Conference sub-theme: 2. Innovate approaches to external QA in tertiary education: not a single approach towards excellence

Rethink the Accountability of Peer Review and Quality Assurance from the Appeals of Evaluation in Taiwan

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Abstract

Peer review has been a cornerstone of quality assurance of higher education. It has recently draw criticism due to reviewers' judgments might be not based on actual achievements. In order to enable the assessed programs to be against the accreditation decisions, appeal system has been developed since Higher Education Evaluation & Accreditation Council of Taiwan (HEEACT) started its first cycle evaluation in 2006. According to HEEACT, A program could file an appeal if the evaluation result is inconsistent with fact or violating procedures after the draft of the site visit report is completed. This study analyzed 5300 items of 741 appeal reports from 65 universities during the first cycle of program accreditation from 2006 to 2009 in Taiwan. This study explores the major reasons for the objections made by institutions through appeal reports, and examines the accountability of the peer review system.

1. Introduction

Peer review has been a major element of quality assurance of higher education (Harvey, 2002). Having experts with deeply understanding the field being evaluated, peer review was able to make judgment and comments for the external evaluation. However, it has recently draw criticism due to reviewers' judgments might be not based on actual achievements. The prior experience of peer reviewers tends to influence the decisions. (Adamson & Flodstrom, 2012; Huisman & Currie, 2004; Silva, Reich & Gallegos, 1997; Kristoffersen, 2012).

In order to enable the assessed programs to be against the accreditation decisions, appeal system has been developed since Higher Education Evaluation & Accreditation Council of Taiwan (HEEACT) started its first cycle evaluation in 2006. According to HEEACT, A program could file an appeal if the evaluation result is inconsistent with fact or violating procedures after the draft of the site visit report is completed. The aim of this study is to explore the major reasons for the objections made by institutions through appeal reports as well as examined the accountability of the peer review systems.

2. Major Findings and Discussion
2.1. Responses from institutions

This study analyzed 5300 items of 741 appeal reports from 65 universities during the first cycle of program accreditation from 2006 to 2009 in Taiwan. It was revealed that the ratio of submitting appeal reports to the program being evaluated is decreasing each year (from 59% to 25%), however the average items for each program is increasing every year (from 5.3 to 8.0 items). The institutions disagreed with the draft of the site visit report for several reasons. First of all, 80% of the appeals considered the reports were inconsistent with the fact. They provided more information and explained how the situations really were. Secondly, 9% of the appeals agreed with the reviewers' recommendations for improvement, but they requested to modify the rhetoric on the reports, such as changing the description from "strong" to "some". The third reason for national and private institutions is different. The national institutions concerned more about how the data collected by the reviewers, such as reviewers making judgments by their prior perceptions of the institution. On the other hand, the private institutions concerned more about the specific context of the institution. They wondered the reviewers applied the universal standards to evaluate each institution.

2.2. Perspective of the reviewers

From the perspective of the reviewers, it showed that most reviewers seem to be keep their opinions unchanged. However, the percentage of upholding the original report decrease (from 76% in 2006 to 63% in 2009), and the percentage of revising the report also decreased (from 22% to 15%), while the percentage of upholding parts of the report is increasing (from 2% and 15%). Analyzing the replies to the appeals, we found that the peer reviews could have challenges from the following issues:

Collecting Data. The major reason the appeals uphold was the reviewers' concern about institutions providing invalid data which was not in the time duration being evaluated, such as how they made improvements after site visit. Secondly, the reviewers trusted what they have got from student or faculty interviews. Even when they found the inconsistence between self-assessment report and the interviews, they chose to draw conclusions from the latter. Although the peer review teams were suggested to cross-check the discrepancies between the self-assessments documents and what they have seen during the site visit, but they rarely trained how to identify and interpret what they see. In practice, there tends to be a significant gap between peers' perceptions and the self-assessment documents.

Making Judgments. It was found the reviewers used inconsistent standards to make judgments and recommendations. Some of the reviewers refused to accept the data provided after on-site visit. They only took the data shown on the days of on-site visit, even though it is the responsibility of reviewers to ask questions if they were not sure of the situation. On the other hand, some reviewers applied low standards to accept the appeal as long as the institutions claimed they have an improvement plan.

Writing Replies to Appeals. Most reviewers (71%) explained the reasons why they did not accept the appeals, while other reviewers did not give any reasons. This could be seen also from the opinions from the institutional side. They suggested the reviewers to make comments clearly in order to help them understand what and how to make improvement.

2.3. Quality of peer review

The application of peer review is influenced by the context of the educational system. As the limited size of educational system in Taiwan, it is difficult to involve large and various panel members in the same discipline for peer reviews. It might happen that the reviewers conduct mutual evaluation. The reviewers in small states have to face the dilemma and the pressure from their colleague from other institutions. If the funding is related to the evaluation results, the pressure is even higher. The complexity of peer review is increasing as the higher education system is smaller.

3. Concluding Remarks

Peer review is the cornerstone to constitute sound quality assurance

procedures. The accountability of peer reviews is being challenged, especially for the small states. The skills and knowledge of reviewers, and the variety of reviewers involved needs to be seriously reviewed.

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