Can sharing QA Knowledge transform China HEIs into Learning Organizations?

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to investigate integrative theories that explore the relationship between Higher Education Institutions (HEI) stakeholders and the knowledge sharing of quality management (QM) activities and practices, which lead to organizational learning. First, this paper explores the under-researched subject areas of industrial QM techniques and their proper applications in the HEIs. Second, though few academics and researchers have studied the QA models, few have specifically attempted to integrate the QA model with stakeholder and knowledge management theories. This paper provides three theoretical propositions as a basis for analytical generalization conclusion. Third, attempt is made to integrate case- and theory-driven approaches to offer insights into QA application knowledge.

Keywords: stakeholder theory, knowledge sharing, quality assurance, HE, HEI, China HEI, learning organization.

1.   Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) play a critical role in the development and growth of the economy. They cultivate talents whose contributions drive discoveries in science and technology, the betterment of their communities; and the profitability and innovations of entities. During the past two decades, enrolment in higher education has increased dramatically, with China having the largest higher education system in the world (Liu 2013). Quality assurance (QA) of higher education is becoming a policy priority and strategic focus in both industrialized countries and less developed nations (Huang, Adamson, & Lee, 2014).

In China, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has, since the end of the 1990s, introduced several quality-assurance systems to assess the quality of HEIs (Liu 2013; Huang et al. 2014). One of the primary goals is to provide directions on how HEIs could strengthen educational infrastructure, improve the quality of teaching, develop management skills, and establish internal quality assurance mechanisms (Huang et al. 2014).   Quality assessment is considered an effective means of bringing change in HEIs. Nevertheless, quality is relative, depending on the interpretations of the external and internal stakeholders. As internal stakeholders, both the governing bodies and teaching staff at HEIs need to be knowledgeable in the QA processes.

Due to the dearth of studies that integrate the QA model with stakeholder and knowledge management theories, this paper represents an initial framework for HEIs to put more emphasis on sharing of QA knowledge and practices learnt, with the ultimate goal of increasing staff's competency and transforming into learning organizations.

2.   Knowledge and Knowledge Sharing

Grant (1996) in keeping with a knowledge-based view, defines knowledge as "that which is known", while Teece (2000) asserts that knowledge should be more about context, rather than just on content or fact. The operational term of knowledge and knowledge transfer, refers to "…the process through which

one unit is affected by the experience of another" (Argote and Ingram 2000, p151).   Knowledge transfer encompasses dissemination and the availability of knowledge to others and might not be a two-way exchange. A major problem in the transfer of knowledge learning intra-organizationally is the stickiness or the embeddedness nature as compared to explicit knowledge (Granovetter 1973).   This is one of the most important challenging aspects of tacit knowledge dissemination in the arena of the total quality management (TQM) process.

2.1   Tacit Knowledge

Knowledge is mainly in two forms: from tacit to explicit, and from socialization to externalization. Both of these two forms represent a process of expressing tacit knowledge in explicit forms whether through concepts or metaphors. Under both the externalization and combination processes are thus, the creation of "know-why" (Nonaka &Takeuchi 1995).   In other words, tacit knowing is the interpretations of exemplary knowledge. Thomas (2011) coined this as "phronesis" where the educators have the ability to do and see the right things in the right circumstances due to the fact that they are reflective practitioners. Hence, a pivotal factor in an organization's learning is its ability to integrate the specialized and tacit knowledge of individuals (Teece 2000).   Learning and socialization are connected in nature, whether it is the intra-organizational level or at the community level.   A cycle of learning that moves from socialization to externalization, to combination and learning-by-doing, from combination to internalization, and back again to socialization.   Nanaka (2007) describes knowledge as a "continual shift in meaning as new knowledge is diffused in an organization".

2.2   Organizational Learning

Senge (1990) advocates the concept of "double-loop learning":   it is when errors in an organization's procedures are detected, there are feedback changes in place so that an organization's capabilities can be expanded.   To facilitate organizational learning and skills development outlined below, Wiig (1997) proposed four perspectives for future knowledge management:
(1) management practices should be integrated into daily work activities and routines including knowledge sharing and collaboration in working teams;
(2) information technology such as knowledge-based systems can provide corporate memory databases and which have intelligent-acting behaviour;
(3) organizational efforts and development such as workload reduction; and
(4) supply and adoption rate such as higher standardization which in turn leads to greater "productization", this also means "technology push" of products and services in a "demand pull" manner.   HEI educators are, therefore, the "producers of knowledge".

Furthermore, there are also three strategic levels for the value creation networks within an organization: (a) strategic or corporate level in the leveraging of knowledge; (b) tactical in the sharing of best practices; and (c) operational level with codified routine information across the strategic business units (Allee, 2000).   Service organizations, such as higher education institutions should, therefore, strategically manage their knowledge specialists (Drucker, 1988).   In order to cultivate employee capabilities, skills and competency, a learning organization environment is necessary.

2.3   Sharing of QA Knowledge and Practices

Organizations have automated knowledge management through various systems or channels through people so that knowledge can be shared (Hansen, Nohria, & Tierney, 1999).   The works of Abrams, Cross, Lesser, and   Levin, (2003), as well as Grant (2010) supported the view that database (depositories) and organizational processes were initially created to enable knowledge sharing and learning through intranets, expert systems, or groupware, a development otherwise known as the "first wave" in the development of knowledge management. For example, the HEI in this case study (BNU-HKBU United International College ("UIC")) deployed an enterprise content management (ECM) intranet system with the aims of disseminating and sharing of useful QA-related documents as well as acting as a data file depository.   Thus, we propose the following:

Proposition 1: Sharing of QA knowledge and practices learnt increases staff's competency and transforms HEIs into learning organizations.

2.4   Stakeholders and TQM

The discussions on industrial TQM models and the applications of quality assurance (QA) for HEI stakeholders have generated a great deal of interests and research in the past decade (Becket & Brookes, 2008). Specifically, HEI stakeholders arguably hold a great deal of "inherent skepticism" in applying more general QM approaches due to the perception of QA process not related to an HE context (Pratasavitskaya & Stensaker, 2010). Stakeholder refers to "…all persons or groups with legitimate interests participating in an enterprise do so to obtain benefits and that there is no prima facie priority of one set of interests and benefits over another" (Donaldson & Preston, 1995, p.68), implying that all relationships are of the same size and shape. Figure 1(a) below shows Donaldson and Preston's (1995) depiction of the relationship among the stakeholders.

However, we posit that HEI governing bodies may have a higher legitimate interest level than the consumers (students and parents), based on the observed phenomenon of the subject of the single-case study. The legitimacy of the stakeholders, especially that of the governing bodies of an HEI and the programme committee members, are expected by other stakeholders to have legal power to ratify QA policies; however, students, who have formal representation, are only regarded as influencers because their input is deemed tokenistic (Freeman 2010; Leisyte et al. 2013). In other words, "power dependence" and "dominate stakeholders" as referred by Mitchell et al., (1997) signify that the university governing bodies have higher power and legitimacy attributes and claims over other stakeholders. They dictate stakeholder salience in terms of QA activities and processes. As a result, other stakeholders are dependent on the university to uphold their interests.

Figure 1(b) represents our depiction of the relationship among the institution and the stakeholders.
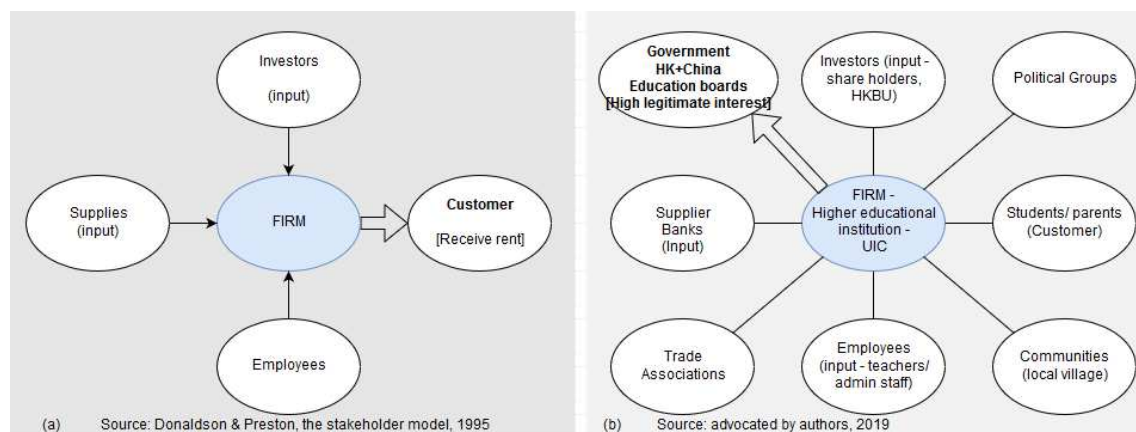

Figure 1(a): Stakeholder model   Figure 1(b): Institution and stakeholder relationship

2.5   Seven models of education quality

Cheng and Tam (1997) summarized seven models of education quality and concluded that not a single model could effectively attain and maintain the desired quality level. As such, the application of total quality management to the field of education is both appropriate and essential. Among the seven models of education quality (the goal and specification model, the resource-input model, the process model, the satisfaction model, the legitimacy model, the absence of problems model and the organizational learning model), the legitimacy model is the widely adopted model in many countries due to the current stress on parental choice and accountability in educational reforms (Cheng & Tam, 1997). In China, the accountability in educational reforms is primarily overseen by the government, one of the stakeholders that has significant power to impact the ability of the constituents to gain legitimacy. The survival of HEIs, therefore, necessitates the establishment and maintenance of a good QA system. Therefore, we expect the following theoretical proposition to be true.

Proposition 2:   HEI stakeholders have higher degree of legitimacy in QA as compared to customers of industrial organizations.

2.6   Applicability of industrial QA model to HEIs

The literature review project undertaken by Liu, Tan, and Meng (2015) indicated that the QA process has both extrinsic and intrinsic functions. The former is associated with accountability and compliance, while the latter is related to improvement of quality. They also found that quality assessment performed in response to accountability did not effectively facilitate the reforms of HEIs and did not improve their quality provision.

Many studies argue that external QA requirements might not have driven any major improvements in teaching and learning in HEIs due to the imperfect design of the QA schemes that are put into place, or the ineffective implementation by the institutions involved (Liu 2013). While the deficiencies might give the critics reasons to broach the low effectiveness of QA in improvement, the use of external quality assessment system as a means to drive the improvement of internal QA schemes are widely documented (Brown 2011; Liu 2013).

<u>Proposition 3</u>:   Industrial QA model is increasingly more applicable to the HEIs of China.

By drawing on the integrative theories of stakeholder and knowledge management, especially in the field of organizational learning as well as QA practices and processes, we have purported the above three theoretical propositions.   Next, we offer the following explanatory single-case study research methodology in support of our findings.

3   Research Methodology

Through an explanatory single-case study, we explore managerial and institutional implementation challenges encountered by HEIs in China. The evaluation of data, documents, behaviours and descriptions of events collected at the institutional level by educational researchers, seemingly resembles a pattern, is considered 'holistic' as a single unit of analysis (Merriam 1998; Yin 2014). The advantages of one in-depth single case study are that we would focus on individuals and groups of actors or internal stakeholders in a chain of events (for example, in QA or accreditation processes) from their perceptions of 'how' and 'why' (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011).   This chain of events, or a particularistic process of event, is of intrinsic interests to the stakeholders involved – whether they are the teachers, the administrators or the governing bodies of the HEIs.   Researchers that use tacit understanding to build exemplary knowledge are essentially offering what Thomas (2011) described as "… an example from which one's experience, one's phronesis, enables one to gather insight or understand a problem." (p,11). However, the disadvantages of a single-case study may have been selective, biased and subjective as researchers combine personal knowledge and inferences; hence, this may result in an interpretive paradigm.   Consequently, it is only through the use of four triangulation elements: (a) construct; (b) concurrent internal validities (use of multiple sources of evidence); (c) an operational framework on the QA process and practices; and (d) explanation building, that analytical generalization can be culminated, as proposed by Yin (1999).   Figure 2 illustrate the UIC's operational framework for QA process (Quality Assurance Council 2016).   As such, the HKBU Senate is the supreme academic body of the HKBU under the Hong Kong Baptist University Ordinance.   It regulates the academic affairs, including the QA process and practices of the University and UIC in addition to the welfare and discipline of its students.
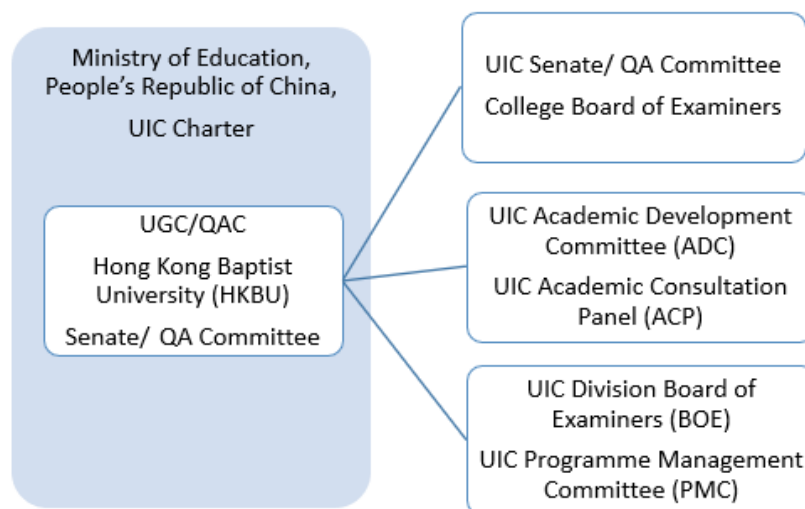
Adopted from: Report of a quality audit of Hong Kong Baptist University, Quality Assurance Council, 2016
Downloadable from: https://www.ugc.edu.hk/doc/eng/qac/report/hkbu201602e.pdf

Figure 2 – UIC operational framework for QA process

Internal quality assurance for HEIs involves developing/maintaining a continuous quality improvement plan, dedicating responsibilities for quality improvement to faculties, and improving documentation of procedures and outcomes (Meade 1995) .

4.   Limitations and Further Studies

Case studies in education offers a means of investigating complex social units of multiple stakeholders that are important in understanding the phenomenon that would offer insights and expand experiences to its educational readers.   Case studies offer detailed programs, processes, practices to the stakeholders in policy-making.   However, the weaknesses and limitations include: researchers' selection of materials, problem of researcher bias, and time-bounded with insufficient in-depth descriptions of chain of events in the HEIs context.   Furthermore, other concerns would include the reliabilities, validities and generalization of this case study.   Therefore, further studies with empirical data would shed additional light and provide support to this topic. Another important area for future studies would be internal quality assurance based on feedback from university students and their parents as they are considered to be valuable stakeholders, especially in the fulfillment of the intended learning outcomes that align with their graduate attributes.

The most important institutional implication is that one single-case study or a collection of case studies can provide powerful support for HEI senates' macro-political decision making.   This research confirms the importance of stakeholders' roles and influences in the context of knowledge sharing of QA activities. Hence, for practical implication, reflective learning is necessary for HEI staff.

5.   Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to examine the applicability of industrial QM techniques to the QA facets of HEIs, based upon the stakeholder and knowledge management theories. The three propositions presented serve to provoke thoughts as well as stimulate empirical research about the extent to which HEIs' QA process should encompass, especially for HEIs in China. By reviewing the relevant theories, prior research, and the increasing need for HEIs worldwide to place more emphasis on quality assurance, we suggest that innovative and systematic approaches to providing high quality education should be considered by HEIs.

Through the use of a single-case study relative to an HEI located in Zhuhai, China, we highlight the importance for HEIs to identify the stakeholders in order to develop and maintain a sustainable QA system. We submit that in China, the stakeholder that exert the most impact on the QA process are the government bodies. Future researchers should consider the unique situations in their respective countries and link them to relevant theories.

Although the findings of some research show that external QA requirements did not yield any major improvements in teaching and learning in HEIs, the conceptual framework presented in this paper offers a fresh perspective for HEIs to glean more benefits from the QA process. The added values involve the sharing of QA knowledge and practices learnt to increase staff's competency as facilitators, mentors, and coaches, as well as the transformation of the institutions into learning organizations through the collaboration among the constituents of the institutions.

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Authors' Backgrounds

	Dr. Bing Chan is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Business and Management (DBM) at the BNU-HKBU-UIC. Dr. Chan teaches Business and Management courses, such as Strategic Management, Organizational Behavior and Marketing. With former service industry and Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) experiences, as well as over 12 years of HEI teaching practices; her current research interests focus on strategic management, knowledge management, and quality assurance. Currently, Dr. Chan also serves as the CRA Coordinator and assists in the implementation/ monitoring of Outcomes-based Teaching and Learning criterion-referenced assessment (OBTL-CRA) policies/ procedures in DBM.
	Dr. Donna Chan joined the Division of Business and Management (DBM) at the BNU-HKBU-UIC in 2012, teaching Accounting and Management-related courses. In addition to her primary position of Assistant Professor, Dr. Chan is also serving as DBM's Assistant Dean. Her current research interests include: financial accounting/reporting and corporate governance; leadership/motivation; and technology in teaching and learning. Prior to working in the academic arena, she had worked in the business field for over 10 years. The last position she held was Vice President, Business Operations in a pharmaceutical development company in Maryland, USA.