Background

Quality Assurance

Quality assurance (QA) is the cornerstone to upholding the integrity and confidence of an education system which definitely covers its vocational education and training (VET) sector. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of VET providers offering different kinds of vocational programmes in Hong Kong. A robust QA mechanism plays a pivotal role to ensure that these programmes are fit-for-purpose in terms of their relevancy and quality in delivery. In this context, the Hong Kong SAR Government implemented the Qualifications Framework (QF) and its associated quality assurance mechanism starting 2008 with a view to, among other objectives, ensuring that all qualifications and learning programmes recognized under QF, academic and vocational alike, are quality assured as well as up-to-standard, and relevant to market needs.

Qualifications Framework and its quality assurance mechanism in Hong Kong

Upon the commencement of operation of the Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications Ordinance, Cap.592 on 5 May 2008, a cross-sectoral QF and its associated QA mechanism was officially launched. The primary objective of establishing the QF in Hong Kong is to provide a platform to encourage and facilitate lifelong learning, with a view to enhancing the capability and competitiveness of its workforce.

The QF is underpinned by a robust quality assurance mechanism which ensures that all qualifications recognized under the framework are of good quality and up-to-standard. All qualifications and their associated learning programmes have to be accredited by the Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) or by self-accrediting institutions before they are registered on the Qualifications Register (QR) and recognized under QF.
The HKCAAVQ (previously known as the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation established in 1990) is an independent statutory body empowered under the above-named Ordinance as the Accreditation Authority and QR Authority under QF. In other words, since May 2008, the HKCAAVQ has extended its remit to take on the responsibility of gate-keeping the quality of qualifications and learning programmes, vocational or academic alike, to be recognized under QF in Hong Kong.

With respect to the VET sector, the HKCAAVQ has provided quality assurance and accreditation services to over 200 VET providers over the past few years. They offer a wide range of accreditation services covering from high level degree/sub-degree programmes to elementary skill-based training courses. These programmes are offered by providers including both the publicly-funded institutions and private ones.

**Current Practice**

*QA Mechanism -- Four-stage QA process*

The HKCAAVQ currently adopts a four-stage QA process for the QA of qualifications and their providers under QF. The four stages are, namely Initial Evaluation, Programme Validation, Programme Area Accreditation, and Periodic Review. HKCAAVQ will form an accreditation panel comprising subject specialists and a QA expert for conducting each accreditation exercise.

![Four-Stage Quality Assurance Process](source: HKCAAVQ website (www.hkcaavq.edu.hk))

**Stage 1 Initial Evaluation (IE) --** to assess organisational competency in running QF-recognised programmes at specific QF level(s)

**Stage 2 Programme Validation (PV) --** to evaluate if the programme meets the required QF standards and the stated learning outcomes. All programmes are required to go through revalidation upon the expiry of the validation period.
Stage 3 Programme Area Accreditation (PAA) – to assess if a provider is competent and mature to develop and offer new programmes within a defined scope of areas at specific QF level. Providers with PAA status may develop and operate programmes within an approved scope of programme area(s) at specified QF Level(s) without going through PV by HKCAA VQ.

Stage 4 Periodic Review (PR) – to periodically monitor if the provider is competent to maintain the PAA status

Guiding principles for accreditation

- **Peer review** - to engage industry experts having the expertise and experience in the discipline/industry/quality assurance
- **Fitness for purpose** – to conduct accreditation based on their stated objectives, the scope and level of the learning programmes
- **Evidence-based** – to make decision with reference to evidence provided by providers
- **Threshold standard** – to ensure that students are able to achieve the minimum standard of performance expected of the programme concerned

Qualifications Register (QR)

All QF-recognised qualifications are listed in the QR. As at July 2014, around 7,900 qualifications ranging from QF level 1 to level 7 are registered in the QR. Of which, over 4,000 qualifications offered by around 200 providers are accredited by the HKCAA VQ.

Four-stage QA Process Review

Given the diversity of vocational qualifications and the unfamiliarity in accreditation to some VET providers, it was a great challenge for HKCAA VQ in conducting accreditation exercises, particularly in the area of vocational accreditation. In 2011, HKCAA VQ conducted a review of the Four-stage QA Process with an aim to evaluate the effectiveness, transparency and efficiency of its ongoing accreditation model. Following the review and the consultation with stakeholders in 2012, HKCAA VQ refined the Four-stage QA Process by phases starting from June 2013.
The refined model emphasizes on the following principles:
- A more learner-centred philosophy;
- Balancing the role between “Gate-keeping” and “Gate-opening”;
- Enabling approach to facilitate providers to get well prepared for accreditation;
- Extent of evaluation contingent upon the maturity and risk assessment of the operator; and
- Transparency.

The refined model aims to enhance providers’ awareness of the accreditation requirements, streamline the process for providers with successful accreditation experience and safeguard the quality of qualifications at the same time.

**Future Development**

*Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT)*

The Education Bureau (EDB) of the HKSAR Government launched the CAT policy and principles under the QF in July 2014 with an aim to support the progression of learners to higher levels of learning without duplicate learning. One of the principles is that the CAT systems and procedures developed by the individual providers should be subject to rigorous quality assurance measures.

*Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning*

Given an increasing part of learning could be achieved by a learner outside the classroom setting, those non-formal and informal learning should be properly recognised and credit-rated under the QF. The EDB has just completed a feasibility study on the validation of non-formal and informal learning for Hong Kong. In order to ensure the credits awarded from non-formal and informal learning is of the same quality as the credits gained from formal learning, the validation system should include an appropriate QA mechanism.

With the introduction of the aforesaid new policies and directions riding on the development of QF, it is timely for the HKCAAVQ to further review their provision and delivery of accreditation services. They should strive to make the accreditation mechanism and process more accommodating and facilitating in order to encourage more VET providers to join the QF.

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