

Assuring Program Quality to Meet the Challenges of Accountability in Higher Education

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Abstract

Universities are accountable to the community for the academic mission assigned to them through public support. The purpose of this study is to investigate the strategies employed by a department of a university in South China to achieve the accountability goals established by the university. The focus is on examining how faculty and staff at the department level of the university have correspondingly developed practical plans to assure their program quality to meet the university goals. This article starts with a review of current literature on program quality assurance and accountability in higher education. A case study of the targeted university and the special education program was designed by reviewing the university and department documents in file searching for details of accountability strategies aiming at university goal achievement. The findings of the study indicate that the targeted department has performed exceedingly well in achieving the university accountability goals of Academic Development, Research and Knowledge Transfer, and Management and Infrastructure.

Introduction

When a public higher education institute assumes the responsibilities of preparing the next generation of national experts, it has also faced the challenges of accountability checks. The pressures of the demand for accountability come from different sources: the funding agencies, the public communities, the business and industrial sector, the national and international competition, professional accreditation organizations, the parents and the students. Higher education program developers need to assure their program quality as a first step to work towards accountability (Flanigan, Marion, & Richardson, 2000; Kaufman, Herman, & Watters, 1996; Lyons & Gooden, 2001). Demand for educational accountability is even more pressing when changes are made in Government policies, social development, economic directions, cultural diversity and ways of life practices (Chan, Richardson, & Jording, 2001). Educational programs in higher education need to stay alert and respond responsibly to the quest for accountability quick enough for survival.

A review of the literature of accountability in higher education has indicated that advanced countries in the world have taken educational accountability seriously. Accountability in higher education is given special attention and demand because of the huge financial investment in higher education. Among all the countries in the world, the United Kingdom and the United States have taken the lead in response to the accountability movement (Leithwood & Earl, 2000). In acting towards program accountability, many global higher education institutes have developed control measures to check on program qualities and outcomes. To be responsible to the public demand, higher education institutes in Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Chile, France, Germany and Hungary have developed solid accountability plans to demonstrate their program achievements (Sobe, 2015). In Asian countries like India, Indonesia, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand, Korea, China, Malaysia,

and Philippines, higher education administrators have instructed their department faculty members to self-evaluate their effort towards accountability (HKCAA Tenth Annual International Conference, 2001). Fuentelsaz and Jimenez (2000) have declared that educational accountability in public colleges in Russia, South Africa, Ethiopia, Spain, Sweden, and Uruguay is the top priority task of administrators and program planners whereas the Bureau for Higher Education, Ministry of University Affairs, Thailand, makes it clear to all the public higher education institutes that they need to show evidence of compliance with the accountability goals in their annual performance report (Bureau for Higher Education, Ministry of University Affairs, Thailand, 1998).

Responding to the accountability movement, a teacher education program in a university located in South China has taken the initiative in planning to assure the quality of its programs. The program developers aim at preparing program candidates to gain competency and confidence in teaching, promoting scholarship activities and knowledge transfer to benefit the communities. The program is a publicly funded special education program focusing on teaching, research and community services. This special education program is chosen as a research target in this study because it typically follows the directions of the university authority in China and at the same time develops its own free initiatives to support the university in meeting the accountability goals. To receive the appropriated public funding, the University has signed an agreement with the funding authority to proclaim its accountability with goals to achieve. This article fully illustrates the effort of the special education program in support of the University to achieve its accountability goals through the assurance of its program quality.

Review of Literature

Program Quality and Program Accountability

Educational program accountability starts with the development of a quality program that meets the demand of critical needs of the community. Then, the program is implemented with quality controls that safeguard the quality of the program outcomes. When the program accountability is achieved, the program is considered as effective.

In support of accountability, Richardson, Chan and Jording (2001) claimed that plans of program quality with specific achievable goals need to be well developed, solid implementing procedures need to be closely followed, practical educational activities need to be supervised, regular checkpoints need to be set to measure the educational progress and guiding directions need to be developed for heading towards achieving accountability.

Chan (2009) described the strong relationship of accountability and program quality in a cycle as shown in Figure 1. The cycle starts with the establishment of accountability goals and ends in program effectiveness which feedbacks to the consideration of goal revision of accountability.

“In this process, it is clear that programs of better quality yield more effective outcomes to satisfy the accountability goals. When accountability goals are not achieved, it is quite possible that the program or its implementation procedures were not developed well enough to generate the desired outcomes. On the other hand, reality of the goals needs to be re-examined to ensure a reasonable extent of attainability.” (p. 15)

This model of program quality and accountability suits well in support of the assumption of this study which explores how the departmental strategies could help achieving the university's accountability goals.

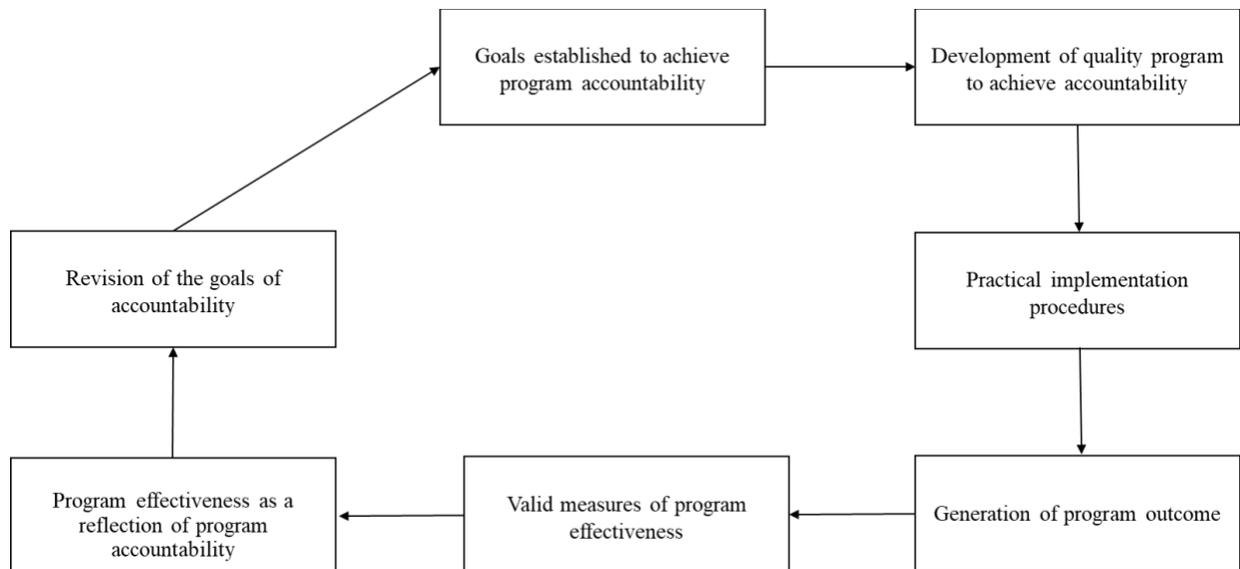


Figure 1. Relationship of Program Quality and Accountability

Assurance of Program Quality

Quality assurance is a system intended to demonstrate to the general public that a product or service an organization produces is up to standards of quality set by the profession. Quality assurance measures the standards that go into a product or service before it is delivered to the public (Gardner, 2018). In-house and/or external auditors are employed to check on the processes of production to assure quality. Zhang and Su (2016) claimed that the improvement of higher education quality started from the current concern to change from quality assurance to quality culture. They emphasized on building a holistic quality culture among various stakeholders based on mutual trust and a social contract. Beza (1984) identified five basic elements to enhance the quality of teacher education programs: entry screening, increased program competencies, mentoring student teachers, exit evaluation, and probation for beginning teachers. Based on these five elements, many scholars have developed their unique ways of improving program quality in higher education. For example, Meek and O'Neill (1997) developed the quality assurance measures in higher education from the perspective of policies and procedures. They placed their emphasis on the integral implementation of quality assurance strategies by faculty of departments. On the other hand, Sutherland (1997) also took a practical approach to the quality assurance of teacher education. He applied an output approach to assess the program quality of higher education to assure that the program produces quality graduates to meet the social needs. On the theoretical foundation of Beza, Crawford (1998) developed an online documentation version of program quality assurance to facilitate the collection of evidence as proof of program quality. Hallett (1997) initiated a model to assure program quality to involve the top-down and bottom-up processes. He declared program quality to be examined through a vertical device to assure continuation of program contents without breaking down the connections. In Ball's (2000) program assurance model, an inputs-and-outputs approach was employed to identify three program components: academics, candidates, and social evaluation. Furthermore, six indicators of effective measures to maintain program quality were created by Leong (2000): institutional mechanisms for course approval and monitoring, course design and delivery methods, staff qualifications and appointment procedures, student support services, assessment procedures and criteria, and course management.

Leong's six program quality indicators were supported by Daniel (2000) who recommended that the six indicators should be developed into criteria to assure program quality as a reflection of university accountability goals.

Beza's program assurance model (1984) and all the subsequent follow-up models are aimed at the many different approaches of how program goals can be successfully achieved. These concepts and assumptions are central to this study which examines how strategies at the departmental level could help achieve the university's accountability goals.

The Consequences of Achieving Accountability in Higher Education

To achieve program accountability in higher education, the program quality needs to be enhanced by increasing the demand for high standards in teaching, learning and scholarship. As a result, Randall (2000) envisioned that the achievement of accountability would increase demands on the students in the knowledge and skills acquisition, the capacity for conceptualization, and autonomy in learning. Randall's point of demanding higher academic standard is directly relating to the foci of this study as expressed in the three research questions. The research questions 1, 2 and 3 are focused on Academic Development, Research and Knowledge Transfer, and Management and Infrastructure of the university respectively. Increasing the demand for academic standards of the university certainly poses challenges to students and faculty to try hard to achieve the university accountability goals. Raising academic standards will demand for a higher level of curriculum update, teaching and learning as stated in Research Question 1. It will also call for more stringent scrutiny over the research and knowledge transfer activities of faculty and students as stated in Research Question 2. Raising academic standards to achieve accountability goals will also ask for a more frequent update of staff knowledge and skills and a larger amount of funding support as related in Research Question 3.

Other consequences of achieving accountability in higher education are mentioned by Beza and Southerland. Beza (1984) also said that attempting to achieve accountability could possibly bring about decreases in student enrollment and incompleteness of academic course work. Sutherland (1997) also worried that documentation in the accountability process could be cumbersome and could possibly overburden the faculty with bureaucratic work.

Research Questions

This study is developed to seek answers to the following research questions:

1. What strategies are employed by the Department of Special Education to achieve the Academic Development goal of the university in this study?
2. What strategies are employed by the Department of Special Education to achieve the Research and Knowledge Transfer goal of the university in this study?
3. What strategies are employed by the Department of Special Education to achieve the Management and Infrastructure goal of the university in this study?

What is actually missing in the current literature is how administrators and faculty at the departmental level can help contribute to the accountability of the university. The answers to these research questions could provide the needed information readers want to know to fill the research gap in current literature.

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative case study approach was employed in the performance of this study. As described by Fraenkel, Wallen and Hyun (2011), “What case study researchers have in common is that they call the objects of their research cases and they focus their research on the study of such cases.” (p. 435) This study is particularly focusing on the instrumental type of case study in which the researchers are interested in studying the particular case as a means to some larger goals (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2011). The researchers intend to investigate the strategies used by the Special Education Department of the university in this case study to contribute to achieving the university accountability goals. Therefore, the purpose and the setting of this study suit the instrumental case design well.

Case Setting

Because of the desperate need for teachers of special education, the government has allocated a large amount of financial support to enhance the development of the special education program of the university. With increased funding support, public attention is paid to how the special education program demonstrates its effort and outcome towards accountability. To respond to public pressure, the president of the university has asked all the heads and coordinators of teacher education programs to evaluate the effectiveness of their respective programs. To illustrate the achievement of accountability in higher education, the authors cite a case in this article relating to preparing teachers of special education in the university. Because of the demand for accountability, the special education program was asked to develop plans and strategies for implementation to achieve the university accountability goals. The special education program was chosen for this case study because of its typical example of program uniqueness. It follows the direction of the university authority in China and at the same time has developed plans and strategies of its own to achieve the university accountability goals.

In reviewing the university filed documents, the university accountability goals are highlighted in the following. The accountability goals cover three major areas: Academic Development, Research and Knowledge Transfer, and Management and Infrastructure. The details of these three goal areas have become the conditions for public funding and are directed to the programs of all the departments to be followed through.

Academic Development

1. Preparing for curriculum innovation.
To accommodate changing societal needs and community demands through developing innovative curriculum.
2. Enhancing quality in education.
To prepare future educators and social leaders through the quality assurance processes.
3. Facilitating learning through technologies
To take advantage of the digital technologies to facilitate constructive and interactive learning.
4. Connecting with local and international networks.
To expand the university partnerships and collaborations with local and overseas professional institutions with all connecting networks.

Research and Knowledge Transfer

1. Positioning to be the leading research and center in education and social sciences.
To be classified as a world leading research institute by increasing funding support for scholarly research that can be applied to teaching, learning and field practices.
2. Serving local and international communities with scholarship products.
To encourage the faculty to engage in a wide range of knowledge transfer activities through extending the knowledge frontiers of the education field and benefitting the wider community.

Management and Infrastructure

The university is committed to strengthening the skills of staff in leadership positions, to promote values in implementing effective human resources policies, to enhance operational efficiency, and to safeguard and strengthen the sources of funding.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers first reviewed the current literature on program quality and program accountability in higher education to investigate what has been known in the scholarship of this field. Then, the available documents at the university level and the special education department level were carefully reviewed to identify the established accountability goals the university is trying to achieve. It was found that the accomplishments of many goal-related tasks of the university were supported by the combined effort of the plans and strategies of different departments. These plans and strategies are embedded in department monthly meeting records, bi-annual department reports to the Dean's Office, self-evaluation reports and the department accreditation reports. The researchers further analyzed the orientations of the different categories of strategies developed by the special education department to meet the challenges of the university accountability goals. The data collected through the review of university and department documents were examined by using a documentary analysis approach in which relevant contents are highlighted and coded accordingly into themes (Creswell, 2009). The emerging themes were then matched with the university accountability goals by category. The findings of this study were then discussed with reference to the current literature reviewed.

Findings

The university has signed an agreement with the government higher education funding authority to confirm its determination and effort toward achieving the program accountability goals.

The Special Education Department in this study, under the directions of the University Administrative Office and the College of Education, has developed a plan to enhance its program quality as a reflection of the University commitment to accountability. The strategies of each of the components of the plan are initiated in direct reference to the University accountability goals. These strategies with their implementation processes are highlighted below by following the order of the research questions.

Research Question 1

What strategies are employed by the Department of Special Education to achieve the Academic Development goal of the university in this study?

Curriculum innovation. To meet the university goals of academic development, the Department continues to review and revise its current programs and courses as a reflection of social needs. A Program Advisory Committee consisting of department faculty, veteran teachers, students and curriculum professionals advises the Department faculty on current curriculum trends to meet the educational demands of the time. Additionally, the Department organizes two other committees for instructional administration.

“The Department Learning and Teaching Committee (DLTC) and the Department Assessment Panel (DAP) are in charge of programme development and quality assurance.” (Evidenced in the Department Organization Manual)

Program accreditation agencies with external reviewers are invited to examine the program quality and make recommendations for improvement to ensure that all the department programs meet professional field recognition. As evidenced in the Special Education Department Self-Evaluation Report.

“The Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) and External Programme Review are two systems established to examine the programme quality to align with professional standards and University strategic plans.”

Quality in Education. To assure the quality of teaching and learning, the Department works with local schools to make arrangements for student teaching and field service experiences which are mandatory participating activities for graduation. Academic advisors are assigned to the students to help with their needs to ensure their success in learning and future career. As reported in the Department Self-Evaluation Report:

“The academic advisors will assist students in defining their study and career goals as well as developing study plans, and refer them to appropriate supporting units when necessary. Students are encouraged to initiate contact with the Academic Advisor when they face difficulties during their studies. Particularly, students with a Semester GPA below 2.0 are asked to seek academic advice from the Academic Advisor and arrange for any necessary follow-up action plan.”

Connections are made with the program graduates who are currently in teaching positions to make sure that they are doing well in performing their teaching duties. (Evidenced in the Department Monthly Report to the Dean.)

The Department supports beginning faculty with reduced class loads and mentor assignment. Funding is provided to encourage faculty for innovative teaching strategies. As evidenced in the Department Program Descriptions:

“The Department established the *Teaching Development Seed Fund* to encourage academic and teaching staff to develop new programmes and initiate innovative teaching strategies. In addition, SEC has also initiated the *SEC Internationalization Matching Fund* and launched the *Additional Financial Support Scheme*. Furthermore, SEC staff are greatly encouraged to apply for the competitive University’s and Faculty’s *Teaching Development Grants*.”

The Department employs the student evaluation of teaching system with serious follow-up faculty procedures for improvement. Additionally, through the double-marking system and the peer class visitation system, faculty members are encouraged to constructively critique one another’s performance for improvement. (Evidenced in the Department Program Descriptions.)

Technology Application. All the courses offered by the Department are fully adopted to online mode by utilizing the key features of Zoom to facilitate teaching and learning. The Department Self-Evaluation Report describes this technology application process as follows:

“The Department timely responded to the challenges of COVID-19 by developing and disseminating a 90-page *Zoom Handbook* (SEC Department, EUHK, 2020) for staff to support for synchronous and asynchronous modes of teaching. SEC staff had fully adopted the key features of Zoom (Share PPT, Share Screen, Annotation, Breakout Rooms, Chat, Polling etc.) to facilitate students’ learning when adopting online lectures. In the 2020/21 Periodic Review Report of the MScESLPLD, the External Reviewers identified one of the programme’s good practices and excellent use of online teaching resources in the face of challenges of COVID-19 pandemic. The External Reviewers also reflected that the programme’s students were very appreciative of staff efforts in adapting to online delivery of the curriculum.”

Internationalization. Partnerships and collaborations with international institutes of higher education and overseas professional institutions are closely connected for professional enhancement. International scholars are invited to participate in benchmarking exercises to upkeep with program quality. (Evidenced in the Department Bi-annual Report to the Dean’s Office and the Special Education Department Self-Evaluation Report.) The Self-Evaluation Report also described the modifications of courses to incorporate the international elements as follows:

“The modifications included: 1) making comparative studies on supporting learners with disabilities across countries; 2) sharing of global policies and practices and developing reflective thinking and critical analysis from the global perspectives; 3) supporting students’ reflection of the learning experiences and appraisal of the implications of global policies on services for learners with diverse educational needs; 4) facilitating students’ global readiness by sharing good practices across countries; and 5) adopting practices or exemplars in overseas countries.”

Research Question 2

What strategies are employed by the Department of Special Education to achieve the Research and Knowledge Transfer goal of the university in this study?

“The Department has established a committee and a task force, *Departmental Research and Development Committee (DRDC)* and *Task Force for Promoting Knowledge Transfer (TFPKT)*, to oversee research and knowledge transfer respectively. The DRDC is overseen by the Associate Head of Department for Research and Development and is made up of five faculty members. The key role of the DRDC is to promote a strong culture of research excellence and impact in the Department. The TFPKT is focused on working with the faculty to produce academic products that could be helpful to teachers in improving classroom instruction. The DRDC and the TFPKT work collaboratively to ensure that the research outcomes of the Department are applicable to the teaching field.” (Adopted from the Self-Evaluation Report.)

Research. The Department provides internal funding to support faculty and student for conducting academic research. Application for external research funding is strongly encouraged. The Department also awards funding for faculty and students to travel for academic activities. (Evidenced from the Special Education Department Program Descriptions.) To promote international scholarship, the Department connects with global educational institutes and known international scholars in research and scholarly exchange activities. (Evidenced in the Department Bi-annual Report to the Dean’s Office.)

Knowledge Transfer. The Department supports faculty to produce quality knowledge transfer deliverables, including professional training, conferences and seminars, public health education, teaching packages, as well as community services. (Evidenced in the Department Bi-annual Report to the Dean’s Office and the Department’s communication documents with external agencies.)

Research Question 3

What strategies are employed by the Department of Special Education to achieve the Management and Infrastructure goal of the university in this study?

Management. The Department has developed a system of fiscal checking to assure that the annual budgeted allocation remains sufficiently strong. As evidenced in the Department Report to the Dean's Office:

“Almost every year, the Department has unspent one-line budget amount to be forwarded to the budget of the following year. This is an indication of good fiscal practice of careful budget planning and the SEC Department's financial situation is strong and healthy.”

Additionally, a self-evaluation and benchmarking program is initiated to examine the program development for quality assurance. The SEC Department clarified this process in the following way:

“This self-evaluation report presents a clear picture of all the operations of the SEC Department over the past six years. It evaluates the Department as part of the robust academic quality assurance (QA) and quality enhancement mechanism acceptable to internal QA and external audit requirements.”

Infrastructure. The Department designates special funding for faculty and staff to participate in professional development activities. As illustrated in the department self-evaluation report, “the Department offers a wide range of measures for staff development, including developmental leave, sabbatical leave, duty leave and course relief for colleagues who receive grants and need time to conduct research. The Department also offers funding support for staff to attend various levels of professional development programs. Such measures allow colleagues to enhance their own professional development.”

The Department also encourages the faculty to operationalize a transactional model of linking teaching-research-knowledge transfer in their academic work by various measures for mutual benefits. As a result, “many projects which operationalized a transactional model of linking teaching-research-knowledge transfer were developed in the past six years. For example, plenty of regional and international seminars and conferences that linking teaching-research-knowledge transfer were conducted over the self-evaluation period.” (Evidenced in the Special Education Department Program Descriptions.)

Discussion

Limitations of the Study

There are limitations to this study. First, the sources of data collection are limited to highlighting the contents of the office file documents both at the university level and the special education department level. Besides that, there is no other secondary source of data collection. Second, the authors employ a case study design to conduct the study. Though case study is a representation of in-depth investigation, the findings developed from a single case may not be generalizable to a wider interpretation.

Major Findings of this Study

The findings of this study have shown that the special education department tries very hard by employing different strategies to meet the challenges of the university accountability goals. In their

strategies of program quality assurance, the department faculty and the administrators have confirmed the many accountability theories and models practised by previous scholars as reviewed in current literature. The findings of this study contribute to supporting the existing scholarship of the field.

In this case study, the Chinese university with its special education program has recognized the importance of achieving program accountability by assuring the high quality of the program. This is in agreement with Flanigan, Marion and Richardson (2000), Kaufman, Herman and Watters (1996) and Lyons and Gooden (2001) who asserted that higher education program developers needed to assure their program quality as a first step to work towards accountability.

Richardson, Chan and Jording (2001) claimed that an accountability plan needs to start with specific achievable goals and solid implementing procedures to be closely supervised. The plan needs to be followed by exercising regular checkpoints to measure the educational progress and directions for accountability. The special education program in this case study is actually following the recommendations of Richardson, Chan and Jording by establishing goals, procedures and self-evaluation processes.

Gardner (2018) specified that the quality assurance process measured the professional standards that went into a product or service before it is finished and delivered to the public. Most of what the special education program did in this study is actually following the guidelines as set by Gardner.

In this case study of the Chinese university, the accountability plan is initiated from the university administrative level all the way down to the college level and ends at the department level. At the department level, the faculty members actually develop the plan of actions to align with the college and university goals. This top-down and bottom-up model of accountability planning is a reflection of the model started by Hallett (1997).

Randall (2000) envisioned that the accountability implementation in the department would raise the academic standards of the students in the knowledge and skills acquisition, the capacity for conceptualization, and autonomy in learning. It is true that in this study the department is attempting to continuously improve its level of demand to catch up with the fast educational, social and economic development of the time.

Sutherland (1997) worried that the cumbersome documentation in the accountability process could possibly overburden the faculty with bureaucratic work. The faculty members in this study have also expressed similar concerns that the paper works involved in data collection, documentations, management meetings and committee reviewing processes in this quality assurance effort towards achieving accountability could be costly, time consuming and mentally fatigue.

On the other hand, the findings of this study have discovered new grounds of assuring program quality to achieve accountability. Some of the featured strategies developed in the program quality assurance plan of the department are highly commendable. They are unique and innovative. Some of them are not only meeting current educational demands but also preparing for future challenges. What this special education department has performed in terms of program quality assurance could serve as a unique example for other higher education institutes to learn.

First, because of the need to deliver education programs during the pandemic period, the special education program has utilized the special features of the Zoom program to facilitate student learning. All the course instructional materials and processes have been designed to be in online mode. This farsightedness has allowed the special education programs of the department to be delivered in multi-platforms even at the post pandemic time.

Second, the university has set its developmental goals to expand its programs to the international horizon. The special education department has responded by embedding global and intercultural elements in its courses and programs. The modification elements include: 1) sharing of global education policies and practices, 2) developing student reflective thinking and critical analysis from the international perspectives; 3) supporting students' learning experiences of global policies on services for learners of special needs; 4) inviting international scholars to visit the department for professional enrichment, 5) hosting large scale conferences and seminars covering a wide range of topics to promote internationalization in learning and teaching, 6) engaging in student exchange programs with prestigious special education programs worldwide, and 7) funding support for faculty and students for international travel to gain teaching and learning experiences. The university is recognized for its courageous effort to allocate substantial educational resources in support of international activities.

Third, the Special Education Department has placed great emphasis on promoting community services. It is not only fulfilling its academic mission of supporting social needs but also serving as a way to advance the prestige of the special education program. Specific strategies like conducting teacher workshops and seminars to address needed special education issues, contracting with social welfare organizations in offering professional services, developing special education curricula for public schools, and offering instructional packages for special education topics. The special education department's work towards promoting community services is outstanding.

Fourth, the Special Education Department has encouraged the faculty to operationalize a transactional model of linking teaching-research-knowledge transfer in their academic work by various measures. Projects prioritizing the operation of a transactional model of linking teaching-research-knowledge transfer have received special credit and funding support. This is such a creative model that project developers are directed to the outcomes of the project benefiting the department through teaching, learning, scholarship and services to the community.

Fifth, the benchmarking exercise of the Special Education Program is earmarked to be conducted every five years. The benchmarking process involves the formation of a benchmark committee consisting of international scholars of the field. The benchmark committee is targeted to review the program quality through examining its activities and achievements for the past five years. The programs' overall qualities of performance are compared with those of other known international programs of similar scales. The benchmark committee will make positive comments on outstanding achievements of the special education program. The committee will also honestly present the observed weaknesses of the program and make recommendations for improvement. Through the benchmark exercise, the special education program of this university has been brought to the international stage for public attention.

Recommendations for Improving the Program Quality Assurance Plan

The program quality assurance plan developed by the special education department is in direct response to the university accountability goals. The plan includes many practical and effective strategies for implementation to assure program quality. Some of these strategies follow the conventional approaches that have records of proven success while some are targeted toward preparing special education teachers to meet future challenges. In view of what have been successfully developed and implemented in the program quality assurance plan, the authors would like to compliment the leaders and faculty members of the special education department for their concerted effort to assure a quality special education program that the world is proud of. The

authors would also like to encourage the program leaders and faculty members to continue their improvement effort by considering the following recommendations:

Follow-up with Program Graduates

The special education program graduates, now beginning teachers, are faced with unanticipated circumstances such as heavy workloads, individual student needs, student advisory responsibilities, extracurricular activity assignments, pressures from parents and community, paper works and administrative duties, and adaptation to new teaching and learning environments. Having been freshly graduated from the special education program, these beginning teachers need the support and encouragement from their home program to be successful in the beginning years of their teaching career. The faculty of the Special Education Program has started their initial effort in contacting their graduates to see how they are doing in their new teaching positions. These caring activities could be strengthened and organized to include visiting them from time to time to see if they are well situated in their new schools, providing assistance to them in their areas of needs, inviting them to come back to the department for professional development, working with their mentors at school to support their teaching, and working with their school principals to get an assessment of their overall teaching performance (Ackley, 1991; Breeding, 1998; Edick, 2001; Montesano, 1998; Robertson, 1997). Continuing to support program graduates as beginning teachers has many benefits: 1) to establish the prestige of the program and the university as a responsible teacher preparation unit; 2) to solicit feedback from practitioners as to how the teacher preparation program can be improved; and 3) to win the loyalty and faithfulness of the program graduates to help promoting the program recruitment. In addition, supporting program graduates in their beginning years of teaching will help retain qualified teachers in the teaching profession (Schlecty & Vance, 1983).

Marketing the Program

The Special Education Program leaders have devoted much effort to marketing the program through local student recruitment, community services and international conferences. However, with the rapid development of technology today, program marketing can be easily expanded worldwide. Particularly, all the courses of the special education program have been prepared for offering online during the pandemic period. The program enrollment can be increased fast by conducting classes in the formats of face-to-face, completely online and/or hybrid. Additionally, by using technology devices like Zoom, consideration can be given to develop joint degree programs with other prestigious universities. Seminars and conferences focusing on special education topics can be offered to global scholars through online participation. In this respect, the program accreditation really goes hand-in-hand with program marketing.

Student Teaching Abroad and International Collaboration

Student teaching is an important component of any teacher preparation program as it relates to the quality of the teachers the program produces. Research has presented on-going empirical evidence relative to the diverse effects of student teaching abroad experiences on student teachers' cultural, professional and personal development (DeVillar, Jiang & Bryan, 2006; DeVillar & Jiang, 2012; Jiang, Coffey, DeVillar & Bryan, 2010; Jiang & DeVillar, 2011; 2013; Jiang, DeVillar & Drake, 2016). Further, the findings from the studies by DeVillar and Jiang (2011) and Lim, Jiang, DeVillar & Delacruz (2019) indicated teachers who engaged in student teaching abroad

settings transferred, adapted, and integrated skills, as well as techniques and knowledge, to their U.S. classrooms. In addition, the student teaching abroad experience added value in terms of cultural and language experiences and resultant sensibilities and behaviors, and, at the same time, prepared the former student teachers to develop their self-confidence, open-mindedness and flexibility. Thus, incorporating student teaching abroad program through either joint degree programs with partner universities abroad or international collaboration with K–12 schools abroad will provide invaluable opportunities for both the special education program student teachers and program faculty who would serve as supervisors to engage in potential professional development and collaborative research opportunities, which would strengthen overall program quality and accountability.

Conclusion

Program accountability is demanded in higher education especially when huge amounts of economic and human resources are devoted to support higher education development. The special education program illustrated in this article needs to respond to the public outcry for accountability. On top of that, the university administration has committed itself to achieving the accountability goals as part of the conditions for public funding. The Special Education Program has been directed by the university administration to develop its strategic plan to reflect strategies to achieve the university accountability goals. Leaders of the Special Education Program believe that the way to achieve the university accountability goals is to develop a departmental plan to assure the quality of programs in their administration.

The plan of the Special Education Department for assuring program quality is developed under the guidelines of the university accountability goals: academic development, research and knowledge transfer, and management and infrastructure. The plan has basically followed the conventional model of goal achievement by developing practical strategies and implementation procedures. In addition, the Special Education Program leaders have also initiated special features to the program quality assurance plan to enhance the program uniqueness of attaining the university accountability goals.

The authors agree with Zhang and Su (2016) that for quality assurance of an educational program to be successful, every aspect of the program culture needs to be focused on quality. The program leaders, the entire faculty and staff and all the students need to work together as a quality team to practice the best quality to achieve the university goals. We strongly believe that only assurance of program quality could lead to program accountability and identification of the university accountability goals is the key.

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