

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND EVALUATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

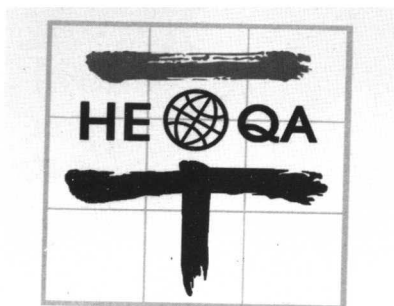


**Research Discoveries
and
Evaluation Experiences
from
Five
Continents**

Edited by
Hu Zuying Qu Hengchang

Beijing Normal University Press





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PREFACE

Gu Mingyuan

Beijing Normal University

In those congenial spring days of sunshine in 1996, more than 100 participants from 20-odd countries and areas assembled in Beijing, the Chinese capital with a long history, to hold an International Conference on Quality Assurance and Assessment of Higher Education.

The main theme of the conference was quality assurance and assessment of higher education. The conference attendants discussed a lot of issues, such as the organization and implementation of educational assessment, the assessment of educational conditions and effects, and the internationalization of educational assessment.

Education is a cause for the future. Students studying at school today are supposed to enter society in the 21st century and to serve the future society, which, I assume, will be rife with various contradictions as well as hopes. It is expected that education can nurture skilled people of various kinds who will solve difficult problems confronting man and promote the progress of society. And in this aspect, there is no shirking the responsibility for higher education, which should play a greater part in the development of society. Nonetheless, it is a common concern as to quality assurance of higher education. Assessment of higher education is a means to guarantee educational quality.

Educational assessment is a value judgment on educational process and its effects. It is a process of appraisal and evaluation of the efficacy and functioning of the educational system according to a given aim and established objectives. In carrying out the assessment, a system of indicators must be developed scientifically, information must be collected systematically, and an analysis must be made qualitatively and quantitatively. Researches into educational assessment and its practice have had a history of almost one hundred years. However, with the advance of times and the development of education, theories and methods of educational assessment have both been evolving continuously. Meantime, in the practice of educational assessment, it is frequently found out that effects brought about by educational assessment tend to have great differences from time to time. At one time, educational assessment may motivate teacher and student, thus playing an active role in giving impetus to educational development; at other times it may provoke some misunderstandings and therefore become the obstacle, which is detrimental to the

development of education. These phenomena indicate that theories and practice of educational assessment need further research so that it will be more scientific and objective and play an active and facilitative role in educational development and reform.

Chinese higher education is now in the course of fundamental transformation, at once confronting the rapid development of science and technology and the dramatic change of Chinese society. China has now been undergoing two changes: one from the prior system of planned economy to the socialist system of market economy, and the other from a coarse economy to an intensive economy. Both the progress of science and technology and the transformation of Chinese economy have made different demands upon higher education than ever before. For this reason, how education can adapt to the development and change of the current situations becomes a concern that every educator should think about day and night. Not long ago Chairman Jiang Zemin, while talking with the heads of four transportation universities, pointed out that educational work must further solve two issues of significance: one is that education must totally meet the needs of training skilled persons of various kinds demanded by the construction of modernization; and the other is that the quality and efficiency of education must be overall improved. This talk succinctly outlined the tasks that Chinese higher education are now facing. They can also be considered as criteria of assessing Chinese higher education. When we assess the quality and effects of Chinese higher education, we must apply these two criteria. Of course, this is only an overall objective. In order to realize this overall objective, many conditions are needed to guarantee its realization. For example, are specialties to meet the needs of social development? Are curricula to be in accordance with the demands of scientific and technological development and the needs of training skilled people? Is it appropriate to distribute the resources of teaching staff? and has the input of educational funding been given as planned, etc. The development of Chinese higher education needs educational assessment to provide all sorts of information concerning the assuring system for guaranteeing the realization of the overall objective and for providing evidence for scientific decision making in the development and reform of education.

In China, it has been only more than one decade since research on assessment of higher education and practical activities began. However, the decade has seen a tremendous development in this field. Ten years ago only part of engineering and technology institutions conducted research in assessment of higher education under the leadership of the State Education Commission. Later, several dozen institutions of higher education of various kinds across the country gathered together to establish a cooperating group of higher education assessment research, which made it an important research project to conduct research in assessment of higher education and its practice. These studies have furnished theoretical and practical bases for the systematization and standardization of following

assessment of higher education. In January of 1994 the Association of Higher Education Assessment of Chinese Higher Education Society was set up in Changchun, Jilin Province, with its membership widespread in various institutions of higher education and educational administrative sections in the whole country. A great achievement was made in the past two years. The international conference was, I believe, a good opportunity to review the research products of the association. The State Education Commission of China also has attached importance to educational assessment. In 1990, It promulgated " Provisional Regulations of Educational Assessment for Regular Institutions of Higher Education". After that, the State Education Commission formed many kinds of regulations concerning assessment. Besides, in every college and university across the country teaching assessment activities were undergone, with progress having been made both theoretically and practically. After all, however, the period of time during which we have conducted research on assessment of higher education is relatively short, our experience is still lacking, and the assessment theory is yet to be improved. It is very necessary for us to absorb experiences from other countries. And this international conference provided a great opportunity for scholars from different countries to exchange experiences and for us to learn from our colleagues.

This conference was organized by Chinese Association of Higher Education Assessment with the help of Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation. It was sponsored by the America-Sino Educational Exchange Service Company and International Center for Educational Quality Assurance and Hong Kong Policy Research Institute Limited. The Conference was hosted by the International and Comparative Education Research Institute, Beijing Normal University. The Organizing Committee of the Conference extends its heart-felt thanks to the above institutions.

The international conference was a good forum of academic exchange for scholars from different countries, and meantime it was also a great opportunity for us to get to know each other and to further friendship. This book has collected excellent conference papers in the hope that it will disseminate the good experiences and fresh theoretical view points to every corner of the world. It is my belief that the publication of this book will of necessity play a positive role in promoting quality assurance and assessment of higher education in all countries over the world.

THE EVOLUTION OF QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN HONG KONG

Andrew S. L. Chuang J. P.

Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation

Introduction

1. My presentation considers the role of an external quality assurance agency in supporting and assuring development and standards of institutions and programs in a rapidly expanding and evolving higher education system.
2. The example chosen is Hong Kong and the role of the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA) since its establishment six years ago.
3. The paper discusses the emergence of quality assurance in higher education and follows with interpretations of commonly used terms. The Hong Kong context, in terms of geography, economy and education are presented in order to consider an Hong Kong quality assurance initiative as an example. Then, the effects of investment in, and the expansion of higher education in Hong Kong are explored in connection with the development of the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA). The role, functions and review procedures of the HKCAA are described in the context of the territory's higher education system. In addition, the autonomy of institutions, the advantages and disadvantages of external quality assurance agencies and the effectiveness of quality assurance are discussed. The paper concludes with a brief comment about the Hong Kong model in relation to peer review, and makes reference to the need for the evolution of quality assurance activities as higher education systems develop.

The emergence of quality assurance for post-secondary education

4. In most countries, until this century, only a very small percentage of the relevant age group received degree level education. Normally, they attained this by attending one of a small number of very prestigious institutions established to attract scholars to pursue their

academic interests. In social and academic terms, students emerging from these institutions were part of an elite, their quality and scholarship were considered self-evident.

5. World-wide over the past few decades there has been a dramatic expansion of higher education. This has been owing to rapid technological development, and the conviction that higher education is of significant benefit to society and the individual. The demand for, and the benefits of improved and more education has led to significant and increasing investment by governments in it.

6. Two trends contribute towards the ever increasing costs of higher education. The first is the labor intensive nature of higher education. As societies become more affluent, the cost of labor becomes relatively more expensive and staff costs in higher education become greater. The second, and more significant, is towards mass (and universal) higher education.

7. Participation rates of the relevant age group in higher education, at the turn of the century, would have been no greater than 1%, with many countries having virtually no higher education system. Recent figures for participation rates illustrate the move to mass higher education. It can be as high as 45% of the relevant age group, as in Sweden. Other examples are the USA 38%, UK 25%, Japan 37%, Hong Kong 18%, and China 1.5%. It should be noted that the comparative participation rates I have quoted are open to interpretation. However, they provide a comparison in relation to those undertaking bachelor's degrees, or equivalent, which would qualify for entry to postgraduate programs.

8. Significant investment in higher education has led to demands for assurances about quality and standards, their maintenance and enhancement. In addition, there are demands that higher education systems should be publicly accountable for standards and quality. Furthermore, credit transfer and the mobility of graduates across national frontiers for higher degrees and employments have also raised questions of comparability.

9. Now it may be useful to interpret and describe some commonly used terms.

Commonly used terms

10. Quality assurance and accreditation are used frequently. The former is a term often used to describe the process and activity of improving, maintaining and evaluating standards of higher education. There are many definitions and interpretations of it, but for our purposes the following brief interpretation is used.

The quality assurance of higher education includes all planned and systematic action necessary to provide confidence that standards of education, scholarship and qualification are

being maintained and enhanced.

11. Academic and professional accreditation are terms which can be considered to cover a major subset of quality assurance, and are often used to express quality assurance with a judgmental emphasis against particular standards. (The former is carried out by " educationists" the latter by professional groups.) In this context they are interpreted as follows:

Academic accreditation means the evaluation, assessment or other activity to determine whether or not the academic standards of an institution of higher education and/or its programs are comparable with (internationally) recognized standards.

Professional accreditation means the evaluation, assessment or other activity to determine whether or not the academic standards of an institution of higher education and/or its programs meet the defined and recognized standards of a profession.

12. In this paper Hong Kong is used as an example of a territory which has developed dramatically in recent years. These developments have led to an expansion of its higher education system, the background and consequences, particularly for quality assurance and academic standards are discussed.

The Hong Kong Context

13. It is necessary before considering Hong Kong's education system, and the need for quality initiatives, to provide a background of the development and context of the territory.

14. Hong Kong is a small rocky, British administered, enclave, a little over 1 000sq km in size. It is situated at the southeastern tip of China. (China is about 9 600 times larger than Hong Kong.)

15. The territory's economic growth since its establishment about 150 years ago, has been remarkable. In the middle of the nineteenth century it had few houses, and was considered as not a good proposition for development. History has demonstrated that this view was incorrect as Hong Kong is an economic success story, having become the world's tenth largest trading territory. There is an annual per capita income of approximately US \$ 16 000, having overtaken the UK, being second only to Japan in Asia. This extraordinary development has occurred in a tiny territory whose only resources are its population of six million people and a deep water harbor.

16. Hong Kong's fast developing economy (the real annual Gross Domestic Product grew at

over 6% per annum between 1981 to 1991) has required a better trained and educated workforce in order to shift from a low to a high grade manufacturing base, and to knowledge intensive activities and financial services. The majority of Hong Kong's labor intensive manufacturing has now been relocated in China, and Hong Kong has increasingly become involved in providing support services, technological expertise and re-export trade. Much of Hong Kong's economic success has relied on its major trading partner, China.

Hong Kong's education system

17. Education is one of the leading issues in Hong Kong and generates passion and debate. The people of Hong Kong consider that education is a reliable path to a successful career and almost all parents are ambitious for their children to have the best available. Degree level education is most parents' goal for their children.

18. The importance that Hong Kong people and the Government attach to education is demonstrated by it being the largest single item in the Government budget. Typically, it comprises around 17% of Government expenditure.

19. There are nine years of compulsory education in Hong Kong, commencing at the age of six. These comprise six years of primary schooling and three years of junior secondary schooling.

20. Senior secondary school of two years ends with a public examination. Those who aspire to higher education then attend a two-year school course which leads to the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination. Successful candidates qualify for entry to degree level education.

21. In terms of tertiary education, just over ten years ago Hong Kong only had two degree awarding institutions and only around 1.5% of the relevant age group had access to them. Since then there has been a dramatic expansion of higher education, and there are now ten degree awarding tertiary institutions with 18% of the age group entering degree level education.

22. Most bachelor's degree programs are three years full-time (or longer part-time) and generally follow a UK pattern. However, some institutions are influenced by the USA model. Those graduates who perform well on first degrees generally can obtain admission to postgraduate programs.

23. Although there is no ranking of Hong Kong's tertiary institutions, the oldest ones are

often regarded as being the most prestigious. Consequently, competition is greater for a degree place at them and they tend to have students who performed best in their Hong Kong Advanced Level Examinations.

Expansion and quality

24. The Hong Kong Government has invested significantly in higher education, expanding existing tertiary institutions, establishing new ones and upgrading institutions to enable them to offer degree programs.

25. This expansion policy has also enabled the development of new degree programs in response to social and economic requirements.

26. The accelerated rate of these changes inevitably has a destabilizing effect on the higher education system. This, together with the high costs, the need to provide guidance and to monitor the developing institutions, has encouraged initiatives in the maintenance of standards and quality assurance. One such initiative is the establishment of Hong Kong's own academic accreditation authority, the HKCAA.

The Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA)

27. During the early 1980s there were only two degree awarding institutions in Hong Kong, the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. In line with the policy of expanding and upgrading the higher education system, two other tertiary institutions, the Hong Kong Polytechnic and the Hong Kong Baptist College were moving towards a position where they could offer degree courses. To support them, and to ensure appropriate standards would be applied, the Hong Kong Government requested an established accreditation organization in the UK, the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) to advise on standards of the institutions and the appropriateness of their offering degree courses.

28. Government realized that continued reliance on an overseas organization was not appropriate and that it would be desirable to consider the establishment of a Hong Kong system. To this end it was decided, in 1987, that a Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA) should take over the work previously undertaken by the CNAA and that there should be a phased evolution of a Hong Kong system of academic accreditation. After considerable planning, the HKCAA came into being as a statutory body in June 1990. The HKCAA is a quasi-autonomous non-Governmental organization (although independent,

it receives the majority of its funds from Government and is financially accountable to it).

29. Those setting up the HKCAA, in the three years prior to its establishment traveled extensively to discuss and investigate accreditation systems in other parts of the world. In developing accreditation for Hong Kong, lessons were learned from the experience of others.

30. The HKCAA provides authoritative advice to the Hong Kong Government on the standards of degree courses in higher education institutions in Hong Kong. One way in which it carries out this task is through academic accreditation, that is; validating and revalidating programs conducted by institutions; or reviewing the general standards of institutions. It was recognized that the HKCAA's role and functions should be broader than the 'evaluation' of the standards of degree programmes. Those setting up the HKCAA were sufficiently experienced in the development of modern tertiary education that they were able to introduce the appropriate quality assurance activities into the HKCAA's role and functions to enable it to support developments in the system. This is reflected in the following basic principles on which the HKCAA operates:

- (a) Hong Kong benefits from an independent accreditation authority advising, and responsible to, the Government;
- (b) degree awarding institutions in Hong Kong should primarily be responsible for their own academic standards;
- (c) academic freedom and autonomy should be a right which carries with it the responsibility for achieving and maintaining the highest standards and quality of tertiary education;
- (d) institutional confidence in their own internal methods of quality control develop best when tested by some external peer review;
- (e) an accreditation authority must be capable of helping to strengthen the institutions' own procedures in order to increase the validity and reliability of standards.

31. The role of the HKCAA, in addition to program and institutional reviews, is to:

- (a) recognize an institution as having the ability to validate or revalidate courses conducted by it, subject to periodical reviews;
- (b) establish and maintain relationships with accreditation agencies outside Hong Kong and to keep under review systems of academic accreditation worldwide;
- (c) disseminate information on academic standards and degree courses and good accreditation methods and practices;
- (d) conduct seminars, conferences and other forms of developmental activities, and to assist in maintaining and monitoring academic standards;
- (e) advise the Government on all matters pertaining to academic accreditation;
- (f) carry out other functions connected with accreditation as may be permitted or assigned by the Government.

Three other factors underlie Hong Kong's accreditation activities, namely the appointment of experienced professionals to administer the HKCAA, support by an international register of specialists, and its governing Council which includes in its membership people of international experience and high reputation.

32. The whole thrust of the HKCAA is via a constructive, positive approach, helping the tertiary institutions to develop programs, standards and goals.

The HKCAA in context

33. Before describing the HKCAA's work, it is important to put its establishment in context with Hong Kong's tertiary education system.

34. There are now ten degree awarding institutions in Hong Kong. Three of these, the University of Hong Kong, the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (established respectively in 1911, 1963 and 1991) are deemed self-regulating as regards degree programs, and have not been subject to scrutiny by the HKCAA. However, they have been subject to some general external reviews by Hong Kong's higher education funding body, the University Grants Committee (UGC).

35. The next degree awarding institutions to be established were the Hong Kong Polytechnic (established in 1972, and first awarding degrees in 1982); the City Polytechnic of Hong Kong (established in 1984 to award degrees) and the Hong Kong Baptist College (established in 1956, and first awarding degrees in 1986).

36. Part of the HKCAA's role, and indeed a guiding principle, is to help and encourage institutions to become self-regulating in terms of the validation of courses and programs. In this respect, following a significant amount of work in relation to the validation of degree programs, the two polytechnics and the Baptist College have achieved self-accreditation and are now in the category of the three universities. They are now called the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, the City University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Baptist University.

37. In considering the HKCAA's activities it is important to realize that it was established at a time of great change for Hong Kong's tertiary education system, and, in terms of its role and functions, it has been required to play its part in the development of new institutions and in the upgrading of existing ones.