

Achieving Quality Assurance and Moving to a World Class University in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Globalization in the 21st century has brought innumerable challenges and opportunities to universities and countries. Universities are primarily concerned with how to ensure the quality of their education and how to boost their local and global competitiveness. The pressure from both international competition and public accountability on universities will continue to increase the importance of university ranking (UR) and university quality assurance (UQA). The purpose of this paper is to point out that the current higher education evaluation and accreditation in Taiwan have helped the universities in Taiwan to achieve quality assurance and move to a world-class university (WCU) in the 21st Century. In this paper, the roles of UR and UQA as well as internal quality assurance (IQA) and external quality assurance (EQA) are discussed first. Then, the status of higher education institutional and program evaluations in Taiwan are presented. Finally, three challenges facing higher education institutional and program evaluations are pointed out as follows: (1) Quality culture has not been well formed, (2) Faculty and staff feel overloaded, and (3) The try-out of self-conducted and external program evaluation is off the track. In order to achieve UQA and move to a WCU in the 21st century, all stakeholders of UQA in Taiwan should think globally and act locally to overcome the above challenges as soon as possible.

Keywords: higher education, quality assurance, world-class university

Achieving Quality Assurance and Moving to a World Class University in the 21st Century

The East Asian region, including countries such as China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Vietnam, that have used Chinese characters and influenced by the culture of China is known as the Chinese-character culture sphere – spelled as “漢字文化圈” and pronounced as “Hànzi wénhuà quān” in Chinese, the Sinosphere, Sinic world or the Confucian world. The people in this region use chopsticks to pick up foods, so this region is also called the chopsticks sphere. The people in the chopsticks sphere highly value education and the students there compete fiercely for entering leading universities. In the past, recruiting top quality students is the most crucial factor in a university's ability to maintain its national reputation. In the 21st century impacted by globalization, many universities in the chopsticks sphere not only want to become a national leading university but also desire to become a world-class university (WCU). The purpose of this paper is to point out that the current higher education evaluation and accreditation in Taiwan have helped the universities in Taiwan to achieve quality assurance and move to a WCU in the 21st Century.

“University Quality Assurance (UQA) and University Ranking (UR)” or “Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) and External Quality Assurance (EQA)” Should Be Like A Pair of Chopsticks

A WCU is not achieved by self-declaration. Its status is basically conferred by global university rankings. Different rankings have different scopes and methodologies. No matter what the definition is associated with WCU, it certainly implies that a WCU is assessed based on a predefined set of criteria and standards of excellence which are internationally comparable (MENA, 2013). Salmi (2009) and Russell Group (2012) pointed out the following three characteristics of WCU: (1) Concentration of talent--a high concentration or critical mass of

talent, including faculty, staff and students; (2) Abundant resources--sufficient resources to provide an extensive, comprehensive learning environment and a rich environment for advanced research; and (3) Favorable governance--favorable governance allowing and encouraging autonomy, strategic vision, innovation, efficient resource management and flexibility. Hamilton (2012) viewed that a WCU comes down to the following four things: (1) Outstanding people, (2) A focus on research excellence underpinned by an international and open outlook, (3) A commitment to high-quality education, and (4) Sustainable funding to ensure excellence and access. Apparently, talented people and sustainable funding are in common in the above two groups of characteristics.

A quality university should fulfill the following three major roles in excellence: (1) education of its students, (2) research, development and dissemination of knowledge, and (3) activities contributing to its community and society (Levin, Jeong, & Ou, 2006). However, most of the existing rankings put more weight on research performance rather than the quality of teaching (Shen, nd). Thus, a WCU is widely seen as a world-class research university. For example, Times Higher Education (THE, 2012a) declared that its Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings 2012-2013 are the only global university performance tables to judge research-led universities across all their core missions--teaching, research, knowledge transfer and international outlook. However, as shown in Figure 1, the breadth and depth of research performance of a university are highly weighted. It has been criticized that comparing with other academic activities, research performance is easier to obtain from international data, and the other performances are largely identified by reputations and perceptions (Shen, nd).

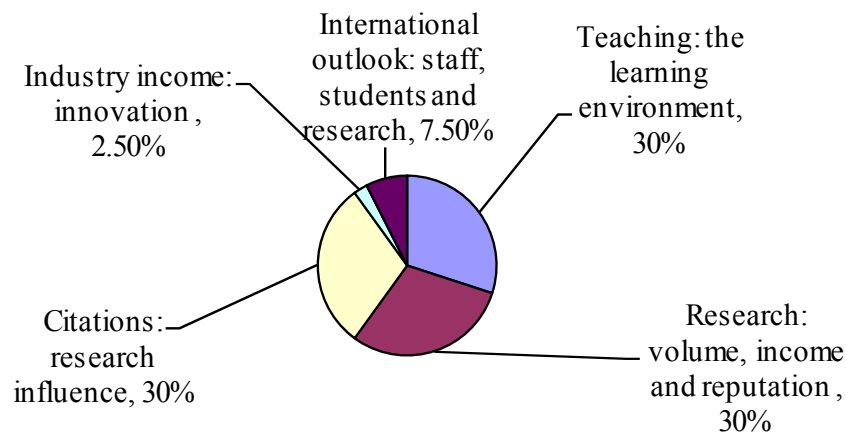


Figure 1. The five categories of performance indicators adopted by the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2012-2013

“Achieving world-class status is a marathon, not a sprint, notes Jamil Salmi, but rapid progress can be made with the right regimen--particularly when starting from scratch” (THE, 2012b). Based on the findings from case studies, Salmi (2013) pointed out that among the key accelerating factors supporting the quest for becoming a WCU, the most influential one appears to be reliance on the diaspora. He identified five effective ways of rapidly building up a WCU as follows: (1) bringing overseas scholars back to their country of origin, (2) the use of English as the main working language, (3) concentrating on niche areas, such as the science and engineering disciplines, (4) using benchmarking to orient an institution’s upgrading efforts, and (5) introducing curriculum and pedagogical innovations.

Quality can be considered as exceptionality, excellence, zero errors, fitness for purpose, transformation, reshaping, threshold, enhancement or value for money; and university quality assurance (UQA) is the activity that aims at maintaining and raising quality (Parri, 2006).

According to UNESCO’s (1998) “World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century”, “quality in higher education is a multidimensional concept, which should

embrace all its functions and activities: teaching and academic programs, research and scholarship, staffing, students, buildings, facilities, equipment, services to the community and the academic environment” (Article 11) . This implies that in terms of quality the criteria and standards of excellence predefined in the existing global university rankings are too narrow.

Quality assurance (QA) is generally understood as “any systematic process of checking to see whether a product or service being developed is meeting specified requirements” (Pavlenko, Bojan, & Trif, nd). QA is based on the following three main principles: control, accountability and improvement (Parri, 2006). According to its customers, university quality assurance (UQA) can be divided into internal quality assurance (IQA) and external quality assurance (EQA). IQA aims at institutional development and assessment of internal accountability, while EQA aims at achieving public accountability. Both IQA and EQA are necessary for a university in order to prove to its internal and external customers that the goals set by the university will be achieved (Parri, 2006). UNESCO’s (1998) “World Declaration” also declares:

Internal self-evaluation and external review, conducted openly by independent specialists, if possible with international expertise, are vital for enhancing quality. Independent national bodies should be established and comparative standards of quality, recognized at international level, should be defined. Due attention should be paid to specific institutional, national and regional contexts in order to take into account diversity and to avoid uniformity. Stakeholders should be an integral part of the institutional evaluation process. (Article 11)

That is to say, the relationship between university quality assurance (UQA) and university ranking (UR) could be cursorily presented in Figure 2. Ideally, both UQA and UR

should be like a pair of chopsticks which work together to effectively and simultaneously assure substantial quality and win a high reputation. In terms of UQA, both EQA and IQA should also be like a pair of chopsticks to collaboratively assure and enhance university quality. If the frequency of use is considered, IQA and EQA are like the fork and the knife, respectively (see Figure 3).

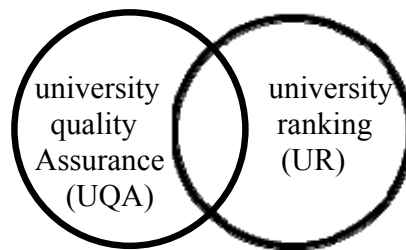


Figure 2. A cursory difference between university quality assurance (UQA) and university ranking (UR)



Figure 3. Chopsticks as well as fork and knife as a metaphor of IQA and EQA

The Current Higher Education Evaluations in Taiwan Have Helped Universities Assure and Enhance Their Quality but Are Facing Several Challenges

The following approaches are often used in UQA: (1) Quality assessment—It is generally conducted in the following four steps—define what quality is, set assessment standards, compare the latter with the real outcome and decide to what extent the standards are met; (2) Quality

audit—It investigates whether the process of activity is efficient; (3) Accreditation—It is often delegated by the government to specially formed assessment agencies as it is common in accreditation of institutions and programs; and (4) Quality control—It is a system that checks whether the produced product or offered service meets the set standards (Parri, 2006).

In Taiwan, the evaluation of all universities/colleges is mandated by the University Act as follows:

Universities shall carry out self-evaluation on instruction, research, services, guidance, institutional administration, student participation and so forth regularly; regulations for the evaluation shall be formulated by the universities.

The Ministry of Education, in order to promote the development of universities, shall organize an Evaluation Committee, entrust academic communities or professional evaluation institutions to carry out regular evaluation on universities and publish the results as the reference for governmental subsidies and adjust the scale of development by universities; rules of evaluation shall be formulated by the Ministry of Education (Article 5).

At present, the Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan (HEEACT) and the Taiwan Assessment and Evaluation Association (TWAEA) have been entrusted to conduct the institutional and program evaluations of the universities/colleges in the track of higher education (HE) and the universities/colleges of technology in the track of technological and vocational education (TVE), respectively. However, the evaluation of medical schools is conducted and by the Taiwan Medical Accreditation Council (TMAC) and nursing programs by the Taiwan Nursing Accreditation Council (TNAC). In addition, post-secondary educational institutions and programs may apply for exemption from the evaluation conducted

by HEEACT and TWAEA if they voluntarily receive the evaluation conducted by other professional accreditors recognized by the Ministry of Education, such as the Institute of Engineering Education Taiwan (IEET), which has been involved in accreditation of engineering, computing, technical, and architectural education, as well as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). All accredited programs are posted at the website - Taiwan Higher Education Institutions Accreditation Results (TWHEIAR; <http://twheiar.heeact.edu.tw/>), which is managed by HEEACT (Lee, Wei, & Wang, 2013).

At present, the higher education institutions in Taiwan receive mandated accredited evaluation every six years, while higher education programs receive mandated accredited evaluation every five years. The PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) cycle and the following five domains of evaluation were adopted in the newly completed institutional evaluation: (1) institutional self-positioning, (2) institutional governance and management, (3) teaching and learning resources, (4) accountability and social responsibility, and (5) continuous improvement and quality assurance mechanism. The PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) cycle and the following five domains are adopted in the current program evaluation: (1) Rationale, goals, and features of program, (2) Curriculum planning and design, (3) Faculty qualifications and instructional quality, (4) Learning resources and environment, and (5) Organizational and administrative operations as well as self-improvement mechanism. Both institutional and program evaluations are conducted in the following five stages: preparation, self-evaluation, site visit, decision-making and follow-up. When conducting site visits, all peer reviewers are external. The final results are categorized into three statuses: “accredited,” “accredited conditionally” or “denial.” Obviously, the higher education institutional and program evaluations adopt the quality assurance approach which

combines both “quality assessment” and “accreditation” mentioned earlier (Lee, Wei, & Wang, 2013).

People hold different judgments on the current higher education evaluations in Taiwan. Many stakeholders appraise that the current evaluations have substantially helped universities assure and enhance their quality. However, the current evaluations are facing the following challenges:

1. Quality culture has not been well formed

As Damme (2011) pointed out, an institutional quality culture includes: (1) A transparent and active commitment to quality at all levels, (2) A willingness to engage in critical self-evaluation, (3) An internal regulatory framework with clear and consistent procedures, (4) Explicit and clearly assigned responsibilities for quality control and assessment, (5) A drive to obtain feedback from a variety of internal and external constituencies, (6) A clear commitment to identify and disseminate good practice, and (7) Prompt, appropriate, and sensitive managerial action to redress problems, supported by adequate information. Based on the above criteria, quality culture has not been well formed in the universities of Taiwan. Firm policies and effective supports will help the formation of quality culture.

2. Faculty and staff feel overloaded

Due to the heavy burdens from a variety of evaluations and project competitions, university faculty and staff feel overloaded. Thus, integrating various evaluations appropriately and identifying key evaluation criteria are urgently needed.

3. The try-out of self-conducted and external program evaluation is off the track

The Ministry of Education has required 34 higher education institutions to try out self-conducted and external program evaluation. This try-out is inconsistent with the University

Act, in which both self-evaluation and third-party evaluation are required. At least, a third-party audit should be added to the self-conducted and external program evaluation.

In order to achieve UQA and move to a WCU in the 21st century, all stakeholders of UQA in Taiwan should think globally and act locally to overcome the above challenges as soon as possible.

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