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Practices and challenges in educational program evaluation in the Asia-Pacific region: Results of a Delphi study

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ABSTRACT

While educational program evaluation has become more important in recent years because of increasing governmental demands for accountability, little is known about the development of and issues in regard to this topic in the Asia-Pacific region. The findings from a Delphi study conducted in a number of relevant countries are provided in this article. Thirty panelists participated in three rounds of iterations to identify current status, challenges, and concerns in the near future. The results should be of value to educational evaluators, researchers, and decision makers.

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1. Introduction

As the demand for accountability continues to increase, educational program evaluation (EPE) has become more important. To understand where the field is, numerous studies have been conducted in Western countries (Weiss, 1998; Worthen, Sanders, & Fitzpatrick, 2004), but little is known about EPE in the Asia-Pacific region (Mohandas, Wei, & Keeves, 2002). To that end, we used the Delphi technique to study what is happening now and what might take place in the future in this part of the world as determined by a knowledgeable panel of experts.

2. Background

The emergence of modern EPE in the Asia-Pacific area is traced to the mid-1970s (Lunt & Trotman, 2005; Sharp, 2003) when it was heavily affected by the experiences and writings of American and European evaluators. They were the first ones to undertake large-scale evaluations and to develop evaluation as a discipline (Mohandas et al., 2002; Straton, 2001).

One example of this was apparent in Australia where two forces shaped the field. It first took on the objectivist and

positivist stance of much of the evaluation in the US. Opposed to this was the British preference for case study investigations (McTaggart, Caulley, & Kemmis, 1991; Straton, 2001). As time progressed many evaluators perceived that the practices in Australia, the US, Canada, and Europe became quite similar and overlapped to a high degree.

The influence of the quality assurance (QA) movement on education among Asia-Pacific countries was another example. QA, originating from the field of management in the US, is a monitoring system to measure performance against quality standards. Recently, educational settings have widely utilized the technique to evaluate effectiveness, especially in schools across the geographical area under study. In 1997, Hong Kong established an initiative to ensure the quality of education for all primary and secondary schools, subject to the recommendations of the Education Commission Report No. 7 (Pang, 2007). Similarly, the Central Council for Education in Japan released "Evaluation Guidelines for Schools of Compulsory Education" (2006) which required that each school set up a Plan-Do-Check-Act management cycle, a ubiquitous paradigm in QA (Washiyama, 2007). Additionally, the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) was established in 2003 to offer programs for improving the capability of higher education institutions to do QA (APQN, 2008). The QA movement is now prevalent in the region indicating that evaluation, to some extent, has been swayed by western practices.

An additional aspect of western thinking of importance for this discussion is the movement toward a profession of EPE. In the west, seven out of 10 criteria for a profession seem to have been met (Worthen et al., 2004). They are: a need for evaluation

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specialists, development of unique evaluation content, establishment of formal preparation programs for training evaluators, emergence of stable career opportunities in evaluation, institutionalization of the function of evaluation, growth of professional associations for evaluators, and acceptance of standards for practice.

As this was taking place, the situation in other areas of the world is much less clear (Mohandas et al., 2002; Owen, 2003). In that regard, there is limited research about evaluation and EPE practices in the Asia-Pacific region. Google scholar and the EBSCO academic electronic searches using the general terms, Asia-Pacific region and program evaluation, generated records that mostly focused on a specific country/area (Lunt & Trotman, 2005; McTaggart et al., 1991; Owen, 2003; Pang, 2007; Sharp, 2003; Stratton, 2001; Washiyama, 2007) and only a few were from a cross-country stance (Mohandas et al., 2002). A Delphi study in the Asia-Pacific region seemed to be worthwhile and informative.

3. Methodology

The study was exploratory and descriptive. Its goals were to collect perceptions about the current status of and challenges in EPE in selected Asia-Pacific countries as well as what the future might hold. A classical Delphi technique with three iterations via web delivery was utilized. The Delphi is a well-recognized group communication process that solicits judgment through iterative sequential questionnaires interspersed with summary and feedback of opinions derived from previous responses (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963; Linstone & Turoff, 1975; Powell, 2003).

Panelists were those with acknowledged expertise in educational evaluation in their countries or in the Asia-Pacific region. Since diversity in languages was apparent, English was chosen as the medium of discourse with the experts required to be proficient in it.

To ensure panel commitment, a two-phase nomination strategy was undertaken. An initial list of 28 qualified subjects with whom the researchers were acquainted was constructed. Via e-mail they were invited to join the panel and to refer other experts. Twenty-five agreed to serve and a list of 17 other names was obtained. The latter were approached through a separate invitation. Further, the internet was searched to augment the sampling frame. By these means, a panel of 37 members from 11 countries/areas—Australia, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Macao, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand was formed.

Three survey iterations (each round lasted between 2 and 3 weeks) were conducted (Brooks, 1979; Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustafson, 1975; Linstone & Turoff, 1975). Reminders were sent to non-respondents 1 week after the survey was issued. For ease of communication, the instruments were web based. This is efficient and in accord with the Delphi guarantee of anonymity (Linstone & Turoff, 1975; Witkin & Altschuld, 1995). The instrument design and data collection process are found below.

3.1. Round 1

Five open-ended questions (Table 1) asked participants about basic perceptions of EPE, its strengths and weaknesses as now carried out in their countries, the nature of the training of professionals in the field, the main challenges for EPE, and potential problems/issues/changes 5 years from now. Panelists were asked to give as clear description of each idea as possible. The content and face validity of the questionnaire were reviewed by two faculty members experienced in evaluation.

Table 1
Open-ended first round questions

Item	Questions
Q1	When you hear or read the words <i>Educational Program Evaluation</i> , what do they mean to you? What three thoughts (more are desirable) come to mind? Write a short phrase or sentence describing each idea.
Q2	What would you identify as the <i>strengths and weaknesses</i> of Educational Program Evaluation as it is now done in your country? (e.g. utilization of findings or lack thereof, quality of reports, quality of data and information, others.) Briefly explain each strength and weakness in a phrase or a short sentence.
Q3	In your country, briefly characterize the nature of the <i>training of professionals</i> for evaluating educational programs. What do you see as the <i>strengths and weaknesses of such training</i> ? Is anything <i>missing and critically needed</i> in that training?
Q4	Aside from the weaknesses mentioned earlier, what are the main <i>challenges</i> your country currently faces in educational evaluation?
Q5	What might be (a) <i>problems</i> , (b) <i>issues</i> , and (c) <i>changes</i> in your country in educational evaluation 5 years from now?

Table 2
Structure of the second round survey

Sections	Sub-categories	Number of items
I. Concept of EPE	A. Purposes	8
	B. Objects	6
	C. Methods/approach	5
II. Strength/weakness/ challenge of the current status of EPE	A. The current strengths of EPE	12
	B. The current weaknesses of EPE	11
	C. The current challenges in EPE	14
III. Future trends of EPE	A. Problems/issues EPE will face 5 years from now	10
	B. Changes in EPE most likely 5 years from now	12
IV. Training of professionals for EPE	A. Training should... (ideal concept of training)	14
	B. The current status of training	14

The first survey was e-mailed along with a cover letter. Thirty out of 37 forms were returned, an 81% response rate. Data analysis was undertaken by two members of the research team to identify key concepts and themes. NUD*IST (N6) was used. From the 106 themes identified four categories were derived: concepts about EPE, strengths/weaknesses/challenges of the current situation, future trends, and training of professionals. The categories and themes guided the development of rounds 2 and 3.

3.2. Round 2

The second round was a structured questionnaire with items in categories and sub-categories along the lines just explained (Table 2). Panel members rated the items in Section 1, using a five-point Likert-type scale where: 1 = not very important, 3 = undecided, and 5 = very important. For the items in other sections, a Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5) was used. One open-ended question solicited additional comments.

Participants who replied the last round ($n = 30$) received an e-mail with a link to the survey's website. Ninety percent of them completed the survey ($n = 27$). The data were analyzed using SPSS (median and inter-quartile range IQR, for each item).

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