

Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan

Report of the Review Panel

26 & 27 November 2009

1. Background

In 2009, the Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan (HEEACT) under took a self-review and invited an external panel consisting of international and national reviewers to review its operations. The purpose of the review was to enhance the quality of the accreditation and evaluation procedures of HEEACT. The on-site visit of the review was organised around two days during 26 and 27 November 2009.

The following members of the review panel visited HEAACT during 26 and 27 November 2009:

- Dr Antony Stella, Audit Director, Australian Universities Quality Agency, Australia (Chair);
- Dr. Wei-Jao Chen, Emeritus professor of National Taiwan University and the Chair-professor of I-Shou University;
- Dr. Tzung-Tsann Mu, Professor, Shih-Hsin University, Taiwan; and
- Dr. Louise Zak, Associate Director, New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), United States.

As part of the review, after a briefing at HEEACT, the Panel observed an accreditation visit at the National Taiwan University on 26 November. The Panel interacted with representatives of the College of Management of the University that was being accredited and the members of the accreditation team.

Ms. Dorte Kristoffersen, Deputy Executive Director, Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic & Vocational Qualifications (HKCAACQ), Hong Kong joined the panel on 27 November.

On 27 November, the five-member Panel had a series of interactions with the HEEACT personnel, including the President, directors of the various divisions, and professional staff who support the various activities of the Council. Additional documents made available to the Panel were examined and the Panel was given a demonstration of HEAACT's information management system.

Based on the inputs received through the examination of the documents provided and interactions held, the Panel provides the following feedback to HEEACT for its quality enhancement.

2. Feedback of the Panel

The review Panel wishes to acknowledge the hospitality shown by HEAACT. The Panel was received with graciousness and openness, and the Panel's comments are made in the same collegial spirit with the hope that the agency may find them useful in its efforts to improve. The Panel applauds the many accomplishments of the agency in the three short years since its founding: the creation of evaluation criteria, the implementation of departmental evaluations, the identification and training of 3000 reviewers, the launching of a journal on quality assurance in higher education, the participation in international organizations and exchanges, the attainment of ISO9001 certification, among others. The Panel also highlights areas where HEEACT can make further improvements and they include integration of internal and external quality assurance, consistency in the interpretation of terminologies, and strengthened training strategy, among others. These comments are elaborated in the following sections.

3. Commendations

3.1. Self improvement

The Panel commends HEEACT for its strong reflective culture that is demonstrated through its continuous quality improvement initiatives including the current self-review that is being commented on by this external panel. The Panel noted the ISO certification of HEEACT and its efforts to learn from other agencies and international good practices.

The self-review has made an attempt to highlight where HEEACT stands in terms of the INQAAHE Guidelines for Good Practices (GGPs). The Panel considers this as a good initiative. However, given the nature and scope of this review, the Panel does not make specific observations about HEEACT's alignment with INQAAHE GGPs but encourages HEEACT to continue to work on its alignment with international good practices.

The Panel noted that HEEACT wishes to formally do annual reviews of its own quality. Given the self reflective organisational culture of HEEACT, the Panel would like to suggest that it makes its self review report more analytic and provided specific qualitative and quantitative data to support its assertions. If the self analysis part of the report is strengthened it would maximise the benefits of the reflective exercise.

3.2. Outreach (national and international)

Since its establishment, HEEACT has organized several seminars and workshops for the universities. It hosts an annual conference with international speakers and international participants; it publishes an international journal and a bi-monthly newsletter. The latter is specifically aimed at increasing the knowledge and understanding of accreditation among the universities. Furthermore, HEEACT senior staff have actively participated in numerous international events with the purpose of bringing international good practice to Taiwan and sharing the Taiwanese experience with sister organizations abroad. The Panel commends this high level of activity and considers that these initiatives have added and will continue to add value to both the conduct of the accreditations and continuous self-improvement within the universities.

The agency has created a laudable public outreach effort, particularly through its website. The website also includes questions and answers about the evaluation process for the benefit of institutions, helpful information for reviewers, and the departmental evaluation reports. This commitment to make public the results of reviews, whether favourable or unfavourable, represents the agency's dedication to transparency in its quality assurance processes. HEEACT may wish to consider expanding the English version of the website, which would help in its efforts to reach out to other quality assurance agencies in other parts of the world.

3.3. Administration

The Panel commends the agency's administrative structure and operations. Its mission is clear and clearly understood by staff. Personnel are dedicated to their work. The organization has been carefully designed to provide appropriate support and oversight of key functions. Well-crafted policies and procedures are in place governing the selection of reviewers, departmental evaluation, and the appeals process. HEEACT's statistical data and documentation are especially worthy of commendation. Documents provided at the time of the review demonstrated thoughtful attention to detail and a commitment to ongoing self-evaluation.

3.4. Appeals

The Panel appreciates the good policies in place to handle the appeals from the institutions against accreditation results. To strengthen it further, it may be essential to ensure that HEEACT keeps an arm's length from the proceedings of the appeals committee.

4. Recommendations

4.1. Integration of internal and external QA

The department accreditation exercises impose a fairly big workload on the institutions in terms of the time required for preparation. As the intention of the accreditation is to underpin and support the work of the institutions and help them establish improvement systems, it may be desirable to HEEACT to consider how the external quality assurance, i.e., the accreditations, can be better integrated with the work of the institutions and their internal improvement mechanisms so that the two can go more closely hand-in-hand and also ease the burden of preparation.

4.2. Terminologies and interpretations

The vocabulary used to describe the purpose of the accreditation exercises is quite varied. The accreditation covers and is done against five criteria. The self-review report mentions that the accreditations explore quality status, assist in developing a high quality learning environment, and are done against the institution's own objectives. Furthermore, the reviewers are also asked to consider the evaluation criteria based on their own experiences. The Panel noted that the meta-evaluation reported incidents where institutions were surprised in terms of the reviewers' interpretation of the requirements. In order to increase the level of consistency of the interpretation of the requirements and transparency in the outcomes, the vocabulary used to present the accreditation purposes could be streamlined and focused.

4.3. Training Strategy

'To develop training programs for agency staff and reviewers' is the third mission statement of HEEACT and this needs strengthening in some aspects. The Panel acknowledges that HEEACT has been successful in identifying a large number of reviewers who are well regarded in Taiwan for their academic qualifications and experience. The reviewers who interacted with the Panel were positive and enthusiastic about their participation in the accreditation visits.

HEEACT has a training program in place for the reviewers which is oriented towards 'information provision'. To uphold professionalism in the accreditation outcome, it is important that the reviewers are trained well to act on behalf of HEEACT. In this context, there is value in considering skill-based training sessions as well on such matters as asking open-ended questions collegially, reviewing documents, interpreting data in light of evaluation criteria, functioning as a team, and writing an effective and analytical final report. The Panel supports the intention of HEEACT to strengthen the training program and suggests that the international models of incorporating role-

plays and simulations in practicing the skills and techniques required of reviewers may be considered. Mentoring by experienced reviewers will also be valuable.

An enhanced training strategy will also help in ensuring that the standards and criteria are interpreted appropriately in various local contexts in line with HEEACT's accreditation framework and thus minimise inter team variances and criticisms from institutions.

HEEACT activities are supported well by a team of enthusiastic support staff. Induction to the new staff is informal. Training for agency staff seems to be mostly internal and ad hoc. Given the key roles agency staff play, HEEACT needs to provide more formal and systematic training and professional development opportunities for them. This should include the part-time staff as well since a number of part-timers are involved in supporting the on-site visit teams and the institutions see them as the HEEACT representatives for all practical guidance.

4.4. Space

HEEACT is currently housed in three different locations. At this early stage in HEEACT's development, where the processes and procedures are still being developed, and due to the need for coordination of the different aspects of HEEACT's work, the panel is of the view that the situation is not conducive to the consolidation of HEEACT and that the Board should consider the means to bring the staff together at one address.

Overall, the Panel applauds HEEACT for the extent of good quality work it has done during the past three years and wishes it well in its self-improvement agenda.

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