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NEW APPROACHES TO QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE CHANGING WORLD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Sub-Theme 2

Different approaches to QA and their impact on efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability

“Different approaches to QA in Hong Kong, Mainland China and Taiwan : background, impact, and reactions from the sector “

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Abstract of Paper

This paper examines the different approaches to external quality assurance in the different areas of China : Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China as currently adopted and compares both the method, criteria for evaluation and the outcome and intended effect of the system. Reference is made to two broad types of external evaluation : “accreditation” and “audit” which are adopted in Hong Kong. The possible historical background for this difference lies in the fact that Hong Kong has originally modeled its system on U.K., whereas Mainland China and Taiwan have had different international influences. Thus the categorization of self-accrediting and non-self-accrediting institutions, a concept adopted in Hong Kong with its application based on the maturity of the institutions concerned, has led to the two models of accreditation and audit / review. However, this binary division also leads to problems of comparability. Further, due to the rise of private higher education, the use of external quality assurance has been extended to cover the private sector but there are also issues and limitations to its use as a quality control/ enhancement tool. External quality assurance is therefore being supplemented by the use of public reports on institutional performance or indicators and this could be a growing trend.

Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China are different jurisdictions in China and each has its own education system as well as quality assurance system. Each has an external quality assurance system for higher education which is based on evaluation by bodies external to the higher education institution, and applies the common elements of **Self-evaluation and Peer Review**. However, having developed from different historical background and having been subjected to different international influences, these quality assurance systems all have their individual characteristics, as well as similarities in approach.

This paper examines the three external quality assurance systems in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong according to the following thematic context :

- (i) The audit approach vs. the accreditation approach
- (ii) The implications of a system which features self-accrediting and non-self accrediting institutions
- (iii) Implications of a private/ self-financed post-secondary sector for external quality assurance
- (iv) Use of external quality assurance and other tools to safeguard quality

Audit vs. Accreditation

Hong Kong, Mainland China and Taiwan each has its own external quality assurance system, which have been subject to different international influences, and also influenced by the system's own culture, history and values. The current trends in educational development, such as the rise of private higher education, also have impact on the external quality assurance system.

If external quality assurance is to be categorized by the outcome of evaluation, it may be broadly divided into two types : **audit and accreditation**. Accreditation refers to the system of external evaluation which leads to an outcome of judgment : a yes/no, or approval/non-approval outcome according to pre-set criteria. Audit (or review) refers to a system whereby the institution is evaluated for the purpose of improvement, and no approval/ non-approval decision is made. Thus according to this categorization, both the Mainland China and Taiwan systems adopt the "accreditation" approach. Institutions are judged according to stipulated criteria and decisions are reached on whether they pass or fail the benchmark.

On the other hand, Hong Kong has adopted a system which is influenced by the U.K. model. There is a binary divide in the higher education sector dividing institutions into '**Self-accrediting**' and "**non-self-accrediting**" types. For the Non-self accrediting institutions, a process of accreditation is adopted, whereas the self-accrediting institutions are subjected to periodic audits or reviews.

Mainland China

External quality assurance in Mainland China has been conducted both at the central (Ministry) level and at the local/ provincial levels. This paper focuses on external quality assurance at the central level, and this has undergone a few changes in the approach adopted: ranging from “minimum qualifying accreditation” to “accreditation for excellence”. The current model has combined features of the main types of quality assurance conducted in the past. Since 2002, the Ministry of Education has adopted a 5-yearly review of institutions, “Evaluation of Undergraduate Teaching at General Higher Education Institutions”. All higher education institutions are subject to review through a peer review and site visit process, and the scope of review includes the following :

- 1. Guiding principles for academic policies 辦學指導思想
- 2. Staff establishment 師資隊伍
- 3. Teaching resources 教學條件與利用
- 4. Subject discipline – development and innovation 專業建設與改革
- 5. Programme management 教學管理
- 6. Academic culture 學風
- 7. Teaching outcome 教學效果
- 8. Institutional speciality 特色項目

The methodology adopted is one of accreditation, with the outcomes being “Excellent”, “Good”, “Pass”, or “Fail”.

Taiwan

Taiwan has adopted a similar approach, which is being instituted by the Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council (HEEAC). Accreditation is conducted on a “departmental” basis, i.e. evaluation of individual departments of the institution, leading to outcomes of “Pass”, “Awaiting Observation”, or “Fail to Pass”. The HEEAC was established in 2005 as an independent corporate body with contribution from both the Ministry of Education in Taiwan and from the higher education institutions.

The use of the HEEAC for the external quality assurance of higher education institutions follows a series of other exercises conducted by the Ministry which can be traced back to the 1970s. These include

- subject – based reviews conducted by the Ministry
- subject –based reviews conducted by academic associations on behalf of the Ministry
- reviews of institutional academic plans conducted by the Ministry

Although these previous reviews were not strictly “accreditation” with a result of granting approval to an institution or its programmes, many of these exercises were conducted for the purpose of funding allocation. In this sense, these are akin to accreditation whereby an “approval” outcome is given – and when this outcome is linked to funding, its impact can be significant.

The current model of accreditation, as adopted since 2006, also has clearly defined outcomes. The 78 university –level institutions in Taiwan are subjected to reviews and the outcome are used as the basis for the Ministry’s allocation of student places. In 2007, out of the 10 institutions accredited, 65.7% obtained the Pass grade, 22.7% obtained “Under Observation” grade, and 11.2% Not Passed (Chan 2008).

Hong Kong

Self-accrediting Institutions

Hong Kong has an interesting external quality assurance system which features a combination of both accreditation and audit. The division between these two types of approach is based on the concept of “**self-accreditation**” which has its origin in the British system dating back to the days of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). The more mature institutions, which are judged to be developed in their internal quality assurance, are no longer required to undergo external accreditation, and currently these are the eight institutions being funded by the University Grants Committee (UGC). Following the U.K. model, a system of audit has been put in place for these institutions. At the degree level, audit was carried out by the University Grants Committee (UGC), through the Teaching and Learning Quality Process Review (TLQPR). Starting 2008, quality audit has been conducted by the Quality Assurance Council under the UGC. The objective of Quality Audit is “an audit of an institution’s Fitness for Purpose in teaching and learning. The audit examines “**whether an institution has procedures in place appropriate for its stated purpose**”, whether it pursues activities and applies resources to achieve those purposes. The audit is conducted by a peer review panel, through site visits to the institution. The panel examines 11 focus areas relating to institutional issues, but selective programmes are also examined to provide evidence of institutional processes in quality assurance.

For **Self-financed Sub-degree programmes**, a system of review is carried out by the **Joint Quality Review Committee (JQRC)**, an independent organization set up by the publicly funded self-accrediting institutions under the UGC, to provide for a framework of peer review of their self-financed sub-degree programmes. The first phase of the review activities of JQRC has been carried out through Institutional Reviews (IR), the purpose of which is “to provide for a **peer review of the institutional structures and processes adopted for ensuring the quality of Self-financed Sub-degree programmes**, including structures and processes for ensuring the appropriate institutional support and environment.” This started with a “Preview”, which is a preliminary investigation into the quality assurance systems prevailing at Self-financed Programme Units (SSPUs) of the eight member institutions. This is then followed by a more in-

depth review conducted on an institutional basis, which is more evidence-based, and involves site visits and interactive dialogues with staff and members of the SSPUs.

The issues examined in an Institutional Review include :

- Policies and processes for academic planning;
- policies for quality assurance;
- processes for programme design, approval, and implementation, and monitoring;
- institutional support for quality; and
- indicators of quality and quality assurance

In terms of outcome, the conclusions reached by the UGC in audit reports, and those reached by JQRC in Institutional Review reports fall into two main types: commendations and recommendations. There is no approval or non-approval decision, as the purpose of the reviews is to encourage and facilitate improvement. The objectives of such reviews are also grounded in the concept of self-accreditation, which recognizes the academic autonomy of the institution and its ability to award qualifications and maintain standards without external approval.

Non-Self accrediting Institutions

For the **non-self-accrediting institutions**, they are required to undergo accreditation by the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ). Accreditation is conducted at both the institutional and programme level, leading to an ‘accredited’ or ‘non-accredited’ outcome.

The HKCAAVQ is formerly the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA) which was set up in 1990 as a statutory body, to be responsible mainly for the accreditation of institutions which were seeking to upgrade to become degree-awarding, and to accredit the programmes proposed by these institutions. The external quality assurance provided by HKCAA was later extended to include the sub-degree programmes offered by private institutions. By 2007, the Council was expanded to include accreditation of institutions and their programmes intended for upload onto the Qualifications Framework. Currently, the remit of the HKCAAVQ covers mainly private/ self-financed institutions (including institutions awarding degrees and sub-degrees), and two other publicly funded institutions outside the UGC. These institutions are required to be accredited by the HKCAAVQ on a periodic basis (with the exception of one institution : the Open University of Hong Kong which is self-accrediting but subject to periodic review).

Impact of the Different Approaches in External Quality Assurance

Effect of a Binary Divide

The adoption of two systems of external quality assurance in Hong Kong: accreditation and audit / review within a system with self-accrediting and non-self-accrediting institutions have sometimes led to concerns about fairness and comparability. For institutions which have to go through the accreditation process before they can mount degree programmes, or before they can upload programmes onto the Qualifications Framework, when other self-accrediting institutions are only required to go through their own internal processes, there are inevitably complaints of inequity. The opposite perspective is that self-accrediting institutions, being more mature, have established vigorous internal quality assurance systems, whereas non-self-accrediting institutions are usually newer institutions whose quality assurance systems are not fully developed.

The establishment of Joint Quality Review Committee in Hong Kong has to some extent alleviated some of these mis-conceptions about differences in treatment and in standard across the two systems and the two types of institutions. Even though JQRC does not conduct accreditation, the institutional reviews it conducts upon the self-financed sub-degree units of the self-accrediting institutions are conducted with equal vigor, and these have added an extra external safeguard in quality assurance on top of the internal systems of these institutions. Additionally, regular communication and exchange is maintained between the external quality assurance bodies of the two sectors so as to maintain comparability in standard across the two types of institutions.

Application of quality assurance to different institutions

Conversely, there could also be dissatisfaction in the situation where external quality assurance is conducted by one agency, but upon different types of institutions. For instance, when Taiwan was conducting accreditation upon the development plans of institutions in the 1990s, there were complaints against the use of the same set of accreditation criteria for different kinds of institutions. This later led to the classification of institutions into different categories with application of different sets of criteria (Chan 2008).

A similar scenario arose in Hong Kong when the accreditation work of HKCAA turned towards the private institutions from its earlier remit of public institutions. The former, being generally less well resourced, were suspicious that the standards for publicly funded institutions were being applied to them to their disadvantage. This led to changes in both the accreditation format and criteria and adoption of the “fit for purpose” objective.

Impact of Private Post-secondary Education on External Quality Assurance

As indicated in the foregoing paragraph, the rise of private post-secondary education in Hong Kong has made an impact upon the external quality assurance system. When the private providers, as new institutions, were subjected to external accreditation, they would be concerned about the apparent inequity in the system: out of concern for any possible difference in the

approach and standards adopted for the two systems of institutions, and also out of the concern for the costs of external accreditation.

The rise of private post-secondary education (offering sub-degrees such as Associate Degrees and Higher Diplomas) has spread over both the self-accrediting and non-accrediting sectors. Providers include private colleges, and the continuing education arms of the publicly funded institutions, which offer self-financed courses. Competition in this private post-secondary sector, together with the different requirements for external quality assurance, have led to controversial discussions and debates in the last few years and the government of Hong Kong has worked with the educational community and the external quality assurance bodies to address the issues concerned. With the establishment of JQRC to reinforce quality assurance for the self-accrediting institutions, and the reform of the HKCAA into HKCAAVQ for the non-self-accrediting sector, the efforts towards greater alignment between the two systems have been bearing fruitful results.

Another impact of the rise of the private post-secondary sector in Hong Kong may be seen in the way that the outcome of external quality assurance is publicized (or not publicized). While UGC audit reports from the degree sector are released in full to the public, accreditation reports from HKCAAVQ are not released (except for announcing the names of accredited institutions). At the same time, JQRC review reports pertaining to the self-financed sub-degree sector, are not released in full but only released as summary reports. This could be an interesting case where the outcomes of external quality assurance are perceived to have an impact on the competitiveness of the institutions and thus there may be a necessity for caution when these are considered for public release.

In some systems, the publication of the outcome of external quality assurance is used a tool for enhancing quality assurance, but in a system where there is keen competition among the institutions, this may not work well and may bring about contrary effects. In systems like these, it may be possible to reinforce external quality assurance by the publication of institutional information. Hong Kong is advancing towards this trend, with the introduction of web-based information on the institutions offering self-financed sub-degree programmes, which include information on institutions / staff / student profiles and statistics on graduation and articulation of graduates into further education. It appears this may be a way forward: empowering the consumers through the provision of information, in addition to external quality assurance.

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