



Research Article

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN QUALITY CULTURE AND HAPPINESS OF LECTURERS AT TRA VINH UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This study's objectives were to investigate the relationship between the quality culture and teachers' happiness at work while considering the mediating role of leadership support under work pressure conditions at Tra Vinh University. Twelve semi-structured interviews (each lasting 45 – 75 minutes) and 385 valid survey responses have been conducted and analyzed using the JAMOVI software. Au-dio-recorded interviews (with field notes) were transcribed into Vietnamese. The survey results were satisfactory, with Cron-bach's $\alpha = .892-.957$. The results of the regression analysis showed that the model explained 44.05% of variance in lecturers' happiness ($R^2 = .4405$). Quality culture made the highest contribution with a positive association ($\beta = .597$; $p < .001$), followed by leadership support with positive ($\beta = .101$; $p = .020$) and work pressure with negative associations ($\beta = -.113$; $p = .006$). Interviews identified differences between implemented quality values and approaches to meeting quality requirements, noting the importance of recognition, dialogue, and fairness. In addition, the study identified a number of challenges in balancing academic work and administrative duties within the framework of implementing Total Quality Management. Since the study used a cross-sectional design, it was unable to establish causal relationships between variables.

Keywords: faculty happiness; leadership support; quality culture; Tra Vinh University

1. Introduction

Quality assurance in higher education tends to be considered not only as a standardizing mechanism of processes but also as a reflection of organizational culture. Having become an integral part of the university governance practices, self-assessment and accreditation draw the attention to the understanding of the presence of the quality assurance mechanisms. Therefore, quality culture approach considers the interaction between structural-management and psycho-cultural factors, including shared values, trust, commitment, involvement and participation, and responsibility for continuous improvement (EUA, 2006; Harvey & Sten-saker, 2008). Bendermacher et al. (2017) present rather realistic

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picture, indicating that sustainable quality cannot be achieved if the institution concentrates on developing the mechanisms of control without creating conditions for substantive ownership, empowerment, communication, and collaboration.

In Vietnamese context, the growth of university autonomy and accountability has highlighted the need to move from the mere compliance with external standards to the capacity of every educational institution in conducting quality assurance. The research, carried out in higher education institutions in Ho Chi Minh City, identifies a connection between internal quality assurance and the development of the quality culture (Do et al., 2020). At the same time, the domestic scientific literature offers an evaluation framework for quality culture based on the value-oriented approach, highlighting the academic, social, managerial, humanistic environment and conditions (Nguyen, 2017; Nguyen & Le, 2019). For Tra Vinh University, the authors show the relevance of the quality cultural factors to the implementation of university autonomy. Thus, quality culture is not an extra-value layer in governance but rather an organizational context which has a potential to influence the work experience of the faculty, innovations, and institutional support.

Of particular relevance to the present study, Nguyen and Pham (2022) previously examined the quality-culture factors affecting the implementation of university autonomy at Tra Vinh University itself. Their analysis identified several quality-culture components – shared values, leadership commitment, communication, and stakeholder involvement – as significant predictors of the institution's capacity to exercise autonomy. Building upon that earlier evidence base, the current study extends the inquiry from autonomy-related outcomes to a psychosocial outcome (lecturer happiness) within the same institutional setting, allowing thus a more direct test of whether the quality-culture factors documented at Tra Vinh University are also reflected in the everyday work experience of its faculty. This continuity of focus on a single institution provides an opportunity to triangulate the earlier qualitative findings against the present mixed-methods evidence, and to examine whether the quality-culture dimensions previously identified as drivers of autonomy are also associated with subjective well-being at work.

Alongside with the quality improvement needs, lecturer happiness becomes a crucial factor of sustainability of the university environment. Work-related happiness means much more than job satisfaction. According to Fisher (2010), work happiness involves multiple positive states and attitudes which include job satisfaction, emotional identification with the organization, and organizational cohesion. Emotional identification implies an attachment based on identification and affect towards the organization (Meyer & Allen, 1991), while work engagement is a state of energy, dedication, and immersion in professional activities (Schaufeli et al., 2006). This multi-component approach is especially appropriate for university lecturers whose professional experience is influenced by the meaning of the work, organizational relations, conditions of support, and professional obligations in teaching, research, and community services.

Speaking about mechanisms, one can refer to two theories which allow understanding the connection between the organizational context and individual well-being. Self-determination theory states that work context, which provides the person with autonomy, competence, and social relations, promotes the quality motivation and psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). On the contrary, the Job Demands-Resources theory suggests that such resources as social support, autonomy, feedback, and development opportunities help to achieve engagement and deal with career demands; otherwise, if career demands (volume of work, time, and performance) are constant and cannot be compensated with resources, stress is enhanced (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Bakker et al., 2023). Speaking about the academic teams, publication pressure, workload, and time constraints are the examples of the career demands, and social support, autonomy, and meaningful work are the examples of the career resources (Naidoo-Chetty & du Plessis, 2021). From the combined evidence, the available evidence suggests that career resources are often associated with engagement while the effect of career demands depends on the demand (Crawford et al., 2010; Mazzetti et al., 2023).

Despite the development of the two streams of research in parallel, in Vietnamese higher education, the studies of quality culture usually cover internal quality assurance, autonomy, and organizational improvement. The studies of faculty examine job satisfaction or work engagement in turn. For example, Pham (2025) notes the connection between job satisfaction and engagement in teaching and research at autonomous universities but does not identify the quality culture as a major predictor. It means that there is a need to test the hypothesis of whether the faculty perceives a more positive quality context and at the same time reports higher happiness. On the other hand, the inclusion of the leadership support and work pressure into an integrated model will help to identify the unique role of the quality culture among the related work context characteristics.

Thus, the study pursues three goals: (1) to describe the quality culture, happiness, leadership support, and work pressure perceived by the lecturers of Tra Vinh University; (2) to explore the connection between the quality culture and lecturer well-being; and (3) to measure the unique contribution of the leadership support and work pressure to the lecturer well-being when these two variables are considered simultaneously. In the course of the work, the following hypotheses are tested: H1: the quality culture is positively correlated with the lecturer happiness; H2: leadership support is positively correlated with the lecturer well-being; H3: work pressure is negatively correlated with the lecturer happiness. As the data collection was conducted according to the cross-sectional design, the hypotheses are tested statistically and should not be interpreted causally.

2. Participants and methods

2.1. Research design and quantitative sample

The study used a mixed-methods approach to examine organizational experiences

alongside cross-sectional associations in survey responses. Twelve semi-structured interviews provided contextual evidence, while the survey supplied the estimates for descriptive statistics, measurement evaluation, and multivariable regression. The two data sources were integrated at the interpretation stage; interview excerpts were not used to calculate regression coefficients. The survey used a stratified random sampling strategy across university units, with 385 valid responses included in the analysis.

2.2. Quantitative measures and measurement evaluation

Four instruments were used: the Quality Culture Scale (40 items representing ten components, A1–A10); the Workplace Happiness Scale (19 items covering job satisfaction, organizational attachment, and work engagement); a four-item Leadership Support Scale; and a four-item Work Pressure Scale. All 67 items used five-point Likert-type response options (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The quality-culture items were informed by the European University Association framework and Vietnamese value-based approaches (European University Association, 2006; Nguyen, 2017; Nguyen & Le, 2019). The workplace-happiness measure drew on Fisher (2010) and Schaufeli et al. (2006).

The reported instrument-development procedure involved independent forward translations, back-translation, reconciliation of wording, and a pilot administration with 30 lecturers at another institution. Four quality-culture items were reworded for clarity and no items were removed.

Cronbach's alpha was used to evaluate internal consistency. Sampling adequacy and factorability were assessed with the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) index and Bartlett's test, followed by exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with Varimax rotation in JAMOV. Extraction was described as using eigenvalues above 1, the scree plot, and theoretical interpretability. Table 1 summarizes reliability and EFA findings for the four scales.

Table 1. Measurement scale assessment and exploratory factor analysis results

Scale	Items	α	KMO	Bartlett χ^2 (df)	Factors	Variance (%)	Factor loadings
Quality culture	40	.957	.892	4,521.23 (780)	10	68.42	.512–.841
Happiness at work	19	.952	.915	3,847.56 (171)	3	63.78	.557–.822
Leadership support	4	.892	.785	456.89 (6)	1	72.19	.741–.853
Work pressure	4	.898	.762	398.45 (6)	1	70.84	.724–.836

Note. All Bartlett tests were reported as $p < .001$. Factor-loading ranges refer to the reported rotated EFA solutions.

The reported internal-consistency coefficients ranged from .892 to .957 and KMO values from .762 to .915. The 40-item quality-culture scale yielded ten reported factors, while the happiness scale yielded three; the two four-item scales were each described as one-factor structures. These summary results support preliminary factorability, although full rotated loading matrices, cross-loadings, and item-level evidence are required for a more complete evaluation of construct validity.

2.3. Qualitative interviews and analytical approach

Twelve participants (P01–P12) participated in semi-structured interviews (lecturers, academic managers, professional staff in faculties, within an institute, and central administrative units). Interview sessions lasted between 45 and 75 min and were audio-recorded accompanied by field notes; interviews were transcribed verbatim in Vietnamese.

Interview guide contained 4 open questions with follow-up probes contingent on responses: (1) How would you describe a quality culture at Tra Vinh University as manifested in your day-to-day work? (2) How is leadership support expressed in your work? (3) What are the main sources of pressure in the current teaching/research responsibilities? (4) What does it mean to have happiness at work in the context of the university?

Interview data were analysed thematically using an initial deductive thematic framework informed by self-determination theory (SDT) and Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) theory, with inductive elements identifying emergent insights not sufficiently covered by the proposed theories. The 4 interview questions formed the initial themes for the analysis. Similarities, tensions, and contrasting accounts were retained in the synthesis, and excerpts were extracted using participant codes P01–P12. English quotations are translations of Vietnamese interview excerpts

2.4. Quantitative analysis

JAMOVİ was used to perform descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations), the measurement analyses summarized in Table 1, and multiple linear regression. The dependent variable was lecturer happiness, with quality culture, leadership support, and work pressure simultaneously entered as predictors. The standardized coefficients (β), standard errors (SE), *t* statistics, *p* values, and 95% confidence intervals were reported. The multicollinearity was assessed using tolerance and variance inflation factors (VIFs). The cross-sectional and self-reported nature of the survey allows for the assessment of conditional associations rather than causal effects.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Qualitative findings

The qualitative analysis revealed four themes. Participants reported positive experiences and counterexamples, in that quality-culture initiatives, leadership practices, and work pressures varied across units. Table 2 presents the themes and supporting and discrepant evidence; the ensuing interpretation retains participant codes to identify the sources of evidence.

Theme 1 – quality culture: enacted values versus formal compliance. Some participants described a shift from compliance to shared ownership of continuous improvement. P01, for example, referred to “end of semester reflective workshops” in which teachers discuss classroom problems and solutions and noted that “quality culture is not a set of documents kept in a cupboard; it shows in how lecturers work every day.” P04 and P08 also described a shift “from compliance to ownership” and “compliance to commitment,” respectively. Such positive reports were tempered by P03, P06, and P10, who described uneven enforcement across units or the use of forms without feedback. P11 associated “a real quality culture” with democratic participation, suggesting that it “cannot be only top-down,” and P12 contrasted effective procedures with responsive services for lecturers and students. Thus, the data suggest that a quality-assurance system is not always seamlessly implemented.

Theme 2 – leadership support: recognition, dialogue, and voice. Participants distinguished between tangible help and supportive leadership. P01, for example, reported that formal recognition of innovations was more important than material support, and P02 appreciated the interest shown by a dean (“What do you need to do this better?”) before assigning responsibility. P05 and P09 emphasized enabling experimentation, and the latter noted the value of being allowed to test new measures even when outcomes were uncertain. Others, however, reported insufficient recognition or dialogue. P03, for instance, described lack of formal acknowledgement after publishing a paper, and P08 found an assignment-focused supervisor’s comments to be discouraging. P11 noted that a curriculum proposal had gone unread for two years, and P06 and P07 contrasted helpful local interactions with inadequate communication at higher levels. Overall, leadership support appeared to involve recognition, encouragement, and involvement in decision making.

Theme 3 – work pressure: competing roles and fragmented time. Participants identified various pressures, including competing roles and the associated time constraints. P01, for example, reported having to enter the same information in “three or four different systems” and saw redundant reporting as a waste of time. P02 and P06 described the pressure of pursuing a research agenda amid teaching and administrative duties, the former writing proposals and manuscripts at night and on week-ends. P03, P05, and P11 focused on the simultaneous demands of teaching or the preparation required for multiple courses, with P08 noting that he would like to teach fewer credits (16-18 per semester) to prepare more thoroughly. Others cited rapid policy changes (P07), the need to persuade multiple units to endorse quality initiatives (P09), limited resources for research (P10), and heavy service demands relative to personnel (P12). The data thus suggest several sources of work-related pressures.

Theme 4 – professional happiness: meaningful work with fair and sustainable conditions. P01 and P05, for example, associated happiness with making a difference to

students, colleagues, or the profession or seeing the results of one's efforts over time, and P07 linked it to institutional change and improvement. For P08, a positive student comment regarding a difficult concept was an indicator of professional happiness, and P09 cited the opportunity to see quality-assurance recommendations implemented. P10, in turn, associated happiness with teaching and research opportunities, and P01 and P05 described the intrinsic reward of the work. Yet, meaningful work was not sufficient, according to several respondents: P03, for instance, noted the discrepancy between the enjoyment of teaching and the lack of time for it, and P04 stressed the importance of time for family. Others cited respect for time and professional judgment (P06) or recognition and equitable procedures (P02 and P11) as contributing factors. Thus, happiness appears to be multifaceted in this context.

Table 2. *Thematic analysis and comparative interview findings*

Interview theme	Illustrative quotations (translated)	Qualifying / contrasting quotations
Theme 1 – quality culture	P01: “At Tra Vinh University, quality culture is not a set of documents in a cupboard—it is reflected in how lecturers work every day.”	P10: “Forms are filled in and submitted, but nobody reads them.” P11: “Quality culture cannot be only top-down.”
Theme 2 – leadership support	P02: “My dean always asks what we need to do better before assigning work.” P09: “That is real support—not support through controlling every step.”	P03: “I wrote a paper, but nobody praised it or recorded it in my performance file.” P11: “For two years, I did not know the status of my proposal—there was no periodic feedback.”
Theme 3 – work pressure	P01: “The same activity has to be entered into three or four different systems.” P02: “I often write papers at night or on weekends.”	P08: “I teach 16–18 credits in a semester.” P07: “Every semester there are new adjustments.”
Theme 4 – professional happiness	P05: “Happiness is not a short-term emotion—it is a deep, lasting sense of fulfillment.” P08: “When a student says, ‘Teacher, I understand now,’ that is happiness.”	P03: “I love the work, but I do not have time to do it well.” P11: “Without fairness, there can be no professional happiness.”

3.2. Descriptive statistics

Table 3 presents the reported scale means and standard deviations. Among the positive-domain measures, leadership support had the highest mean ($M = 3.78$), followed by quality culture ($M = 3.75$) and happiness at work ($M = 3.66$). Work pressure was closer to the scale midpoint ($M = 3.15$). These aggregate values describe the survey sample rather than the proportions of respondents endorsing each response category.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for the four constructs

Construct	M	SD
Quality culture	3.75	0.48
Happiness at work	3.66	0.46
Leadership support	3.78	0.53
Work pressure	3.15	0.55

The qualitative material adds context to these means. Reports of meaningful improvement and supportive supervisors coexisted with concerns about inconsistent enactment, lack of recognition, workload fragmentation, and procedural fairness. The interviews cannot establish how prevalent these experiences were in the 385-person survey sample, but they clarify which workplace processes participants associated with each construct.

3.3. Regression and hypothesis testing

Multiple regression was used to estimate the conditional associations of the three predictors with happiness at work. Given conceptual overlap among the organizational predictors, tolerance and VIF were examined alongside the regression coefficients. Table 4 jointly presents these estimates and diagnostics.

Table 4. Regression estimates and collinearity diagnostics for workplace happiness

Predictor	β	SE	t	p	95% CI	Tolerance	VIF
Quality culture (H1)	.597	.043	14.061	< .001	[.514, .680]	.612	1.634
Leadership support (H2)	.101	.043	2.343	.020	[.017, .185]	.584	1.712
Work pressure (H3)	-.113	.041	-2.741	.006	[-.194, -.032]	.647	1.546

Note. Dependent variable: happiness at work; $N = 385$; $R^2 = .4405$. β = standardized coefficient; CI = confidence interval; SE = standard error. Coefficient estimates support H1–H3 in the hypothesized directions.

Quality culture showed the largest standardized conditional relationship with happiness ($\beta = .597$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.514, .680]), supporting H1. Leadership support showed a positive association with happiness ($\beta = .101$, $p = .020$, 95% CI [.017, .185]), supporting H2, while work pressure showed a negative association ($\beta = -.113$, $p = .006$, 95% CI [-.194, -.032]), supporting H3. The proportion of variance explained was reported as $R^2 = .4405$ (44.05%). All re-reported VIFs were below 2 (1.546–1.712), indicating no serious collinearity according to conventional screening criteria.

The relative sizes of standardized coefficients indicate that perceived quality culture had a stronger conditional relationship with happiness than the other two predictors in this model. This does not imply that organizational culture causes happiness or that increasing any of the predictors would have a corresponding effect on the outcome. The positive and

negative coefficients should also not be taken as mutually exclusive causal mechanisms, because the interview accounts illustrate that, for example, quality-assurance routines can simultaneously be seen as a valued shared practice and a source of administrative burden.

3.4. Integrated discussion

The main finding of this study, a relatively large positive association between quality culture and workplace happiness, is compatible with approaches which see quality culture as shared values and collective practice rather than compliance only (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Bendermacher et al., 2017). Interviews confirm the complexity of the relationship, with positive descriptions of reflective workshops and voluntary improvement (P01, P04, P08) counterbalanced by the experience of box-ticking and poor feedback (P03, P06, P10). Thus, the evidence supports a tentative statement that the formal structure of quality assurance can coexist with divergent experiences of quality culture on a day-to-day basis. The current single-institution design is not suitable for identifying the extent and sources of these differences across all university units.

The self-determination theory offers a productive theoretical framework as several participants identified a positive academic experience with autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For instance, recognition of scholarly contributions (P01, P03, P10), opportunity to influence curricular decisions (P11), and collegial feedback (P02, P06) can be related to experiences of competence, voice, and social connection. At the same time, the study did not estimate mediation paths and measure the psychological needs satisfaction directly as a possible mechanism. Therefore, these interpretations should be seen as theoretical speculations which are consistent with the observed responses but not proved by them.

Another relevant theoretical perspective is the JD-R, which incorporates the finding of a smaller positive coefficient for leadership support and negative coefficient for work pressure (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Bakker et al., 2023). Participants mentioned resources (development opportunities, feedback, research collaboration, and access to equipment) and demands (high teaching loads, multiple roles, duplicate reporting, shifting regulations, and resource scarcity) associated with their quality work. Notably, the tension between them is not necessarily resolved in favor of one or another: P03 and P06 spoke about the conflict between the commitment to research and the lack of time for it, whereas P09 identified the persuading of others as a demanding aspect of quality work itself.

Overall, the presented findings demonstrate that professional happiness was discussed by participants in the context of the capacity to engage in meaningful academic work under equitable conditions. P04 and P11 put work-family balance and fairness at the forefront, whereas P05, P07, and P09 focused on the cumulative impact and perceived usefulness of research activities. In this regard, the findings caution against the interpretation of a higher mean score or a single interview response as representing the experience of a larger population. The mixed-methods design contributes to the understanding of the research

question in terms of explanation: the quantitative part identifies the association, and the qualitative part explores its manifestations in the lived reality of participants.

3.5. *Implications for university governance*

The results indicate three areas for institutional consideration rather than demonstrate causal interventions. First, quality improvement is being integrated into everyday scholarly practices-course reflection, peer discussion, actionable student feedback, and use of the quality evidence-rather than proliferating multiple distinctive practices. Second, leadership development may involve developmental dialogues, transparent recognition, two-way feedback, and equitable assignment of responsibilities as both supportive and unsupportive interview accounts illustrate. Third, administrative reductions and protected academic time are worth investigating, especially if duplicated reporting, competing deadlines, and changing demands are experienced as crowding out teaching and research activities. The areas should be pilot tested and evaluated rather than assumed effective based on present observational findings.

3.6. *Limitations and future research*

Several limitations qualify the interpretation. The quantitative observations were taken at one university, and the cross-sectional, self-report design is subject to common-method bias and cannot determine directions of effects (Podsakoff et al., 2024). The validity of the measurements was established using scale-level EFA indices; item-level loadings, discriminant validity, and measurement invariance require further examination. The qualitative interpretations were based on a small set of purposive interviews, and the study makes no claims about the thematic prevalence beyond the participants' group. The future reporting would benefit from a thorough audit trail of the translation and coding decisions.

4. *Conclusions and recommendations*

In the reported cross-sectional survey of 385 respondents, quality culture showed the strongest positive conditional association with lecturers' workplace happiness, followed by leadership support (positive association) and work pressure (negative association). The interview results obtained from P01-P12 provide more detailed descriptions of the identified constructs. Enacted values, meaningful feedback, voice, recognition, fair treatment, and protected professional time were associated with the presence of a sustainable academic experience.

For the case of Tra Vinh University, the findings call for further exploration of how quality processes are enacted in different units, how recognition and feedback practices are operationalized by academic staff, and whether duplicated administrative requirements may limit the time for core academic work. Further research is needed in these areas to evaluate possible improvement strategies, but the results of the quantitative model and interview analysis contribute valuable insights into understanding the link between quality-oriented organizational practice and professional well-being.

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MỐI QUAN HỆ GIỮA VĂN HÓA CHẤT LƯỢNG VÀ HẠNH PHÚC CỦA GIẢNG VIÊN TẠI ĐẠI HỌC TRÀ VINH

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TÓM TẮT

Nghiên cứu xem xét mối liên hệ giữa văn hóa chất lượng và hạnh phúc tại nơi làm việc của giảng viên Đại học Trà Vinh, đồng thời phân tích sự hỗ trợ của lãnh đạo và áp lực công việc. Thiết kế hỗn hợp kết hợp 12 cuộc phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc (45–75 phút/phiên, ghi âm và ghi chép hiện trường, phiên mã tiếng Việt) với 385 phiếu khảo sát hợp lệ. Phân tích bằng JAMOV cho thấy các thang đo có độ tin cậy nội tại cao (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0,892–0,957$). Mô hình hồi quy báo cáo giải thích 44,05% phương sai của hạnh phúc nghề nghiệp ($R^2 = 0,4405$). Văn hóa chất lượng có mối liên hệ dương nổi bật nhất ($\beta = 0,597$; $p < 0,001$); sự hỗ trợ lãnh đạo có liên hệ dương ($\beta = 0,101$; $p = 0,020$), còn áp lực công việc có liên hệ âm ($\beta = -0,113$; $p = 0,006$). Các cuộc phỏng vấn làm rõ sự khác biệt giữa bảo đảm chất lượng mang tính thủ tục và văn hóa chất lượng được thực hành; vai trò của công nhận, phản hồi, công bằng; cùng xung đột thời gian giữa công việc chuyên môn và nhiệm vụ hành chính. Thiết kế cắt ngang không cho phép suy luận quan hệ nhân quả.

Từ khóa: hạnh phúc nghề nghiệp; hỗ trợ lãnh đạo; văn hóa chất lượng; Đại học Trà Vinh