

CAPACITY BUILDING OF PEER REVIEWERS

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Abstract

The vision of the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) is to become a nationally and globally recognised independent quality assurance body in education and training, dedicated to high quality accreditation, assessment and consultancy services. And as a member of Asia-Pacific Quality Network, HKCAAVQ maintains a firm commitment to openness and sharing of experience with its partner agencies. This paper outlines the experience of HKCAAVQ in providing training and support to peer reviewers (or Specialists). It also outlines the proposed directions of change that will address the feedback and meet the needs of the Specialists in the ever-changing educational landscape. This paper is also a response to the need of strengthening of capacity building among the quality assurance bodies and networks from around the world.

Keywords: *Peer Reviewers, Capacity Building, Training of Peer Reviewers, Support of Peer Reviewers.*

Introduction

The Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) is a statutory body established under the HKCAAVQ Ordinance (Cap. 1150) that accredits academic as well as vocational and professional learning programmes to ensure that they meet threshold standards for entry into the Qualifications Register of the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (HKQF).

Peer review is one of the guiding principles of HKCAAVQ and is at the heart of HKCAAVQ's quality assurance process. For this purpose, HKCAAVQ identifies prospective peer reviewers (or Specialists) from its established networks including representatives of higher education institutions, professional bodies, employers, and sister agencies.

HKCAAVQ has in place a transparent and rigorous process for appointment and management of Specialists. Firstly, a Specialists Selection Committee has been set up to advise the Executive Director on the policy and procedures for (re-)appointment, termination and suspension of Specialists. Secondly, the Committee considers and endorses the appointment of Specialists according to a set of criteria in the public domain. The appointment period of Specialists is normally three years. Thirdly, when considering and endorsing the re-appointment of Specialists for a second term of three years, the Committee takes into account the Specialists' experience and performance in accreditation exercise(s) and/or needs of HKCAAVQ. The Executive Director approves the (re-)appointment on the basis of the Committee's recommendations.

Currently, HKCAAVQ has a pool of 821 Specialists covering all 14 Areas of Study and Training of the Qualifications Register (Figure 1). About one-third of them reside outside Hong Kong. These non-local Specialists are generally engaged in institutional and/or academic programme (re-)accreditation exercises.

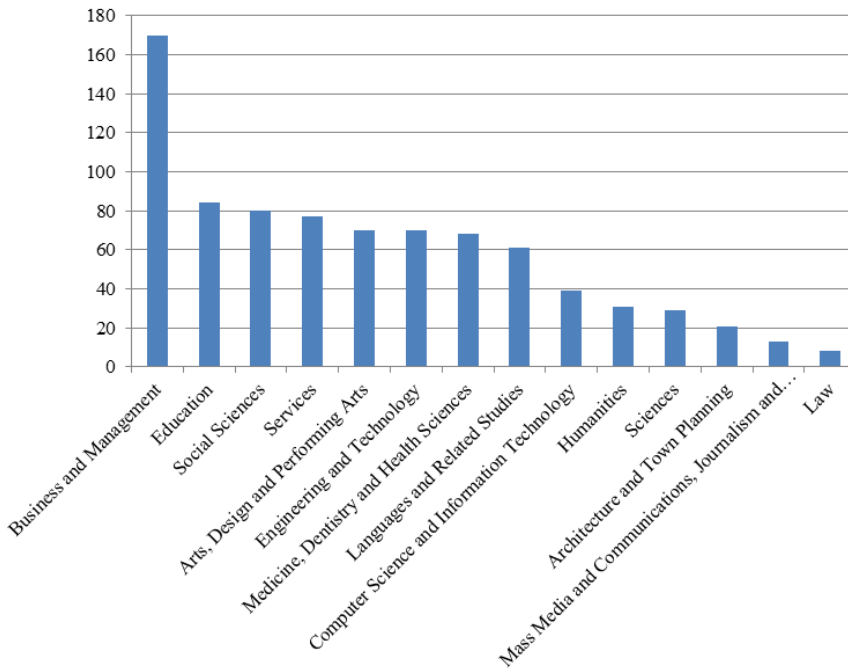


Figure 1: Specialists' Expertise

In early 2015, a new knowledge management system of HKCAAVQ, the Quality Management System (QMS) went live. The QMS gives staff of HKCAAVQ easy access to information and facilitates the internal sharing of information (Chan & Yau, 2016). Based on the QMS data between 1 January 2015 and 31 December 2017, HKCAAVQ conducted 580 academic and vocational accreditation exercises. 128 of them were institutional and/or academic programme (re-)accreditation exercises involving 159 local and non-local Specialists.

KCAAVQ adopts a systematic approach to equip Specialists with the necessary knowledge and skills for conducting accreditation exercises. Workshops on the basis of the level of experience of the Specialists are held on a regular basis. During these different workshops, role-playing activities are often used as a means for simulating the site visit of an accreditation exercise. At the same time, Specialists will receive Newsletters so that they may keep track of the latest development of HKCAAVQ. They may also access the Online Specialists Resource Centre (OSRC) for the training manual.

What and how have we been doing?

As a normal practice, HKCAAVQ conducts a voluntary opinion survey at the end of the workshops. The survey questionnaire consists of open-ended and closed-ended questions to gauge the opinion of the attending Specialists about the content and the arrangements of the workshops. Specialists are asked to rate the extent to which they agree that the overall quality of the workshop was high on a five-point scale. A mean score is calculated by using 5 for "Strongly Agree" to 1 for "Strongly Disagree".

Based on the QMS data between 1 January 2015 and 31 December 2017, HKCAAVQ conducted 17 workshops. A summary of these workshops is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1. Summary of Workshops for Specialists
between 1 January 2015 and 31 December 2017**

Type of Workshop	Number of Workshops	Number of Participants	Response Rate	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Induction Workshop	3	35	87.1%	4.63	0.50
Refresher Workshop	6	139	82.8%	4.40	0.55
Thematic Workshops	6	178	77.0%	4.50	0.50
Role and Function of Panel Chair	2	20	63.5%	4.65	0.55
	17	372			

As shown in Table 1, it can easily be seen that there is a consistent agreement on the quality of the workshops for Specialists. When looking into the qualitative feedback, the majority of them felt that refresher and thematic workshops provided the environment for sharing of experience and clarifying issues that would not have been able to ask during the accreditation exercises. Nonetheless, Specialists have asked for the possibility of having workshops delivered in other forms of delivery. For instance, latest developments of HKCAAVQ and the HKQF on accreditation could be delivered in videos, leaving the face-to-face time for simulation and experience sharing.

An internal driver for change is the current review of accreditation standards. During the research phase of the review, organisations seeking accreditation and Specialists had said that they would expect to have the same level of guidance and information in applying the accreditation standards. To do that, a new structure for presenting accreditation standards will be implemented in April 2019. This has led to the need of additional workshops for familiarising organisations seeking accreditation and Specialists with the new structure.

At a macro level, student engagement, use of data in quality assurance, and differentiation of quality assurance approaches are contemporary issues pertinent to the development of the education sector. As these issues and views of the stakeholders will have an impact on the policy development of HKCAAVQ, it is important to engage stakeholders into dialogues and discussions as early as possible.

Proposed Directions of Change

As a quality assurance agency, HKCAAVQ seeks to take its capacity building initiatives for Specialists to a next level. HKCAAVQ is working on the following initiatives and directions of change.

First, HKCAAVQ is now using the Kirkpatrick model for evaluating the effectiveness of the workshops for Specialists. This evaluation is targeting at a specific group of Specialists who participated in at least one workshop and served on at least one accreditation panel in 2017. The first round of results will be available in May 2018.

Second, the OSRC is a static environment. In keeping with the latest trend of using a digital platform to structure online teaching, learning and assessment activities, HKCAAVQ is exploring a suitable digital platform that enables local and non-local Specialists to have 24/7 access to contents in various forms, such as video, text, links, interactivities and etc. The data analytics will enhance the traceability of the Specialists in acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills for conducting accreditation exercises.

Third, YouTube is a free-of-charge video-sharing website. YouTube analytics, such as Average Durations, Average Percentage Viewed, and Audience Retention are potential indicators of the effectiveness of the videos. Hou, Tam & Au-yeung (2017) published two series of informative videos about earth system science on YouTube and compared the analytics. The study revealed that short educational videos could encourage a higher viewing percentage and for longer videos an attractive beginning may help audience retention. HKCAAVQ may use YouTube as a platform for hosting bite-sized informative videos for mass communication with all Specialists (and to organisations seeking accreditation).

Fourth, Specialists are peers of the organisations seeking accreditation. Other than meeting each other during accreditation exercises, they should be provided with an opportunity to interact in an informal occasion. In May 2017, HKCAAVQ trialed for the first time and organised a joint event where organisations seeking accreditation and Specialists were invited to attend. The lesson learnt was the three-way flow of views and ideas allowed an alignment of understanding on the latest developments of HKCAAVQ among organisations seeking accreditation, Specialists and staff of HKCAAVQ and sharing of good practices in quality assurance. In 2018, HKCAAVQ will organise such a joint event again with more emphasis on dialogues and discussions. Joint sessions may also be organised for introducing the new structure of accreditation standards and exploring those contemporary issues pertinent to the education landscape.

Last but not least, as John Dewey said, “we do not learn from experience...we learn from reflecting on experience.” Noting also Specialists have said that they appreciate a face-to-face environment where they are encouraged to share their accreditation experiences and ask questions outside an accreditation exercise, it is therefore critically important that there is an informal environment for learning and reflection among the Specialists to take place. As a psychology professor at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, So (2017) experimented an innovative pedagogical approach whereby her students were engaged in self-practice activities. At the same time, students were asked to reflect on their own experiences. This ‘self-practice/self-reflection’ approach, based on psychological research, put students in the center stage of their learning. The same principle of learning and reflection may well be extended to Specialists during face-to-face time. As adult learners, they relate their learning to what they already know or to their past accreditation experiences.

Way Forward

This paper outlined the experience of HKCAAVQ in providing training and support to Specialists. It also outlined the proposed directions of change that will address the feedback and meet the needs of the Specialists in the ever-changing education landscape. As a quality assurance agency, HKCAAVQ seeks to take its capacity building initiatives for Specialists to a next level.

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