training courses and workshops for some lecturing staff members from teacher training institutions and colleges from across Vietnam. One representative comment was that: “MoET had ever had a staff development project for lecturers at universities and colleges which train secondary pre-service teachers; therefore, in 2006, I had opportunity to attend two short training courses about the innovation of teaching methods” (Ngóc). The purpose of these professional development activities was reported to be to provide participants with knowledge about innovative teaching methods and contemporary student assessment practices. These programs were reported to have provided the trigger for the implementation of change in teaching practices. One typical comment from a Changing Pragmatist was:

I have changed the approach to student assessment because in 2005-2006 I was involved in an innovation of teaching and assessment method training workshop. I realised that if I wanted to change my teaching methods and the learning style of my students, then I had to change my methods of student assessment. (Xuan)

This participant also suggested that she had worked out the importance of the link between teaching, learning and assessment, or what Biggs (1996) called constructive alignment

One Adaptive Implementer who was in a management position also reported that, in addition to the continuing staff development program of MoET, his university also held different staff development programs since then:

As a Centre of Testing and Accreditation Education Quality responsible for ensuring the quality of training in my University - each year we hold from 3 to 4 training courses for lecturers. In each course we can only afford from 40 lecturers, so the total of lecturers attending our training courses per year is more than 100, whereas the University has 952 lecturers. Thus, the proportion of lecturers received specialized training program still remains low. However, the feedback we
There were eight participants in this investigation who had studied in Western higher education systems, and five of them were classified as Adaptive Implementers and three of them were classified as Changing Pragmatists. It is most revealing that five of the Adaptive Implementers reported that they had also been able to observe student assessment practices in several Western higher education settings. One representative participant, for example, reported that: “I was sent to Australia to do my PhD about Teaching Methods in Biology in 2007. During this time I had opportunities to engage in formative assessment environment which influenced a lot in the way I assess my student now” (Duyen).

They regarded this experience as having had a significant impact on their professional practice as lecturers. The knowledge that had gained was reported by them to have inspired them to implement changes in their approach to student assessment. One of these participants explained, for example, how she had realised the need to assess students formatively and to give them useful feedback on their learning progress in order for them to learn effectively. She reported:

After attending a few training workshops on teaching, and upon completion of my PhD abroad, that was an opportunity for my awareness about the important role of student assessment and different student assessment approaches to be developed. I grasped the nature and strategies of formative assessment and experienced formative assessment practices, and this helps me change my thinking about the purposes of assessment […]. When I went back to my university, I gradually implemented some changes by providing feedback to motivate the students to learn better. (Huyen)

For this participant, then, attendance at the staff development programs during her time abroad, supplemented by the opportunity to experience at first hand student assessment practices in Western settings, had been instrumental in causing her to reconsider her approach to student assessment. In particular, she reported seeing the role and purposes of student assessment in a different light as a result of the opportunities that had been given for professional development.

### 7.1.3 Supports and encouragement from educational leaders

Six of the Adaptive Implementers and four of the Changing Pragmatists reported that they had been encouraged to make changes to their teaching and student assessment practices by their educational leaders at their site institutions. A typical report was:

My Head of Department is a young and knowledgeable person who often supports people with new ideas in teaching […]. He always encourages and appeals to us to implement changes in student assessment. Last semester, I required students to do group assignments and I provided
formative feedback to the students. My Head of Department praised my attempts; I was really happy about that. (Han)

Clearly acknowledgement, encouragement and praise from managers such as Head of Department encourages lecturing staff to make the extra effort to implement assessment changes. It also fuels the development of any community of practice that might be forming in the department or faculty.

Of interest is that, three of the Adaptive Implementers and eight of the Changing Pragmatists reported that the university leaders encouraged them to change their teaching and assessment practices by providing them with updated technical equipment such as laptops and software, and by upgrading teaching facilities. One typical report was:

In recent years, I carry out teaching and assessment activities which link to the real life situations. It was fortunate because my university had been supportive to carry out these activities […]. At the beginning of each academic year, I usually plan and make recommendations to my university to allow students to go out of the classroom environment to learn. The provision of a means of transportation and better support from my university encourage my motivation for implementing change. (Ngoc)

In this case, the participant was describing how her university educational leaders addressed her need for practical support in the form of assistance with transportation for students to school settings. This support contributed greatly to her commitment to implement change in her teaching and form of student assessment. It may appear to be a small acknowledgement and a necessary support, but in the context of Vietnam, this was no small gesture.

7.1.4 **Motivation by collegial sharing and supportive climate**

Five of the Adaptive Implementers and one of the Changing Pragmatists reported that collegial sharing and support helped them to realise the weaker aspects of their teaching and student assessment approaches, which motivated them to continue implementing changes in their assessment practices. One participant, for example, shared:

I have some friends studied abroad who are teaching at other universities who share with me about their teaching and best assessment practices. This would help me know more about formative and authentic assessment and how to use them […]. The process of observing each other class teaching, and sharing our experience as well as concerns about student assessment issues with colleagues within my department, motivated me to change my assessment practice to encourage students to learn better. (Ngoc)
This participant described that the process of interacting and learning with her colleagues who had studied abroad helped her to understand more about contemporary student assessment approaches. By observing class teaching, and by talking with her colleagues about shared issues and concerns related to student assessment, she also found out a better way to help her students to learn through assessment. It was perhaps that the meaningful feedback generated from colleagues was very important to support this participant to change her assessment practices. In a similar vein, another participant reported that through working collegially with his colleagues who taught the same unit in Social work department, he learned how to improve his assessment practices for the benefit of student learning. As he spoke:

As a young lecturer, I am keen to learn and always try my best to learn from my colleagues in order to make changes in student assessment practices that benefit to my students. At the first stage of my teaching, I faced with a lot of difficulties in designing assessment tasks and in building assessment criteria. Through sharing these difficulties with my senior colleagues who have good knowledge about teaching and assessment, they help me to improve my assessment practices. (Tien)

These two participants explained that learning through social interaction and sharing difficulties with their colleagues’ on-job learning was an important way that triggered them to make changes in their practices. These interactions have all the characteristics of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) communities of practice. It is obvious that learning is a socio-semiotic construct. People learn best in an actual social context through interactions and conversations; not only do students learn in the context of their peers, but lecturers learn in the context of their colleagues. This point was clearly exhibited in theory of complex adaptive systems (Stacey, 1995; 1996; 2007), Fullan’s (2001; 2007) theory of educational change and Lave and Wenger’s (1991) communities of practice theory.

Among these five Adaptive Implementers, there were only three Adaptive Implementers reported that they learned through benchmarking practice with their colleagues externally as well as with their own students. One participant reported:

As a Head of the Teaching Method Department, I understand to be always a good example in implementing student assessment with a progressive approach. Therefore, I often engage in benchmarking my student assessment practice with colleagues in different departments and also my colleagues from other universities who teach the same subject with I am now. Specially, I want to design assessment rubrics for the Teaching Method unit in Biology, the benchmarking process with colleagues who have made positive changes is very important for me. (Huyen)
This participant explained that exchanging information with friends in other universities assisted her to gain a better knowledge about contemporary student assessment approaches.

In accordance with the motivation for change provided by benchmarking source from colleagues, two of the Adaptive Implementers reported that they often required their students to provide evaluative feedback that assisted them to be able to improve their professional practice. Feedback from the students motivated them to constantly reflect and adjust their practices. One typical report was:

> During the teaching process, I often invite my students to talk about aspects that make learning demanding for them. By talking with and listening to students, I can learn how an improvement in student assessment can be better fostered […]. After finishing a unit, I ask the students to evaluate my teaching and assessment via a confidential form composed by myself in order for me to constantly adjust my teaching and assessment process appropriately. (Nhi)

This participant was describing that through dialogue with her students during the teaching process and by obtaining students’ evaluative feedback, she could better understand the difficulties that students face in their learning, together with those aspects of her teaching that needed to be improved. From this experience, she knew better how to adjust her teaching and assessment in order to perform her assessment duties more effectively in support of student learning better. Learning through benchmarking, according to Morgan et al. (2004, p. 25-6), is one of the effective ways for lecturers to develop their professional judgement of students’ performance.

### 7.1.5 Motivation by personal learning and reflection

Only three of the Adaptive Implementers reported engaging routinely in personal learning to widen their assessment knowledge. Their personal learning and reflection had motivated them to change their assessment practices. One participant explained, for example:

> In 2005, I attended a short training course about renovating teaching methods. I got to know about formative assessment. I think that it is very useful to promote student learning. Thus, I tried to find books to read about it and learnt from the Internet in order to put it into my practice […]. Personal learning keeps me to up to date with contemporary pedagogical knowledge so I never have to never be backward. (Ngoc)

These Adaptive Implementers further reported:
In the “Vietnamese Practice” unit, my goal was to know if the students were able to write correct sentences in grammar. During the regular assessment process, I provided a lot of constructive feedback to the students […] I am so pleased that after completing the unit, many students realize their mistakes and are motivated to express their ideas with better expression. That is a good result that motivates me to never stop in making meaningful changes. (Nhi)

I have worked very hard to provide detailed feedback on my students’ performance progress in their writing assignments […]. I am really happy because my students do use my feedback to improve their writing. (Huyen)

Through self-reflection, these participants were able to know how their students had learned and then how actively engaged in learning they became when they were provided with constructive feedback. That outcome was reported to be a big motivation for them to continue making improvements in practice, which shows that completing the feedback loop in formative assessment is inherently satisfying for both learners and their teachers. This participant also informed that the positive outcomes of her student learning enhanced her beliefs and commitments in making changes. This was consistent with what Fullan (2007, p. 37) argued that significant change in people’s beliefs occurs more effectively after they gain evidence of changes that they have attempted to put in practices.

It is clear that these Adaptive Implementers had made significant changes to their teaching and assessment practice as a consequence of personal learning and reflection. In turn, they sought to develop in their students these same reflective and self-directed capacities.

### 7.2 Obstacles to Change

Participants identified several obstacles that they faced when they attempted to implement change in their student assessment practices that were remarkably consistent across both the Adaptive Implementers and the Changing Pragmatists. Various obstacles were reported relating to matters that included: the regulatory environment; a lack of knowledge and skills; limited resources and incentives; difficulties related to system accountability; an examination-oriented culture; and the issues of leadership. These issues are now discussed.

#### 7.2.1 The national and institutional regulations

A very considerable concern reported by five of the Adaptive Implementers and three of the Changing Pragmatists concerned the complexity of the MoET Decision in 2007 concerning requirements about student assessment. A typical comment was:
I think Decision 43/2007-QĐ-BGD&ĐT is an advanced document […]. However, what is written in this document about assessment procedure is quite detailed, thus it tends to encourage universities to follow exactly what is clarified in the Decision […]. Moreover, according to the MoET Decision, lecturers are entitled to determine the methods and forms for cumulative assessment with a good purpose for giving them more flexibility and freedom in changing their practice. However, for the majority of lecturers who do not want to change, they can choose the easiest and most convenient ways to assess student learning, such as requiring their students to sit exams for obtaining grades […]. So far, there have not been any mechanisms to require all lecturers to renovate their assessment. (Toan)

This participant reflected the view of the others on this concern. These participants felt that MoET had stipulated so many detailed requirements that individuals were limited, in the context of their home institutions, in their capacity to comply with them. MoET’s desire to achieve reform in student assessment practice was being undermined by the detailed way in which it articulated its training decisions. Added to this was the concern that MoET and universities had no practicable means of compulsorily requiring all the lecturers in an institution to implement new approaches to student assessment.

In the absence of clear rules and associated guidelines, the form of implementation depended mainly on the enthusiasm of individual lecturers for new approaches to student assessment rather than any well-informed approaches to assessing students more effectively. One participant spoke for all Adaptive Implementers and one-half of the Changing Pragmatists in reporting the fact that a majority of lecturers tended simply to perform assessment in the most convenient way, which was by multiple choice and short answer examinations, to fulfil their responsibilities rather than implementing a teacher-centred assessment approach.

Decision No 43/BGD&ĐT stipulates that the assessments of students’ learning outcomes need to combine with different forms of student assessments that include continuous assessment. In this regulation, however, all continuous assessment is equal to the quantitative grades thus the assessment of students’ learning outcomes still remains not comprehensive. My university follows regulation No 43/BGD&ĐT which requires continuous assessment as follows, for example, a 2 credit point-unit with one mark column on-going assessment; a 3 credit point-unit with two mark column on-going assessment; a 4 credit point-unit with three mark column on-going assessment. However, since all continuous assessments are equal to grades, the lecturers still prefer having exams or tests to get marks and thus the student assessment lacks its comprehensiveness. (Xuan)

This participant described that the current student assessment Decision had not prompted change in the assessment practice. With the lack of a strict requirement, guidelines and of
institutional obligations, it was likely to provide an opening for those who do not want to change because it might be too demanding and might take up too much of their time while they also had second or third jobs.

These Adaptive Implementers and Changing Pragmatists, together with one of the Defending Denialists, further expressed concern that the assessment procedures stipulated in MoET’s decisions were not based explicitly on a contemporary, research-led understanding of learning and student assessment. A typical report was:

My concern is that MoET’s decisions do not explicitly exhibit the different purposes of student assessment, or that motivating students to actively engage in the learning process is the main purpose. The attempts of MoET to change student assessment, as stipulated in these decisions, were also not based on any particular learning theories or research underpinnings. (Kien)

These participants further felt that these Decisions also did not elaborate sufficiently the underlying principles and the different purposes of student assessment, nor give expression to the importance of standards-based assessment. One participant went on to say:

[…] although these regulations require continuous assessment, details and exemplars for such an assessment approach remain absent. Thus, in practice, lecturers tend to implement continuous assessment by requiring their students to sit more exams […] and place more emphasis on the memorisation of knowledge for grading purpose. (Tuan)

This participant explained that the unclear guidelines, together with the lack of practical examples of how continuous assessment should be implemented, resulted in lecturers tending to interpret the Decisions in different ways, which mainly focused on grading purpose. In a similar vein, another participant reported:

The intention of MoET is to encourage cumulative assessment and tends to move from norm-referencing assessment system to standards-based assessment. However, the important role of standards-based assessment has not been clearly articulated. […]. Moreover, there is not guidelines and information about how to provide comments and feedback on students’ performance progress. Therefore, many of my academic staff reported to be confused about how to implement continuous and standards-based assessment. (Luc)

There was also a sense among this group that the explicit emphasis on grading in MoET’s Decisions, and a lack of explicit expression about the purposes of continuous assessment in creating opportunities for students to receive feedback on their progress, created confusion leading to opportunities for a majority of lecturers to maintain their traditional practices.
There was a sense among this group of participants that MoET’s had not provided a strong theoretical and research-based rationale for the required changes to student assessment in its Decisions. This in turn gave rise to a lack of clarity about the difference what assessment based upon merit is, the nature of purposes of student assessment and their implications for practice or the potential of formative assessment to engage students in their own learning.

7.2.2 A lack of professional development

One Adaptive Implementer, all of the Changing Pragmatists and one of the Defending Denialists reported their concern about having a very rudimentary knowledge of and understanding about well-informed student assessment practice. One representative participant reported that the insufficiency of professional preparation for pre-service teachers was the first reason that resulted in the shortage of understanding about student assessment of teachers. This participant commented:

In the MoET’s curriculum framework, there is no specific unit that required teaching about student assessment. Almost pre-service teachers are taught the ‘Theoretical Teaching Methods’ unit which has only one credit covering student assessment. However, this unit merely introduces the literature on student assessment; differentiates between traditional and modern student assessment forms and provides guidelines on how to design written tests such as multiple choices tests and essay questions. Therefore, lecturers are lacking of knowledge about the progressive student assessment approaches and also do not see the importance of student assessment in driving learning (Kien)

Both Adaptive Implementers and Changing Pragmatists continued reporting that although the university leaders and the MoET required them to implement changes, these requirements did not go hand in hand with the on-going professional development. One representative participant commented:

Currently, my university is encouraging the staff to do make changes but we are not provided with sufficient professional development. Few years ago, the MoET held some short training courses and workshops in the form of projects. Few years later, these projects expired and then the MoET did not organise any other professional development in terms of teaching and student assessment innovations… (Hien)

Another Changing Pragmatist, for example, reported that: “during the last five years, I did not have opportunities to attend any other training courses [about student assessment]” (Xuan). Another participant, who was Defending Denialist, also reported that: “I have not had any opportunities to be involved in staff development programs that relate to student assessment since I engaged in this teaching job” (Quyet). One
Adaptive Implementer who had opportunities to attend staff development programs reported that all staff development was carried out “through short training courses or workshops [about teaching and learning innovation, not about student assessment]” (Tuan). Thus, such training programmes or workshops did not provide the detailed knowledge and operational procedures required to implement specific assessment changes. Against a background of little or no professional development workshops on well-informed student assessment practice, participants candidly explained that it was very difficult to implement changes in their assessment practice because they simply did not know what to do or why to do it.

The majority of the Adaptive Implementers, who did not report any lack of knowledge or skill in implementing well-informed student assessment practices, reported that MoET had convened some thematic workshops at their institutions about renovating teaching methods, but that these had only touched upon minor matters related to student assessment. However, these workshops were reported not to be accessible for all lecturers. One representative Adaptive Implementer explained this situation:

In fact, there was only one time in 2005 when a two-day training course on teaching methods innovation were conducted, but mostly the Head/Vice-Heads of the Departments and a few senior lecturers were allowed to attend. This course primarily provided general knowledge and concepts about new teaching and student assessment approaches. The Head/Vice-Heads only grasped the general viewpoints but did not fully understand how to proceed with student assessment. Thus, they could not share with their teaching staff about effective student assessment […] (Ngoc)

Unfortunately, appropriate professional development was first not targeting student assessment practice, and just as importantly, it targeted only managers and senior lecturers who do not carry most of the burden of undergraduate teaching with large class. Lecturers and academic managers could not effectively work together to improve their practices because of their mutual lack of a deep understanding about student assessment and how to implement effectively more progressive methods of student assessment.

Those participants who had opportunities to attend professional development workshops relating to teaching and learning widely reported that they subsequently were not encouraged by their supervisors to integrate insights from these programs into their professional practice. Two typical claims were:
I have access to the new student assessment forms through attending workshops in other universities. However, when I return back to my own university, I am not required or do not have opportunity to try them out new aspects of student assessment in my practice. (Hien)

I attend some short training courses and workshops about teaching and assessment, thus I capture a lot of contemporary student assessment practices, such as formative assessment, peer-assessment and portfolio assessment. I then try them out by myself. My head of department seems not to concern much what I have learned from the staff development and thus he does neither encourage me implement these practices nor require me to share them with my colleagues. (Vuong)

All of the Adaptive Implementers and one-third of the Changing Pragmatists expressed a deep concern that collegial processes of working and learning as a community of practice was lacking in their universities. One Changing Pragmatist reported:

The educational leaders do not create an environment where lecturers within or across departments can share experiences and learn from each other […]. There is a lack of professional dialogue amongst lecturers because we just come to class to teach and go home after finishing our teaching hours. Therefore, I do not really know the teaching and assessment activities of others. (Vuong)

This participant felt that there was almost no opportunity for lecturers to engage in continuous learning about their teaching and student assessment practices through working collegially with their colleagues who faced with similar problems, concerns and challenges.

In circumstances where lecturers did not have opportunities to engage in on-going and extensive professional development programs, nor collegial learning culture to which they could contribute and from which they might benefit, these participants did not have access to well-informed, contemporary advances in student assessment theory and practice. Lecturers in these circumstances find it difficult to justify changing their practice, so of course they choose to stay with practices and beliefs informed by their past experience that have enabled them to get by in the past.

7.2.3 Resources and financial incentives

Two Adaptive Implementers and every one of the of the Changing Pragmatists spoke about the challenges of implementing student assessment change in a situation in which infrastructure, resources and financial incentives could not meet the requirements. One of these participants reported, for example, that:
I teach many units in one semester (about 5) with an average 16 to 20 teaching hours per week [...]. There are also too many students in a classroom (up to 50 to 60 students), and the training curriculum is heavy in theoretical knowledge. Thus, for some units I barely have sufficient time to go through all materials [...]. I know that if the students submit their written essays or assignments, I should have carefully provided them with timely feedback on their performance. However, with these constraints, I am unable to carry out this function well. (My)

Another participant reported similarly that the conditions of employment, with other resource-constraint issues, extinguished his passion to implement changes. He commented:

The overcrowded classes, the constraints of time, the lack of teaching facilities, the inappropriate curriculum content, the duration of the courses which are not really well-designed [...] and the most important thing is the lack of financial incentives and low salary. These barriers have extinguished my personal enthusiasm and effort to make changes. (Tien)

These two participants seemed to be very sad to describe conditions that are widespread in Vietnamese universities. More participants also reported that class sizes are reportedly burdensome: “I have to teach several large class sizes with 40 or 50 students, for the compound classes, it is up to 100 to 150 students, thus it is hard for me to fully manage the classrooms and assess the students’ learning in an effective way” (Xuan); the curriculum was content-laden and onerous for students: “the training curriculum was overloaded and heavy in theoretical knowledge. Thus, many teachers merely had sufficient time to go through all materials” (Duyen); and the teaching facilities were woefully inadequate “the experiment rooms lacks necessary resources for performing the experiments and the facilities are too old [...]. There are only two the laboratories at the moment that cater for 15 classes. Thus, we have to inconveniently move in and out when teaching practical hours” (Han). These conditions mean that, even if highly motivated to reform student assessment practices, lecturers face considerable obstacles along the way. In the present investigation, the participants were typically apologetic for not being able to overcome these obstacles to the extent that they would have liked, and for which they felt a sense of personal responsibility.

A distinctive characteristic of all of the Adaptive Implementers was that they chose to implement formative assessment on a purely voluntary basis, regardless of the personal costs to themselves in terms of time and especially the opportunity to earn extra income from a second job. One representative comment was:

I have tried to change my student assessment activities even though my income is not high. For example, I use the formative assessment to get students involved in the assessment process and provide feedback to students. I also design the exam questions to reduce the incidence of memorised questions and increased questions that require students to understand, analyse and synthesise their knowledge of a unit. [...] Regarding providing detailed feedback to the students generally took a lot of time why I have to reduce my extra teaching; I still do that because I
wanted to create favourable conditions to assist my students to learn and to help them understand that marks do not mean everything. (Ngoc)

These participants did not complain about the lack of incentives for change, or about the fact that their initiative would have no beneficial effects on their salary. All the same, these participants did report that low salaries and a lack of incentives were barriers to change in terms of the necessary reform of student assessment practices. One simply has to admire their commitment and courage, not to mention the personal financial cost they suffered. One educational leader explained his dilemma:

Indeed, I want more frequent formative assessment to be implemented… However, it remains difficult because these require the lecturers to do extra work without any increased incentives given to them or providing additional payment […]. Because of the low salary and the shortage of financial incentives, whenever I raise this issue, they always ask me “will we be paid for doing this job?” So I am only able to encourage those who are interested and enthusiastic in making change. (Luc)

There is, then, a gap between policy and practice: policy, as articulated, even if inadequately, by MoET encourages reform of student assessment practices, but lecturers are not provided with any form of financial compensation, much less incentive, to implement the relevant reforms. As this participant implies, the circumstances for achieving reform are far from what they should be.

For all of the Changing Pragmatists, the biggest obstacle was, in fact, the low salary and the lack of financial incentives, which caused them to feel disinclined to implement change. These participants claimed that on previous occasions when MoET and their universities had called for reform, they had been enthusiastic in spending time on designing more diverse student assessment activities, but such willingness could not be sustained. One participant explained:

Lecturers are not well paid. The payment for one teaching period is approximately 50,000 VND to 60,000 VND (AUD $2-3). If a teaching unit includes 30 teaching hours, I will receive about 1,500,000 VND (AUD $70-75). If I spend a great deal of time marking and providing formative feedback, I will have to sacrifice my other jobs […]. I regret that although I know the necessity of change in the student assessment, I have not done as much as I would like due to the limited resources. (Vuong)

Low salaries for academics teaching in universities, together with the need by many to take on work in order to obtain the income needed to support a family, seem to be an everyday experience for university lecturers in Vietnam. The dilemma for the participant mentioned above was that he knew that he was not providing enough attention to his students, but he felt
obligated to focus his efforts on a second job to generate additional income in support of his family.

It was clearly the case that Changing Pragmatists realised the need for change to their assessment practices, but they had not made any significant change to these practices because change was seen as being too demanding in circumstances where their salaries were low, they lacked resources and there was no financial incentive for change. The easier option, which they seemed to admit with guilt and sadness, was to maintain the traditional teacher-centred approach to student assessment. It was more manageable given the conditions of their employment.

7.2.4 Leadership for change

All of the barriers to change in student assessment are mentioned above relate by one means or another to the matter of leadership. All of Adaptive Implementers and ten of the Changing Pragmatists expressed a concern about the lack of leadership, or the ineffectiveness of leadership, at different levels, including at the level of MoET, and also institutional and departmental levels. A typical comment was:

MoET issued the Decisions that required lecturers to make some changes in student assessment. This was their small effort to reform assessment, but this reform was not systemic. It is nearly ten years since the Decisions were issued; there has been no follow-up to see what more needs to be done, no evaluation, and no sense of seeing how assessment has evolved or developed […]. Thus, change merely happens at the level of the individual lecturers. (Hong)

This participant is describing a sense of powerlessness felt by a sizable proportion of all participants. The call for innovations in student assessment with a view to achieving more use of cumulative assessment and a more diverse range of assessment methods was not being followed through with any measures to ensure that change was being implemented. It was being left entirely to individuals to respond positively to the policy statements, and they felt unsupported in doing so.

Four of the Changing Pragmatists expressed concern that, while educational leaders appealed to lecturers to make changes to their student assessment practices, they did not have the knowledge or procedures to ensure that such changes were being effectively implemented. Further, these participants confided that lecturers were not required to be accountable to any superiors for any of the required changes in practice. A typical comment was:

While collegial sharing climate within my department is not encouraged, Department and Unit heads do not supervise lecturers and check to see how they are implementing changes. Thus,
For lecturers such as this one, appeals by educational leaders to reform student assessment practices were unlikely to have much impact if not followed up by any accountability system to see whether the reforms were being implemented. This particular participant also went on to candidly report that this practice caused distrust among a majority of lecturers. He reported that “I attempted very hard to make changes and this effort took me a lot of time, even though I gave up some of my extra teaching outside. Other lecturers did not make any changes but they were still safe; they got the same salary and even did not take any responsibility about that […]. This lessened my passion and then I thought I should simply follow other lecturers’ norms” (Thinh). Clearly, this participant reported that there had developed an atmosphere of a lack of mutual responsibility among lecturers and the ‘trust building’ within his department as suggested by Fullan (2011) was not seriously taken into consideration.

Among those who reported wishing to undertake their teaching responsibility, these participants tended to choose the easiest way to implement changes that were suitable within a context of the majority of lecturers maintaining quite pragmatically their traditional and learned-by-experience student assessment practices.

A further concern was reported by three of the Adaptive Implementers and four of the Changing Pragmatists concerning the management style of some educational leaders who tended to discourage lecturers from implementing changes. Two typical comments were:

I see that the Head of Department and university leaders expect their staff to listen and implement their orders. I believe that the educational leaders need to listen to and welcome different opinions from their teachers to make change happen, but the opposing ideas or opinions are often excluded […]. Thus, many lecturers tend to show a surface compliance to their leaders. (Duyen)

Vietnam is one of the countries that lack breakthrough views of change. It will be incorrect if we think education in Vietnam has not changed. We have made considerable changes over the past 10-20 years, but the results still remain much lower than expected due to the influences of ideology, culture and more importantly, the attitudes of leaders. Many educational leaders still want to influence change through their orders. I think that it will be also very difficult to change if there is no change from the political leaders who have great influence on the education system in Vietnam. (Kien)

And so, rather than weigh up the different innovative student assessment ideas from their staff, this participant’s experience was that his superiors tended to expect their lecturers to show
respect and accept changes passively and without question, even when clarity was so sorely needed. The requirement to change student assessment practices was initiated by means of an order; however, it lacked any two-way negotiation about its practical implementation between educational leaders and managers and their staff.

One Changing Pragmatist further reported that her supervisors or educational leaders were extremely conservative and resistant to change. She explained:

> Many educational leaders are often satisfied with what they have; they are afraid of exploring and changing, and so they also do not support others to make changes […]. They tend to honour and worship the old ones […]. During the past two years, engaging in a management position, I felt very tired because of the inertia of the managers and lecturers. This inertia sank the managers and lecturers compared with the development trends of the world. My little power was not enough to make any changes, and so it made me tired. (Hien)

Concern about inertia among educational leaders was more widely shared, the main sentiment being that if the leaders had no energy for change, then it was difficult for those reporting to them to achieve change. It is interesting to note that, according to one-half of the Adaptive Implementers and one-third of the Changing Pragmatists, change needs commitment from agents at all levels, and its prospects can be enhanced or inhibited by the level of commitment of the educational leaders.

### 7.3 Necessary Conditions to Support Effective Assessment

The following section reports on the necessary conditions for change from the point of view of the participants. During the interviews, participants provided their perspectives about the necessary conditions for effective student assessment. These are reported below.

#### 7.3.1 Beliefs and commitments towards change

Four of the Adaptive Implementers and two Changing Pragmatists reported that in order for effective student assessment to occur, that is, or much-needed assessment reform to occur in Vietnamese universities, it was first necessary that the necessity for change must be clearly perceived and there needed to be a belief that change was possible. This view resoundingly echoes Fullan’s (2007, p. 89) theory of educational change. The implication is that management and leadership elements of MoET, institutional leaders, and leaders at the departmental level must also believe in the need for change towards comparable global practice. Without such a belief, Fullan’s (2007) theory would predict that they could not be strongly or effectively supportive of such change. Further, individual lecturers would need to understand why change
is necessary, and therefore be committed to such change. An Adaptive Implementer expressed this viewpoint:

I think educational leaders and lecturers are key factors to create the quality of change. Thus, it is important for the administrative leaders and academic managers at all management levels and lecturers to understand the necessity of change towards formative assessment. More importantly, they should realise that the change towards different purposes of student assessment is inevitable and is compulsory to perform [core elements]. (Luc)

In a similar vein, two other participants, both of whom were Changing Pragmatists, emphasised that any changes should be derived from the leaders of MoET. One participant, for example, reported: “it will be also very difficult to change if there is no change in perceptions of the leaders at MoET, who have great influence on the education system in Vietnam” (Vuong). Another participant also stated:

The administrative /academic managers, the Rector, Deans, Heads and lecturers must believe in change, have empathy to change and be committed to change. They themselves must have a strong desire for change in their assessment practices. […] I think that if we want to change the perceptions of the purpose of student assessment, this change must firstly stem from the senior management levels, and especially, there must be a change from the macro level, namely the MoET, which is primarily responsible for the educational changes. (Tien)

In particular, these participants explained that changing towards well-informed assessment practice needs to be regarded as being the only option, and so educational leaders and lecturers need to believe the importance of change. In accordance with perceiving the need for change, educational leaders and lecturers also need to be committed to change, and be devoted to securing change. As mentioned earlier, many of the participants declared that any passion and commitment for change must start from the governmental level, and they specifically mentioned MoET. These suggestions seemed to be well suited to the context of Vietnam, where MoET has a most authoritative influence in the whole educational system, and where its influence is highly regarded and respected among the community.

7.3.2 Legal framework and student assessment policy

Not surprisingly, all of the Adaptive Implementers and four of the Changing Pragmatists reported that for effective student assessment practice to occur in Vietnamese teacher training universities, MoET would take a leading role in setting the conditions that facilitate change. For example, one representative participant reported:

MoET has to set up the vision for changes in student assessment […]. I think there should be a progressive student assessment policy from the MoET. In the assessment policy, MoET should introduce different
progressive student assessment approaches and ask the lecturers to change in line with pressure and supports. (Tuan)

According to these participants, rather than issue specific Decisions about student assessment, and considering the highly regulated context of Vietnamese day-to-day existence, it might be better for MoET to provide a legal framework to guide teacher-training universities in the adoption of student assessment practices. One typical participant’s view was:

It is essential for the MoET to issue legal frameworks, which set the particular requirements in student assessment […]. The goals for change in student assessment established in the legal framework must be based on well-evidenced rationale research and adapted to the context of Vietnam. (Duyen)

Clearly, MoET plays a leading role in initiating change in any form of pedagogical direction, including student assessment in teacher training institutions. They are bestowed with the agency to set legal requirements in place, including systemic acknowledgement of good practice, requirements for professional development and regulatory requirements, accountability mechanisms to facilitate monitor change and ensure adequate professional development in order to achieve these outcomes. Most importantly, the above participant expressed the view that no other agency in Vietnam is capable of achieving student assessment reform towards research-led student assessment practice.

A considerable number of these participants reported that in parallel with the legal framework from the MoET level, at institutional level, teacher-training universities needed to have their own assessment policy in order to support lecturers to implement change. One typical example was:

I think university assessment policy should state all assessment requirements, assessment procedures and different purposes of student assessment. This policy should also provide a coherent statement of what the institution is trying to achieve and must make the lecturers see the need for change in assessment. It should clearly set concrete obligations that require lecturers to implement change […]. It is important that all lecturers need to understand all the messages conveyed in the assessment policy. (Tien)

This participant explained that the perquisite factor for supporting effective assessment practice is an institution’s assessment policy, which clearly needs to be congruent with national aspirations and expectations. This particular participant argued that when an institutional assessment policy clearly articulated all requirements of student assessment, together with realistic targets for change in student assessment, and well-informed guidelines for implementing effective student assessment in practice, it may enable lecturers to implement
successful change in their university classrooms. Of course it would thereby influence student assessment practice more broadly in the school sectors.

7.3.3 Professional development

Every one of the Adaptive Implementers and Changing Pragmatists reported that in order to support assessment change, both lecturers and educational managers needed to be equipped with appropriate knowledge and understanding about contemporary student assessment approaches. These participants claimed that professional development programs at national and institutional levels were an essential element for change. One Adaptive Implementer spoke for most:

MoET and university levels should have planned extensive and regular professional development programs about student assessment in order for lecturers and academic managers to update and improve their understanding of contemporary student assessment approaches, to engage in the best practices and also to improve skills for the implementation. (Huyen)

Not only did this participant understand the importance of ongoing professional development, in student assessment, but he also understood that these professional development programs enable lecturers join into a social network, or communities of practice whereby practical benchmarking and innovation can take place and new values may come to be shared, as Fullan (2001; 2007) and Wenger et al. (2002) suggest.

Adaptive Implementers further suggested that in order to have a widespread implementation of the progressive student assessment in Vietnamese teacher training institutions, lecturers need to be encouraged to undertake research in the area and be sent to abroad to learn how to conduct relevant, rigorous research on the topic. A representative comment was:

Teacher training institutions must create opportunities for their lecturers to do research about student assessment […]. Vietnamese lecturers studying abroad should also be encouraged to do research about this area […]. In addition to this, I think the lecturers specialised in different discipline needs to be encouraged to do research about contemporary student assessment approaches. For example, if mathematic lecturers are given training programs on the student assessment and encouraged to do research on that area, they will be able to assess future maths teacher students properly. The results would become much better-off. (Tuan)

This particular participant, like the rest of the Adaptive Implementers, enthusiastically believed that Vietnam could catch up with and equal global standards in best practice student assessment regimes.
### 7.3.4 Fostering collaboration and collegial culture at department levels

Six of the Adaptive Implementers and five of the Changing Pragmatists identified the importance of developing and nurturing a collaborative teaching and learning culture within department, in that lecturers had opportunities to work together, share knowledge and support each other to implement change, echoing Fullan et al.’s (2005) notion of a culture of evaluation.

One Adaptive Implementer reported:

> I think there should be a close link amongst faculties and disciplines. It is time for us to cooperate and develop our teaching and assessment activities together for the benefits of our students. I believe that would be a good way to broaden the implementation of effective assessment […]

As the Head of the Social Work unit; I always create opportunities for lecturers to discuss and exchange knowledge and experiences in implementing assessment through the planning meeting. It is important to have a good working environment where people share and collaborate together to accelerate the issues to be resolved quickly and efficiently. (Tuan)

This participant expressed the need for lecturers within department and across different departments to work collaboratively to implement resolve identifiable issues and to share a commitment to assessment reform. He went on to say that he endeavoured to engage his academic staff in the process of working collegially in support of one another so that they had opportunities to engage in dialogue about problems they were facing, share knowledge and expectations about assessment and the best practices.

There was only one Adaptive Implementer, a Vice-Head of Department in the Social Science who spoke to the challenges presented by having been assigned charge of the teaching issues in her department. She described how she had set up a rule that required her colleagues to have regular class teaching observation of each other to inspire them and to support them to improve their teaching and student assessment practices, based on constructive peer feedback. This was also her suggestion for improving the student assessment and teaching and learning culture of her Department. She said:

> I know that it is not easy to achieve collaboration among lecturers in the whole institution. However, in my department, I often observed my colleagues’ teaching classes and so I encourage them to observe each other teaching. Thus, I could provide them with feedback that has assisted them to reflect and improve their teaching and student assessment and vice versa. I am also a Vice-Head of Faculty, so through the regular Faculty meetings, I appeal the lecturers to share each other how they make changes in their teaching and student assessment practice.

(Nhi)

Clearly, lecturers needed to be encouraged to cooperate, share and work together to develop their teaching and assessment activities. These Adaptive Implementers and Changing...
Pragmatists clearly described a need to form communities of practice for benchmarking knowledge gains, new methods and sharing values to foster change.

7.3.5 Giving autonomy and agency as well as requiring mutual responsibility

In terms of fostering a collaborative culture for student assessment reform, seven of the Adaptive Implementers and four of the Changing Pragmatists asserted that MoET would make better progress if it gave autonomy and freedom to staff providing training programmes in student assessment methods, rather than place more emphasis on rigid administration which encouraged lecturers to resist change. One representative participant said:

The most important thing is that the universities should be given the autonomy in their curriculum development, in particular, in relation to student assessment. I hope in 2013 when the Higher Education Law becomes effective, MoET will be more open-minded and universities will be more autonomous and so student assessment may also change because universities will have to take responsibility for their quality of training […]. However, the autonomy must coincide with the universities’ quality of training. (Kien)

This participant explained that successful implementation in student assessment depended on the extent which teacher training institutions given with autonomy in openly discussing the reasons for reform, and issues of implementation, so that staff might work cooperatively together. This was consistent with theory of complex adaptive systems (Stacey, 1995; 1996) which explained the importance of encouraging the participatory role of all organisational agents in the change process.

Four Adaptive implementers and three Changing Pragmatists further identified the importance of Head of Departments and Head of Units in playing a significant role in setting the supportive conditions for lecturers to implement change. These ‘middle managers’ had some degree of authority; they are people who closely work with the lecturers; and they also have their own particular areas of expertise. These participants felt that Department Heads or Unit Heads needed to be given the responsibility for deciding which issues related to teaching and student assessment need to be addressed. One typical report was:

Head of Departments and Head of the Units should set themselves as good examples in implementing change in assessment. They must also remind their lecturers to do the student assessment properly in accordance with checking and supervision. Head of the Units must be people who have the right to make comments and to decide anything regarding teaching and assessment to their academic staff. Thus, they should be given the freedom to do that. (Hong)
Indeed, without giving explicit expression to it, these participants were suggesting the need for some kind of realistic accountability system to ensure that transparent and fair student assessment practices are implemented and maintained.

All Adaptive Implementers and Changing Pragmatists were of the view that all lecturers must have agency, responsibility, and most importantly, accountability in the teaching and assessment processes. However, they clearly understood that teachers needed a monitoring and evaluation system through which they were accountable: One typical report was:

I think the best way is to give lecturers the agency in their assessment process but in return they are requested to perform student assessment properly. There should be some concrete rules and policies that encourage lecturers to change and give them the responsibility for that change […].

It is also important to obtain the feedback from the students and other lecturers and academic managers in order to understand how lecturers exercise their assessment activities and judgements in a certain unit. (Vuong)

This participant echoed key aspects of all three theoretical frameworks upon which this investigation draws. He aspired to a change process whereby all of the teaching community is committed to a shared aim (see, Wenger, 1998). He also clearly saw that, with responsibility and agency comes accountability (Fullan, 2010; 2011 and Stacey, 1995; 1996); and he had worked out the importance of an evaluation culture (Fullan et al., 2005), together with closing the feedback look for teachers who are learning to implement effective student assessment regimes.

A further, vital aspect of the theoretical framework was clearly illustrated by this group of participants. They strongly argued that in order for effective change to happen, the attempts of lecturers in implementing changes needed to be recognised and rewarded, echoing Fullan’s (2007) theory of change. As one of the Adaptive Implementer claimed:

I believe that there are still many lecturers who are enthusiastic about their teaching and assessment, so these good natures need to be recognised and strengthened. It is important to distinguish the differences between the lecturers who have compassion with those who have not got compassion in order for un-empathic lecturers realise that if they want to continue their job, they must maintain their enthusiasm, ethics and responsibility. If we do not have strong accountability and reward system, the lecturers who cannot maintain their enthusiasm, may feel painful, but then they may ignore because other lecturers around them are all like that. (Hong)

7.3.6 Support to change in terms of financial salary, incentives/facilities/resources

In making suggestions for how to achieve assessment reform, a widely shared and often emotionally expressed view was that neither teachers’ salaries, nor acknowledgement processes
were conducive to the routinely extra unpaid workload it took to implement effective formative assessment and effective standards-based assessment. The common concern was simply that lecturers are not paid sufficiently to survive without taking on outside work, which severely constrained their capacity to make the extra effort required in contemporary assessment practice.

All of the participants, especially the Changing Pragmatists strongly expressed that lecturers needed markedly better support in terms of salary, incentives, teaching facilities and resources for making change. Interestingly, there participants were not self-centred in their concern; they understood that in turn, their students were negatively affected. A typical comment was:

If there was a comprehensive change about the student assessment, there must have a fundamental change in supporting system for lecturers from MoET and university leaders. First is to reduce theoretical amount of knowledge and overloaded curriculum. Second is to reduce the teaching hours and ratios of students/lecturer because of overloaded teaching hours with a large number of students would result in the popularity of tests and exams. Third is to upgrade physical facilities, teaching conditions and means for assessment. (Tien)

In accordance with supporting lecturers with teaching resources, financial incentives and improved salaries were universally longed-for. One Adaptive Implementer spoke for most in explaining:

Currently, the most difficulty is the shortage of finance […]. If sufficient salaries for lecturers are secured; they do not have to struggle with doing the second or the third jobs. The lecturers may concentrate to make change because this is their duty and they have already been paid to do it. (Luc)

One Changing Pragmatist, who reported to be enthusiastic about change but his passion waned because of the lack of resources and low salary. He spoke:

I believe lecturers who love their teaching job and want to do their best for students all want to change their current student assessment practices. However, change is a challenging task for them as for myself when we are not being able to survive on my single salary. Currently I am not being able to devote extra time due to my second job and third job. I have to do extra teaching outside my university as the same time I have to manage the coffee shop to get additional income to support my family. (Thin)

In this vein, one Defending Denialist believed it would be difficult to change student assessment practice, arguing that lecturers were not well paid enough to encourage them to make changes:

Supposing that if I were the Minister of Education, I would be afraid that nothing could be done to change the situation. However, there are a number of problems that are clearly seen and need
Overall, the investigation’s participants seemed to be defeated in terms of reform taking root any time soon because of the need for most to find outside work to support their families. Nevertheless, when given three wishes, the wish for a decent salary for university teachers certainly emerged as the number one priority. However, it was not alone.

### 7.4 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has addressed the opportunities for and obstacles to educational change regarding student assessment practices, as perceived by the participants who contributed to the present investigation. The chapter has also documented various conditions that the participants identified as being likely to be impactful on the prospects of achieving enduring change. Significant sources of encouragement for change were identified as being MoET’s policy Decisions regarding the need for more use of cumulative assessment, the inspiring effects of attendance at staff development programs, the encouragement provided by particular educational leaders, the support provided by collegial sharing, and personal motivation to make changes, based on reflection on practice. It is clear that both the governmental level and individual level, the need for change in student assessment practices exist. MoET recognised the power of legal frameworks to be levers for the enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning, and started to make initial investment and encouragement for change. Individual lecturers were also flexible in finding different ways to implement change through working collaboratively with their colleagues. The support and sharing from colleagues seemed to be a most valuable source of information and experience for lecturers to make change.

Obstacles to change are, however, also identified, including: the lack of sufficient guidance from MoET, the lack of resources and financial incentives to motivate effort for change, the limited professional knowledge and skills for implementing change, the absence of an accountability framework for change, the lack of a collegial work environment, and deficiencies in the quality of educational leadership at a local level. These were the frequently provided reasons for the limited change to date in the context of Vietnam. Among these, however, the low of salary and financial support for lecturers in universities, and teacher education universities in this instance, were critical, everyday challenges for lecturers.

Participants suggested a range of interventions that, based on their personal experience, were likely to impact on the implementation of more effective student assessment practices taking
root more expeditiously in Vietnam. The main intervention was the need for all stakeholders to agree that there was a need for change and committed to change, and many saw the need for their educational leaders to be committed and supportive of their colleagues in this enterprise. Other conditions included having a conducive legal framework of accountability in which university staff are permitted greater agency and responsibility, but also considerably greater accountability for their performance. This observation led most participants to realise that, having appropriate professional development available to them, being able to have a collegial workplace that is supportive of change, as in a community of practice in the workplace, and being provided with sufficient teaching resources and an adequate salary were all strongly desired. These matters will be discussed further in the following chapter.
Chapter 8 - Discussion

The previous three chapters have provided a detailed picture of the student assessment practices of a selected group of participants at three universities in Vietnam that are engaged in teacher training. Chapter 5 identified the need to categorise the participants as Adaptive Implementers, Defending Denialists or Changing Pragmatists, according to their typical beliefs, values and attitudes about student assessment practices. It also examined how these individual attributes influenced their approaches to student assessment. Chapter 6 addressed the participants’ perceptions about the need for change, and it documented the main changes preferred by the different groups of participants. Chapter 7 focused on the kinds of conditions considered necessary to stimulate the participants to adopt more progressive approaches to student assessment.

This chapter addresses the significance of the findings reported in Chapters 5 to 7, taking into account the research problem introduced in Chapter 1, which, concerns how to achieve an enduring change to the culture of student assessment in teacher training universities in Vietnam. The topics which now come into focus concern: the positive changes in student assessment practices reported by the participants; the constraints reported by participants in their capacity to implement changes in student assessment practices; and the conditions reported by the participants to be potentially conducive to enduring change in the culture of student assessment in teacher training universities.

8.1 Positive Changes

Of special interest are reports by the participants of positive changes towards student assessment reform at the three site institutions. The Adaptive Implementers were at the forefront of change, and so much of the discussion focuses on what they reported to be their achievements. The Changing Pragmatists had in many cases embarked upon change, but they tended to pull back in light of difficulties encountered. The Defending Denialists did not appear to be much interested in change, and so their views are lightly touched upon here.

8.1.1 Appreciating the different purposes of assessment

All of the Adaptive Implementers and most of the Changing Pragmatists could see a difference between formative and summative assessment. There was a general acceptance by these participants of the value and importance of formative assessment. In commenting on formative
assessment, a widely expressed view was that it motivated students to engage more deeply with their studies. As one participant claimed: “assessment that focused on formative purpose was able to support student learning and motivate their active engagement” (Hong). This experience of formative assessment is consistent with reports from other investigations (see, for example, Black & Wiliam, 1998a, 1998b) concerning the value of formative assessment. A majority of participants also regarded formative assessment to be supportive of transparency and fairness, an experience of formative assessment that is also consistent with reports from other investigations (see, for example, Morgan et al., 2004).

Though the terminology of ‘standards-based assessment’ and ‘norm-referenced assessment’ was well understood by only a minority of the participants, mainly the Adaptive Implementers, there was generally an appreciation of the difference between student assessment based on pre-determined performance standards and student assessment based on a pre-determined distribution of grades. All of the Adaptive implementers and most of the Changing Pragmatists were committed to a standards-based model of student assessment, even if they did not explicitly refer to it in these terms. However, as documented in Chapter 6, the regulatory and cultural environment at each of the site universities required lecturers and educational managers to provide end-of-unit grade distributions for students in units that were not too bunched at particular levels on the 10-point scale. Given this set of circumstances, the Changing Pragmatists, in particular, did not push to implement a standards-based model.

The high general level of understanding of formative and of standards-based student assessment practices among the participants is, however, very encouraging. The majority of participants were dissatisfied with the traditional approach to student assessment, involving the conduct of examinations focused principally on the need to rank student performance for certification purposes. These participants acknowledged the connection between student assessment and student learning. In this regard, they appeared to see the importance of the role played by student assessment in driving student learning and an active engagement in the learning process, as is well documented by Marton et al. (1984), Shuell (1986) and Biggs (1996).

8.1.2 Broadening role perceptions

All of the Adaptive Implementers and a majority of the Changing Pragmatists perceived themselves to be facilitators of student learning, rather than teachers whose primary role is to transmit knowledge to students. Many also claimed that lecturers and students should be engaged in a co-learning process. One participant went so far as to define an effective lecturer
as “a person who openly learns from his or her students” (Tuan). This perspective is highly consistent with the argument advanced by Gipps (1999), that alternative forms of assessment require lecturers to share power with their students and to involve the students more as partners in the learning process. They are, however, views that are markedly at odds with deeply held cultural norms in Vietnamese society about the authority to be exercised by teachers (see, for example, Harman & Bich, 2010; Nguyen & McInnis, 2002). Many of the participants appreciated the potential for conflict with traditional values, but argued that those values were more suited to a past era when students were wholly dependent upon teachers for learning.

Many Adaptive Implementers also claimed that students should be permitted to have more opportunity to question and interrogate what they were learning, and to develop their own viewpoints. This was consistent with what Black and Wiliam (2009, p. 7) suggested that the responsibility for learning was distributed between teacher and the learner in the formative assessment. They were also in favour of students being able to provide evaluative feedback on teaching performance. Obtaining student feedback would not generally be welcomed in Vietnam because of the strong influence of cultural norms about respect for teachers, but it is of note that the Adaptive Implementers, in particular, held a strongly progressive outlook on this matter. Fullan (2007) in this vein, argues that appreciating student opinions and involving students in the change process is one of the key elements contributing to successful educational change. Adaptive Implementers appear, therefore, to be well positioned as agents for educational change in Vietnam.

### 8.1.3 Adopting a more diverse range of assessment methods

All of the Adaptive Implementers and most of the Changing Pragmatists also reported that they had tried, or would like to have tried, to employ a diverse range of assessment methods. They mentioned methods such as take-home assignments, classroom observation, essay questions, computer-based tests, group discussions, oral vivas, role-plays and mini-research projects and group projects. Such assessment methods were presented as being relatively innovative in the context of teacher training universities in Vietnam, where the dominant form of assessment has been summative examinations involving multiple-choice and short-answer questions. The participants explained that using a wider range of assessment methods allowed them to appreciate better the nature of their student’s approaches to learning. Nguyen Thi Hong Tham (2013) similarly reports about positive changes in teaching and assessment methods that are being made by lecturers in higher education institutions in Vietnam. This development is positive for teacher training in Vietnam because, as reported by Cowie and Bell (1999) and
Heritage (2010), a diverse range of assessment activities could be flexible in adjusting to learners’ needs and be supportive of more effective learning by students. Further, when applied to teacher-training universities, there would be a swift trickle-down effect into the schools sectors.

Many participants in the present investigation reported, however, that their students’ learning styles tended to remain passive and dependent – a characteristic of Vietnamese students that has also been reported by McCornac and Phan Thuy Chi (2005), and by Pham Thi Thanh and Renshaw (2014). Therefore they reported to attempt to employ various assessment methods in order to encourage students’ independent learning and to create different opportunities for students to involve in the learning process. Carless (2015) and Shepard (2000) argues that multiple assessment methods are needed to capture properly the attainment of important learning goals and processes, to connect more directly assessment to ongoing instruction, and to develop students’ active engagement and their higher-order learning skills.

Of particular importance are reports from some of the participants that they had established dynamic group-based learning opportunities for their students, involving small-group discussion and peer-group feedback on group presentation. These methods, which empower students to become actively engaged in learning, are positively regarded in the literature on student assessment (see, for example, Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), and are reported in other studies (see, for example, Moore & Teather, 2013) as being successful in engaging students in their learning when implemented.

8.1.4 Implementing formative assessment tasks and feedback

As reported earlier, most participants in the present investigation were in favour of the more widespread use of formative assessment tasks, but it was mainly the Adaptive Implementers who reported employing them in the units for which they were responsible. Carless, Joughin, and Liu (2006, p. 9) refer to the importance of assessment tasks being perceived as learning tasks. The Adaptive Implementers strongly shared this point of view. They determined that student assessment should be an integral part of teaching process, and they insisted upon providing their students with constructive feedback on an ongoing basis. There are contrasting views in the literature about the appropriateness of awarding grades to formative assessment tasks (see, for example, Morgan et al., 2004), but in Vietnam there is little choice but to do so. The regulations that apply to student assessment require all students to have a score out of 10 for every unit of study completed. Formative assessment tasks were, therefore, graded, but the
Adaptive Implementers reported retaining some elements of formative assessment that they felt were important, such as the provision of individual feedback and peer feedback, in a context that ultimately required them to declare only summative grades.

Most participants in the present investigation reported that they simply provided their students with grades upon completion of a unit – the kind of postscript feedback referred to and criticised by Orrell (2006, pp. 442-4). Some, however, reported providing additional feedback in the form of an oral report to the group on what students might have done to improve their learning. This practice is recommended in the contemporary research literature on student assessment (see, for example, Black & Wiliam, 1998b; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Hounsell, 2007; and Orrell, 2006). Although obviously time-consuming and therefore resource-intensive, the Adaptive Implementers, in particular, were committed to its importance.

In general, the findings of the present investigation are consistent with the findings reported by Chen, Kettle, Klenowski and May (2013) in research that adopted a sociocultural perspective to investigate how formative assessment had been interpreted and enacted in the teaching of College English in Chinese Higher Education. Chen et al. (2013) found that teachers interpreted formative assessment as including emphases on process and student participation. Although there was strong influence of institutional policy on these universities’ assessment practice, the flexibility of the policy enabled teachers to conduct assessment in their preferred ways. These researchers also found that, though there were many constraints, there were some significant gains made in terms of the implementation of classroom student assessment practices.

### 8.2 Issues in Implementing Change

MoET’s regulations issued in 2006 and 2007, which were reported in Chapter 2, were seen by many of the participants to have opened a door for change and improvements in student assessment practices in teacher training universities in Vietnam. For many participants, however, the door had not been opened very widely. Regulatory constraints, and also constraints related to a lack of knowledge and skills, a lack of resources and incentives, sociocultural influences and a lack of effective leadership presented obstacles to implementing more extensive change.

#### 8.2.1 MoET’s regulations

The first significant issue concerns the relevant MoET regulations. Many, if not most, of the participants made some reference to these (Decision No. 25/2006/QD-BGD&DT, dated June
26, 2006, regarding school-year training, and Decision No. 43/2007/QĐ-BGD&ĐT, dated August 15, 2007, regarding the credit-training system), indicating that they these Decisions had prompted them to consider seriously a move away from more traditional student approaches towards continuous assessment. The new MoET regulations were considered, however, to be more of symbolic significance because they appeared to challenge for the first time the dominance of norm-referenced summative examinations. Teacher training universities were reported to have moved swiftly to comply with them, even if all they required, in effect, was the implementation of a mid-term assessment requirement in addition to the traditional end-of-unit assessment process.

It was reported by most of the investigation’s participants, however, that the MoET regulations were inadequately supported with relevant guidelines, implementation principles and exemplars. They were, therefore, ambiguous and entirely open to interpretations in terms of their operationalization. Fullan (2007) describes this kind of context as one in which there is little or no full understanding of the deep underlying principles for significant educational change. The Adaptive Implementers appear to have leapt at the opportunity to adopt more diverse assessment methods, but the regulations did not push the Changing Pragmatists all the way towards implementing the kinds of changes they believed in, and the Defending Denialists were easily able to respond by having an additional norm-referenced examination to provide their students with a mid-term assessment. Indeed, there is evidence that in some cases, the mid-term assessment task and its grading were fabricated, or at the very least, open to fabrication.

8.2.2 Knowledge and skills

There was evidence that MoET had provided some professional development activities relating to the new regulations and participants who had attended these activities reported that they gave them confidence about making changes to their student assessment practices. A majority of participants reported, though, that they did not feel they had sufficient knowledge about student assessment practices to feel confident about implementing significant assessment-related changes. Especially, the lack of significant knowledge and understanding about contemporary student assessment approaches led a considerable group of Changing Pragmatists to return their traditional teacher-centred approach to student assessment. This issue was well documented by Snow (1989) nearly three decades ago. Furthermore, the professional development activities provided by MoET reportedly were more about innovations in teaching and learning than they were about the reform of student assessment practices. In this regard, Goldenberg and
Gallimore (1991) and Mouza (2002) comment on the limited utility of short training programs when they fail to provide ongoing support for long-term change processes.

Many of the participants also reported that, while they were not prevented from attending professional development activities concerning the MoET regulations, they did not feel a strong sense of support from their education managers to introduce major changes in approach to student assessment. They also did not feel strongly empowered by their colleagues to experiment with change, principally because their colleagues had a limited understanding of the possibilities for reform of the ways in which students was assessed. Fullan et al. (2005, p. 58) point out that “learning in context”, where lecturers learn collaboratively in their workplaces about how to achieve change, is important in terms of the success of change initiatives. Wenger (1998) also argues that the primary place of learning is a community of practice within which there can be partnerships in the learning process. Subsequent to the announcement of the new MoET regulations, there was, by all accounts, a lukewarm response within teacher training institutions to the possibility of going further than simply ensuring that students had an opportunity for a mid-term assessment in addition to their normal end-of-unit assessment.

### 8.2.3 Resources and incentives

A need expressed by all of the participants was for more resources to support initiatives in teaching and learning. The adverse impact of limited resources on the quality of teaching and learning in Vietnam has been previously documented in the literature (see, for example, Nguyen Thi Phuong Hoa, 2009; Hayden & Lam Quang Thiep, 2010; Harman & Le Thi Bich Ngoc, 2010). Large class sizes are a particular problem. As Pham Thi Hong Thanh (2010) reports, large classes are one of the main reasons why traditional approaches to teaching and learning in Vietnam remain widespread. The participants in the present investigation reported extensively on the adverse impact of large class sizes. Their comments echoed those reported by Nguyen Thi Hong Tham (2013). These circumstances were instrumental in persuading many of the Changing Pragmatists to withdraw from the reforms that they considered being desirable. Large class sizes added to their student assessment workloads, and so examination-based assessments involving multiple-choice and short-answer questions became a means of containing their workloads. Harman and Le Thi Bich Ngoc (2010) observed that heavy teaching loads left lecturers in Vietnamese higher education institutions with little time for preparing lectures and updating materials, and this situation was also reportedly the case overall for the participants. Even for the Adaptive Implementers, who were proactive in implementing formative assessment, the demands on their time to provide timely feedback to individual
students were generally felt to be overwhelming. These participants were forced to invest their own spare time in supporting their students’ learning.

More than two-thirds of the participants expressed concern about their low salaries and the lack of incentives to achieve better quality teaching. These circumstances impacted on the decisions made by many of the Changing Pragmatists to not implement new approaches to student assessment. These participants were concerned that by doing so, they would become overextended. These circumstances also presented challenges for educational managers, including some who were Adaptive Implementers. One reported, for example, when he encouraged lecturers to provide feedback to students, the response tended to be along the lines of whether or not they would receive additional payment for doing so. Hayden and Lam (2010), Harman and Le Thi Bich Ngoc (2010), and Nguyen and McInnis (2002), have all observed that official salaries for academic staff members in Vietnam are inadequate, resulting in long teaching hours and insufficient opportunities to attend to the quality and delivery of study programs or to research.

8.2.4 Socio-cultural factors

Confucianism has been referred to previously, particularly in Chapters 1 and 2, as a strong cultural influence on society in Vietnam, and especially on the education system. Its specific impact is always difficult to discern. It is the case, though, that there is, as London (2011, p. 28) has described an “achievement syndrome” (Bệnh Thành Tích) in Vietnam, whereby students focus somewhat exclusively on the pursuit of examination success. Hayden and Le (2013, p. 337) refer to the “tyranny of testing” in the education system in Vietnam, but whether the attitudes of students to examination performance are a product of this tyranny, or the tyranny itself is the product of a more general cultural tradition of Confucianism, remains uncertain. Attempts to change student assessment practices in teacher education universities must, however, overcome a strong tendency for the system at large to see norm-referenced examinations as the usual basis for demonstrating scholarly distinction, as was the case for centuries when the former Confucian academies were dominant in the education system.

As reported in earlier chapters, perceptions of the role of teaching in Vietnam remain focused on considerations of authority and respect, and so more progressive teaching and student assessment methods are prone to provoking some general social discomfort, which would be predicted in Fullan’s (1999) theory of educational change. Many observations of this nature are recorded in the literature (see, for example, Nguyen Kim Dung & McInnis, 2002; Phuong Mai,
Achieving Change in Student Assessment in Vietnamese Teacher Training Institutions

Terlouw & Pilot, 2005; Harman & Bich, 2010; Nghi, 2010). Compliance with the views of leaders is another aspect of the Confucian tradition that is relevant to any discussion of student assessment reform in Vietnam. According to Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), Vietnam scores highly in terms of “power distance”, which means that Vietnamese society is comfortable with organisational hierarchy, and uncomfortable with challenges to leadership. If MoET and the leadership within teacher training universities are not convinced of the wisdom of new approaches to student assessment, then the likelihood of their widespread adoption is restricted. In addition to this, the issue of maintaining a control of instructional as well as assessment activities and the power relationship between the lecturers and learners prevented participants, who were identified as Defending Denialists, from implementing changes in their practices.

8.2.5 Leadership’s role

All of the contemporary issues and obstacles documented in this investigation have implicitly involved considerations that relate to leadership. The leadership of MoET and of teacher training institutions in driving changes in student assessment may be summarised as shown in Figure 8.1.

Figure 8.1. A Model of Leadership in Student Assessment
All of the participants recognised MoET as being the entity that controls the direction of all changes in higher education institutions in Vietnam. As shown in Figure 8.1, employers, professional associations and the community at large influence its policies. MoET articulates Decisions for higher education institutions, and it also provides staff development activities. Universities set their goals, expectations and strategies in light of MoET’s Decisions, and they develop their own training regulations, which are supported with staff development activities and, as far as possible, with resources. These institutional regulations impact on lecturers’ student assessment practices. If these institutional regulations are tightly prescribed, then there will be little variation in terms of how individual staff members assess their students. If they are not so prescriptive, then variations will occur.

It is within such an institutional culture that variations of the type reported in the present investigation have evolved. The existence of these variations is, however, a function of the extent of top-down control, which means that any two of the categories of Adaptive Implementers and Defending Denialists could be promptly removed if the will to do so existed within MoET or at the leadership level of a teacher training university. The Changing Pragmatists are less distinctive as a group, and they would most likely continue to exist in whatever the institutional culture is that prevails.

8.3 Key Elements for Implementing Change

Key elements for implementing change may be identified, based on the experiences reported by the participants. These involve perceptions and commitments, the legal framework and assessment policies, professional development activities, the availability of resources and incentives, the system of accountability, and the emergence of a supportive institutional culture.

8.3.1 Perceiving the need for change and developing a commitment to change

The Adaptive Implementers and Changing Pragmatist overall expressed the need for change agents who are able to guide change and inspire a commitment to its importance. Consistent with the top-down nature - making in Vietnam, they considered that these individuals needed to be senior leaders, whether within MoET or within their own teacher training universities. One participant, for example, explained this point of view as follows: “it will be also very difficult to change if there is no change in perceptions of the leaders at MoET, who have great influence on the education system in Vietnam” (Vuong). This view is consistent with what Fullan (2007, p. 236) emphasised about the essential role of the government for achieving a whole-of-system reform. He regarded government to be “a major force for transformation”.

148
Fullan (2001, p. 114) recommended, however, that it was also essential to develop the energy, ideas, commitment, comprehensive endeavour and ownership of all agents in a system. In this investigation, the Adaptive Implementers were unanimous in reporting that an essential element for successful change was that all change agents should “have a strong desire for change their assessment practices” (Huyen). In fact, the changes they were pioneering were very much the product of their belief in and commitment to the importance of the changes. The present investigation also shows, however, that lecturers’ dispositions to make changes were affected by how social norms were perceived within their organisations. It is difficult, therefore, for individuals to bring about significant change if a majority of their colleagues were reluctant to provide support, or are opposed to what is being suggested. Fullan’s (2007, p. 36) basic argument is that beliefs and understanding are fundamental to lasting educational change. An important insight from the present investigation is that belief and commitment are critically important to reform in the way student assessment is practised in the setting of teacher training universities in Vietnam.

8.3.2 Legal framework and assessment policy

A concern expressed by the Adaptive Implementers was that too few of their colleagues could see the need for assessment reform. Accordingly, several proposed that MoET needs to develop a legal framework within which a policy on student assessment is clearly articulated. Consistent with how regulatory processes function in Vietnam, MoET would need to issue a Decision that expresses a contemporary policy on student assessment in higher education institutions, and then more detailed regulations would be need to be developed to explain how the now student assessment framework should be implemented. Professional development activities would also need to be made available.

Having a legal framework and guidelines for change would allow teacher training institutions to have more flexibility in developing their own assessment policies to suit their specific institutional needs and obligations. Missing altogether, at present, according to the participants in this investigation, is a coherent statement of what MoET is trying to achieve through the training decisions issued in 2006 and 2007, other than that it wanted higher education institutions to make use of continuous or cumulative assessment. Fullan (2007) argues that the greater the clarity about the means and goals of reform, the more opportunity agents have to engage in the reform process.
8.3.3 Professional development

One of discoveries from the present investigation concerns the extent to which the participants reportedly received so little professional development concerning student assessment practices. The follow-up to the issuing by MoET of the Decisions in 2006 and 2007 was reportedly inadequate, with the three site universities apparently taking the matter of training their members of staff about student assessment no further. Many of the participants referred to the need for short training courses and workshops on student assessment practices, including new theoretical developments and current research in the area. This expectation seemed realistic and defensible. Indeed, there is a well-established literature about the role and importance of professional development in creating a successful change culture within institutions (see, for example, Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Elmore, 2002; Fullan, 2007). Adaptive Implementers also suggested that Heads of Departments needed to encourage lecturers to conduct research projects concerning contemporary student assessment approaches. This suggestion is in line with what Harman and Le Thi Bich Ngoc (2010), Macdonald and Joughin (2009), and Maughan et al. (2012) have proposed concerning the value of research-led practice in stimulating teachers’ professional learning.

8.3.4 Resources and incentives

The question of finding additional resources, and of providing resource-related incentives, is challenging in the context of Vietnam, where budgets for teacher training universities are extremely limited, Hayden and Lam Quang Thiep (2010) also raised this issue. There is little doubt, though, that, from the experience of the present investigation, a proportion of the Changing Pragmatists could easily have become Adaptive Implementers had there been some financial support available to allow them to spend more time developing assessment practices that were consistent with their beliefs, values and attitudes. More broadly, most if not all of the participants agreed that the salaries and working conditions of academic staff members in Vietnam were deplorable.

8.3.5 Giving autonomy, agency and accountability

More general matters concerning the higher education system as a whole emerged from the interviews with participants. There was general frustration expressed that higher education institutions have so little individual institutional autonomy, which, with regard to student assessment practices, means that no individual institution can risk developing institutional regulations that are too far ahead of those that have been approved by MoET. It means also that
reform across the higher education is delayed until MoET decides to adopt it. This lack of institutional autonomy in Vietnam is well documented in literature on governance and leadership in the higher education system in Vietnam (see, for example, Hayden & Lam Quang Thiep, 2010).

Within individual teacher training institutions, there was reportedly also a high level of centralisation in terms of decision-making authority. Rectors are, for example, required to approve even minor changes to assessment requirements for individual units. Of interest, though, is that, in the present investigation, the Adaptive Implementers were found to have taken the initiative in adopting new ways of assessing their students, but they were well aware of the risk they were taking and of how dependent they were ultimately on having the support of the senior leadership at their institutions.

8.3.6 Fostering collegial interaction and support

Another key element for implementing change emerging from the findings concerns the need for academic staff members who are engaged in change processes to have a collegial culture that is supportive. Fullan et al. (2005) refers to “cultures of learning,” and Wenger (1998) to “communities of practice”. Collegial culture is critical to the availability of meaningful and constructive support. Carless (2009) asserts that greater dialogue and more sharing between lecturers about issues and practices in relation to student assessment might contribute to reducing the incidence of distrust. In the present investigation, however, many of the Adaptive Implementers appeared not to be too concerned about the extent of the collegial support they had. In contrast, one of the restraints felt by the Changing Pragmatists was that they were not sure if they would have collegial support for becoming more proactive in changing their student assessment practices.

8.4 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has addressed the significance of the findings reported in Chapters 5 to 7 concerning how to achieve an enduring change in the culture of student assessment in teacher training universities in Vietnam. It has focused especially on: the positive changes in student assessment practices that were reported by the participants; the constraints reported by the participants in terms of being able to implement changes in student assessment practices; and the conditions reported by the participants to be potentially conducive to enduring change in the culture of student assessment in teacher training universities.
The findings suggest that the principal dilemma faced by lecturers and education managers seeking to adopt more progressive approaches to student assessment is that MoET has remained silent on matters of student assessment since issuing its Decisions in 2006 and 2007. That silence means that individual teacher training universities are held in suspense, and individual lecturers and educational managers pushing for change are limited in terms of how adventurous they can afford to become. In addition, of course, there is perceived to be a widespread lack of knowledge within the academic communities of the site universities regarding contemporary forms of student assessment. This need possibly also relates to MoET’s tardiness in articulating a progressive policy on student assessment, because individual teacher training universities would not be prepared to invest in the delivery of these programs without there being some clear direction as to MoET’s intentions.

Of course, waiting for MoET is not a long-term solution. As Fullan (2011, p. 8) argues, “leading with accountability is not the best way to get accountability […] whole system success requires the commitment that comes from intrinsic motivation and improved technical competencies of groups of educators working together purposefully and relentlessly.” The Adaptive Implementers were able to show what is possible when educators work purposefully and relentlessly together. Unfortunately for them, however, they also have to work in situations of isolation from one another, and expend considerable time and energy at the expense of other forms of potential income to do so.

The participants’ perceptions and experiences about change towards effective student assessment practice may be integrated to form a complex adaptive model for change in student assessment in teacher training universities in Vietnam. This task is undertaken in what follows in Chapter 9.
Chapter 9 - Conclusion

This chapter concludes the investigation. It begins with a brief overview of main findings from the investigation. It then presents a model for achieving more effective student assessment practices at teacher training universities in Vietnam, a setting in which the influence of cultural, social and political circumstances is generally pronounced. Some practical considerations related to the model are discussed; some brief comments are provided about the methodology for the present investigation; suggestions for possible directions for future research are made; and the chapter finishes with some concluding remarks.

9.1 Review of Findings

Table 9.1 provides an overview of the main characteristics of the three identified groups of participants: the Adaptive Implementers, the Defending Denialists and the Changing Pragmatists. The themes listed in the first column of the Table correspond broadly with the research questions for the investigation, as presented in Chapter 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Adaptive Implementers</th>
<th>Defending Denialists</th>
<th>Changing Pragmatists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs, values and attitudes about student assessment</td>
<td>To motivate and to support student learning and individual development.</td>
<td>Beliefs consistent with traditional principles of norm-referenced measurement.</td>
<td>To motivate and support student learning and individual development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive attitude towards the students.</td>
<td>Student assessment is for educational accountability.</td>
<td>Students are perceived to be passive learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lecturer is a facilitator.</td>
<td>Authoritarian outlook with expectations of respectfulness and obedience from students.</td>
<td>Lecturer is a facilitator but circumstances may require an authoritarian outlook.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions about the need for change</td>
<td>Strong desire for change in student assessment, because:</td>
<td>No desire for change, because:</td>
<td>Strong desire for change in student assessment, because:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(i) change is inevitable and necessary;</td>
<td>(i) change is unnecessary;</td>
<td>(i) change is inevitable and necessary;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(ii) students are too passive and too dependent as learners;</td>
<td>(ii) Confucian values should be upheld;</td>
<td>(ii) students are too passive and too dependent as learners;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(iii) students tend too readily to adopt surface approach to learning;</td>
<td>(iii) happy with the status quo.</td>
<td>(iii) students tend too readily to adopt surface approach to learning;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Considered in terms of how they initiated or dealt with change, the three groups were distinctive. The eight participants identified as Adaptive Implementers welcomed change and saw it as being inevitable. They were motivated by a desire to raise the quality of student learning, and they were deeply concerned about the effects on student learning of the pressure created by sole, summative examinations. They saw change in assessment practices as being desirable and inevitable, and they tried to introduce a more diversified range of student assessment tasks. They especially focused on making use of formative approaches to the provision of feedback to students.

The three participants identified as Defending Denialists were, in contrast, resistant to change. They were satisfied with the status quo, and they were happy to retain traditional student assessment practices based on principles of norm-referenced assessment. These participants were traditionalists, proud of their Confucian traditions, and satisfied with the role it required them to play in the social hierarchy. They strongly preferred to use summative tests and exams, and they felt that their job was done once they had determined a distribution of grades for their units.
The thirteen participants identified as Changing Pragmatists shared some attributes with the Adaptive Implementers, particularly a perception about the need for change in student assessment practices. They were basically keen to support and motivate student learning, and they generally regarded themselves as facilitators of student learning, though circumstances sometimes limited their capacity to perform this role. They differed from the Adaptive Implementers in the extent to which they were willing to follow through on their beliefs by introducing a more diverse range of assessment methods and by engaging in the provision of formative feedback. Whether for lack of time, lack of financial incentive, lack of confidence or lack of official encouragement, they ended up conforming to a traditional model of student assessment, involving summative examinations.

As reported in Chapter 3, Musselwhite and Ingram (1999) identified differing personality types, based on their style preferences for initiating and dealing with change. Three personality types were identified: conservers, pragmatists and originators. The Defending Denialists were most like the conservers, who accepted the current structure, preferred to retain established practices, and honoured tradition. The Changing Pragmatists were most like the pragmatists, who were not opposed to change but who embraced it much more readily if it involved or seemed likely to result in workable outcomes. The Adaptive Implementers were most like the originators, who were attracted to risk and uncertainty, and yet they were also the most systemic in their thinking. Though the match between the two typologies was not perfect, it was strong enough to suggest that personality factors may have been a potent influence on the approaches taken by the participants in the present investigation.

9.2 A Model for Effective Student Assessment

A model for achieving more effective student assessment practices at teacher training universities in Vietnam is presented diagrammatically in Figure 9.1. The purpose of this model is to seek to identify how teacher training universities might function if the achievement of more effective student assessment practices were to become a driving passion institutionally and systemically. The model is based largely on the comments and suggestions of the participants in the present investigation, but it also takes account of important messages provided by a contemporary research literature concerned with issues of teaching and learning, and, more specifically, with issues related to student assessment practices. This literature was extensively reviewed in Chapter 2. The model is also based on three theoretical perspectives that inform change, theory of complex adaptive system, Fullan’s theory of educational change and communities of practice theory. These perspectives were addressed in Chapter 3. One
further point is that the model is firmly based on a view that emerges clearly from the relevant research literature, which is that effective student assessment is, as Morgan et al. (2004) identify, good teaching.

Figure 9.1. An Adaptive Model for Effective Student Assessment at Vietnamese Teacher Training Universities

To begin, the model identifies three levels of influence on effective student assessment practice: a governmental level, an institutional level, and a teaching and learning level. In many higher education systems in OECD countries, there would be little need to consider the government level because universities have sufficient institutional autonomy to be able to decide for themselves on policy and practice regarding student assessment. In Vietnam, however, MoET plays a dominating role in the higher education system as far as curriculum matters are concerned. MoET’s decisions are, however, circumscribed by the social, cultural and political context for decision-making about student assessment in Vietnam. Elements here include the extent of international benchmarking, the extent of assessment literacy, the role of the
knowledge economy, Vietnam’s Confucian tradition and the role played by Communist ideology.

At the government level, what measures might MoET implement in order to achieve more effective student assessment practices across the higher education system? The comments of the participants suggest one specific task to be completed: the development and articulation of a vision for student assessment in the higher education system in Vietnam. This vision should clearly identify the inextricable connection between student assessment and student learning, consistent with theory as advanced by Biggs (1996) and others.

It is not evident at present whether MoET does have a clear and realistic vision, or set of strategic goals, for student assessment practices in higher education institutions in Vietnam. Participants in the present investigation expressed a sense of puzzlement that MoET, having issued significant Decisions in 2006 and 2007, did not follow through with guidelines for implementing them, nor did it provide further clarification of its aims regarding the improvement of student assessment practices in Vietnam. Fullan (2007, p. 89) argues that when an organization has a clear vision, then that vision permeates the organization with value and purpose that provides the driving force, or ‘moral purpose’, for change and development. Fullan also points out that a vague and obscure vision can have the opposite effect, that is, it may contribute to confusion, cause anxiety, build frustration and generate resistance. To date, according to many of the participants in the present investigation, MoET’s vision and ambitions regarding student assessment practices in higher education institutions have been vague and obscure.

Ideally, a vision would develop around a conceptualisation of the kinds of attributes that graduates should have developed during their studies to a high level, as a consequence of undertaking a degree-level undergraduate program in Vietnam. This vision could usefully be informed by discussions with stakeholder groups, including the academic profession, employers, graduates and representatives of community organisations, reflecting Fullan’s (2010) and Stacey’s (1996) view that educational institutions exist as part of a greater system. MoET might then establish clear goals for the higher education system, in the form of objectives or milestones to be reached in moving the whole of the system in the required strategic direction. In the process, certain key decisions would need to be made, including whether the national approach to student assessment in higher education institutions should be standards-based or norm-referenced, and how formative assessment is to be positioned in relation to summative assessment. These are difficult policy matters, but they need to be properly resolved before
individual teacher training universities can begin to develop and promulgate their goals, expectations and strategies.

According to Fullan (2005, p. 55), developing knowledge, skills and competencies for people to implement change is one of the most essential aspects of capacity building in support of the achievement of deep change. As reported in Chapter 3, various governments in the Asian region, particularly Singapore’s, have invested heavily and systematically in capacity building to ensure that they have advanced and enlightened student assessment practices at every level of their education system. MoET will need to demonstrate a similar resolve.

At the institutional level, a determination and commitment to develop a parallel statement of vision and goals suited to the needs and circumstances of the institution is needed. The Adaptive Implementers, who were well regarded in their institutions for their commitment and the quality of their achievements, were, however, working in a liminal space, stuck and unable to move forward in their thinking. They had no way of knowing for certain whether the more progressive and contemporary approaches to student assessment that they were pioneering were consistent with institutional values and priorities for achieving quality and impact in the implementation of more effective student assessment practices across an institution as a teacher training university. The clarity of goals and implementation strategies, as Fullan (2007) refers to as ‘clear mean and goals,’ is so essential because it reinforces lecturers’ beliefs in change and motivates their commitment to change.

At an institutional level, therefore, the institutional assessment policy should provide a coherent statement of what the institution is trying to achieve, the assessment procedure, the implementation plan and clear guidance for implementation. More important, the student assessment policy message should help lecturers to understand the need for assessing student effectively, not only with an aim to building their knowledge and skills in a specialised field, but also for students to become a better learner with a lifelong learning ability, and later an effective citizen, as well as for their future jobs. These messages should be well-informed and be accessible to all change agents within university in order to establish what Fullan (1999) called ‘moral purpose’.

In addition to this, there are some specific institutional capacities that need to be developed. As indicated in Figure 9.1, these include a capacity for professional development, for monitoring and evaluation, for accountability, and for the dispensing of resources and incentives.
The value of the contribution made to the effectiveness of student assessment by targeted professional development activities is well documented by Heritage, Kim, Vendlinski, and Herman (2009), and by Kane and Khattri (1995). Kane and Khattri (1995) report how, at an institutional level, professional development programs need to help lecturers to know how to design assessment tasks, how to design rubrics, how to set up student performance standards, and how to provide good feedback to students. A striking feature emerging from the present investigation was the extent to which lecturers, even when willing to consider being innovative about their student assessment practices, were reluctant to take a first step because they did not feel suitably capable in terms of their knowledge about effective assessment practice. Equally striking was that one-half of the Adaptive Implementers were lecturers or educational managers who had completed their studies recently in a foreign and more established university where they had been able to acquire knowledge and skills regarding a wide range of student assessment practices. Furthermore, the value of research and the need for lecturers to be involved in doing empirical research related to contemporary student assessment approaches and student learning were suggested by participants to promote lecturers’ professional learning. Harman and Le Thi Bich Ngoc (2010) strongly recommended the value of research-led practice in reforming teaching and learning in Vietnam’s higher education system.

In the present investigation, it was abundantly clear that there was little or no accountability for lecturers to implement continuous assessment. This points to the need for a targeted monitoring and evaluation capacity in relation to the implementation of assessment and grading practices. Maughan, Teeman, and Wilson (2012) argue that careful monitoring informs decision making at all levels of a system, provides an analysis of ongoing needs, and builds trust as well as understanding. These are important matters for a teacher training university striving to be highly effective in its student assessment practices. Monitoring and evaluation allows for reflection based on reliable data. It provides a concrete foundation for planning, and for reviewing the effectiveness of different initiatives. It is fundamental to the important task of assessment moderation. Very few of these processes and procedures were reported by any of the participants from across the three site universities, and it seems highly probable that they were not, in fact, being addressed.

In one sense of the notion of accountability, that is, the sense of accountability that is associated with control, there is a high level of accountability in Vietnamese teacher training universities. In another sense of the notion, however, that is, concerning trust, or what Fullan (2010, p. 66) refers to as ‘intelligent accountability’, there may not be so much. The participants reported how even minor changes to study unit assessment requirements had to be approved in advance
by the rector, which meant that there was a high level of accountability in the sense of there being control; but it also meant that there was a significant gap in the level of trust. Highly capable and very experienced members of academic staff were not being given much room to show that they could be trusted to make professional decisions about assessment practices in the units of study for which they were responsible. The setting was, however, affected by reports of irregularities in the awarding of grades, though curiously this aspect of the assessment culture seems not to have received as much close inspection as did proposals to vary assessment tasks.

In general, there is much to be done to construct viable accountability systems in teacher training universities that take proper account of the professionalism of the lecturers and education managers working at those institutions.

Finally, there is the need for a system for dispensing resources and incentives that are directed squarely on improving the effectiveness of student assessment practices. A pressing problem for public universities in Vietnam is the low salary level of lecturing staff and the generally poor conditions of their workplaces. The low salary levels mean that much of the lecturing workforce is mobile, moving from institution to institution to take on extra hours of teaching or carry out second and third jobs, and thereby contribute more to family incomes. Individual public universities cannot do much to address this matter. They might, however, try to partition some funds to support research-led professional development activities.

At the teaching and learning level, the most needed thing is collegiality, collaboration and trust. The present investigation has demonstrated clearly a lack of much interaction and conversation among lecturers within and between departments, as well as between lecturers and academic managers, and this was one of the critical reasons to impede change to occur. The theory of complex adaptive systems (Stacey, 1995, p. 490) emphasises the importance of conflicts, differences and dialogues among agents as key drivers for change. Fullan (1999, p. 36-7) also suggests treating resistance as an essential force of change, arguing that dissimilar ideas and perspectives enable members to work together to address complex problems. Thus, institutional and departmental leaders need to create a supportive culture and a climate of trust that could enhance the ability of lecturers to interact, self-organise and for lecturers’ new patterns of behaviours to emerge. Instead of exercising change through orders and excluding opposite opinions, the institutional and departmental leaders might need to listen to, respect and welcome various perspectives. Lecturers should also be encouraged to openly listen to and negotiate differing points of view from both their colleagues and their learners. Usually, the culture of maintaining harmony and avoiding conflicts, as some Vietnamese authors have observed (Nguyen Hung Tuong, 2002, p. 2; Nguyen Phuong Mai et al., 2005, p. 410), serves to constrain
genuine and productive interactions and conversations. For example, lecturers might superficially accept change to show superficial compliance with their educational leaders. However, if lecturers understand that they were allowed to contribute openly to discussions about student assessment issues, then meaningful exchanges might result because lecturers are confident that their ideas are listened to and respected. In terms of establishing a trusting relationship, sharing power between the lecturer and learners and appreciating learners’ voice, the Adaptive Implementers was a live example of pioneers. With a ‘moral purpose’ to support learning and to do the best things for students’ lives, the Adaptive Implementers attempted to create a democratic and trustful learning environment to involve students in the collaborative learning.

In accordance with nurturing a culture of open interaction, it would be useful for lecturers to enjoy a climate where they could feel that they have control over their teaching and assessment practices, and that those efforts are acknowledged where successful. As Gardner, Harlen, Hayward, and Stobart (2008) suggested, lecturers need to be provided with agency in making change, and they need to feel that they have agency in implementing assessment well. Ideally, university leaders would delegate authority to head of units to be responsible for and to decide all student assessment matters within their areas of responsibility. However, an effective monitoring and evaluation system is concomitantly needed to ensure compliance with the institutional mission and aims. In a study of factors affect curriculum change in Singapore, Sng (2008, p. 101) suggested two elements that were crucial for the success of change implementation: the involvement of academic staff in decision-making process and the effectiveness of communication of curriculum change. Sng (2008, p. 103) specifically recommended that in order to introduce curriculum change, it was essential to foster a positive working climate through teamwork and collaboration, echoing the notion of a productive community of practice.

In this investigation, some Adaptive Implementers had been motivated to participate in student assessment reform after studying abroad and by networking with external colleagues outside their institutions. These participants reported that such dialogue, collaboration and information-sharing led to the generation of more well-informed knowledge about student assessment issues and recent innovations. They clearly found these developments empowering and point to the need for both MoET and individual institutions to encourage these collaborations. They also point to the need for institutions to commit to providing opportunities for continuous learning or ‘on-job learning’ and create communities of practice in support of their efforts towards student assessment reform. This is particularly important because it reflects the basic socio-
Achieving Change in Student Assessment in Vietnamese Teacher Training Institutions

The process of sharing information, insights and advice relevant to their existing issues could help lecturers negotiate the best ways to implement change in student assessment for an effective practice. As Wenger et al. (2002, p. 11) explain, interaction and informal learning process, such as daily conversations, dialogues and storytelling in the communities of practice are particularly important for sharing tacit knowledge and embodied expertise. Drawing from theory of communities of practice, teachers’ professional learning communities would seem to be appropriate drivers of reform, observed in relation to formative assessment in the school classroom context of United Kingdom (see, Wiliam, 2006; 2012) and in the context of Confucian Heritage Cultures (see, Carless, 2011).

In retrospect, all the institutional elements for successful change in student assessment are conditionally dependent upon each other in order to create a sustainable change. Resources and incentives, regulations, system of accountability, monitoring and evaluation systems must be in partnership with professional learning and development, the whole institution’s commitment to change and the institutional culture that supports change. Reflecting Fullan (2007), when lecturers do not see the necessity for change, do not understand the rationale for change, do not value the important role of contemporary student assessment approaches and do not have skills to implement change to improve students’ learning outcomes, it is impossible for them to make positive changes, and remain committed to the vision and goals required for it. Therefore, university and faculty leaders need to harness all of the elements associated with the desired assessment reforms, strengthen them and make them work effectively as part of a system.

9.3 Practical Considerations

This chapter has presented a model for a more democratic change in student assessment practices in teacher training universities in Vietnam. It is beneficial to identify the unavoidable challenges that the model will face if it is implemented. The most challenging will be to initiate this model under the hierarchical system of social relationships that exists in Vietnam. The nature of this model requires all agents to play a participatory and collaborative role in the change process, whereby they interact, self-organise and change without external control being imposed. It means power tends to be decentralised and leadership must be distributed among agents. This model thus challenges the status quo of Vietnam where a high “power distance” (Hofstede, 1997, p. 28) and centralised decision making are dominant as features. There are inevitable tensions between a strongly hierarchical and bureaucratic model of management and a model of professional practice that accentuates the importance of autonomy and agency.
Higher education in Vietnam is currently experiencing a transition in which decentralisation of management is being promoted (Article 32, *Higher Education Law 2012*). If institutional autonomy is fully provided, it will be create a favourable condition for the implementation of this model. However, even though when the institutional autonomy is promoted, the “power distance” phenomenon will persist inside universities at departmental levels. Its ethic is strongly internalised. Thus it would be not an easy matter for most educational managers or lecturers to share the power. For example, in this investigation, the Defending Denialists preferred students to be obedient, and to listen to and follow their instructions. They were very resistant to change.

One of the key principles underpinning of the model is that the interaction and conversation among stakeholders might lead to change. In particular, the model encourages different stakeholders to share collaboratively. The model involved the notion of communities of practice. It requires consideration of the diversity of all agents through their interaction in the system to provide the balance or coexistence. In the context of Vietnam, collectivist values stress the importance of harmony over conflict makes people tend to avoid disagreements and reject confrontation (Nguyen Hung Tuong, 2002, p. 2; Nguyen Phuong Mai et al., 2005, p. 410). The fear of ‘a loss of face’ tends to make Vietnamese people reluctant to express their points of view or raise questions, particularly if this might be perceived as expressing public disagreement (Nguyen Hung Tuong, 2002, p. 2) or it may make others feel hurt or embarrassed (Nguyen Phuong Mai et al., 2005, p. 409). The notion of maintaining harmony and saving face may result in change agents being less likely to express their opinions and beliefs openly and directly. They may also avoid criticising their peers. This may limit the opportunities for agents within the system to interact, influence each other, and learn from each other’s differences.

The proposed model argues for the need to change the conceptions of all stakeholders about the role and purposes of student assessment. This model suggests a synergy between formative and summative functions of student assessment for the purpose of supporting student learning. Therefore, this model may create the tension between formative and summative use of student assessment that is well documented in the assessment literature. The underlying principle of formative, standards-based assessment, as well as the learning culture that underlies it, to some extent challenges the deeply rooted beliefs of Vietnamese people about testing and examinations. Summative assessment with examinations in Sadler’s term (1989) is ‘too deeply coded’ in Vietnamese minds, whereby success in exams and graduation with high qualifications can be seen as gaining future benefits in the socio-economy, such as employment and getting high promotion. Parents and society also value the exam scores and take it as the most important measure of the quality of a school. According to Kennedy et al. (2008), it will be hard to break
these codes because they are principally cultural codes. In this case, it is fitted with the beliefs and conceptions of student assessment of Defending Denialists. Although this investigation revealed the positive evidence reported from Adaptive Implementers who supported the possibility of the synthesis of these two functions of student assessment, the findings also showed a huge challenges that Changing Pragmatists facing with in terms of a lack of resources and a solid understanding about contemporary student assessment to synthesising both purposes of learning enhancement and accountability.

The proposed model was designed with an aim not to diminish the power of senior managers, but to achieve a better distribution of power and of mutual responsibility among agents at different levels of the system. The nature of this model, thus, presents the complexity of change where tensions, conflicts, confrontations and resistance are unavoidable. Still, the researcher believes that in a complex world, the existence of contradictions, difference and tensions, at least, has the potential to create a disruption of the dominance of examination culture. It also urges both educational managers and lecturers to reflect, to choose, and implement change for the ‘moral purpose’ of having a positive impact on student learning. Vietnam is an ideologically driven-nation. However, a lot of the changes proposed in this model represent the democratic and humanistic values towards effective student assessment practices.

In spite of the good intention, the researcher does not know whether this model would even be practical and successful in implementation in Vietnamese context because the theory of complex adaptive system informs that the results of change are often unpredictable. If change does not happen in student assessment practices in teacher training institutions in Vietnam, Vietnam will not reach ‘world-class’ because its standards will not be able to be benchmarked.

9.4 Methodological Issues

This investigation adopted a Naturalistic Inquiry approach, using ethnographic interviewing to address the research problem and questions. This methodological approach appears unfamiliar in the published literature on Vietnam’s higher education. According to Le Van Canh (2011, p. 97), a positivist approach to research, involving quantitative methods with questionnaires and surveys, is dominant in Vietnam. Employing Naturalistic Inquiry allowed the researcher to address what Schwandt (1994, p. 118) calls “world of lived reality and situation-specific meanings.” It permitted the researcher to enter into participants’ worlds (Guba & Lincoln, 2005), and it enabled the researcher to elucidate participants’ understandings about student assessment practice, and to understand their beliefs, values and attitudes contextually. Having
the opportunity to enter the day-to-day working world of participants, the researcher was able to develop a close rapport and to appreciate their honesty and integrity in providing rich descriptions of their perceptions and their experiences relating to student assessment practices. It may have been possible to categorise them differently, but in adopting the selected theoretical stance, participants fell into the three change-related groups identified: Adapting Implementers, Changing Pragmatists, and Defending Denialists. Not one of the participants, all of whom checked their transcripts, asked to be placed in a different category.

A particular strength of the methodology was that, as the interviews advanced, participants would ask what other participants thought, and what practices they engaged in, and so participation in the investigation became a learning experience for the participants. Of course, on many levels, it was a rich learning experience for the researcher also. As Lincoln and Cannella (2004, p. 179) recommend, research should “promote a free and open debate […] all voices have a right to be heard.” During the interviews, the researcher carefully listened to the participants’ stories and answers, and encouraged them to share their experiences without making any judgements about their answers or their assessment practices. The participants came to feel secure and relaxed in airing their issues, claims and concerns. They reported that they very much appreciated the interviews because they felt they were being acknowledged as professionals. The researcher developed the view that each of the participants had begun to think deeply about existing assessment practices and the potential benefits to student learning that reform of these practices might bring.

A particular strength of Naturalistic Inquiry is that it requires the implementation of rigorous trustworthy methods of data collection and analysis. The researcher developed a sound knowledge of rigour in post-positivist research, and a growing sense that participants learned about these trustworthy methods and techniques as well.

With hindsight, several areas might have been improved. First is that it would be useful to include the views of completing students who have had considerable experience of student assessment from many different lecturers during their teacher-training studies. Unfortunately, time and the resources available for the present investigation did not permit this avenue of enquiry to develop, which is a pity because Fullan (2007) suggests that one important way to make sustainable change occur is to raise student voice in relation to it. He states that the process of implementation will benefit significantly from listening, appreciating and integrating students’ points of view.
Second, ideally it would have been an improvement to include a large sample size to enable more exploration of disciplinary differences. Again, time and resources for the investigation, including the amount of time spent in the field collecting data, prevented this. In particular, a larger group of Defending Denialists would have been recruited because these did generate a very interesting set of experiences and perceptions.

Third, in the present investigation, the researcher mainly interviewed lecturers and educational managers, together with examining their workbooks and other documents. The researcher did not have access to observing lecturers in their classrooms to observe and document at first-hand how participants implemented the practices they reported in their classroom practice.

Finally, the amount of time it took to transcribe the interviews, and then translate them word-by-word, and then have the translations checked by an independent auditor, was immense. With hindsight, it would be wise to investigate how second-language speaking researchers have managed this issue, and the techniques they have used in reporting such data.

Although this investigation has many areas that could be improved, its findings have given rise to a comprehensive proposed model for managing the required institutional and systemic changes required for effective student assessment reform in Vietnam.

### 9.5 Further Research

This investigation began the process of identifying the key elements that might support effective student assessment practices in teacher training institutions in Vietnam. It proposes an adaptive model for effective student assessment practice. However, there are several areas within the model that require further research to inform their effective implementation.

First, Vietnam would benefit from further phenomenographic research, such as that undertaken three decades ago by Marton et al. (1984). Not only would this research be able to provide a better understanding of approaches to learning and how they might be appropriately influenced in the context of Vietnam, but the active involvement of so many students in the survey phases of phenomenographic research would be empowering because it would increase community awareness about the roles and importance of assessment in student learning. It would certainly empower lecturers and educational managers by informing them about how to improve their practice.
Second, there seems to be a dearth of rigorous ethnographic research into teaching, learning and student assessment practice and cultures in Vietnam. Such studies might address the ways in which lecturers facilitate student learning; provide constructive feedback to students; interact with students and negotiate meaning in contemporary student assessment practices; engage students in group work; and implement peer- and self-assessment processes. Since Vietnam essentially maintains its Confucian traditions, community awareness of the depth and complexity of effective teaching, learning and student assessment practice would certainly generate respect and high regard for effective teachers in all education sectors.

Third, there is a need to investigate the ways in which the professional development needs of lecturers might be better addressed. Future research might identify how best to support routinely university lecturers to implement effective student assessment practice. There are slightly different models addressing this issue found in developed sectors of higher education, so comparative studies that include Vietnam would be highly informative.

The findings from the present investigation suggest the need to build communities of practice within universities in Vietnam to assist lecturers to engage in collaborative learning about implementing changes in student assessment. It would, therefore, be a promising research direction to investigate about the operation of communities of practice at the departmental level in Vietnam’s universities. Future studies might investigate how these function in the context of Vietnam’s culture, which, as noted in Chapter 2, is strongly influenced by Confucian values and beliefs.

Finally, there is a need for Vietnam to embrace an evaluation culture, as Fullan et al. (2005) and Fullan (2010; 2011) suggests. This would enable MoET to be well informed about making progressive changes to policy and procedures. It would also enable higher education institutions to engage in the continuous improvement of their institutional policies and guidelines for practice with a view to attaining global standards.

9.6 Concluding Remarks

There is a huge body of international research over several decades that attests to the amount of time it has taken for developed higher education systems to move from a norm-referenced measurement model of student assessment, together with a heavy reliance on summative examinations, to a more learner-centred understanding of student assessment, using fair, transparent assessment practices with grades allocated solely on the basis of individual academic merit, and students have opportunities to construct their learning from formative
feedback. Even in the developed systems, there are improvements that remain to be made, and so an evaluative culture in teaching, learning and student assessment is vital. So too is an investment in empirical research in these important areas.

Vietnam, in order to achieve a higher education system that is globally competitive, must draw upon this international body of research. Vietnam also needs to contribute to it. There are limitless possibilities for further research into aspects of student assessment in Vietnam. The present investigation has been one small step towards informing a research-led culture of teaching, learning and student assessment in higher education in Vietnam.
References


Bộ giáo dục và Đào tạo. (1999). Quy chế 04/1999/QĐ-BGD&ĐT (12/02/1999) về tổ chức đào tạo, kiểm tra, thi và công nhận tốt nghiệp đại học và cao đẳng hệ chính quy (Regulation 04/1999/QĐ-BGD&ĐT, dated 12/02/1999 of the organisation of training, testing, examination and graduation regconition at universities and colleges)

Bộ giáo dục và Đào tạo. (2001). Quy chế 31/2001 về thi điểm tổ chức đào tạo, kiểm tra, thi và công nhận tốt nghiệp đại học và cao đẳng hệ chính quy theo học chế tín chỉ ngày 30 tháng 7 năm 2001 (Regulation 31/2001 of the organisation of the pilot training, testing, examination and graduation in universities and colleges based on credit system).


Chính phủ. (2001). *Quyết định của Thủ tướng chính phủ về việc phê duyệt “Chiến lược phát triển giáo dục 2001 - 2010”, số 201/2001/QĐ-TTg, ngày 28 tháng 12 năm 2001 (Decision made by the Prime Minister numbered 201/2001/QĐ-TTg, dated 28/12/2001 on approving the development strategies of national education in the period of 2001-2010)*.

Chính phủ. (2012). *Quyết định của Thủ tướng chính phủ về việc phê duyệt "Chiến lược phát triển giáo dục 2011-2020", số 711/2012/QĐ-TTg, ngày 13 tháng 06 năm 2012 (Decision made by the Prime Minister numbered 711/2012/QĐ-TTg, dated 13/06/2012 on approving the development strategies of national education in the period of 2011-2020)*.


Achieving Change in Student Assessment in Vietnamese Teacher Training Institutions


Pham Thi Ly, Nguyen Tat Thang, & Hayden, M. (2015). Vietnam's higher education system in transition: the struggle to achieve potential. In R. Bhandari & A. Lefebure (Eds.), Asia:
Achieving Change in Student Assessment in Vietnamese Teacher Training Institutions


Quốc hội. (2012). *Luật Giáo dục Đại học, số hiệu 08/2012/QH13, ban hành ngày 18/06/2012 (Higher Education Law, rule number 08/12/QH13, issued on 18/06/2012)*.


Appendix 1: Letter of Recommendation for PhD Candidate to conduct data collection

Letter of Recommendation for Data Collection (sent to each of 3 institutions)

Lismore, May 5, 2012

Dear Rector A/Professor X

My name is Martin Hayden, Dean of Education, Southern Cross University (SCU), Australia. I am also a co-supervisor for Ms. Luong Thi Hong Gam, who is currently conducting research for her PhD in the School of Education at my University. I would like to take this opportunity to offer a formal recommendation for her to conduct her data collection at your prestigious University.

Ms. Gam’s investigation aims to develop an in-depth understanding of the beliefs, attitudes and values of a selected group of lecturers and educational managers at three teacher training universities in Vietnam. Its purpose is to throw light on the conditions that affect their ability and willingness to reform student assessment practices at their institutions.

As a result, she is seeking permission to conduct data collection and access participants who are lecturers and managers for her PhD research at some selected Teacher Training Institutions in Vietnam, including your University.

In this regard, firstly, I would like to ask for your kind permission for my PhD candidate, Ms Gam, to conduct data collection in your Institution. Secondly, I would also like to ask for your recommendation of around 6 lecturers and 2 educational managers to participate in her research. In her PhD research, she will interview lecturers and administrative managers by using a semi-structured interview about student assessment (please see the interview questions attached). Each interview should take up to an hour. Additionally, she would probably ask these lecturers for their agreement for her to observe their teaching and to provide her with some examples of their assessment tasks and grading methods.

Thank you in advance for your kind consideration. I am looking forward to your positive response.

Best regards,

Martin Hayden

Prof. Martin Hayden, PhD Dean and Head, School of Education, Southern Cross University, PO Box 157, Lismore, NSW 2480, Australia Tel: 61 - 408 624 170
Appendix 2: Email Introduction to Experienced Lecturers and Educational Managers

Dear (Title + name of the participant),

My name is Luong Thi Hong Gam and I am conducting research for my PhD in the School of Education at Southern Cross University. My research investigation aims to develop an in-depth understanding of the beliefs, attitudes and values of a selected group of lecturers and educational managers at three teacher training universities in Vietnam. Its purpose is to throw light on the conditions that affect their ability and willingness to reform student assessment practices at their institutions.

The Rector (name + title) of your University has given your name to me as he understands that you are an experienced academic who is an experienced educator. I would like to invite you to participate in a semi-structured interview about student assessment for approximately an hour. I would also hope you can share some examples of your assessment tasks and grading methods with me.

Please find attached an overview of the investigation, the Information Sheet, Informed Consent Form, and a semi-structured interview protocol. In a few days after that I will contact you to discuss any matters relating to the project and to set up our interview.

Kind regards,

Ms Luong Thi Hong Gam
PhD Candidate
Appendix 3: Participant Information Sheet

Title: Achieving Change in Student Assessment in Vietnamese Teacher Training Institutions

Dear (participant’s name)

Your Rector………………has recommended you as an experienced university teacher in teacher education. I would like to invite you to participate in my doctoral research.

My research sets out to develop an in-depth understanding of the beliefs, attitudes and values of a selected group of lecturers and educational managers at three teacher training universities in Vietnam. Its purpose is to throw light on the conditions that affect their ability and willingness to reform student assessment practices at their institutions.

The expected outcome of the research will be to develop a theoretical framework to inform the expeditious uptake of contemporary, evidence-based student assessment practice, thereby assisting Vietnam to attain global parity.

Your views will help me understand and identify how improvement and change in practice has occurred in your experience. I hope you will share your experiences, thoughts, values and beliefs about student assessment, and your views on best practice with me.

Your role as a participant in this investigation would be to participate in a semi-structured interview for approximately an hour at your Institution where you work and at your convenience. If possible, I would also like to see some examples of your assessment tasks and grading methods. Your Informed Consent is required and you may withdraw from the research for any reason at any time.

Any information you provide will be confidential. When the data is analysed, your identity will be anonymous in the research report. The site university will not be named in any reports including the thesis resulting from this research. All information will be confidential and kept in a locked cabinet at the university for a period of seven years. I assure you that any documents you hand to me will be used for private research purposes only and reported anonymously. The results of the research may be presented at a conference or published in a journal, but only group data will be reported and no identifying information will be revealed.

In order to ensure that all your experiences and perspectives will be presented accurately, I will return the transcripts of my analyses for you to clarify, comment or change as you see fit. A summary of the results of the research will be made available to you when the research is complete.

This research has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Southern Cross University. The approval number is ECN-12-150. If you have concerns about the ethical conduct of this research or the researchers, you can write to:

The Ethics Complaints Officer
Southern Cross University
PO Box 157
Lismore, NSW 2480
Email: ethics.lismore@scu.edu.au
All information is confidential and will be handled as soon as possible.

My research is being conducted under the supervision of Associate Professor Sharon Parry and Professor Martin Hayden, both at the School of Education, SCU. If you would like to discuss any aspect of my research with them, Associate Professor Sharon Parry’s email address is sharon.parry@scu.edu.au, and her cell phone number is +61 408683052, and Professor Martin Hayden’s email address is martin.hayden@scu.edu.au and his cell phone number is +61 408624170. My email address is g.luong.10@student.scu.edu.au and my cell phone number is +61 435882589.

Kind regards

Luong Thi Hong Gam
PhD Candidate
Appendix 4: Informed Consent

Title: Achieving Change in Student Assessment in Vietnamese Teacher Training Institutions

PhD Candidate: Thi Hong Gam, Luong

Tick the box that applies, sign, date and give to the researcher
I agree to take part in the Southern Cross University research project specified above.

Yes ☐ No ☐
I understand the information about my participation in the research project, which has been provided to me by the researcher.
Yes ☐ No ☐
I agree to be interviewed by the researcher.

Yes ☐ No ☐
I agree to allow the interview to be *audio-taped and/or *video-taped.

Yes ☐ No ☐
I agree to make myself available for further interview if required.

Yes ☐ No ☐
I agree for the researcher to observe my class.

Yes ☐ No ☐
I agree to share some assessment tasks and grading methods to the researcher.
I agree to make available selected emails and feedback documents for triangulation.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and I understand that I can cease my participation at any time.

I understand that my participation in this research will be treated with confidentiality.

I understand that any information that may identify me will be de-identified at the time of analysis of any data.

I understand that no identifying information will be disclosed or published.

I understand that all information gathered in this research will be kept confidentially for 7 years at the University.

I am aware that I can contact the researcher at any time with any queries. Her contact details is provided to me.

I understand that this research project has been approved by the SCU Human Research Ethics Committee.

Participant’s name: ________________________________

Participant’s signature: ________________________________

Date: ___________________
Please tick this box and provide your email or mail address below if you wish to receive a summary of the results:

Email: ________________________________________________________________

Thank you most sincerely for your willingness to contribute to my research investigation!
Appendix 5: Auditor Report

Southern Cross UNIVERSITY

Southern Cross University
PO Box 157, Lismore, NSW 2477
AUSTRALIA

August 12, 2014

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

I confirm that I conducted an audit trail on the data collected and analysed by Ms Luong Thi Hong Gam. This process involved reviewing her interview transcriptions, her reflective journal and her field notes. I especially checked the accuracy of her translations from Vietnamese to English, and I discussed at length how the material in Vietnamese could be properly interpreted in an English-speaking context.

I performed this task as part of my normal duties as a Research Fellow and had no vested interest in her thesis.

Yours faithfully,

[Signature]

Khanh Van Dao PhD
School of Education
khanh.dao@scu.edu.au
Appendix 6: Ethics Approval

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HREC)
HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS SUB-COMMITTEE (HRESC)

NOTIFICATION

To: A/Prof Sharon Parry/Thi Hong Gam Luong
   School of Education
   Sharon.parry@scu.edu.au,g.luong.10@scu.edu.au

From: Secretary, Human Research Ethics Committee
      Division of Research, R. Block

Date: 19 June 2012

Project: Achieving Change in Student Assessment in Vietnamese Teacher Training Institutions

Approval Number ECN-12-150

The Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee has established, in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research – Section 5/Processes of Research Governance and Ethical Review, a procedure for expedited review and ratification by a delegated authority of the HREC.

This expedited application was considered by the Chair, HREC and the research is approved. The Chair would like to comment that your application is a very well-written, full and thoughtful plan of research.

All ethics approvals are subject to standard conditions of approval. These should be noted by researchers as there is compliance and monitoring advice included in these conditions.

Ms Sue Kelly
HREC Administration
Ph: (02) 6626 9139
E. ethics.lismore@scu.edu.au

Professor Bill Boyd
Chair, HREC
Ph: 02 6620 3569
E. william.boyd@scu.edu.au