AN INVESTIGATION OF ASSESSMENT PRACTICES IN THE MBA DEGREE PROGRAM IN A CHINESE UNIVERSITY

Gryphon Sou

BS(Eng)(CCU) MAdmin (ACU) DMgt(IMC-SCU)

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

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ABSTRACT

The Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree was introduced into mainland China in 1982 and Renmin University of China was one of the first Chinese business schools to start MBA education. In recent years, there has been an increasing demand for the MBA degree programs for Chinese career managers. However during this time in mainland China, international accreditation of MBA degree programs was not in place and there was no evaluation model utilized for quality assurance of those programs especially their assessment practices. Thus the situation merited further research to develop such a model.

This study initially investigated the assessment practices of a 2-year part-time MBA degree program in China. To complete this program, the candidates had to study 17 core subjects plus 3-out-of-6 elective subjects and conduct an action research project leading to a master thesis and a viva. The assessment practices of these subjects, theses and viva were analyzed both from the perspectives of the candidates and the examiners and this formed the basis of the research and evaluative data.

In this research, the Student Learning Experiences (SLE) and Student Learning Outcomes (SLO) of the MBA candidates were collected as well as the perceptions and views of the internal and external examiners. The "quality" of the subject program through the study of the candidates' theses and performance in the viva against the criteria of the Asia International Open University (Macau) and the assessments made by its examiners were also investigated.

A pilot study by means of Pearson and ANOVA Analysis revealed that the students (n = 1,074) of the subject program had favorable Student Learning Experiences on the learning and research processes but less favorable Student Learning Experiences on the appraisal

process. From 2007 to 2008, the author further sampled 331 candidates from 20 higher education institutions within mainland China. Those candidates, who attended the viva, had the Student Learning Experiences that was studied in this research. From the perspectives of the candidates, the subject program provided favorable Student Learning Experiences particularly the action research and the viva voce.

The author explored the candidates' Student Learning Experiences on the research or assessment processes and analyzed their Student Learning Outcomes through the thesis supervisors and examiners. In the sampling period, the author held 23 focus group interviews with all the available examiners and the registrars. To add value to the interpretive part of this study, the author further analyzed the sampled candidates' Student Learning Experiences and Student Learning Outcomes (n = 331) with the aid of Pearson's Analysis, ANOVA, Dunnett's tD Test, S-N-K Test and Tukey HSD Test (n = 67).

Qualitative and quantitative data analysis disclosed that the less favorable Student Learning Experiences of the candidates was partially attributed to the marking variances of the thesis supervisors and the thesis examiners. The former regarded the assessment task of marking the thesis as a norm-referenced assessment while the latter regarded it as a criteria-referenced or an objective-referenced assessment. Findings of the statistical tests on the marking variances showed that the thesis supervisors were more lenient than the examiners in the assessment task.

Focus group interviews revealed that the examiners wished to maintain key characteristic of formative and summative as well as diagnostic assessment in the marking processes. It is difficult for any assessment to have three characteristics. Nevertheless, it might not be impossible for a management education program to have an integrated assessment program that could do the work of these types of assessment.

This study identified nine areas for improvements. They included (1) Scope of Action Research, (2) Compilation of Thesis, (3) Reflection of Candidates, (4) Pre-Notification of Assessments, (5) Elimination of Marking Variances, (6) Change of Assessment Process, (7) Transformation of Students, (8) Benchmarking of Student Learning Outcomes, and (9) Development of Management Learning Styles.

Based on the results of this research, a program evaluation model for quality assurance of an MBA program is proposed. This model is based on the identified needs to assure the quality of a management education program through robust assessment practices that measure whether the program can achieve the desired Student Learning Outcomes. This model also includes quality assurance tools to measure the Student Learning Experiences in the program. With due consideration of Student Learning Outcomes and Student Learning Experiences, the assessment practices should give a more holistic view of the educational quality of the program.

However, such a model should be applied in an integrated manner. Recommendations for its application are detailed in the last chapter of this dissertation. The proposed model contributes to the wide body of knowledge in "program evaluation"; and also enhances the knowledge base of educators who wish to cultivate effective career managers in mainland China. Thus, this research also makes an important contribution to the professional practices of management education.