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## A comparative study on accountability of educational think tanks around the world

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### 1. Abstract

This paper presents the analysis on educational think tanks performance evaluation from the examples of UK, US, Taiwan and Singapore. The author adopted qualitative approach with 21 participants, including educational research institute administrators, researchers and scholars to collect the data. With comparing the materials from different four countries, the paper shows the trend and the core concept on doing and preparing the accountability of educational think tanks.

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### 1. Introduction

Education policy making nowadays becomes a high professionalized body of knowledge and practice aimed at promoting the quality of national competitiveness, which is increasingly important in our interconnected world. In order for policy makers to understand and address the multifaceted challenges and opportunities they will face and to thrive in an increasingly global environment, educators and administrators must create opportunities for them to develop intercultural awareness, knowledge and perspective on educational issue, and global trends in educational researches.

Educational think tanks will engage educational policies in the active and critical examination of the concept of global competency and the need of the state. Most of the countries around the world, e.g. US, UK, Russia, Japan, Australia, Singapore, Taiwan, etc., all share this same value of establishing educational think at national level.

During the past decade in particular, from north countries to the south countries, there are some debates going on about the quality of educational researches and their implements to the policy, and in the process, determine the kinds of research that will be given the seal of approval, especially by governments and funding agencies (Stewart,



2012). Given current globalization, new technology and market forces, dramatic change in the field of education is hardly surprising. Therefore, having an educational think tank to predict the social and economic change and meet the need of policy making are necessary to the government.

This paper is to demonstrate the operations of different countries' educational think tanks and compare their accountability of running the institutes. In order to cover various of educational thinks, this paper includes US, UK, Singapore, and Taiwan as the subjects to compare and analyze.

## 2. Problem Statement

After sorting and comparing the operation of the national educational think tank in various countries, this paper chose Taiwan, US, UK and Singapore as the targets to compare and analyze. Since the author is from Taiwan, Taiwan is included in the context of international comparison. And the reasons to choose the others three countries are as following. First, these three countries are in the different region, representing different inhabited condition and culture. US can symbolize the continent of North America. UK is for Europe and Singapore can represent Asia. Secondly, these three countries' institutions own different institutional characteristics, the US one is under the command of Ministry of Education, the UK one is a foundation operating independently and the Singapore one is subordinate to the university, has double functions of research and teaching.

### (1) Taiwan (National Academy for Educational Research, NAER) (National Academy for Educational Research, 2011)

NAER was officially established in 2011. NAER is majorly composed by three institutes: National Institute of Translation and Compilation, National Institute of Educational Resources and Publishing and the preparatory office of NAER. Core missions of NAER focus on long-term, integrated and systematic educational research, and actively exploring any opportunity for international collaborations.

Basically, NAER bears three main missions: research, training, and service.

#### A. Research

NAER has been conducting long-term, systematic and integrated researches in theoretical, empirical and policy-related issues. For instance, K-12 curriculum, teaching material, teaching methods, textbooks, research and development of evaluation tools and establishment of educational data base. All research results should be advantageous to the construction of education theory, improvement of education practice or the decision of educational policy to show its value.

#### B. Training

Based on previous abundant experiences from Taiwan Provincial Institute for Elementary/Secondary School Teachers Training Service, NAER would continuously provide professional training channel for the cultivation of educational leadership and teaching expertise, which should be helpful for the professional development of administrative and teaching personnel. Efficiency and efficacy of school and education administration are expected to be greatly enhanced.

#### C. Service

NAER bears the social responsibility, and should fully play the service role. Educational research results and information distribution should be promoted to teachers, students and parents. Information consulting service should be given to central and regional education administration institutes for policy making.

### (2) US (Institute of Educational Sciences, IES)

According to the US constitution, the authority of education is under the command of the state government and the federal government can't intervene. But because of the structural change of the finance and results of student's international achievement, this division of work has already changed cleverly. The concrete change is the establishment of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) which was founded after the passing of Education Science Reform Act of 2002 (Institute of Educational Sciences, 2008). Its name reflects the priority to make the educational research more scientific. The main task is to provide the rigorous and related evidence, using it to

improve the educational practice and policy and sharing the information to the mass. Basically, IES is the research mastermind of the US Department of Education, aiding state government and federal government to set up effective teaching measure and policy. The Education Science Reform Act of 2002 established the federal government's resolution and role to leading the educational research. The scientific research is paid a lot more attention, securing the educational research's major role in federal government. In general, IES has reached these important achievements since its establishment (Wang, 2006):

- A. By founding a various level of large-scale database, IES provides clear information about the present situation and development about the US education. And the data can be used when deciding the policy or improving the practice.
- B. By spreading the discovery of the educational research, the education can be improved.
- C. By authorizing or subsidizing the research, IES can encourage the educational research to develop vigorously.
- D. IES can strengthen the connection between the educational research and practice, and then improve the policy and proposal. Through the set up of the regional educational laboratory, the research result, practice and policy can be linked together.

In the concrete level, the IES mainly enlarges and spreads the basic knowledge, providing the fair and reliable information to the education leaders, participants, parents, students, researchers and the public. And it also provides students the educational policy, proposal and method which related to the enhancement of learning effectiveness and the equality of educational opportunity, including the educational plans' outcomes from the other states.

IES has to offer a report with extensive contents to president, the Secretary of Department of Education and congress members every two years, including: A. The annual research contents of the research centers of the IES. B. The summary of external subsidy, contract and the cooperation agreement which is over 100 thousand US dollar from every research center. The minimum money, beneficiary, the purpose of money, the relation among these items and every IES's task are all included. C. The description of the consistence between the research activities and scientific research of every research center. D. Other advices, suggestions and the suitable matters that approved by the directors.

Although the IES is under the command of the Department of Education, the supervising organization, National Board for Education Sciences (NBES) is established to improve its operating function and social identity. NBES is composed of 15 educational experts, researchers and members of society and its major responsibility is to supervise IES. Take the operation in 2009 to 2010, NBES have hold 5 conferences, providing reports to the congress, Minister of Education and the IES's leading group. These reports are focus on the "evaluation of IES's practice of its research main point and task's effectiveness, the items and task related to scientific research, operating a fair evaluation, collecting and reporting an accurate educational statistics and to make the research into practice." (IES, 2011)

### (3) UK (National Foundation for Educational Research, NFER)

NFER was co-established by local education authorities and Ministry of Education in 1946. Being identified as a non-profit organization according to The Companies Act 1948, NFER became the biggest national level educational database in 1940's. NFER also provides extensive services and information networks which are related to the education and the improvement of children's lives to all the children from Wales and England as well as the institution providing education and teaching.

Affected by the passing of the Amendment of the Companies Act in December 2th, 2010, NFER has actually become a limited liability company and against the original non-profit property. And it also expended its activity to provide more extensive educational service (National Foundation for Educational Research, 2013).

Although the initial Amendment is to respond the external environment which is changing toward commercializing, the evaluation of NFER's operation and research effectiveness are also influenced by the business model.

According to the outline of NFER (National Foundation for Educational Research, 2013), NFER is mainly authorizing by different departments, dedicating itself to the research of the children and teenagers' achievement, future development and social welfare services. NFER wants to provide school leaders a way to solve the difficulties that a school might meet when developing by these research outcomes. NFER also wants to modify the problems of underachievers and teenager violence, promoting the education in UK to be one of the best in the world.

The goals of establishing are as following:

- A. To start to influence the education-related items and develop the education-related research.
- B. To collect and exchange the research-related idea and information extensively, the information about the publisher whose primary purpose is to increase the public interest is also included.
- C. To provide the independent data to improve the learning quality, learning process and the lives of the learners, also to publicize the outcomes of the research.

NFER is the largest independent educational research institution in UK, providing education-related information, methods to evaluation and research service to promote children development. NFER also offers professional counsel and specialized service to UK central and local government. The purpose is to improve learning quality of the learners by providing objective evidence, and become the leader of educational research and practical application in UK.

But in recent year, the negative growth in UK economy has forced the government to reduce the expenditure on the subsidy and the NFER has also been affected. (National Foundation for Educational Research, 2012) From the other point of view, it is a chance for NFER to practice the organization restructuring. Through the voluntary and compulsory lay off, the members will be reduced and the whole structure will be more flexible and refined, also has the sustainability when developing. Apart from satisfying the need of the one commissioning the research, NFER can respond to the impact from the external environment by promoting new activities.

#### (4) Singapore (National Institute of Education, NIE)

NIE can be traced back to World War II, the teacher training system mainly responded to the short-term labor requirement. However, with the enrollment increasing, the demand for teacher also enlarged. Singapore therefore realized that there is an urgency to do the teacher training in a long-term and organized way.

Singapore has operated a series of organization reform in teacher training institution since 1950's. In 1991, NIE was set up after the combination of Institute of Education and College of Physical Education. The NIE formally subordinate to Nanyang Technological University (National Institute of Education, 2010).

NIE's vision is to become an eminent fame institution; the major task is to pursue the outstanding performance in teacher training and educational research. The core values of the institution are as following. A. To provide a professional service. B. To be people oriented and the college as a spindle. C. To insist the principle of integrity. D. To respect diverse backgrounds and advantage. E. Be glad to accept change. (National Institute of Education, 2011)

The biggest difference between the aforementioned UK, NIE not only studies the practicality of the educational policy and implement, but it also has the function of teacher training. Such property can be observed from its organizational functions. A. To provide a university course and keep training teacher: the diploma of the graduate student's educational course, university degree course and diploma course. B. To provide a course of master degree, promoting professional learning: higher degree courses, leader ability course, developing activity professionally and course. C. To operate the strategic research to make education reform: development plan of strategic educational research, school-centered renovation plan and specific research plan. E. To promote the educational research: translating and disseminating the outcome of educational research, publishing various periodicals and holding academic seminars.

The NIE has double functions in property, teacher training and educational research. But in the actual development, having the absolute functions from policy counseling, course's research and development, refresher course to teacher training, the NIE therefore shows more direct influence on the policy and practical

application.

### 3. Research Questions

This paper is based on the above-mentioned background, planning to use the related materials from US, UK, Singapore and Taiwan to operate investigation. The paper uses the assessment of the performance as the analyzing target and having a concrete discussion to the problems as following: (1)investigating the recent development in these four countries; (2)understanding the method of the performance evaluation in these four countries' national educational think tanks; (3) using the in-depth interviews and focus group to induct the trend of the performance evaluation; (4) comparing the different functions given by the different types of institutes.

### 4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to investigate these four countries educational think tanks by adopting comparative analysis, intending to understand the resource investment, operation, institutional output and the policy influence in these four countries. This paper also explains the characteristic of the operation in these four institutes by their different experiences of performance evaluation.

### 5. Research Methods

Apart from adopting comparative research method, the paper also collects and investigates the related information by analyzing qualitative text. The research held three focus group interviews, consisting of 21 participants, the participants can be mainly divided into two attributes: the administrators of the educational think tanks and the scholars. These 21 people discussed the general situation of the educational think tanks and contribute the experience of doing institutional performance evaluation. The purpose is to condense the research, focusing on the performance evaluation of the national educational research institution.

### 6. Findings

#### (1) Educational think tank has the necessity to establish indicators to evaluate performance

When discussing the developing condition in different country, the scholars always emphasize to establish some suitable indicators no matter what kind of performance evaluation is adopted. The indicators establishment is necessary because it can be complied by the follow-up research.

*No matter it is a forum of expert and scholar, document analysis or the above-mentioned questionnaire investigation, all of them need a evaluating indicators and related standard. Therefore, the research groups have to consider setting up a clear indicators when evaluating both the whole national educational research institution and the departments from it. This clear indicators can provide a more accurate evaluation, otherwise, the evaluation is hard to operate. (administrator-03)*

*Take US for example, the IES publishes its annual report every year. Therefore, the research groups can collect and arrange these official documents as well as comparing the annual reports with the function description on the official website to get to know more about the indicators' content. (administrator-02)*

The participants have little consensus of the process or the content of the indicators' establishment, but to make the indicators as a basis to evaluate performance has become an important element to run the think tank. All interviewees express that when establishing the national educational research institution's evaluation, the setup of indicator system is the first priority. Even so, the current materials about the establishment of the performance evaluation indicators in US, UK, Taiwan and Singapore is inadequate. Singapore is now in an initial stage and the other three countries have not set any evaluating method and content yet. Because of this situation, these countries focus more on the expenditure explanation. Nevertheless, the administrators and scholars still think that there is an

importance to establish a specific evaluation indicators.

The evaluating indicators of the educational think tanks should focus on “inputs” and “outputs”. According to the analysis of the text, the research institutes in these four countries don’t have any mature or obvious index to be the standard of the performance evaluation. The participants provided a method to collect information indirectly, meaning that to arrange the direction and content of the “performance” by clarifying the component through the related report and analysis

*Although there is no formal plan to operate the performance evaluation, at least every organization has its covert way to evaluating the performance. We can arrange the possible method by the annual report or information. When setting up performance evaluation system, first of all, we should make a list of the related elements, orientation and the index. Secondly, we should understand the document related to performance evaluation. Or we can interpret the existing document first, and then set the research goal. If there is any limitation, we can consider amending the research topic. (administrator-07)*

Because of US, UK, Taiwan and Singapore have inadequate information about the performance evaluation indicators, the participating experts suggest to examine the annual reports of the related institutions. They can get to know more about the institution’s emphasis by viewing the annual reports’ ethos and content. The annual reports in this paper are all focusing on the allocation of funds, especially in UK, whose financial statement is the main part of its annual report. If using this way to understand the annual performance, we may fail to see the woods for the trees. But what is worth considering is that if these four national research institutes all emphasize on the finance and funding and put them in the annual report, then we have consider the represent meaning carefully.

(2) There exist some difficulties to set up a performance evaluation system for educational think tanks

According to an influential international scholar, even an educational think tank with perfect operation or with high reputation internationally, there is still a difficulty to develop a concrete performance evaluation. Therefore, the emphasis will be put on the output of research, and make it the indicator of a performance evaluation.

*Two weeks ago, I got the message that Taiwan government have already decided to develop the performance evaluation and ask for my advice. My country often asks the same enquiry, but we have not yet finished it. First of all, we don’t have the index. Secondly, we pay attention to the index in UK and Australia, Both of them adopt the research assistant exercise when evaluating. We also use some basic indexes, like the average output from every professor every year, including the monograph, periodical, essay and a useful chapter in a book.(scholar-01)*

*There is no indicator to evaluate a researcher so far, but we will know how much influence this researcher gets. Many outstanding researchers reside in institute and become researchers or the professors, having the influence on the primary school teachers. But we don’t have the ability to make that to be an objective indicator. (scholar-04)*

From the present situation, adopting the evaluation from the researchers’ output is an alternative for the direct performance evaluation. Emphasizing on the application is not a concrete indicator, but it at least point out the direction of the requirement. If using this argument to consider the possible performance evaluation, the researchers’ output can represent the annual performance somehow.

(3) Research productivity is the main concern of planning institutional evaluation

As a national educational think tank, the value and the competitiveness of the research outcomes should be the main point of the performance. Many interviewees think that the guarantee to quantity and quality of the research is also important.

*My institute's reputation is the higher one comparing to other countries, even can be called the first-class standard. That is what an institution's leader must to ensure. Our goal is to make our educational researcher reach the highest standard. (administrator- 09)*

*Every researcher has his own evaluation once in a year, that's a continuous assessment, including me. Of course the major subject is our research achievement. (administrator- 04)*

According to the interviews, the concrete requirement to the performance is the researcher's academic publication and the satisfaction to the rule of the promotion. It seems to emphasize on the individual research performance, but actually, there is an annual evaluation for each individuals, ranging from the directors to researchers. Before the setting of a more concrete performance evaluation for the institute, this method is also an acceptable way.

Based on the above analysis, instead of policy application, the emphasis on the research publications seems to be a main expectation to the educational think tank. Therefore, the gap between policy practice and education research has become obvious due to the current expectation for the educational think tanks faculties is publication. Although the research may be the base of the following up policy implementation, there is no significant evidence to show the correlation.

From the related materials this research has collected, when it comes to the evaluation, the requirement contains not only the financial management, but also the research output. But there is no concrete tracking mechanism to view that how to make a research output to be an applicable policy research and how to make the output to have a connection with the educational policy making.

## 7. Conclusions

(1) In terms of the autonomy of the institute, NFER obviously has more freedom, comparing with the other three institutes, of planning and doing the research. No matter the demand of the research is from educational administration or from the foundation itself, the autonomy of doing the research is relatively independent. The research outcomes of the NFER are separately announced on the policy documents, educational research quarterly, periodical and annual report which are based on the research content. The performance evaluation's content mainly reflects on the annual diversion, research plan's summery, finance operation and the effective management of the income and resource.

(2) Both governmental institutes, IES and NAER, don't have an accurate mechanism for performance evaluation. However, they are under the command of the federal and central government. Providing the (annual) report about its effectiveness to the Department (Ministry) of Education and the Congress has been taken as the symbol of the annual evaluation of the institute. Even so, the pragmatic institutional performance evaluation with rubrics is still necessary.

(3) NIE so far extends more measures in doing institutional evaluation comparing with the other three institutes. Although the NIE in Singapore focuses on both teaching and researching, it fulfills the academic production capacity in performance evaluation. One main reason is that NIE subordinates to Nanyang Technological University, and this makes NIE need to follow the related regulations of higher education evaluation.

(4) NAER in Taiwan still has a vague classification between the administrative institution and research institution. Established in 2011, NAER combined many administrative departments from Ministry of Education, so it's not simply a research institution. The NAER also has to do the education-oriented research, so some of the studies become administration-oriented research, which are the research without autonomy. Adding the problem of the lack of the performance assessment, so comparing to other countries, the studies' influence and the regulated outputs are still inadequate.

(5) Combing above 4 countries experiences, both fiscal distribution and academic performance are the two

major domains in doing or preparing for the institutional accountability. Although the solid form of accountability for educational think tanks hasn't been maturely developed so far, the need of competitiveness and the requirement of institutional inspection drive those think tanks toward the path of auditing institute.

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