

**Skills for Inclusive and Sustainable Growth in Developing Asia-Pacific:
An International Consultative Forum**

Asian Development Bank Headquarters, Manila, Philippines December 12-13, 2011

Paper Title: Partnership with the Stakeholders in Assuring Quality in Skills Development – Stories of the HKCAAVQ

Author: Mr. Sam Ho

Abstract:

The Hong Kong Council for Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ) is the Accreditation Authority and the Qualifications Register Authority under the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (HKQF). HKQF is a seven-level hierarchy of qualifications covering the academic and the vocational education and training sectors. These qualifications are characterized by outcome-based level descriptors which describe the common features of qualifications at the same level. As the Accreditation Authority, the HKCAAVQ is entrusted by the Hong Kong Government with the responsibility to quality assure learning programmes and their qualifications offered by non-self-accrediting providers including corporations offering in-house skill development programmes. For the purpose of this paper, references are made to the experiences gained by the Vocational Accreditation Division of the HKCAAVQ in providing accreditation services to the vocational education and training (VET) sector since the launch of the HKQF in 2008. Given the diversity of the training providers in the VET sector and the kinds of learning programmes – job-specific pre-employment training, apprenticeship training and in-service skill upgrading – that they offer, the HKCAAVQ was presented with many opportunities and, yet, many challenges. The experiences gained by the HKCAAVQ suggested that partnership is the keystone. This paper examines how partnership is manifested in vocational accreditation at the HKCAAVQ through three stories – engaging the stakeholders, gate-opening, and networking with industries.

Paper:

INTRODUCTION

The Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications (HKCAAVQ), formerly known as the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation, was established in 1990 as an independent statutory body to provide authoritative advice on academic standards of degree programmes of the non-self-accrediting higher education institutions in Hong Kong. In 2007, the Council was reconstituted as the HKCAAVQ to reflect the expansion of its scope and responsibilities to include provision of accreditation services to the vocational education and training sector and its new role as the Qualifications Register Authority under the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (HKQF).

Year 2010 marks the twentieth anniversary of the HKCAAVQ and a conference, *Quality Assurance at the Crossroads – A Critical Reflection after Twenty Years*, was held with a view to bringing together professionals from different sectors to facilitate dialogue and promote the exchange of experiences. The conference was attended by many stakeholders, and past and present Council members who showed strong interests in the work of the HKCAAVQ. At the conference, the former Council Chairman, Dr. York Liao, made a remark that “the vocational sector presents challenges for the Council and globally there is no consensus on what models of quality assurance to use.” So where are the signposts and where do these signposts point?

Compared to academic accreditation services of the HKCAAVQ, vocational accreditation is relatively new and it was first introduced in 2008 to complement the launch of the HKQF. The clientele of the HKCAAVQ has since been very diverse which includes, for example, (a) the two statutory bodies, the Vocational Training Council and the Employees Retraining Board, that have specific missions to serve the VET sector, (b) Government department such as the Force Search Unit of the Hong Kong Police Force, (c) Apprentice Jockeys’ School of The Hong Kong Jockey Club that provides apprentice training to the jockeys, horse riders, and farriers, (d) beauty and cosmetic schools, and (e) trade unions that provide a range of skill upgrading programmes. Demand for prompt vocational accreditation services has grown unprecedentedly over the past years when providers and corporations see the value of the HKQF as a people management and development tool. Noting that there are different types of training providers and learning programmes in the VET sector, the HKCAAVQ needs to provide its accreditation services in a flexible and innovative manner. In response to this new challenge, the HKCAAVQ entrusts the responsibility of providing vocational accreditation services through a dedicated team of 15 colleagues under the Vocational Accreditation Division.

This paper is based on a self reflection of the Vocational Accreditation Division of the HKCAAVQ (VAD-HKCAAVQ) through three stories – engaging the stakeholders, gate-opening, and networking with industries – that would hopefully shed light on working towards broad consensus on what models of quality assurance to use in accrediting vocational qualifications.

APPROACHES TO VOCATIONAL ACCREDITATION AND LESSONS LEARNT

(1) Engaging the Stakeholders in Developing Accreditation Tools

Understanding diversity has been the main thrust that drives the VAD-HKCAAVQ for continuous improvement. Diversity comes in different forms – the nature and the maturity of the training providers and variation of learning programmes. And most importantly, these training providers are not very familiar with the work involved in external accreditation. Taking note of the diversity and the need for providing guidance, the VAD-HKCAAVQ revamped all guidelines and turned these guidelines into a set of 3-step accreditation tools.

The first-step tool is a self-assessment checklist. This checklist helps training providers assess the extent to which that they are ready to meet the accreditation standards. The second-step tool echoes the evidence-based accreditation principle which is a list of possible sources of evidence alongside each accreditation standard. Training providers can make reference to the list and gather the evidence for accreditation. The third-step tool is an application form stating more clearly what need to be provided for accreditation. All these tools were designed to help the VET sector to evaluate their readiness for undertaking accreditation and to take them through step-by-step the requirements for accreditation. To ensure that the stakeholders have ownership of these tools, focus group meetings covering the whole range of training providers were held to gauge their feedback on these tools. It turned out that participants of these focus group meetings eagerly shared their views and provided valuable input in the finetuning of these accreditation tools. As one of the measures to assess the effectiveness of these accreditation tools, cases where accreditation seekers found that they could not meet the accreditation standards and asked for withdrawal dropped from 30% to 5%.

There is a lesson to learn here. The VAD-HKCAAVQ has to let the VET sector know that their needs are being heard through different means and that their needs are addressed. The VET sector was involved in refining these tools through a number of focus group meetings. Throughout this engaging process, the relevant stakeholders have ownership of the accreditation tools. This strong sense of ownership has strengthened the relationship between the HKCAAVQ and the VET sector. By building a relationship that is based on trust, the VET sector sees the VAD-HKCAAVQ as a partner in the quality assurance journey.

(2) Gate-opening – A hand-holding strategy

The VAD-HKCAAVQ recognizes that the VET sector needs time to get used to the idea of quality assurance and to gain buy-in. The VET sector also needs time to see their contributions to economic and social development. Therefore, the concept of gate-opening comes in. This concept is translated into a hand-holding strategy, i.e. walking hand-in-hand with providers in the quality assurance journey. The word, hand-holding, symbolizes a lot of caring, patience, and trust between the HKCAAVQ and the VET sector.

The website of the HKCAAVQ frequently publicizes the information on briefing sessions or hands-on workshops organized for different trades and industries. These briefing sessions or workshops touch upon the hurdles that the accreditation seekers may encounter. It is in these briefing sessions and workshops that VAD-HKCAAVQ walks hand-in-hand with the VET providers to overcome the hurdles in the accreditation process. Different providers may have different needs. The VAD-HKCAAVQ is very sensitive to needs of individual providers. To this end, the VAD-HKCAAVQ often organizes tailor-made workshops such as how to assign QF level to a learning programme, what evidence to meet which accreditation standard, etc.

In November 2011, the VAD-HKCAAVQ conducted a tailor-made workshop for the Leadership Training Institute (the Institute) of the Scout Association of Hong Kong. This is a case in point to illustrate the kind of tailor-made workshops that the VAD-HKCAAVQ has been offering to the VET sector. Colleagues of the Institute were taken through the evidence-based accreditation process by using their own training materials. The workshop was very well received by the colleagues because the whole workshop was designed to meet their needs. And in another workshop, the VAD-HKCAAVQ invited a training provider that has successfully gone through the accreditation process to share its tears and joys with the workshop participants. Such a third-party endorsement was very powerful as workshop participants could vividly see the values of the accreditation process.

As evidently illustrated in the examples, there is another lesson to learn - neither the HKCAAVQ nor the training provider should be left isolated. In fact, both the HKCAAVQ and the training providers in the VET sector are working partners in people development. A hand-holding strategy is effective in building the quality assurance capacity of the VET sector.

(3) Networking with the Industries

Since the launch of the HKQF, the Hong Kong Government has set up Industry Training

Advisory Committees (ITAC) to, among other things, develop, maintain, and update the Specifications of Competency Standards (SCS). ITAC provides a platform for employers, employees, professional bodies and other stakeholders to exchange their views on people development. The VAD-HKCAAVQ, as a moderator of the SCSs, continues its representations in the ITACs meetings and takes an active part in events organized by ITACs. Such networking has helped the VAD-HKCAAVQ to keep abreast of the developments in manpower planning and training requirements of the industries and to ensure that the accreditation services can best suit the needs of various industries.

The VAD-HKCAAVQ also maintains close communication with the industry specialists who may be invited to serve as members in the accreditation panels. In the past year, the HKCAAVQ had frequent dialogues with many industries, e.g. Beauty Care, Chinese Catering, Property Management, Retail, and Automotive industries. During these dialogues, practitioners shared their views on the trends, developments and challenges of the respective industries. The VAD-HKCAAVQ has become more aware of the people development needs of the industries.

Building a strong network of support in the industries has proven to be an effective way to promote the work of the VAD-HKCAAVQ. Using the Property Management industry as an example, there were 3 providers and corporations requesting for accreditation services in 2010. They successfully went through the accreditation process and saw values in having both open-to-public and in-house training programmes accredited for skill development and recognition. Because of this demonstration effect, another 8 providers and corporations decided to follow suit a year later.

LOOKING AHEAD

There are many new initiatives under the HKQF such as the development of work-based learning and accreditation of corporations that award certificated training. The Vocational Accreditation Division of the HKCAAVQ has to reach out to its stakeholders around-the-clock to gain their trust and take on these new initiatives together with the stakeholders as partners. The signposts as described in the stories – engaging the stakeholders, gate-opening, and networking with industries – will no doubt lead the Vocational Accreditation Division of the HKCAAVQ to a very promising direction. By sharing these stories, the Vocational Accreditation Division of the HKCAAVQ invites dialogues with education and training specialists and quality assurance professionals around the world and joins hands in working towards broad consensus on what models of quality assurance to use in accrediting vocational qualifications.