

Reviewing quality assessment tools for graduate education

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Jn 2013, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) Task Force on Graduate Education called for an assessment of the state of graduate education programs in the Philippines. This assessment produced a comprehensive report on the state of graduate education programs in the country based on available CHED databases.¹ It included a review of quality assessment (QA) tools used in different countries to determine how the quality of graduate education is being assessed. This review is in line with the prospect of CHED developing its own QA tool for Philippine graduate education. This *Policy Note* discusses some of the highlights of this review and looks at what the QA tools for higher education are really measuring.

Background

In this review, quality assessment pertains to the process by which the quality of higher education is evaluated. It seeks to determine the specific aspects of higher education that are being

evaluated or assessed. It also aims to determine the criteria used for assessment or evaluation. In the Philippines, the assessment of the quality of higher education in general and graduate education in particular, has been undertaken primarily by private accrediting agencies. Examples of accrediting agencies are the Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, Colleges, and Universities (PAASCU) and the Accrediting Agency of Chartered Colleges and Universities in the Philippines (AACUP).

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Accreditation by private accrediting agencies is an example of evaluating or assessing the quality of education through external peer review. What is being explored by the country's education officials is the involvement of government, in this case CHED, in the process of monitoring and evaluating the quality of higher education.

Globally, quality assessment or quality assurance tools have gained popularity and controversy for serving as a means to compare and rank schools, colleges, and universities. One of the most popular and controversial QA tools for higher education is The Times Higher Education World University Rankings produced by Thomson Reuters. It has been marked by controversy for measuring quality through a global survey of the academic reputation of universities. Another example of a controversial tool is the Academic Ranking of World Universities by Shanghai Jiao Tong University. It measures quality based solely on objective indicators such as the number of research publications in indexed journals and the number of awards. In the Southeast Asian region, the ASEAN University Network (AUN) has developed a QA framework for universities in the region. With these developments, the QA of education in the Philippines is made even more salient, and the possibility of CHED developing a QA tool for graduate education more relevant.

The review

A total of 28 QA tools from 20 sources were included in the review. Two of the sources were international or global QA tools, 5 were regional or Asia-specific QA tools, and 21 were local or country-specific QA tools. Of the local or country-specific QA tools, five were for the United States and four were for the Philippines.

Other countries represented were Canada, Germany, United Kingdom, Russia, India, Indonesia, Singapore, and New Zealand.

The QA tools varied in scope. Some were specific to undergraduate programs while others were applicable to graduate programs only. There were also QA tools that assessed both undergraduate and graduate programs. Some evaluated colleges and universities or higher education institutions (HEIs) as a whole while others focused on specific degree programs. The organizations that developed these QA tools also varied from universities to private institutions, accrediting agencies, and governments.

From the 28 QA tools reviewed, the research team created a master list of sample indicators and their operational definitions. Subsequently, thematic analysis was conducted that involved an iterative process of creating themes and categories to arrive at the broad areas and subareas for QA. Content analysis was performed next by counting the number of sample indicators that fall under each broad area and subarea.

The 10 broad areas for QA

The 10 broad areas for quality assessment found in the review are curriculum and instruction, research, extension and linkages, faculty, students, staff, alumni, support structure, internal quality assurance, and external quality assurance (Table 1).

The first three broad areas of QA can be clustered into "what we do" or what an HEI does: (1) curriculum and instruction, (2) research, and (3) extension and linkages. This general category of

“what we do” has a total of 121 sample QA indicators. Of the three broad areas, curriculum and instruction has the most number of sample indicators at 76 (Table 1). This implies that the quality of curriculum and instruction is the most heavily assessed across the 28 QA tools.

The next four broad areas of QA can be clustered into “who we are” or who comprises an HEI: (1) faculty, (2) students, (3) nonteaching staff, and (4) alumni. This general category of “who we are” has a total of 96 sample QA indicators. Of the four broad areas, students and faculty have the highest and almost equal number of sample indicators at 44 and 46, respectively. This implies that the quality of students and faculty is the most heavily assessed across the 28 QA tools.

The eighth broad area of QA focuses on support structures or how an HEI is supported. It is comprised of several subareas, namely, governance, physical environment, facilities and equipment, instructional resources, and support services. The large scope of the different subareas explains why this broad area has 86 sample QA indicators.

The last two broad areas are ways of “how we are evaluated” or how an HEI is evaluated. They refer to the QA mechanisms used by an institution, which include (1) internal quality assurance, and (2) external quality assurance. Internal quality assurance includes internal mechanisms for evaluating all the other broad areas. Internal quality assurance has 84 sample QA indicators. External quality assurance with 10 sample QA indicators refers to the assessment done by external parties.

Table 1. Frequencies (f) of broad areas of quality assessment

Broad Areas of QA	f
1. Curriculum and instruction	76
2. Research	31
3. Extension and linkages	14
4. Faculty	44
5. Students	46
6. Nonteaching staff	1
7. Alumni	5
8. Support structure	86
9. Internal quality assurance	84
10. External quality assurance	10
<i>Total</i>	<i>397</i>

Table 2. Frequencies of subareas under curriculum and instruction

Curriculum and Instruction	f
1. Program/Content	37
2. Method/Strategy/Pedagogy	9
3. Teaching outcomes	14
4. Academic policies	16
<i>Total</i>	<i>76</i>

What we do

The first three areas of QA focus on curriculum and instruction, research, and extension and linkages, or what an HEI does.

Curriculum and instruction. Curriculum and instruction looks at (1) the curriculum program or content; (2) the teaching method, strategy, or pedagogy; (3) the teaching outcomes; and (4) academic policies (Table 2). Based on the number of sample indicators ($f=76$), the quality of the curriculum is the most heavily assessed among the three areas of QA that focus on what an HEI does. For example, curriculum content can be assessed in

terms of the relevance of courses to the nature and purpose of the program and in terms of the balance of courses among specialized content, general knowledge, and skills.

Research. Research looks at (1) research activities ($f=16$), (2) publications ($f=9$), and (3) influence or citation ($f=6$). Research is divided into opportunities for students and faculty to engage in research, publishing in journals, and indexing and citation of publications.

Extension and linkages. Extension ($f=3$) and linkages ($f=11$) look at an HEI's contribution to society and the community and its linkages with industry and external partners.

Who we are

The next four areas of QA focus on faculty, students, nonteaching staff, and alumni, or those comprising an HEI.

Faculty. The QA of faculty covers (1) faculty qualifications, (2) faculty competence or expertise, (3) faculty count, (4) faculty development, and (5) internationalization (Table 3). The faculty is assessed primarily based on the professional qualifications of its members such as relevant degrees or licenses earned and relevant

work experiences in their areas of specialization. These sample indicators fall both under faculty qualifications upon entry and competence or expertise developed as a faculty. Faculty competence includes observed expertise in teaching, research, and practice.

Students. The QA of students covers (1) selectivity, (2) enrollment or student count, (3) competence, (4) completion, and (5) internationalization (Table 4). Students are assessed primarily based on meeting admission requirements or their qualifications upon entry such as good academic records and entrance exam scores. Acceptance rate or student selectivity is considered a measure of quality of students.

Staff. The QA of nonteaching staff had only one sample indicator pertaining to staff development.

Alumni. The QA of alumni covers (1) recognition ($f=2$), and (2) employability ($f=3$) of graduates.

How we are supported

The QA area of support structure covers governance, physical environment, facilities and equipment, instructional resources, and support

Table 3. Frequencies of subareas under faculty

Faculty	<i>f</i>
1. Faculty qualifications	14
2. Faculty competence/expertise	15
3. Faculty count	5
4. Faculty development	4
5. Internationalization	6
<i>Total</i>	<i>44</i>

Table 4. Frequencies of subareas under students

Students	<i>f</i>
1. Selectivity	17
2. Enrollment (student count)	2
3. Student competence	10
4. Completion	7
5. Internationalization	10
<i>Total</i>	<i>46</i>

services (Table 5). Governance has the most number of sample indicators and covers an HEI's organizational structure, administration, and financial management. Physical environment looks at size, location or accessibility, cleanliness, and safety. Facilities and equipment look at classrooms, audiovisual rooms, conference rooms, ICT and media equipment, and safety standards. Instructional resources include the library and laboratories. Support services include guidance, placement, health services, and the cafeteria.

How we are evaluated

These refer to internal quality assurance and external quality assurance.

Internal quality assurance consists of mechanisms for evaluating the different broad areas, such as the curriculum program, faculty, students, and nonteaching staff. It includes evaluation and feedback mechanisms and systems of institutionalizing good practices through the creation and implementation of policies. For example, having a student manual and a faculty manual makes all concerned aware of their rights and duties and thus help to uphold student and faculty quality. Specific examples of maintaining the quality of instruction include policies for approving degree programs or setting the class size or faculty-student ratio.

External quality assurance includes institutional responsibilities, accreditation, and reputation.

Conclusion and policy implications

The review of 28 QA tools from 20 local and international sources revealed 10 broad areas of quality assessment in higher education, namely:

Table 5. Frequencies of subareas under support structure

Support Structure	<i>f</i>
1. Governance	42
2. Physical environment	6
3. Facilities and equipment	18
4. Instructional resources	15
5. Support services	5
<i>Total</i>	<i>86</i>

Table 6. Frequencies of subareas under internal quality assurance

Internal Quality Assurance	<i>f</i>
1. Program evaluation	14
2. Faculty	25
3. Students	18
4. Nonteaching staff	15
5. Alumni	2
6. Administration	3
7. Institution	1
8. Recognition	1
9. Labor market satisfaction	2
10. Mission and vision	3
<i>Total</i>	<i>84</i>

(1) curriculum and instruction, (2) research, (3) extension and linkages, (4) faculty, (5) students, (6) staff, (7) alumni, (8) support structure, (9) internal quality assurance, and (10) external quality assurance.

The most heavily assessed areas are the quality of curriculum and instruction, the quality of faculty and students, and the quality of governance and administration as part of a support structure. Internal QA mechanisms focus on the quality of the curriculum, faculty, students, and nonteaching staff, and given the results, they are considered the most important in determining the quality of higher education.

In developing a QA tool for graduate education in the Philippines, it is relevant to reflect on the following points:


- Do we follow the same set of QA areas and subareas found in the review?
- Do we give the same weight or importance to certain QA areas and subareas as in other countries?
- Are there QA areas and subareas unique to graduate education in the Philippines that need to be included or given greater importance?

Pondering on these questions, it is important to ask if QA is relevant to all graduate education programs in the Philippines regardless of varying local contexts. Is there a need to contextualize QA to the specific vision, mission, and goals of an HEI or to the unique needs of a local community? Also, is there a way to set standards that are responsive to the present state of graduate education programs in the Philippines and flexible to their varying contexts?

For instance, should the Philippines follow the increasing emphasis on research rather than on extension and outreach in assessing the quality of its HEIs? Should QA vary for research-oriented and practice-oriented programs? Should we give

equal weight to community work, public service, and collaboration with government and civil society alongside research and publications?

Following the areas and subareas of QA outlined in this paper, we can determine if all areas and subareas are relevant to graduate education in the Philippines. We can then ask if there are specific indicators of quality that are most relevant to graduate education in the country. For instance, what would be the appropriate content of a graduate program? What would be the relevant qualifications for graduate faculty? What would be the criteria for selecting graduate students? What would be the resources needed for a good graduate program?

The present QA tools also emphasize the quality of people upon entry rather than the quality of people upon exit. There is greater emphasis on the criteria for selecting students upon admission than on the added value of higher education to students as measured by their competencies upon graduation. We can examine how we can assess the quality of education based on measures of change in students' competencies. We can also look at the outcomes of education through the quality of graduates or alumni being produced, their employment status and career track, and their contribution to society at large. Thus, it is important to have appropriate tools for assessing not just learning outcomes but also the impact of graduation education as a whole. This requires revisiting the objectives of graduate education and its intended value and utility both at the individual and societal levels and how quality assessment may be better conducted to measure outcomes fully and accurately so that the results can better inform policymakers. 

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