

Research on Key Problems in Construction and Implementation of AOL System from Perspective of AACSB Certification

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Abstract—With the rapid growth of the scale of higher education and its internationalization development trend, the teaching quality of higher learning institutions is arousing extensive attention of the international community. To construct a scientific and efficient quality guarantee system of higher education has become an important research subject in the development of higher education in various countries across the world. As the most authoritative certification in the international certification system, AACSB business certification is widely praised by famous schools of business at home and abroad. Among the AACSB certification standards, the construction and implementation of the system of Assurance of Learning (AOL) is of paramount importance. This article analyzes the basic principle of constructing AOL system with detailed analysis of the key problems in the implementation of AOL. The elaborate design and implementation of the process of AOL system in higher learning institutions will be helpful to realizing continuous improvement of teaching quality.

Keywords—AOL; higher education; teaching quality; AACSB certification; Rubrics

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEMS

Since 1999, China has witnessed the rapid growth of higher education scale. In this context, how to improve the teaching quality of higher learning institutions has gradually become an urgent task of the reform and construction of higher education. In 2003, the Ministry of Education of China launched the first round of teaching assessment, effectively promoting the construction of the inner quality assurance system of higher learning institutions. In 2011, the Ministry of Education issued *The Guidance on Assessment of Undergraduate Teaching of Colleges and Universities* [1], which was intended for conducting examination and assessment of regular undergraduate universities that have passed teaching assessment. Instead of directly assessing the education quality of higher learning institutions, examination assessment is intended for evaluating the education quality of universities in an indirect way through assessing the construction of inner quality assurance system of universities and the effectiveness of its operation [2]. The aforementioned assessment has played a positive role in the comprehensive improvement of the training quality of talents in higher education.

However, notably, with the gradual intensification of internationalization in higher education, the exchange and collaboration between universities in China and their counterparts overseas are becoming more and more frequent, which objectively demands that the teaching quality of regular undergraduate education of the universities in China should be recognized and well received even more widely. In terms of business education, three mainstream certifications, namely AACSB, EQUIS and AMBA which are popular in the world, are regarded as the standards for controlling and improving the quality of schools of business. Among the three certifications above, the most authoritative is AACSB certification, which pays high attention to education quality. One of its guiding principles is to realize the high quality of education and teaching by accepting and encouraging the use of different methods. Therefore, the acquisition of this certification is universally considered as an important hallmark for a school of business to march toward the level of first-rate schools of business in the world.

In AACSB certification, research and construction of AOL constitute the core elements. However, in the existing research and successful cases, there is a shortage of materials for ordinary schools of business to refer to. How to deeply understand the connotation of AOL and to decompose and refine the international standard of certification according to the characteristics and actual conditions of regular universities? How to design the learning objectives, learning outcomes and assessment criteria based on the mission of a concrete school of business? How to build testing contents and methods of testing curriculums? How to find out the problems in specialty construction and to provide sustainable improvement measures? How to establish the systematic mechanism of teaching process management and the effective improvement mechanism of students' learning activity? All the key problems concerning the construction and implementation of AOL need to be deeply researched in a specific way, which on the one hand provides theoretical basis and guidance for the teaching reform and practice on the part of the school of business itself, and on the other hand supplies valuable experience and reference for regular undergraduate universities ready to participate in the certification of international business discipline in the future.

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II. THE CLASSIFICATION OF AACSB CERTIFICATION STANDARDS

AACSB certification focuses on the continuous improvement driven by the mission of a school of business. In April 2013, AACSB issued new certification standards, including 15 specific standards covering four parts such as strategic management and innovation, participants, learning and teaching, and academic and professional participation. The AOL discussed in the article belongs to the third part, including 5 standards ranging from Standard 8 to Standard 12 covering the following main contents such as “assurance mechanism of curriculum management and learning”, “curriculum content”, “interaction between teachers and students”, “the education level, structure and equivalence of degree curriculums” and “teaching effectiveness”.

According to the AACSB certification standards mentioned above, AOL requires a school of business to establish a set of complete, strict and systematic procedures to ensure the determination of learning objectives of specialties, the setup of training programs, the choice of curriculum contents, the selection of teaching methods and the assessment of learning outcomes. Through scientific and effective self-examination and external assessment, the attainment of students’ learning objectives and the improvement of their learning ability are judged. More importantly, AACSB emphasizes continuous improvement of teaching, which will play an active role in promoting relevant schools of business to always make up for the deficiency in accordance with their mission and unremittingly improve teaching quality.

III. THE PRINCIPLE OF CONSTRUCTING AOL SYSTEM

According to the requirements of the AACSB certification standards, the basic principle of constructing AOL is characterized by ‘motivation by mission, full participation, organizational guarantee, process management, scientific assessment and continuous improvement’. In other words, according to the mission of business school, project-based learning objectives are established so as to realize the improvement of teaching quality through the formation of a closed-loop system intended for promoting the continuous improvement of teaching projects.

As an institution of higher learning, in the process of teaching practice and reform, the following questions can be answered through the construction and implementation of the AOL. These are also the important questions that have to be faced with in the AACSB certification [3]: What will our students learn in our program? What are our expectations? How will they learn it? How will we know they have learned it or not? What will we do if they have not learned it?

In order to ensure that the questions above can be effectively answered and solved, it is necessary for us to conduct the top-level design and construction of AOL. By way of establishing necessary an institutional framework and curriculum management system, the implementation process of AOL is planned. In addition, various tasks related to the whole implementation process are effectively organized, guided and monitored so as to ensure the high level of the education quality on the part of the school. At the same time, the

implementation of AOL has also provided the school of business with a mechanism to maintain high quality and a motive force for continuous improvement. Only in this way can a school of business make its curriculum system keep abreast with the time and satisfy the need brought to business education by the business world which changes rapidly.

IV. THE KEY ISSUES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF AOL

The process of AOL mainly includes the following steps: (1) to establish the training objectives of projects based on the mission of the school and to pinpoint objective learning outcomes; (2) to construct the curriculum map of various projects according to training objectives and to determine the assessment mode and assessment standard of expected objectives; (3) to collect data and analyze the attainment between the data and expected objectives; (4) to make adjustment of project contents or implementation plan in accordance with feedback information and put forth an improvement plan; (5) to apply the improvement plan to the project of the next term and repeat the process so as to make continuous improvement and form a closed loop, as indicated in Fig. 1.

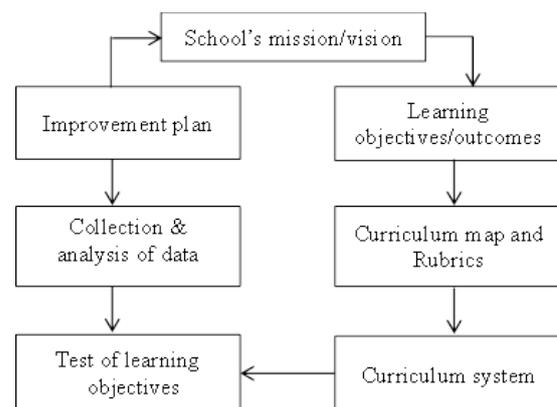


Fig. 1. Process of AOL

In this process, the key problems concerned include the following four aspects, which are expounded one by one as follows:

A. Determination of Learning Objectives and Learning Outcomes

The basis and basic starting point characterized by project-based learning objectives/ learning outcomes based on the school’s mission/ vision have not only provided the assessment methods featuring independent standards and reference system for universities of various types and different projects, but also put forward standardized implementation process for universities at different levels to realize the high-level teaching that can reflect their own characteristics. The determination of project-based learning objectives/ learning outcomes can excellently answer the questions above such as “what can students learn in this specialty?” and “what does the school expect them to learn?”

Then, how to identify project-based learning objectives/ learning outcomes clearly and accurately? The pre-condition is the clear and deep understanding of the mission of the school.

Because of different characteristics of their own, different schools of business have different missions, which also determine that they inevitably have certain differences in their training objectives towards students. The training objectives that are determined by a school of business should not only satisfy the specialty norms or teaching quality standards prescribed by the Teaching Advisory Board of Institutions of Higher Learning under the Ministry of Education but also explicitly and concretely reflect the ability and specification of the students cultivated in the specialty of the school as well as satisfy the requirements of each and every stakeholder.

In order to achieve the objectives above, on the one hand, teachers of each and every specialty should earnestly and deeply research the specialized core curriculum system and norms prescribed by the teaching advisory board of the specialty and the training program designed by them should conform to the basic requirements of this specialty; on the other hand, extensive questionnaire surveys and interviews should be conducted towards stakeholders such as students, alumni and employers. Through some in-depth surveys, we can do the following things, such as truly understanding the needs of students, tracking the growth of alumni and mastering employers' requirements and expectations for the abilities of graduates. Only by closely combining the two aspects above and giving comprehensive consideration can we design the specialized training objectives that not only conform to specialty requirements but also meet social demand so as to pinpoint the direction for the formulation and revision of follow-up training programs and the implementation of teaching process.

B. Construction of Project-based Curriculum Maps

With regard to curriculum mapping, there is no recognized and unified concept in the academic world. Starting from their own perspectives of research, scholars have given many definitions of curriculum maps. For example, American scholar English defined curriculum mapping as "fact-based content records, including actual teaching contents, teaching time and the coordination between teaching and assessment programs." [4] British scholar Harden pointed out that curriculum mapping mainly involves "what have been taught (contents, field of specialized knowledge and learning outcomes)", "how has it been taught (learning resources and learning opportunity)", "when was it taught (timetable and curriculum sequence)" and "have students attained the expected learning outcomes (assessment)." [5] Chinese scholars Ji Chengjun and Zhang Yali believe that "curriculum map is a design plan in which a school identifies the core abilities to be cultivated according to students' possible career development in the future before carrying out the curriculums and related activities based on these core abilities." [6]

Based on the definition of curriculum mapping, in this article, the features of curriculum mapping are divided into three aspects including the scientific nature of top-level design, the clarity of curriculum interrelation and the definiteness of the presentation of students' learning outcome. In accordance with this principle, while designing curriculum mapping, we should demonstrate the project's realization path, the interrelation among curriculums and the support given to specialized learning objectives and learning outcomes by

various curriculums in a scientific and strict way so as to provide clear and complete orderliness of knowledge for the teachers and students in the system and supply student with effective solutions featuring "how to learn". At the same time, we will further offer employers as stakeholders the basis on which to assess students' leaning effectiveness and ability.

C. Design of the Rubrics of Learning Outcomes

Unlike previous specialty training programs, the learning objectives, especially learning outcomes, which are embodied by curriculum mapping when it is being designed according to the requirements of the standards of AACSB certification, should be specific, measurable and assessable. In this way, it is clear what ability students can acquire and what standard they can reach when they graduate.

When a design is made aiming at each expected project-based learning objective, it can be divided into one or more observable, measurable and assessable learning outcomes and corresponding assessment indexes are worked out. Such assessment mechanism not only embodies the expectation placed on students by the specialty and teachers but also indicates the detailed scoring standards of different grades, which are standard, transparent, clear and objective to both teachers and students. Students' learning effectiveness data obtained on the basis of assessment indexes will be analyzed at specialty level in a stricter and deeper way so as to understand whether students "have learnt it" and examine the attainment between training effect and training objectives.

While designing the rubrics of learning outcomes, we can follow the seven steps below:

Step1: to consult the examples of the universities that have passed the certification and to look for the templates suitable to curriculum nature and assessment objectives;

Step2: to set up definite learning objectives and learning outcomes;

Step3: to establish a clear and definite assessment standard;

Step4: to determine assessment modes by deciding on 3 or 4 standards of different grades;

Step5: to determine the score range of each grade as well as detailed instructions;

Step6: to consult the suggestions from peers, experts and students in order to make continuous revision and improvement;

Step7: to fully communicate with students in order to make sure that they have understood the assessment standards.

In a word, for teachers, the use of rubrics can avoid subjective prejudices, make clear the response to students' doubt about scoring and help teachers to choose suitable teaching methods, examine and adjust their teaching objectives. For students, the use of rubrics can enable them to clearly know about the assessment standards of their scores, lead them to effective learning directions and develop their self-assessment ability so as to learn to be responsible for their own learning activity.

D. The Analysis of Testing Result and Its Influence on Teaching

The assessment of students' learning outcomes and evidence collection can be conducted in many manners. Direct manners include class quizzes, big curriculum assignments, case analysis, speech presentation, closed-book exams and so on. Indirect manners include questionnaire surveys conducted through Blackboard network platform, follow-up surveys of graduates and interviews or surveys of employers. For the sake of ensuring the fair and impartial test of students' learning state as well as objectively and truly reflecting and reducing the influence caused by individual teachers and students, the choice of testing objects should satisfy a certain number of requirements and conform to the principle of random sampling in statistics.

As far as testing result is concerned, detailed data analysis is made toward each ability objective and observation point of each and every project in accordance with Rubrics, from which we can on the one hand find the proportion of students who have failed to achieve expected objectives and the contents that have failed to meet the standards and on the other hand analyze the concrete aspects of students' inadequate ability that has been reflected. On this basis, the detailed analysis and reflection of the project outcome reports that should be completed by each specialty and the problems in the implementation of AOL are made before proposing adjustment suggestions and improvement measures of the project. Such adjustment or improvement can be the further improvement of assessment indexes or the adjustment or improvement of teaching methods, or the supplement to teaching contents, or even further inspection and evaluation of project-based learning objectives and even the minute adjustment of the school's mission. When the next round of teaching process begins, the implementation process of AOL will be carried out for the second time. New test data will be comprehensively analyzed together with project improvement program and the first test data in a concentrated way to re-examine the attainment of project-based learning objectives and put forth further improvement suggestions, thus forming a closed-loop system characterized by motivation by mission, continuous improvement and ceaseless cycles.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Just as what Prof. Xu Jingchang, dean of the Department of Accounting of School of Business under Renmin University of China, has said, "AOL pays attention to the following main points: to set up learning objectives (training objectives) and measurable objectives; to make teaching conform to students'

assessment and learning objectives; to construct a complete set of system and process so as to effectively collect evidentiary material and reflect the degree of the realization of learning objectives." [7] Through the study of AACSB certification material and cases as well as the research of AOL, the author agrees with Prof. Xu in this regard. At the same time, in the author's view, the school's objective and attitude to AOL have a bearing on whether its implementation can be carried out effectively. Hence it is very important.

In addition, the implementation of AOL helps teachers to update their teaching ideas and improve their teaching methods to overcome the phenomena in teaching such as "ambiguous teaching objectives, arbitrary teaching contents and stagnant teaching reform" as well as the phenomena on the part of students such as "ambiguous learning objectives, insufficient learning motivation and inconformity between learning methods and learning contents". Through the elaborate design and implementation of the process of AOL, we can realize the continuous improvement of teaching quality.

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