



Contextual influence on evaluation capacity building in a rapidly changing environment under new governmental policies



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ABSTRACT

Evaluation capacity building (ECB) is a context-dependent process. Contextual factors affecting ECB implementation have been explored theoretically and practically, but their influence within a changing environment has seldom been discussed. This study examined essential context-sensitive parameters, particularly those involved in implementing new governmental policies regarding higher education. Taiwan was used as a case study for exploring the effect of contextual change on ECB attributes from the perspectives of training receivers and providers. Surveys and interviews were used for data collection and importance–performance analysis was applied for data analysis. Four prominent features were identified. First, the ECB attributes perceived as important by receivers were performed adequately, whereas those perceived as less important were performed less well. Second, under new policies, training provider designed training covering a wide range of ECB, whereas receivers focused on those can be directly applied in evaluation process. Third, in a small education system such as Taiwan's, the complexity of peer review is high and ethical issues become important. Fourth, because the evaluation structure has been changed from single- to dual-track, receivers expect more training for institution staff, whereas providers insist on hierarchical training. Aligning ECB supply and needs is paramount for adaptation to new policies.

1. Introduction

Accreditation is the primary means of quality assurance employed by higher education, especially in North America and the Asia-Pacific region. With goals of public accountability and institutional improvement, institutional quality is externally evaluated by accreditors or accrediting agencies. Over the last decade, as the education paradigm has shifted from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning, accreditors have incorporated student learning outcome assessment into evaluation standards and review processes when evaluating institutional effectiveness (Rust, 2002). Institutions now explore various pedagogical methods, develop learning assessments, and plan improvements for better student learning. With learning outcome assessments, accreditation is a form of outcome evaluation aimed at improving higher education quality at both the program and institution levels.

Accreditation results rely on expert judgment of institutional performance. In this assessment approach, accreditors design evaluation standards, institutions collect evidence to demonstrate their educational effectiveness, and evaluators invited by accreditors examine institutional self-evaluation reports based on these standards. To conduct

an effective evaluation and accreditation, both evaluators and institutional staff must be able to evaluate the results of learning assessments and identify ways of improving student learning. Therefore, accreditors utilize a variety of evaluation capacity building (ECB) activities to enhance evaluators' capabilities to collect information and make judgments, as well as to increase institutional staff's engagement in assessments. ECB is critical for evaluators and institutional staff to improve educational quality and meet accountability requirements (Stitt-Bergh, 2016; Stitt-Bergh, Richards, & Jones, 2016).

Designing ECB activities to fulfill multiple stakeholders' needs in various contexts is complex. It has been found that ECB is a context-dependent process for increasing an individual or organization's evaluation competency (Bourgeois, Whynot, & Theriault, 2015; Stockdill, Baizerman, & Compton, 2002). The contextual factors theoretically affecting ECB implementation have been systematically explored (Volkov & King, 2007). Practical investigations have been performed across cases in several contexts. However, the contextual influence on ECB in a changing environment and its impact on the barrier between ECB supply by accreditors and ECB demand by evaluators and institutional staff have seldom been discussed, particularly regarding higher

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education. The higher education environment has changed dramatically over the past decade with respect to numerous factors, including demographic changes, declining public support, rapid development of information technology, and internationalization. These changes have engendered notable growth in different types of higher education institutions and affected the scope and complexity of higher education evaluation (Eaton, 2015). The necessary ECB in response to the contextual changes occurring in higher education should be discussed. Therefore, this study employed the Taiwanese higher education system as a case study to explore this issue.

Taiwan's higher education system has experienced dramatic changes in its environment and has encountered challenges in maintaining educational quality. Gross enrollment in Taiwanese tertiary education reached over 50% in the 1990s and was 84% in 2012, which is higher than that of any other Asian country (Chang, 2015). Despite this fast expansion, Taiwan has earned a positive reputation for educational quality. A total of 12 universities in Taiwan rank among the top 100 in the QS World University Ranking: Asia 2016 (QS, 2016). Education quality is assured by adopting an accreditation approach, which is handled by the institutions themselves and monitored by a national accreditor, the Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan (HEEACT). Similar to most accreditation models, the evaluation process consists of institutional self-evaluation by institutional staff and site visits by the evaluators invited by the HEEACT at both institution and program levels.

Taiwan's higher education environment is in a process of continuous change. Recently, globalization has become an important factor affecting higher education. It increases the visibility and collaboration of higher education, but also raises the tension involved in inter-university competition. Evaluation and accreditation has become a proof of educational quality, but also a barrier to international exchange. To respond to these contextual changes, the Taiwan Ministry of Education implemented a new evaluation policy in 2012 of self-accreditation to increase university autonomy regarding the development of university specialties. A total of 34 universities and 26 vocational colleges were given self-accreditation status and authorized to set up university-based evaluation standards to self-monitor the provided programs. Program accreditation is open for self-accreditation conducted by institutions. However, institutional accreditation is still conducted by the HEEACT.

These changes from the policies focusing on globalization and self-accreditation have led to shifts in the conceptualization and implementation of ECB. With their responsibility for designing ECB activities, the accreditors—as training providers—are expected to identify ECB attributes and design new training covering the required capacities, whereas evaluators and institutional staff—as training receivers—are expected to be familiar with new concepts in effective evaluation. However, it has been noted that ECB activities are often designed by accreditors and delivered to evaluators and institutional staff regardless of the recipients' opinions and needs. The underpinning hypothesis is that the required ECB attributes perceived by providers and receivers are aligned. This raises the question of how the two sides' opinions can remain closely aligned in a rapidly changing environment.

This study aimed to investigate the fundamental characteristics of the context-sensitive parameters and their influence on the ECB attributes perceived by evaluators, institutional quality assurance (QA) staff, and accreditors. The gap between the needs and supply of ECB activities was focused on. Three research questions were addressed:

- How has the evaluation context changed since the introduction of the new government policies?
- What are the ECB attributes perceived by the training receivers (evaluators and institutional QA staff) and the provider (the accreditor) under the new policies? What is the nature of the relationship between them?
- What was the effect of context changes on the ECB attributes before and after the implementation of the new policies?

2. Literature review

2.1. Contextual factors of ECB

ECB occurs in complex contexts with different organizational, social, and political conditions. As a context-dependent process, ECB helps individuals or organizations attain knowledge, skills, or evaluation practices (Bourgeois et al., 2015). Because ECB occurs at individual, intraorganizational, and interorganizational levels, the context can be explored from the microcontextual perspective of a local setting as well as from the macrocontextual view of a broader sociopolitical context (Chouinard, 2013; Conner, Fitzpatrick, & Rog, 2012; King, 2007; Rog, 2012).

The microcontext refers to the local organizational and community conditions, as well as the multiple relationships between individual, organization, and community settings. Five major features appear particularly relevant on the microcontextual level: (1) *Evaluation resources*. These resources are those available for ECB, such as financial support and human resources. Human resources are those staff having evaluation experience or who are able to conduct evaluations. (2) *Structures*. Organizations and communities with appropriate structures can facilitate the information flow and effectiveness of ECB. For example, a team structure can be formed that enhances collaborations and problem solving. (3) *Power dynamics*. Power dynamics are related to who is responsible for evaluation and how a decision is made. (4) *Policies and procedures*. These are related to governance approaches. Clear rules can lead to actions being taken regarding ECB. Formal written policy guidelines may increase stakeholders' attentiveness as well as their practical actions. (5) *Evaluation culture*. Evaluation culture consists of the evaluation atmosphere, stakeholders' concerns, and past ECB efforts. These factors can influence staff and organizational attitudes toward the evaluation process and participation in ECB activities (Cousins & Chouinard, 2012; Labin, Duffu, Meyers, Wandersman, & Lesesne, 2012; Volkov & King, 2007).

The macrocontext embeds the local organization and community within a broader, interconnected social system involved in ECB. It can be influenced by political, social, and economic factors. Political factors include legislation, global influence, and government policies. Social factors consist of demographics, major events and influences, and ethics. Economic factors comprise national economics and trends, taxation issues, and markets (Altschuld & Kumar, 2010; Bourgeois & Cousins, 2013). Recognizing the effect of micro- and macrocontextual dimensions can assist in the identification of the challenges involved in developing ECB in complex and demanding contexts.

2.2. Contextual influence on ECB attributes of higher education accreditation in various countries

A trend toward international convergence in accreditation and QA has emerged (El-Khawas, 1998; Van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994; Woodhouse, 1996). Review processes often consist of self-evaluation by institutions, site visits by evaluators, and a determination by accreditors of whether an institution meets the minimum standards. To ensure that evaluators conduct effective evaluations and institutions prepare appropriate documents, accreditors design and supervise ECB training and sometimes produce written guidelines. Evaluators and institutional staff passively accept ECB activities and form a local network with accreditors.

However, sociopolitical context and the relationships among accreditors, evaluators, and institutional staff can affect the ECB activities of higher education systems in various countries. From this perspective, the cultural diversity of ECB activities is a particular concern. The accreditation system originates in North America. Regional or specialized accreditors are self-funded and nongovernmental organizations, so their authority is not derived from the state or federal government. For example, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges' Senior College

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