Quality Education Management in self-funded Post Secondary Education Institutions in Hong Kong

Prof. Edwin K. P. Wong
President, HK Buddhist College, HKSAR

ABSTRACT
This article discusses the management of external validation exercises (academic audit). Such exercises are now seen as providing an important means for assessing the quality of education in self-funded Post Secondary Education Institutions in Hong Kong, and therefore careful preparation for them is essential. Relevant individual’s implicit/tacit knowledge has been converted to explicit knowledge for organizational formal transfer. Ten implementation strategies for the achievement of key performance results are proposed, and a check list of twenty tasks is formulated, against which institutions might assess their level of achievement and evaluate their readiness for external validation.

Keywords: quality education management, self-funded post secondary education, academic audit/validation exercise, organizational learning.

1.0 Introduction
For the protection of students’ learning right, it is incumbent on Government to ensure that the various study programmes prepared for them are of high quality.

In Hong Kong, education is currently being expanded at both school and post-secondary/higher education levels. From 2011, the Government is belatedly providing 12 years of free education at school level to all students, while at the post-secondary level, the Government is adopting a two-pronged approach to the provision of educational opportunities. On the one hand, it provides subsidized, UGC-funded places to a certain percentage of students, and on the other hand it is encouraging and assisting the private sector to provide self-financing programmes at both sub-degree and degree levels.

For self-financing programmes, the task of assuring the quality of institutions and their programmes has been given to the Hong Kong Council for the Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) [previously known as The Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation]. It is therefore important for institutions offering self-financed programmes (or those that are planning to do so) to have a strong knowledge of how the HKCAAVQ’s external institutional reviews and programme validations are carried out, and of what constitutes quality.

2.0 The Context
Hong Kong’s well-being has become increasingly dependent on the development of a knowledge-based economy. In the context of globalisation and knowledge-based economies, it is now internationally recognised that higher education is an essential driving force for national development in both developed and developing countries. The UNESCO document entitled: World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century: Vision and Action (1998) states that: “Without adequate higher education and research institutions providing a critical mass of skilled and educated people, no country can ensure genuine endogenous and sustainable development.”
Educational development in Hong Kong is led by Government, whose previous Chief Executive, Mr. Donald Tsang, indicated recently in his “2009 Policy Address” that educational services would be one of the six industries in which Hong Kong had a regional edge. He foresaw that the further development of our educational services would bolster the pluralistic, international and professional nature of Hong Kong. Despite Government rhetoric over the years, the provision of post-secondary education in Hong Kong has lagged behind that of many countries in the region. The provision of Government-subsidised degree places in Hong Kong in 2008/09 catered for only 18.5% of the relevant population, which is a long way off the average 2007 figure of 39% among the 30 countries in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. The latest Hong Kong figures indicate that the Government and private institutions together are only able to provide 4-year tertiary education places for around 30% of youngsters in the relevant age group, though this rises to 65% if one includes 2-year sub-degree places (HKSAR October 2010 Policy Address). When compared to some others in the Asia Pacific region, tertiary education provision is extremely low. For example in Taiwan the tertiary education participation rate is 100%, in Japan 57.3% and in Thailand 45.9%. In mainland China, the gross entrance rate for tertiary education in 2010 has increased to 26.0% from that of 15% in 2002 (Ng, 2011), indicating that China is catching up fast.

There is certainly no lack of demand for higher education opportunities in Hong Kong. Figures have indicated a strong and increasing demand for tertiary education. For example, between 2007 and 2008, more than 20,000 students studied in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. While some of these no doubt chose to do so, others were forced to do so, because of a lack of appropriate places in Hong Kong. Moreover, the number of Hong Kong students engaged in non-local education programmes at degree level or above surged from 21,000 to over 30,000 from 2006 to 2009. This demonstrates that the youth of Hong Kong are highly motivated to attain tertiary qualifications.

In 2009, President Barack Obama indicated in an address to a joint session of Congress held on February 24, 2009 that: “In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity — it is a prerequisite. … I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be community college or a four-year school, vocational training or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma.” (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational & Adult Education; February, 2010). This address highlighted the importance of post-secondary education of an academic or vocational nature in the USA and has provided a wake-up call for other countries.

It has now become clear in Hong Kong that relying on the Government to fund tertiary education will not be sufficient. The role to be played by non-government-funded institutions will become increasingly important, and for the assurance of the quality of the tertiary education that is to be provided by these institutions, knowledge of how this is to be done will also become ever more crucial.

---

1 General Statistics on UGC-funded Institutions, University Grants Committee, Jan 2010

2 Education at a Glance 2009: Organisation for Economic Co-operation Development Indicators

3 The China Post, 29th July 2008

4 Ma Xiaoying and Malcolm Abbot, China’s Tertiary Education Expansion. China: Domestic and International Number 53, Fall 2008

5 Integrated from 19 Jan 2008 Wenweipo and 16 Nov 2009 Takungpao

3.0 Quality Education

Frequently, academics and administrators have to go back to theories of educational management for conceptual guidance. These will include theories of leadership, various planning models, change theories and so on. In addition, educational managers must inevitably rely on past experience and intuition. Noronha (2003) opined that there are close relationships between total quality management which depends largely on practicality and theories of organizations. In practice, therefore, educational management becomes a blend of these three elements – theory, experience and intuition. Since quality assurance work is a crucial part of the management of education, we should perhaps look to theory, experience and intuition for enlightenment in this domain too.

It is important to look at models or approaches that have been developed, based on years of empirical work in this field, to guide the work of those involved in quality assurance for institutional and programme evaluation and review, so as to achieve better efficiency and effectiveness in what is being done.

With regard to the definition of quality education, one can find numerous approaches in the literature, ranging from those that highlight the provision of learning facilities, student learning achievements, outcomes, the relevance of what is taught and learnt, catering for individual needs, controlling processes, the setting of various sorts of standards, to meeting the expectation of customers, and so on. (Ashraf, Ibrahim & Joarder, 2009). Noronha (1998), based on the literature and empirical data collected from using structural equation modeling analyses, stated that we could use a four-variable quality management model for the study of ‘quality’. The four quality variables (with the underlying construct/factors written down in brackets) are: Climate (top management vision, long term commitment, unity of purpose and culture change), Process (leadership & communication, training & education), Method (scientific approach, teamwork & involvement) and Result (customer satisfaction & continuous improvement). Of these four, the Climate variable was considered the most important one in the preparation for quality work. Noronha (2002,2003) further indicated that national (local) culture is associated positively with total quality management of organizations.

From observations and interpretation of the latest trends in Hong Kong, there would seem to be three main areas that local education providers of self-funding tertiary education are focusing on with their students. They are:

1. to nurture positive core values for active participation in the civic life of society and the nation;
2. to gain various competences and abilities for life-long self-improvement and learning; and
3. to acquire professional and/or vocational skills and knowledge for career development.

The guidelines as stipulated by the Education Bureau, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (2012), for Associate Degree and Higher Diploma programmes have indicated that there are two main areas of curriculum that universities or colleges need to include in their programmes. They are Generic Content and Specialised Content. While the former includes Languages, IT and General Education for life-long learning education, the latter looks after professional or vocational learning.

The nurturing of “Positive core values” among the students in Hong Kong is seen by many in the education sector as being the most important of the three. Nonaka (1994) mentioned the conversion of implicit/tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge as an important aspect of organization learning. These three empirical concepts in quality education are gradually being accepted as important organizational norms for quality education. The relationship of these three main concepts can be shown in a diagram as follows:
In addition to the above-mentioned three main areas of development for quality education, it is necessary to keep in mind the key performance indicators for private tertiary institutions. This is, of course, whether the public and students in particular consider them to be a meaningful alternative to Government-funded institutions/universities, or in certain circumstances perhaps as a better choice. This latter might be achieved, at least to start with, in some special areas or subject disciplines such as nursing in the medical field, or banking in the business area.

### 4.0 Model for the evaluation of the management of an organization

If we take the quality assurance work of an organization as a branch of educational management, then the task of the evaluation of quality education should be looked upon more vigorously as the evaluation of the management of an organization. It is doubtful for an organization to provide quality education if it is not managed properly.

An organization needs to manage its business effectively, employing appropriate strategies to accomplish its mission and vision and using evaluative strategies to identify areas for continuous improvement in an ever changing context. We need a model that can be used effectively and efficiently to assess an organization in terms of its ability to survive and improve.

The European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Excellence Model ([www.efqm.org/en](http://www.efqm.org/en)) (previous known as the European Quality Award (EQA) model in Hong Kong) is commonly being used in many organizations and institutions in the region, including Hong Kong, China and South East Asia. In fact, there are a total of seven similar models being used in different parts of the world, namely, Australia, India, Ibero & Latin America, Japan, Singapore and the United States. The EQA model has a cyclic nature for ever improving based on organizational learning which depends heavily on feedback collection from various stakeholders, critical review and striving for innovation and changes. It is shown as follows:
“The EFQM Excellence Model (EQA) represented in the diagram above is a non-prescriptive management framework used by over 30,000 organizations in Europe and beyond. Regardless of sector, size, structure or maturity, organizations need to establish an appropriate management framework to be successful. The EFQM Excellence Model is a practical framework that enables organizations to:

- Assess where they are on the path to excellence; helping them to understand their key strengths and potential gaps in relation to their stated Vision and Mission.
- Provide a common vocabulary and way of thinking about the organisation that facilitates the effective communication of ideas, both within and outside the organisation.
- Integrate existing and planned initiatives, removing duplication and identifying gaps.
- Provide a basic structure for the organisation’s management system.

This EQA model has incorporated the main essence of four quality variables and key constructs set out by Noronha (1998). When we embark on a change process, the leadership and long-term commitment at the governance level is of ultimate importance. At the management level we need to address the ‘people’ aspect including teamwork, communication and staff development. We also have to put much stress on innovation and continuous improvement and adopt scientific approach in our day-to-day handling of college affairs. Empirical practices using this model and the ‘quality’ concepts have been found to be effective and efficient by the author in a number of self-funded tertiary education settings.

5.0 Implementation Strategies

Using the model (EFQM) above as a guide, the author has found the following ten strategies in terms of implicit knowledge (Nonaka, 1994) useful in enhancing the performance of an organization:

1. a good institutional vision shared by stakeholders;
2. agreed core values owned by colleagues to guide daily decisions;
3. strong leadership and well-constructed strategic plans;
4. availability and management of resources;
5. efficient and effective internal and external communication;
6. benchmarking;
7. working within government policy;
8. a working culture of innovation, critical review and continuous improvement;
9. the whole-hearted participation of professional academics in learning and teaching activities and
10. be responsible to stakeholders and especially to provide a caring environment for students.
Internally, there should be various channels of communication so that the information flow is without any hindrance. However, each individual party should concentrate on its own role and responsibilities so that all building blocks and phases of all processes in the organization are well defined and should be able to deliver what is expected of them.

Strategically, staff members of the organization need to be involved as much as possible and ‘own’ all the quality assurance processes and should be heavily involved in all phases of the validation exercises. They should buy into what the organization is going to do and be committed to it all the way through. This is what Noronha (1998) has addressed as ‘unity of purpose’ in the most important variable ‘college climate’ of his quality management model.

A check list of tasks is proposed below, which can be considered as explicit knowledge for the monitoring of organizational performance (Nonaka, 1994), to facilitate the quality education management of an organization for the achievement of good performance results. The various aspects of the list could also be used to assess the level of development and achievement of organizations.

**Check List:**

[A] Self Evaluation
1. Initial exploration with key personnel and the various parties to be involved
2. Initial contextual analysis (both internal and external of the organization)
3. Comprehensive SWOT analysis
4. Intended outcomes that the organization wants to achieve
5. Feasibility study of important projects
6. A survey of colleagues’ guiding values and beliefs
7. Negotiation on those values that are to be agreed by all

[B] Planning Ahead
8. Formulation of a strategic plan for the coming five years, which should include plans for benchmarking against other organizations.
9. Development and approval from the authorities in charge of the institution of an operational plan for one to three years, which should include a business plan.
   An operational plan should include the following key elements:
   i. mission & vision statements;
   ii. core guiding values;
   iii. aims and goals;
   iv. SWOT and market survey;
   v. details of programmes to be offered;
   vi. financial projections and budget;
   vii. availability of financial resources and controlling procedures;
   viii. important bodies, their memberships and their Terms of Reference (ToR);
   ix. governance structure;
   x. management structure;
   xi. committees structure;
   xii. human resources policy;
   xiii. staff establishment and development;
   xiv. auditing procedures; and
   xv. logistics of improvement cycles.

[C] Preparation for Auditing
10. Checking and review of learning resources: including premises, library stock, special rooms, IT equipment, software for the college and student data management, and sports facilities.
11. Review of the latest government and HKCAAVQ policy and regulations on college registration and programme accreditation.

12. Preparation of documents (such as those for Institutional Evaluation (IE) or Review (IR)) for organization registration

13. Preparation of documents for programme validation (PV) exercises

14. Draw a Project Gantt Chart with various milestones for time control

[D] Management Issues

15. Review/set up and/or improve existing continuous self improvement culture and mechanism

16. Set up a double-loop improvement practice in the daily operations of the organization (Argyris, 1993 & 2002; Smith, 2011)

17. Strengthen the various channels of communication with staff members and students

18. Review all types of feedback collection procedures, including via electronic means

19. Employment/Retention of capable and enthusiastic staff members; and

20. Building up of a caring culture for staff and students.

It is important to relate the successful management of all these tasks with the presence of a strong academic and administrative leader to take charge of all the processes. S/He should be committed and able to set up an effective and efficient core team with members having diverse expertises.

6.0 Conclusion

Different organizations have different historical backgrounds and contexts. The above strategies and check list are not meant to be prescriptive or exhaustive. The EFQM model suggested is by no means the only model that might be adopted. Also, one should be alert always to the need to face up to sudden changes, including those not previously envisaged, both internally and/or externally.

There are various aspects of work for ensuring quality education including, but not limited to, organization governance & management; financial & resources management; quality assurance for programme development, delivery, review & improvement; and management of teaching & learning environment at tertiary level. Organizations have learnt the key processes or strategies that need to be well handled before they could manage well the external audit checks.

Individual’s knowledge is transferred to organizational knowledge and shared among colleagues, i.e., implicit (tacit) knowledge is converted to explicit knowledge as described by Nonaka (1994) and reported in the Management & Business Studies Portal (Ikujiri Nonaka, information retrieved in December 2012). The empirical knowledge was gained through actual working on institutional basis in vigorous external quality checking exercises (formal validation processes). Colleges can now arrange formal training for its staff members to learn the knowledge explicitly so as to ensure obtaining positive results in validation exercises to be conducted by external authorities. Though “luck” may account for a certain percentage of variance in results, “being well prepared” is always the main strategy to be recommended.

References


**Author’s Background**

Prof. Edwin WONG is the President and a BoG member of Hong Kong Nang Yan College of Higher Education and Hong Kong Buddhist College (since 2011). He was the President/Vice-President (Academic) and a BoG member of the Chinese University of Hong Kong – Tung Wah Group of Hospitals Community College (2009 -2011) and the CEO/Director of the School of Continuing and Professional Education of the Hong Kong Institute of Education (1999 - 2009). In 1998, he got the award of “Neil Andrew Johnson Award for Excellence in Research in Educational Administration” from the University of NSW in Australia. Other awards received included: Award of Distinctive Contribution (& Examiner), Asia-Pacific Business Excellence Standard (APBEST) Academy (2011); Bronze Certificate of Merit, Hong Kong Institute of Directors (2010); APBEST HR Developer of the Year 2008; Bronze Award for Volunteer Service, Social Services Department, Hong Kong (2000); and 木铎奖 (銅), Hong Kong Teachers’ Association (2011). Professor Wong has extensive experience and proven successful records in the management of self-financed institutions, including the conduction of Institutional Review (HKCAAVQ; Govt. Cap 320) and various programme validation exercises at HKQF levels 1 to 5 in the tertiary sector. Also, Professor Wong has published extensively in academic journals and involved in many paid consultancy works in areas of educational administration, strategic management, quality assurance and life-long education.