

Performance Evaluation of Lecturers in Applied Universities in Shaanxi province

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ABSTRACT

The review of literature on performance evaluation system are abundant but empirical study investing how performance evaluation system influencing lecturers' work efficiency among applied university in China is under-researched. Applied university in China has unique educational goals and characteristics different from other higher institutions such as research-driven universities. This study aims to address literature gaps related to unanswered nuanced and influencing factors on performance evaluation system and lecturers' work efficiency in applied university using the cases from Shaanxi province, China. Researcher employed qualitative method. Data were mainly collected through semi-structured interviews from 16 informants of applied and research universities from Shaanxi province who have knowledge on performance evaluation system with direct or indirect impact. The background of informants consists of President of applied universities, faculty members, senior administrators, undergraduates, parents and employers. Interview data was transcribed and analysis was complemented with other official documents. Qualitative research tools such as coding, memoing, constant comparisons, theoretical saturation and content analysis were used to analyze the interview data. Two cycles of coding led to 23 first-level focused codes, and subsequently reduced to nine second-level focused codes which leading to the discovery of three themes. The findings of this study can be reference for holistic understanding on performance evaluation, support interdisciplinary research particularly to the development of more effective, comprehensive, and context-specific performance evaluation systems that enhance the operational performance and societal impact of applied universities and other institutions.

KEYWORDS

Performance Evaluation; Applied University; Lecturer.

1. INTRODUCTION

Prior to 2015, all universities in China were research universities (Han, 2018). In May 2014, the Chinese government through an official statement Decision of the State Council on Accelerating the Development of Modern Vocational Education and Training indicated the intention to facilitate the transformation of several research universities into applied universities. Additionally, in October 2015, the Ministry of Education, the National Development and Reform Commission, and the Ministry of Finance jointly issued the statement with title Guiding Opinions on Guiding Some Local Research Universities to Transform into Applied Universities. These documents marked the official kick off of university transformation and provided specific guidance for local research universities during the transition process to becoming applied universities (Jin, 2020) by means of pilot projects (Huang, 2021).

2. BACKGROUND

In 2016, the policy paper titled 13th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of China highlighted the need to promote the transformation of local research universities into applied universities, making the direction of this transformation even clearer (Lv, 2019). Senior administrator (faculty deans included) plays a crucial role in research universities as they are the architects, participants, and implementer of the whole transformation process (Shi & Tian,2020). The success of the transformation depends on whether the quality, attitude, behavior, and performance of these administrators are in line with the goals of the transformation and development of the universities (Shen,2020). Thus, undergraduate education in China can be divided into two types: research universities and applied universities. Given this transformation context, it is of great practical importance to investigate the availability and efficiency of existing performance evaluation system for academics at applied universities (Wei, 2022). It is equally important to ensure the teaching qualities are aligned with the goals of university transformation plan. However, there is under-research on the availability and applicability of performance evaluation systems appropriate for applied universities in China. If there is any, the methods used in performance evaluation are relatively simplistic, and the resulting research lacks practical applicability (Xiao & Chen, 2022).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study employs qualitative method useful to unravel a complex phenomenon or one with little information about (Budur, Faraj & Karim, 2019). The qualitative research is definitely not the approach to take if you are looking for quick results and easy answer (Poth & Searle,2021). It involves enthusiasm and the determination to dig deep to understand a situation or process and often need a longer time and further inquiry to better understand a situation through observation, interviews and further follow up sessions (Wolf et al, 2020).

Taking into account the interpretive nature of the study and its aims, which focus specifically on process and context, content analysis is deemed most appropriate.

3.2. Data Collection Method

This study mainly collects data from interviewing participants with firsthand experience related to performance evaluation of applied universities in Shaanxi Province. The data collection strategy used is determined by the question of the study and by determining which source(s) of data will yield the best information with which to answer the question . After interview data was transcribed, researcher used content analysis approach, and qualitative research tools such as coding, memoing, constant comparison and theoretical saturation in analyzing the data.

3.2.1. Selecting the Research Participants and Organizations

After close to nine months of data collection process, this researcher successfully interviewed 16 participants of eight types of background, namely, president of applied universities; senior administrators such as faculty deans; lecturers from applied university; lecturer from research university; undergraduate; parents of undergraduate from applied university; senior staff of applied university such as human resource manager and employers to graduates from applied universities. Of these 16 participants, only six were familiar with the researcher. The other 10 participants met the researcher for the first time during the interview as introduced by other participants through snowball sampling technique. Please refer to Table 1 of the profile of research participants.

Table 1. Profile of Research Participants

No.	Background	Quantity	Gender
1	President of applied university	2	2M
2	Senior academicians of applied university	4	1M 1F
3	University lecturers from applied university	3	3F
4	University lecturer from research university	1	1M
5	Undergraduates from applied university	2	1M 1F
6	Parents of undergraduate from applied university	1	1F
7	Senior staff of applied university	3	2M 1F
8	Employer to graduates from applied universities	2	1F 1M
	TOTAL	16	8M 8F

3.2.2. The Choice of Interviews as the Primary Data Collection Strategy

The study collected data through semi-structured interviews and supplemented by secondary data. The semi-structured interview is an exploratory interview used most often in the social sciences study for qualitative research purposes or to gather clinical data. While it generally follows a guide or protocol that is devised prior to the interview and is focused on a core topic to provide a general structure, the semi-structured interview also allows for discovery, with space to follow topical trajectories as the conversation unfolds (Magaldi & Berler, 2020).

3.2.3. Developing the Interview Guide

This researcher is a senior lecturer in an applied university and is very conscious of not wanting to impose too rigidly any preconceived frameworks on the data collection or analysis. The interview questions are categorized into three sections. The first section contains prompting questions aims for ice-breaking purpose, The second section is more structured. The third section of questions are more open-ended, depending on what the interviewee wants to add themselves.

3.2.4. Interview Process and Protocol

Once these procedures are completed, the interview begins. Each interview may last for 60 to 90 minutes. However, for some people who are not very familiar with researchers, the process of establishing trust and rapport may take longer, and in some cases, it may take a considerable amount of time from initial contact to conducting interviews. After the interview concluded, participants were asked about their motivation to agree to participate in the study and whether they believe participation is meaningful or helpful to them. This usually ensures that participants leave the interview environment with a positive vibe and are willing to participate in any subsequent interviews or for interview transcript verification.

3.2.5. Interview Transcription, Verification and Data Storage

After the interview, this researcher immediately transcribed the interview data for further analysis. In addition, I prepared memo to record observations, thoughts, and aspects for further inquiry. In order to verify the accuracy of the transcript and to provide participants with the opportunity to edit, correct, add or delete any statements, the transcript was returned to the participants via email upon request.

For confidentiality purposes, all participants' identification and background information were stored in a separate database. This database contains unique codes given to each of the participants, contact information, age (estimation), gender and profession (without exact job title). The participant database such as voice recordings and interview transcripts were stored in a password-encrypted file only accessible by the researcher and PhD supervisor. All files related to the study were backed up to an external hard drive and to cloud-based storage to reduce the risk of data loss.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1. Data Analysis Tools

This study uses qualitative research tools of coding, memoing, constant comparison, and theoretical saturation in analyzing the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For the benefits in maximizing the validity of the findings, data triangulation undergone the following stages of coding: open coding (exploring, conceptualizing, categorizing, and comparing data) and focused coding (reassembling data around key categories in order to determine the nature of the relationships between and with other categories).

4.2. Open Coding

Coding of interviews commenced as soon as possible after their transcription. Working inductively, I code line-by-line rigorously in order to scrutinize the meaning of essence of the data and identify pattern, concepts or themes from the raw data. Open coding also served to identify the properties (characteristic that define and describe the concept) and dimensions (variation within properties) of the emergent concepts. I followed the advice of Charmaz (2011) to use process coding which present in gerunds form showing the action, for example, lamenting, lecturing and expressing. In addition, I also applied In Vivo coding which shows the original statements of participants.

4.3. Focused Coding

Focused coding followed open coding. Two levels of focused coding were used in this study with aim to 'break up' the data in a more specific manner or theme. Following this initial 'fracturing', focused coding is used to data in a more coherent way through categorizing the data and then determining the links between categories and sub-categories. Unlike word-by-word or line-by-line coding, focused codes subsume large bathes of data and thus allow the analysis to progress more swiftly in line with the emerging theory.

4.4. First-Cycle Coding

The first cycle coding commenced with open coding from the interview transcripts. The result of 16 interviews led to a total of 41,521 words of transcriptions. This coding process leading to many codes, however, only 70 open codes are categorized and presented in the forms of in vivo and process coding. These 70 open codes were then reduced to 23 first-level focused codes. Table 2 provides a summary of the categorization of open codes, first-level and second-level focused codes.

Table 2. Categorization of codes: Open Codes, first-level focused codes and second-level focused codes

Open Codes	First-Level Focused Code	Second-Level Focused Code
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questioning the rationale of performance evaluation towards university long-term growth • <i>...the focus of applied university differs from that of a research university, as we prioritize the development of undergraduates' technical and work skills rather than... academic research abilities.</i> (Mia, 48F, dean) 	Differing opinions on the goal of applied university	Differing characteristics and objectives of applied and research university
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledging both types of universities have unique characteristics and challenges • <i>...main employment destination of undergraduates [of applied university] is some local small and medium-sized enterprises, we train undergraduates for these companies.</i> (Emma, 33F, lecturer) 	Expressing varying objectives between applied and research universities	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>... This measure [cutting lecturers wages] is necessary because our chairman emphasizes cost considerations and hiring part-time teachers to compensate for insufficient class hours incurs additional recruitment expenses.</i> (Jacob, 37M, HR manager of university) • <i>.... I believe that leaders possess the utmost awareness of our evaluations as educators, while we ourselves are subject to evaluation and remain passive in this regard. It is within the purview of leaders to determine our course of action, what aspects are being evaluated, what no longer warrants evaluation, and how results are interpreted.</i> (Grace, 29F, lecturer) 	Influence of leaderships in the performance evaluation	Leadership style and formal authority influence the implementation of performance evaluation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying challenges in balancing the interest of diverse stakeholders • <i>So these dual-qualified lecturers are essentially nominal dual-qualified lecturers, just to fulfil an indicator set by the Education Department. You may also feel that our evaluation of applied performance is quite utilitarian.</i> (Jacob, 37M, HR manager of university) 	Identifying the dilemma of performance evaluation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exerting the authority of administrators on evaluating lecturers • <i>...human resources department serves as the primary evaluating body, with all indicators being issued and documents formulated by us... HR Department assessed the workload of teaching staff, and monitored the quality of instruction [implementation].</i> (Jacob, 37M, HR manager of university) 	Administrators' power on performance evaluation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing the importance of compliant to local regulation 	Aligning performance evaluation system in accordance with	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Shaanxi Provincial Education Department has not delegated authority in the evaluation of professional titles for applied university, it may not be possible to fully integrate the development goals of the university with the personal development goals of lecturers [without the approval of the authority] (Lucas, 38M, Human Resource Manager)</i> 	authority requirements	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exerting the importance of performance evaluation • Expressing the lack of commitment in and doubtful on the meaning of performance evaluation • ... <i>incorrect to use a simple, uniform model for the evaluation of faculty performance. The thinking and approach of such an evaluation model are flawed (Daniel, 52M, dean)</i> 	Varying views on the usability of performance evaluation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing the influence of the senior management of university in deciding the long term direction • ...<i>evaluation is undeniably indispensable for fostering the growth of the university. I firmly believe that the progress of the university is accomplished through collective efforts of its lecturers. (Grace, 29F, lecturer)</i> 	Linking performance evaluation with university' growth	Balancing the importance of performance evaluation and university development growth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledging challenges in assessing performance in China • ..<i>fostering the university's sustainable development by enhancing its internal quality. (Mia, 48F, dean)</i> 	Acknowledging the importance and objectives of performance evaluation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing the importance of colleagues working environment • "... <i>must place great emphasis on enhancing the professional faculty team and innovating practical teaching ...</i>" (John, 46M, journalist) 	Expressing the expectation and ideals of performance evaluation	Designing pragmatic performance evaluation systems
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing the indicators are similar to that of research university • ...<i>indicators of performance evaluation system of applied university does not in line with its development plan. More so, the essence of these evaluation system is not design with aim for university career development plan (Nora, 53F, university manager)</i> 	Identifying indicators of performance evaluation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing the commonly punitive method is demotivating • <i>failing to accomplish the assigned task will result in a deduction from our remuneration, while exceeding the required amount will be rewarded accordingly ... (Jacob, 37M, HR manager of university)</i> 	Suggesting strategies in motivating lecturers	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agreeing many areas for improvement of current performance evaluation systems • <i>it is imperative that we prioritize the integration of applied course reforms into performance evaluation. Lecturers must shift their focus from traditional theoretical instruction to nurturing undergraduates' practical abilities...</i>(Jacob, 37M, HR manager of university) • <i>we should reduce emphasis on research achievements not only in daily tasks but also when evaluating lecturers' qualifications.</i> (Mia, 48F, dean) 	<p>Suggesting strategies in improving performance evaluation systems</p>	<p>Applying relevant indicators in improving the implementation of performance evaluation</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varying views on the quality of graduates from applied university • When lecturers engage with enterprises, they should also comprehend the specific talents required and identify any shortcomings within the organization, enabling them to offer valuable management advice based on their professional expertise. (Mia, 48F, dean) • ... We hire interns from applied universities every year....I reckon that applied universities should focus more on enhancing undergraduates' practical skills instead of trying to compete with research-oriented universities for job opportunities...The salary expectations of students from research universities are generally higher (Lucy, 38F, accountant) 	<p>Employers' concern on employees' requirements and applied universities</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>...many undergraduates prefer engaging in conversations with lecturers and listening to them discuss various topics rather than focusing solely on academic pursuits.</i> (Noah 22M, undergraduate) • <i>.. as undergraduates in the classroom, we are the primary recipients of the lecturer's instruction, making us best suited to evaluate their teaching effectiveness.</i> (Emily, 21F, undergraduate) 	<p>Identifying undergraduates' self-exertion right on evaluating lecturers</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>...noticed that these universities prioritize employment-oriented course goals but neglect the cultivation of undergraduates' innovative abilities in their teaching methods, thus undervaluing the importance of practical and innovative skills.</i> (Lucy, 38F, accountant) • <i>Our aim is to find a job better. I am a junior this year, and I still worry about last year's employment rate</i> (Noah 22M, undergraduate) 	<p>Expressing concerns on future</p>	<p>Misalignment between university's performance evaluation and societal needs</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledging lecturers have unproportionate workload and frustrations 	<p>Expressing concerns on lecturers' wellbeing</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledging lecturers are important component of university • <i>Our university requires leaders to listen to four lecturers every month and give guidance to these</i> 	<p>Acknowledging the importance of evaluating lecturers</p>	<p>Recognizing the role of lecturers in applied university</p>

lecturers after attending the lectures. (Sophia, 46, lecturer)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledging the feedback on lecturer performance evaluation systems is not taken seriously <i>The 80 % of lecturers who don't do much work don't get any punishment for their wages, so the result is that everyone doesn't work.</i> (Emma, 33F, lecturer) <i>Even if I rank at the bottom, it holds no significance as it does not impact my salary or any other aspect. ... its value is minimal.</i> (Grace 29F, lecturer) 	Questioning the meaning of performance evaluation	Flawed performance evaluation demotivates lecturers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognizing that an objective and fair performance evaluation systems system is yet established. <i>Many of lecturers feel that performance evaluations are unfair, and the main reason for this unfairness is the lack of incentive mechanisms... To encourage teachers who believe they have received unjust evaluations to submit appeals based on their self-performance</i> (Daniel, 52M, dean) 	Questioning the fairness of performance evaluation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discovering the weaknesses of performance evaluation systems from multiple perspectives <i>The disadvantage is that we attach too much importance to research, even more than teaching. ... the current result is that everyone values scientific research and ignores teaching.</i> (Emma, 33F lecturer) 	Acknowledging the weaknesses of performance evaluation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>In terms of teaching, there are two aspects of evaluation: the teaching workload, and the quality of teaching... part of our evaluation criteria.... Given the divergent objectives of research universities and applied universities, it is understandable that educators would allocate more attention to research endeavors while potentially compromising the quality of teaching.</i> (Grace, 29F, lecturer) 	Meaning of performance evaluation and teaching quality and effectiveness	Design of performance evaluation requires consideration on lecturers teaching motivation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>... The "up or out" policy mandates that numerous recently recruited young lecturers must fulfill designated research assignments. The liberal arts majors, for instance, necessitate the completion of five core academic papers as a rigorous requirement.</i> (Mia, 48F, dean) 	Identifying factors impacting the motivation of lecturers	

4.5. Second-Cycle Coding

Second cycle coding is the next step after the first-cycle coding as presented in previous section.. Using Charmaz’s (2008) coding techniques, 70 open codes were selected from the initial analysis. These chosen open codes were then re-coded, following Saldaña’s (2016) assertion that this step is essential “...to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from your array of first cycle codes.” As a result, 23 first-level focused codes and 9 second level focused codes were identified as presented in Table 2 located at 3.4 First-cycle coding. For illustrative purposes, the following describes the process to identify second-level focused codes from the chosen first-level focused codes.

4.6. Identifying Themes from Focused Codes

As mentioned earlier, this researcher conducted two data coding phases, first coding process leading to the discovery of first- and second-level focused codes (Charmaz, 2008). The coding process was interactive and further coding of these focused codes leading to the discovery of three themes. Illustrated by participants' comments, the following sections deliberate how the identified themes were developed from the various codes.

The first theme: uncoordinated communication among stakeholders leading to misalignment of the implementation of performance evaluation in line with applied university' characteristics.

The second identified theme is: rationale to streamline the design of performance evaluation systems with comprehensive indicators considering larger stakeholders' expectation and long-term development objectives.

The third theme relates to innovative strategies in achieving the long-term goals of the applied university by means of people-driven approaches. The following table illustrates how the themes were derived from the analysis of focused codes.

Table 3. Categorization of themes from first-and second-level focused codes

First-Level Focused Code	Second-Level Focused Code	Themes	
Differing opinions on the goal of applied university	Uphold unique characteristics of applied university	Uncoordinated communication among stakeholders leading to misalignment of the implementation of performance evaluation in line with applied university' characteristics	
Expressing varying objectives between applied and research universities			
Influence of leaderships in the performance evaluation	Leadership style and formal authority influence the implementation of performance evaluation		
Identifying the dilemma of performance evaluation			
Administrators' power on performance evaluation			
Aligning performance evaluation system in accordance with authority requirements			
Varying views on the usability of performance evaluation	Performance evaluation as a means in achieving university developmental goal		
Linking performance evaluation with university' growth			
Acknowledging the importance and objectives of performance evaluation	Urgency to review pragmatic performance evaluation systems		Streamline the design of performance evaluation systems with comprehensive indicators considering larger stakeholders'
Expressing the expectation and ideals of performance evaluation			

Identifying indicators of performance evaluation	Integration of positive indicators in improving the implementation of performance evaluation	expectation and long-term development objectives
Suggesting strategies in motivating lecturers		
Suggesting strategies in improving performance evaluation systems		
Employers' concern on employees' requirements and applied universities	Misalignment between university's performance evaluation and societal needs	
Identifying undergraduates' self-exertion right on evaluating lecturers		
Expressing concerns on future		
Expressing concerns on lecturers' wellbeing	Recognizing the role of lecturers in applied university	Academic-staff-centred performance evaluation system is beneficial in teaching morale, quality enhancement and meeting university sustainable goals
Acknowledging the importance of evaluating lecturers		
Questioning the meaning of performance evaluation	Flawed performance evaluation demotivates lecturers	
Questioning the fairness of performance evaluation		
Acknowledging the weaknesses of performance evaluation		
Meaning of performance evaluation and teaching quality and effectiveness	Design of performance evaluation requires consideration on lecturers teaching motivation	
Identifying factors impacting the motivation of lecturers		

4.7. A Summary of Three Themes

A thorough examination of the data revealed three themes that present multifaceted challenges to performance evaluation systems at applied universities. The findings presented on the three themes: a) uncoordinated communication among stakeholders leading to misalignment of the implementation of performance evaluation in line with applied university' characteristics; b) rationale to streamline the design of performance evaluation systems with comprehensive indicators considering larger stakeholders' expectation and long-term development objectives; and c) academic-staff-centred performance evaluation system is beneficial in teaching morale, quality enhancement and meeting university sustainable goals.

5. CONCLUSION

The research focuses on evaluating performance systems in applied universities in Shaanxi province, China. Unlike research universities, applied universities aim to enhance undergraduates' employability and industry readiness. The study is tailored to the unique characteristics of these institutions, exploring how they align their evaluation systems with local policies and practices. It emphasizes metrics that prioritize teaching quality, practical skills, and industry collaboration while investigating the impact on academic staff. This interdisciplinary study employed qualitative methods to address challenges and barriers of performance evaluation at applied universities.

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