Enhancing Internal Quality Assurance Mechanism at HEI through Responsive Program Evaluation

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Abstract

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should be more responsive and routinely take proactive role in quality assurance in time with the internationalization of education and massification of enrolment in academic programs offered. This can be done through continuous quality improvement by enhancing, complementing and developing HEI internal quality assurance mechanisms. Hence, the first part will observe the development of a proposed responsive outcome evaluation as a complementary tool towards heightening the comprehensiveness of existing quality assurance mechanisms. The second part of the paper will further discuss and elaborate the qualitative nature of the proposed self-evaluation as a meaningful dialectic device towards continuous quality improvement of programs. In the proposed qualitative and responsive program evaluation, the quality of an academic program is explored from the perspectives of stakeholders. Domains of change are the main reference in this proposed responsive program evaluation. These domains of change focus on knowledge, attitude, skills and aspirations (KASA) and broad indicators of outcomes derived from the program outcomes, course learning outcomes and graduate qualities promised to be catered to stakeholders. The proposed qualitative and responsive outcome evaluation as an alternative internal quality assurance mechanism is believed to complement the existing internal quality assurance mechanisms by including the aspects which relate directly to the stakeholders inclusive of the program’s provider, lecturers, graduates and also employers. With relevant minor modification, the proposed responsive outcome evaluation could be employed in other educational programs and higher education institutions.

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Keywords: Internal Quality Assurance Mechanism; Responsive Program Evaluation; Qualitative evaluation

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1. Background

Globalization has not only changed the landscape and trends of the world economy but also higher education environment in many countries. Consequently, internationalization or cross-border higher education or transnational education is rapidly taking place. Arrangements are made by governments and education institutions to cater not only their domestic demand of higher education but also demand from abroad.

The concepts of inclusiveness and democratization in education to reduce social inequalities of opportunities in life have also been highlighted in government agendas of many countries. This has led to mass enrolment of students and hikes in graduates churned by public and private educational providers. Altbach and colleagues (2009) reported a 53 percent increase between 2000 and 2007 in overall global higher education enrollments. In Malaysia, as of December 2011, the total enrolment at public higher education institutions increased to 508,256 from the previous year total of 462,780 students (MOHE, 2011). According to Altbach (1999), the global phenomenon has pressured every education systems and no country is impervious. This massification of enrolment has been one of the major 21st century higher education realities discussed globally (Altbach and Salmi, 2011; Jung and Harman, 2009; Morshidi, 2006). Responsiveness of the government and educators at higher education institutions (HEIs) is crucial and routine proactive role must be taken in assuring quality of programs offered, in time with the internationalization of education and massification of enrolment (Nethi 2005, p.15).

HEIs in Malaysia employ both internal and external quality assurance mechanisms in their quality assurance (QA) system. Currently, Malaysian Qualification Agency or MQA is playing its role in the process of accrediting programs offered. Quality audit, ISO Standards and Peer Reviews are also in the list of external mechanisms for HEI continuous quality improvement of programs and institutions. At institutional level, academic assessment; self-evaluations of resources and activities in teaching and learning process, self-accreditation, and students/staff feedback have become a routine process under internal QA mechanisms. (Please refer Table 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Assurance Mechanisms</th>
<th>Example of Mechanisms</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| I. External                  | • Accreditation of programs  
|                              | • Peer Review          
|                              | • Validation           
|                              | • Quality Audit        
|                              | • International Standards i.e. ISO |
| II. Internal                 | • Self-Evaluations     
|                              | • Self-Accreditation    
|                              | • Educational Assessment|
|                              | • Students/Staff Feedback |

2. The Gap in the current QA System

Comprehensive QA system should examine the multi-dimensional concepts of quality from three interrelated dimensions, the quality of the human and material resources available (inputs), the quality of the management and teaching/learning processes taking place (process), and the quality of the results (outputs or outcomes) (Frazer 1994, Cheng & Tam 1997 and Graue & Naidoo, 2002). This is in accordance to program’s Logic Model that consists of four dimensions- input, process, output and outcome. Unfortunately, in Malaysia both external and internal mechanisms of QA system mainly focus on the input, process and output dimensions only. The outcome dimension that would have completed the dimensions towards a comprehensive quality assurance system is seldom given its due attention. (Please refer Figure 1)
Additionally, HEI has been observed to take the top-down management-oriented approach in dealing with quality by promoting a QA system that centers on compliance to standards and a top-down management-oriented approach. According to Guba & Lincoln (1989) this top-down management-oriented approach has several flaws. First, the goals and intentions of policy makers in making judgment would lead to management bias. Second, the findings are hardly used in decision making and third, the stakeholders’ experiences and expertise and dialogue with and between stakeholders are being sidelined although their interests are at stake (Abma, 2006, p.1).

Fig. 1. The Gap in Quality Assurance System

Thus, a more responsive internal quality assurance mechanism is proposed in a form of qualitative outcome evaluation as a complement to the existing QA mechanisms. This internal QA mechanism will be focusing on quality as transformation and quality as fitness for purposes. Meaningful changes of participants of the program are gathered as the significant indicators of quality as transformation and issues that are raised by curriculum officers, lecturers and employers of the graduates will be the significant indicators of quality as fitness for purposes.

The following discussions provide the framework for the proposed mechanism. In addition, practical suggestions regarding purposive sampling and data gathering method and types of outcomes needed from participants/stakeholders are also discussed. To ease the interpretation of the meanings derived from the information gathered, a list of broad indicators for each domain complements the discussions of data analysis.
3. Methodology

3.1. The proposed Qualitative Evaluation

Evaluations of educational programs were primarily experimental, quasi-experimental and survey; utilizing quantitative outcome measures of programme effectiveness. According to Bassey (1999), the problem with the demands of objectivity, experiments and statistical proof is the heterogeneity of individuals and educational institutions that comes with different attributes, abilities, aptitudes, aims, values, perspectives, needs etc. These players “…are located within complex social contexts with all the implications and influences that this entails”.

Such approaches according to Norris and Simons, “…failed to capture the complexities of these programmes in practice and provide adequate evidence as basis for action” (as cited in Simons, 2010, p.14). Simons further elaborated that,

“…many programmes were specific and innovative. No comparative control group could be established to make sense of an experimental design, no benchmark of ‘normal’ practice existed with which to compare the innovation, and focusing on pre/post testing as the sole indicator of the worth of the programme clearly short of representing the programme in action” (Simon, 2010).

As cited by Gaynor Lloyd-Jones (2003), “qualitative design displays an interactive, dynamic, and emergent character in which the aims, strategies, data, analysis, and validity are woven together in the process of the study (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Maxwell, 1996; Becker, 1996)”. Thus, a qualitative and responsive outcome evaluation is proposed in an effort to capture the complexities of the program in practice, and the findings would significantly be put as evidence as basis of informed continuous improvement.

3.2. Responsive Outcome Evaluation

Responsive program evaluation was first introduced by Stake (1989) focusing on “…redirecting data gathering and interpretive efforts around emerging issues of importance” (Abma, 2006, p.280). This proposed outcome evaluation is responsive in nature by responding to the issues and concerns raised by its stakeholders. The evaluation will help the stakeholders to become better acquainted with the quality of the program (Stake, 2004, p.8).

Valuable insights are taken into account in defining the “real meaning” of stakeholders’ life experience going through the program (graduating students and graduates) or dealing with the program’s products and processes (employers, curriculum officers and lecturers). It is also responsive in nature because in the evaluation’s processes and findings, different valuable perspectives of the participants/stakeholders will be gathered, clarified and shared.

Stake (2004) reminds that the idea is to convey the sense of value through personal experience and this is done by describing the case (p.26). Stories of change can be useful in giving some sense of merit and shortcoming from the vivid experience told by participants. According to Duque & Weeks (2010, p. 85), the focus now is shifting to students as the primary consumer of higher education service and “…uses perceived quality and satisfaction ratings as the main measures of service performance.” They further argued that this approach might be controversial if students are perceived as passive recipients and they are viewed as commodities. Hence, in this proposed responsive outcome evaluation, stories of change should be largely derived graduating students and graduates of the program. This attention on students as active participants in the program evaluation will be a good recent enhancement in quality assurance as a whole.
3.3. The Sampling

As mentioned by Stake (2004) asserts that “One needs to learn as much as possible from those who know most” (p.5) and in discussing about data gathering, time is of major concern and the evaluator should select “…data sources partly on the basis of high likelihood of cooperation” (p.6). According to Simons (2002), interviews should be done with key players of the case, who have the key role which the researcher will likely learn most about the issue in question. Hence, in order to maximize learning of the issue in question and part of triangulation strategies, five types of purposive sampling should be used for this evaluation:

3.3.1. Heterogeneity/maximum variations sampling

- Graduating students vs. Graduates vs. lecturers

3.3.2. Homogenous sampling: information-rich participants

- Graduating students – 3 from each class of final year
- Three (3) Lecturers

3.3.3. Typical case sampling: key informants

- Program coordinator & Two (2) Senior lecture

3.3.4. Politically important sampling

- Two (2) Curriculum officers

3.3.5. Convenience sampling

- Three (3) Employers

4. Data Gathering Methods

In this proposed responsive evaluation, the researcher should be the anthropologist in “…describing or portraying stakeholders' interests as accurately as possible” by using thick descriptions (Stake, 1986, Stake & Abma, 2010). The researcher should take a democratic stance and establish relationship with the participants in such a way that their engagement in the evaluation process; they will share their ‘real life’ experience which is considered valuable to them. According to Creswell (1998), reciprocal relationship between the researcher and participants is crucial in qualitative research. The researcher should also be the “key instrument” and will be researching ‘with’ them, not simply gathering data on and about them for the researcher’s own project.

The perspectives of stakeholders may be explored through sessions of face-to-face interviews with curriculum officers, lecturers, graduating students, graduates and employers. Group interviews or focus group may also be employed with graduating students as a triangulation strategy. Semi-structured and open-ended questions to graduating students and graduates should be posed as a proactive strategy for enhancing meaningful sharing and clarifying sessions. Questions should revolve around the outcomes of the program. Outcomes are usually expressed as and indicated by knowledge, skills and attitudes. According to Hatry et al (1996), outcomes “…may relate to behavior, skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, condition, or other attributes. They are what participants know, think,
or can do; or how they behave; or what their condition is, that is different following the program”. These outcomes focus on meaningful changes to the participants in their knowledge, skills, attitudes, behavior as a result of the program implementation or intervention.

Member checking or respondent validation should also be employed to during or after the process and also at the end of analysis for clarification.

4.1. The Iterative Nature of Data Analysis

For the purpose of analysis, the data will be iteratively analyzed using the process of noticing, collecting and thinking as promoted by Seidel’s Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) (1999). The characteristics of Seidel’s QDA are Iterative/Progressive, Recursive and Holographic. These characteristics are based on the nature of the process which is non-linear, one part could call you back, each part contain the entirety and also cycle that will keep on repeating. Data are coded and categorized into themes accordingly to KASA and broad indicators as the main focus. Other themes may also arise and emerge from the process. Most Significant Changes or MSC technique (Davies, 2005) will then be employ to recognize and highlight the quality of the programs in terms of significant changes to knowledge, attitude, skills and aspirations.

Meaningful life experiences of curriculum officers and lecturers in implementing the program; changes of the graduating students and graduates in going through the program and also the perspectives of employers in supervising employed graduates are explored and analyzed in terms of knowledge, attitudes, skills and aspiration or in short KASA.

These domains of change that focus on KASA will also be guided by broad indicators of outcomes derived from the program outcomes, course learning outcomes and graduate qualities promised to be catered to stakeholders. These broad indicators consist of keywords would be used in determining the trends during data gathering and data analysis. Examples of broad indicators are shown in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From Program Outcomes</th>
<th>From Course Outcomes</th>
<th>From Graduate Qualities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Skills in English language communication</td>
<td>• Knowledge</td>
<td>• Effectiveness with and upon a body of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Skills of Information Technology</td>
<td>• Communication / Team Skills</td>
<td>• Lifelong learning preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Cultural awareness</td>
<td>• IT / Practical Skills</td>
<td>• Effectiveness in solving problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Critical thinking skills</td>
<td>• Ethics</td>
<td>• Level of professionalism in working autonomously and collaboratively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Work management ability</td>
<td>• Critical Thinking / Problem-solving Skills</td>
<td>• Level of commitment to ethical and social responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Work environment appraisal</td>
<td>• Social Skills / Responsibility</td>
<td>• Effectiveness in professional communication in professional practice and community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Continuous improvement at workplace</td>
<td>• Life-long Learning</td>
<td>• Perspectives as a professional and as a citizen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self-development</td>
<td>• Managerial / Entrepreneurial Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Broad Indicators
5. Conclusion

This proposed internal quality assurance mechanism complements the existing internal and external quality assurance mechanisms at HEI by including important aspects of stakeholders’ feedback. Adaptive in nature, this responsive self-evaluation of outcomes may be implemented at respective HEI in Malaysia with appropriate minor modification to cater to the uniqueness of each programs offered.

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