

Chairman's Message

主席序言



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Reflections on Accreditations

In this age of clamouring for accountability and transparency, Quality Assurance (QA) for institutions that provide public service, especially those receiving public subsidy, has become an obligation. For academic institutions in particular, it predominantly takes the form of structured internal processes accredited by an external body. As we look around the world at such practices, we would probably notice some interesting features.

There are numerous forms of accreditation, either amongst countries or regions that have been practising this for quite a number of years, or newcomers who are eager to join the league and establish some credibility. There is yet a “best practice” that is universally recognised. The job would have been so much easier if there were a magic formula for all to follow! All models continue to evolve, as a reflection of the rapidly changing cultural, political, social and economic environments within which academic institutions must operate. The outcome of such exercises, often elaborate and costly, still has some ways to go towards efficacy and credibility. QA, to a large extent, is regarded as a necessary evil, except by the agencies with vested interest. The difference in perspectives is quite expected. Practitioners do not believe in any external authority that can truly judge “quality”, while QA bodies want increasing responsibilities, and preferably authority, to fulfil their missions and to justify their existence.

We have to admit that all the less-than-perfect precedents are food for thought. To avoid falling into some of the unfortunate pitfalls, it might be useful for QA agencies to occasionally reflect on some fundamental premises.

對評審工作的一些想法

在這個大家都要求透明度與問責的年代，任何一間提供公眾服務，特別是得到公帑資助的機構，都免不了要做好質素保證。學術機構尤其如是，它們通常都有一套內部的機制，再引入外來的評審，從而取得某一種資格或認可。環顧全球，這種做法有不少值得討論的地方。

質素評審的模式五花八門，有些模式在某些國家或地區行之有素，有些新加入行列的機構則採用另類模式，務求建立其公信力。各施各法，卻至今仍未見到一個典範。如果有一個公認的最佳評審模式，大家只需要蕭規曹隨，該是多麼清脆利落！事實上，因應文化、政治、歷史和經濟等各種外在因素的變遷，評審的工作亦不斷演變，正所謂因地制宜、因時制宜。評審的結果一般都篇幅可觀、成本不菲，但離開成效與公信似乎仍有一段距離。學術界一般都視質素評估為一劑苦口良藥，甚至是費時失事的苦差。道理很簡單，因為「質素」似乎是專家的禁脔，外人是難以「評估」的。那邊廂，質素保證機構卻要求有更大的權力與責任，以履行其使命，及證明他們的存在價值。

無可否認，古今中外的評審路程都是崎嶇的。要避免重蹈覆轍，質素保證機構或可想想以下幾個基本的理念。

寧輕勿重

管制的尺度一旦定下來，通常都會自我膨脹，易放難收。觀之在評審界不乏深刻的教訓，所以現今的趨向是強調「輕描」，而不要「重擊」。話雖如此，恐怕我們似乎還沒有見過太「輕」的例子。在非常稀有的情況下，我們也許會碰到少數實在辦不下去的院校。但這些個案的弱點其實早已路人皆知，哪怕再「輕」的評審也早就把問題點出來了。從另一端來看，有哪一間有名望的學院是用評審結果來建立自己的地位呢？所以在開始的階段，還是寧輕勿重。以後要加重力度豈有困難，要減輕卻談何容易呢！

先內後外

質素保證應該是持之以恆的過程，且能成為院校風氣、文化的一部份。教育機構需要有一套有理、有節、有效，專為自己而設的內部質素保證機制，而不是受制於統一的制度。外部的評審，無論以任何形式進行，理應是輔助性質，不會對院校的整體質素造成巨大影響。若在一間擁有完善質素保證機制的機構進行評審，很「輕」的檢視亦足以奏效。反之，縱然有多「重」的壓力施加在沒有良好內部質素保證機制的機構上，外部評審也只會流於表面，甚或毫無幫助。基於這個概念，香港教育資助委員會的教與學質素保證過程檢討 (TLQPR)、英國在2001年改制後的高等教育質量保障局 (QAA)，以及澳洲大學品質機構 (AUQA)，都強調檢視機構是否能夠建立良好的內部質素保證機制。

Light over heavy

History has shown the genie of regulatory measures does have a tendency to grow beyond control, and it would usually take rather drastic measures to put it back into the bottle. From the lessons learned and the adverse reactions generated in the past, everyone is now subscribing to the idea of “light touch”. It is, however, worth noting that lightness can never be over-emphasised. There was never a QA body that was accused of being too lenient. For the few cases of catastrophic failures, the signs were there in broad daylight and would have been picked up by the most cursory accreditation exercises, as indeed they were. At the other end, there was never an academic institution which attained excellence through some heavy-handed QA exercises. Accreditation reports were rarely, if ever, cited as evidence of an institution's laudatory assets. It may also be useful to keep in mind that going from light to a bit heavier is easy, almost inevitable, while going the other way could be very contentious and “painful”.

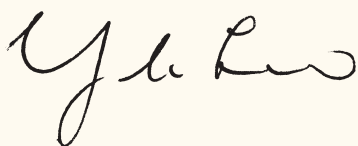
Internal before external

QA is a continuous process. Ideally it should be part of an institution's culture. As such an institution should establish some appropriate internal mechanisms for monitoring and promoting quality. An internal process can be flexible, efficient and effective. It is not bound by the requirement of “one size fits all”. Any external inspection, be it accreditation or validation or audit, should be peripheral, supplementary and in the cases of well established internal systems, perfunctory. If the former is done well, the latter is easy (and therefore “light”). Without a proper internal process, however, any external effort would be quite superficial, transitory and even futile. There is no doubt where emphasis should be placed. It is perhaps not fortuitous that the Teaching and Learning Quality Processes Review (TLQPR) of Hong Kong's University Grants Committee, the post 2001 Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the United Kingdom and the auditing roles by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) all chose to focus on internal processes.

Quantitative leading to qualitative

Despite a strong academic belief that quality, or more precisely excellence, is necessarily judgmental and subjective, the popular perception and practical reality are quite the opposite. Attempts to quantify quality may not be fool proof or universally accepted, but they have gone a long way towards establishing a whole range of key parameters. The popularity (and reluctant acknowledgement by even the leading universities) of league tables, increasing from 4 countries to 22 (including those in the Mainland, typically Shanghai Jiao Tong University) in a matter of a few years, is a case in point. The extensive and wide spread use of admission statistics in the US higher education sector by parents and students is another. Job prospects for graduates are used widely as selling points. Closer to home we have seen the introduction of Information Portal for Accredited Self-financing Sub-degree Programmes (IPASS) by the Education Bureau for a comprehensive and quantitative summary of post secondary education landscape. Further back we have seen the introduction of several indicators, such as the Value Added Indicators for the school sector.

The trend is obvious and irreversible. A set of simple yet meaningful data may not give the full picture, but it certainly sets off a QA exercise on a more solid footing. Conversely, a "qualitative" assessment without any hard numbers will have very little credibility. As we have long entered into an age of comprehensive and reliable data accumulation, there is no reason not to begin with disclosure and transparency. While the concern of unfair and biased comparisons across institutions is well justified, there could hardly be any objection to comparisons of an institution along a time line, i.e. with its own past and its projected future. Gathering and publishing a simple yet meaningful set of data is only the first and necessary step. A full assessment will certainly involve substantial qualitative judgment.



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以量評質

學者多半認為卓越的學術質素是不可以車載斗量的，但世界的趨勢似乎並不如此，多方面都要求對學術水平作量化評估。量化的方法與結論雖然得不到全面的認同與接納，但無可否認愈來愈多的數據及指標已被廣泛採納作為反映質素的工具。最為人熟悉的例子，就是近年發展的全球大學排名表，由最初只有4個國家到現在跳升到22個國家（包括中國在內，上海交通大學的排名就是一個典型）。在數據比較普及的美國，收生的統計早已被家長與學生廣泛應用，畢業生就業率更是很多學校宣傳的重點。香港近幾年也引入了各項學界的統計數據，如教育局所設的經評審自資副學位課程資料網 (IPASS) 及學校教育的增值指標等。

將質素水平量化是大勢所趨及不可逆轉的事實。當然還沒有人可以提出一套放諸四海而準的量化指標，但有一些起碼的數據作質素保證的依據，較不著邊際的長篇大論有說服力。隨著數據處理已趨成熟，我們亦應該積極考慮公開有關的數據，以實踐高透明度的理念。也許憑數據來比較本質各異的機構不是一個公平的做法，但單看一家機構本身的數據，從而衡量它的過去、今天與未來，總說得過去吧。從一組簡單明確而有意義的數據開始，加上深入的質素評估，才是一個比較完整的質素保證作法。

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