

Reaching out to the unreached: A qualitative assessment of the quality aspect of the project Applied Academic for Excellence (APEX)

John Christian C. Valeroso
Social Sciences Department

Abstract

This qualitative study probed into the quality feature of Project Applied Academic for Excellence (Project APEX), an initiative undertaken by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Regional Centre for Innovation and Technology (SEAMEO-INNOTECH), for the purpose of providing education opportunities to communities especially in rural areas through a clear-cut linkage between secondary schools and community development framework. In-depth interviews were conducted with a select group of students (n=8), teachers (n=10), and the project head from San Pedro National High School. Field texts were subjected to vertical and horizontal analyses to identify recurring themes. The condensed meaning units and themes went through a member-checking procedure to ensure data trustworthiness. The study eidetically and interestingly revealed the qualities of Project APEX through the different Moves identified. Through this study, government and other educational agencies are invited to formulate practical and sound approaches toward further improvement of education programs in the country.

Keywords: Project APEX, quality, assessment, San Pedro National High School

Education plays a vital role in the lives of people living in developing countries. This is widely regarded as the road to economic progress, the key to scientific and technological development, the way to stop unemployment, the basis of social equity, and the hub of political socialization and cultural vitality (Chimombo, 2005). It is extremely difficult for developing countries to gain from the global knowledge-based economy without education. This is the reason why the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) initiated a regional expert meeting in 2011 to promote the right to quality education. This also reaffirmed the commitment of the member countries to promoting this right and eventually fostering cooperation for education.

The school, as a service organization, has the main task of providing education to people. It must have a strong emphasis on the child's act, creativity, and initiatives (Saito & Tsukui, 2008). However, schools cannot pursue this very significant task alone. People within the community should also do their part in providing education especially to the youth sector. There is an urgent need to study the process of trials to reform the school (Saito & Tsukui, 2008). Therefore, a link between school and community shall be established. This link may also be regarded as a pro-poor intervention (James, 2003) because it will eventually solve issues concerning economic and social instability within the community. This link will also address issues within the education sector because developing countries have non-related educational expenditures (Rodrigo & Baker, 2002).

Notably, the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Innovation Technology (SEAMEO INNOTECH), a research center that encourages innovative and technology-based solutions to address problems in the education sector (Salamanca Conference, 1989) initiated a project known as the Applied Academics for Excellence (APEX). The said project is aimed at ensuring the availability of education in communities especially in rural areas. Through the years, SEAMEO INNOTECH has been acquainted with other Asian countries as well in confronting common problems together through an all-Asian mechanism for cooperation. The heads of state and education secretaries of the different countries have further enhanced this cooperation. SEAMEO INNOTECH also gained external support from other countries such as the United States, Canada and some parts of Europe (Salamanca Conference, 1989). This external support from

the US has helped in funding the curriculum development project of APEX as well as its expansion in different areas in the Philippines (Project APEX Laguna, 2006).

Project APEX is a community-based project that links secondary schools to the development framework of the community through meaningful alliances and local education governance. Partnership between education provider and corporate industries may gear toward the development of the community. This partnership helps develop an institution's ability to offer a wider content base with course offerings designed at the level and interests of students enrolled (Omar & Chiam, 2010). Since APEX deals with the development of the education sector in a particular area, it exposes students to different hands-on applications, interactive peer learning, and exciting activities, which strengthen the foundation, technical, and life preparation skills in pursuit of post secondary education and a career of choice (Project APEX Operations Manual, 2008).

The main objective of this study was to conduct a qualitative assessment of project APEX from an outside or external vantage point. Stubbs (2010) stated that qualitative assessment focuses on a specific aspect of the project. This kind of assessment is flexible and helps in addressing every decision made for the project by the stakeholders involved (Stubbs, 2010; Schilling, 2006). Failure to assess a project may lead to the inability to form new insights or receive information that was not anticipated (Westat & Horizon, 2001). Without an assessment, the so-called "unanticipated consequences" (Fretchling & Westat, 2002) might prevent an inherent relationship between evaluation and project or program implementation. Moreover, lack of information regarding stakeholders might also cause the failure of a project.

Such an attempt is vital because it will also provide information that will help the project. Through this study the researcher hoped to identify the distinct characteristics of the project and ascertain how it has contributed to the community in the rural areas. Moreover, this attempt made by the researcher would look at the extent to which the qualities of the project have been effective during Project APEX' implementation. Any project effort is bound to face the challenges of monitoring and assessment (Project APEX Laguna, 2006).

Project APEX can be considered as a vehicle for lifelong learning (Omar & Chiam, 2010) and a perfect move to combat poverty and

unavailability of education in a community. Also, this should be considered as something that is never-ending and can never reach perfection (Saito & Tsukui, 2008), and that is the main reason why assessment will play a fundamental role within project APEX.

Assessment Using the Logic Model

Theoretically, this study was anchored on the Logic Model. For more than 20 years, the Logic Model process has been used by program managers and evaluators to describe the effectiveness of their programs (McLaughlin & Jordan, 1999). This particular model depicts logical linkages among inputs (University of Wisconsin-Extension, 2003; Frechtling & Westat, 2002) or program resources (McLaughlin & Jordan, 1999), activities or process (Frechtling, 2002; McLaughlin & Jordan, 1999), outputs (University of Wisconsin-Extension, 2003) or outcomes (University of Wisconsin-Extension, 2003; Frechtling & Westat, 2002; McLaughlin & Jordan, 1999). When a specific program has been characterized in terms of this structure, critical procedures of performance can be already recognized (McLaughlin & Jordan, 1999). Questions for the different stakeholders of the project were patterned after this model in order to identify the distinct characteristics of Project APEX.

The Logic Model is a storyline or graphical representation of processes in real life with assumptions upon which an activity is expected to lead to a specific result (Millar, Simeone, & Carnevale, 2001). This particular model describes a cause and effect relationship. It explains the sequence of events thought to bring about benefits or change over time. It also represents the chain of reasoning that links investments to results (University of Wisconsin Extension, 2003).

The Logic Model can be considered as a systems model that shows the correlation of interdependent parts that together make up the whole (University of Wisconsin-Extension, 2003). In dealing with the concept of systems thinking, it is already given that the total program is greater than the sum of the individual parts. Since the Logic Model emphasizes the characteristics of the project in terms of its planning and implementation, this model is appropriate to use in this study that deals with the project's quality and accessibility.

The Quality Aspect of the Project

In this study, the researcher addressed several factors touched by the concept of qualitative assessment. One of these is the concept of project quality, which, when considered especially in education can address and solve current issues and debates (Heyneman, 2004). Quality of a project is defined as an improvement of all its participants (Cornick, 1987). This study will prove that the concept of quality will definitely play an essential role for project implementation.

O'Sullivan (2006) and Slack, Chambers, and Johnston (2004) argued that quality as a framework of culture and tradition, behavior, social relations, economic and political life can address problems and issues within a particular project. This definition will identify the concept of quality as something that refers to "fitness of purpose" (Council of Higher Education Accreditation, 2001) or "fitness for purpose" (Kazaz & Talat Birgonulb, 2005). It means that the concept of quality may be regarded as a way of meeting and adapting to generally accepted standards. Different stakeholders involved in the project determined conformance to factors that brought quality to particular projects. Pondering over this vital point may lead it to become a factor that will resolve issues concerning the state of education in developing countries since many of these are still considered poor (Sullivan, 2006).

A program can be considered as a "quality program" if we measure it by identifying the level of implementation of the project which corresponds to project conditions and stipulation (Bubshait, 1994). It can also be considered as a quality program if it can identify indicators that will expose other possible problems within it (Motala, 2001).

Cogitating quality in building projects will ensure that the tasks are completed correctly (Kazaz & Talat Birgonulb, 2005). According to Kazaz et al, (2005) and Oliver and Qu (1999), deliberating on the project's quality would also identify different problems and reveal anomalies within its implementation. However, considering the concept of quality is not an easy task in project evaluation. Pond (2002) stated that the assessment of the quality of educational program and activities has been quite a challenge in the 21st century, and for which different methods like Internet, videos and other electronic media are being used. Several studies have been done extensively in other countries such as Turkey, United States, Ireland, South Africa,

Saudi Arabia and Australia, but this study regarding the qualitative assessment of project APEX, considering its quality, is the first of its kind in the Philippines.

Moreover, in dealing with these issues concerning quality, the engagement of community in different collaborative works is very helpful in solving social issues and may invite government and funding support (El Ansari, 2005). Schools cannot always grant students with individual and cultural competencies required to become successful in the education sector (Editorial in the *International Journal Education Research*, 2004). Improving the quantity and quality of training can result in greatly more successful and competent academic learning. This is a manifestation where the community can really contribute, directly or indirectly through its resources (Wallace & Walberg, 1991). This partnership between schools and communities will provide strong accountability for the students involved and can make large differences in achievement because of the diverse nature of partnership.

Chervin and colleagues (2005) divulged that partnership with community can solve different problems. However, their study also revealed that lack of strength within that partnership would result in insufficiency of its function. Strengthening the partnership between schools and communities will prepare professionals for taking new directions in their life (Sutherland et al., 2005). Most of the studies concerning this partnership were done in Australia, Spain and the United States. Hence, this paper may well constitute a pioneer study in the country. Epstein (2001) also stated that partnership between schools and community could support the learning of the students. Therefore, the good partnership between schools and communities can develop different competencies.

These competencies may either be a leadership competency (Mozhgan et al., 2011) or an entrepreneurial competency (Passow, 2007). First is student leadership competency. Student leadership competency development can assist politicians, planners, and higher education authorities in making their policies and plans that target leadership growth and progress. It also assists in directing their university programs toward student leadership growth development (Mozhgan et al., 2011).

Second is entrepreneurial competency. Entrepreneurial competency is the combination of all entrepreneurs' necessary traits for sustainable success and entrepreneurship, including attitudes,

values, beliefs, knowledge, skills, abilities, characteristics, wisdom, expertise (social, technical, managerial) and mental and behavioral tendencies (Passow, 2007).

It is vital for programs and projects for education to be informed of the qualities that are valued by employers in the industry. It is the function of education agencies to plan and execute projects that are aimed at preparing a workforce that is relevant to the needs of stakeholders or employers. Education agencies have the accountability to give the youth sector relevant experience in the field that they may eventually become professionals with rational skills and the capacity to apply theory to realistic situations (Ramli, 2010).

Quality is a concept that has been extensively studied in repetitive operations. However, Geraldi and colleagues (2011) averred that this concept remains under-researched in projects. This paper aims to advance the significance of quality in a qualitative assessment of a program or project. Hence, from the foregoing related literature review, this question was raised: **What characterizes the best practices of Project APEX?**

Method

This study employed a qualitative approach which is necessary in this study, for it considers the context or setting (Creswell et al., 2007) in which people discuss their outlook regarding a specific project. Creswell also added that the qualitative approach encourages the voices of participants, as well as their personal biases and interpretations, which are not directly documented in positivistic studies.

Another reason for using a qualitative approach is the focus on assessing project APEX. Since this study emphasized how project APEX contributed to the competency level of the students, students' career path success after attending school and the rate of their participation in this project, the qualitative approach was deemed appropriate in describing life as it is lived in real situations (Pratt, 2005). Adler and Adler (1994), Atkinson and colleagues (1994), Denzin and Lincoln (1994), Richards (1994), Stake (2010) and Patton (1990) cited that a qualitative approach is the best method in assessing a project because it would determine complex, differential and sensitive impacts, processes involved, and potential consequences.

Research design

The descriptive-evaluative design according to Project Star (2006) can help the assessor determine whether the program is operating as planned. Van Wyk (2012) stated that this design would provide an accurate and valid representation of variables under study while considering input, process and output. Such design will address challenges that will contribute to the improvement of the project. Project Star (2006) also added that this would help in providing the feedback about the services that a project offers and will determine whether the program is producing the types of outputs and necessary outcomes, thus clarifying program processes, goals, and objectives.

Selection/Subjects and Study Site

SEAMEO INNOTECH. The Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) was established on November 30, 1965. SEAMEO's primary objective is to advance collaboration among the Southeast Asian nations through culture, education, and science. To accomplish SEAMEO's goal to have a "one consolidated center" (instead of many), an Innovation Technology (INNOTECH) was established. In 1981, the Philippine government recognized the formal request of the SEAMEO Council to perpetually host SEAMEO INNOTECH, a research and study center built on the grounds of the University of the Philippines in Quezon City.

Students under the curriculum of project APEX. The students involved in this study were the beneficiaries of project APEX in Laguna specifically those from the following schools: Pulo National High School, Biñan National High School, and San Pedro Relocation Center High School (Project APEX Laguna Terminal Report, 2006). These students were pursuing higher education or careers and enterprises of their choice (Project APEX Operations Manual, 2008).

Instrumentation and Data Collection Procedure

1. Interview. The interview conducted with the stakeholders involved (school heads, teachers, students, local government, project APEX team) was scheduled at a time most convenient to them. The interview focused on the stakeholders' experiences and perspectives on the overall quality and accessibility of

project APEX. Significant data collected were used to provide an eidetic portrait of the project's contribution to the communities in Laguna through its unique curriculum that connects Math, Science and TLE to the development framework of the community.

2. Documentation. Documentation would be very helpful in the study of project APEX because it will verify the proper titles and the names of the stakeholders involved. The researcher gathered all the necessary documents by visiting the INNOTECH library and the schools that implemented the unique curriculum.

After gathering all the important documents such as letters, memoranda and other form of communication, administrative documents, formal studies, evaluation from the past, as well as other articles from mass media, the premise that this study is the first of its kind was reinforced. Documents that the researcher gained from the SEAMEO INNOTECH and the information given by the project head to the researcher provided specific details to support information from other sources. This strengthened the assessment of the project because the operation manual, and the terminal and final reports of the project supported some of the distinct characteristics, particularly those that are related to leadership development and student-centered lessons and strategies that the researcher identified in this study. Moreover, through documentary analysis, significant inferences were drawn within the project (Yin, 2003). However, Yin (2003) reminded researchers to treat inferences as clues worthy of further investigation rather than as definitive findings since inferences could later turn out to be false leads.

Mode of Analysis

The researcher followed the steps of the Kelly grid (also known as repertory grid), which was based on the works of George Kelly on the personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955). The repertory grid was a very effective method in this project evaluation because it highlighted the way people involved in this study adjust to recognized regularities and recurring experiences. The normal process of the repertory grid involves initiating a topic for investigation, identifying a set of elements, obtaining a set of constructs that differentiate these

fundamentals, and relating the fundamentals to construct (Bannister & Mair, 1968; Fransella, Bell, & Bannister, 2004).

Findings and Discussion

From the cool and warm analyses of the sharing of the participants, this study yielded interesting conceptualizations of the program quality features of link, share and facilitate Project APEX. Interestingly, the Quality Moves of Project APEX are valuable inputs in identifying sound policy measures and in restructuring efforts that ensure the overall success and viability of the program delivery.

Table 1. *The quality moves of Project APEX*

Moves	Thrust	Input Variable	Product
Linking Move	Community Orientation	Student Involvement	Heightened awareness and involvement in addressing community problems
Sharing Move	Teacher Orientation	Teacher Dialogue	Improved instructional delivery for better student engagement
Facilitating Move	Resources Orientation	Project Head and Local Government Unit Provision	Better provision of relevant and up to date teaching and learning resources

The Linking Move

It is interesting to note that Project APEX is typified by its Linking Move that the school and community. As a move, it involves the students in rural areas to become part of the solution to the different problems in the community. As verbalized by stakeholders:

“Students are assigned to different community problems such as water pollution in Laguna. The students analyze the quality of sample water from the river and determine the pollutants. Whatever findings they discover must be reported to the community.”

Students are very much involved in this project. As articulated by one of them: “We also help in solving the problems of the community.” In this study, the Linking move of Project APEX, it was found out, heightened the awareness and involvement of students in addressing community problems. As shared by the project head: “Through Project APEX, the students conduct an investigation regarding the different community problems... Students become aware of the employment issues because of their lessons about the community.

Lessons being taught under Project APEX are very much connected to what is happening in the community. Students gain more knowledge and experience from these lessons that prepare them for life after school. When asked about the experiences of the students about their lessons, the project head stated that: “They are able to connect the projects in the needs of the community.” These kinds of lesson are clearly evident in the following verbalizations from among the stakeholders:

“Students are benefited because they are exposed to contextualized instruction, where they see the importance of what they are doing in the classroom to what is expected of them once they go out of the school.”

“Lessons match the business and development need of community.”

The Sharing Move

The second move, known as the Sharing Move of Project APEX, concerns the teachers engage themselves in exchanging knowledge, skills, methods and strategies. As shared by one of the teachers: “We widen our knowledge then we have to impart what we have learned to the students.

In this study, teacher respondents collectively think that the dialogues, trainings, workshops and seminars conducted by different experts from Project APEX and fellow educators can help improve instructional delivery aimed at student engagement. As one of the teachers shared: “I talk to my colleagues after class and we have sharing of ideas to enhance ourselves and teach well under Project APEX.”

Through dialogues, teachers are able to exchange ideas and practices inside the classroom and engage students actively in activities

and classroom discussions. Another teacher added that: “Students are given the chance to lead the group because in this project, everyone should be given a chance to play in the learning process.” Some of the students become satellite leaders and teach their fellow classmates to raise their grades and improve their performance in class. The teachers serve as a guide and students are taught to become independent and do things on their own. The stakeholders observed:

“They (teachers) allow the students to use their creativity and higher order thinking skills. The teachers would assign satellite leaders or lead learners so they will not be the only who will teach.”

“The teacher acts as facilitator and students learn how to be independent.”

“The teacher is more of a facilitator of learning that is the reason why it is considered student-centered.”

The Facilitating Move

While the first two quality moves of Project APEX focus on the teachers and community, respectively, it is interesting to note also that resources are part of the project’s priority. The last move, known as the facilitating move of project APEX, characterizes how the local government and project head supports the education sector in rural areas by providing relevant and up-to-date teaching and learning resources. As shared by the respondents:

“The government provides monthly financial assistance for the project implementation in school.”

“They gave us modules and training. They discuss about the things that we should do.”

Respondents interpreted resources as adjunct to their performance both inside and outside the classroom. These resources are used by the students especially in their research study, and for the different assignments given to them by their teachers. As shared by the students:

“There are laptops, a desktop, projectors, and all the necessary components that would help us in learning and doing our assignments.”

“We have two classrooms for TVE. There are tables, dishwashing area, sink, cooking range, refrigerator, and microwave ovens.”

Surprisingly, one of the students considered these resources as something new and unusual. When asked about these resources, he shared that: “We have printers and scanners, which I thought was a xerox machine. I was amazed with the scanner. Also, there are cordless mouse.”

These resources are not only for students. As verbalized by a participant: “Our school implements that the teachers should have lapels because our teachers tend to lose their voice when they keep on speaking.”

Another teacher added that: “There are trainings and preliminaries that would introduce one to the project.” Resources are also intended to improve the lessons being delivered by the teachers. One of the teachers said: “The learning materials such as books, modules and different technologies provided by the project are very helpful in the development of the lesson.”

Through heeding and studying the discernments granted by the respondents, an accessibility game plan of Project APEX emerged. It depicts the process by which the project made education accessible to the people in rural areas through the participation of different key players in the community.

Discussion

Project evaluation is vital in the implementation of a project or program especially if the nature of evaluation is external. An external evaluation pinpoints the effectiveness (Frechtling & Westat, 2002; Blank, 1993) of a project and facilitates decision-making. Interestingly, this study revealed the different moves of the project, namely: linking, sharing, and facilitating moves. These moves describe the quality of the Project Applied Academic for Excellence (Project APEX) and define the project’s role as a catalyst of change in the education sector especially in rural areas in the country.

As shown in the study, the first move identified as the *linking move* is typified by the connection between the school and the community, and it involves the students in rural areas as they become

part of the solution to the different problems in the community. In countries like New Zealand and Romania, establishing a connection between academic institution and community leads to community development (Voyle & Simmons, 2009) and cooperation (Margaritoiu & Simona, 2011). Initiating connection between school and community could raise the level of awareness of the students about the different community issues and at the same time prepare them for life after school especially when looking for employment or pursuing further studies. The said finding invites school administrators and local government to initiate more tie-up projects and activities that focus on the empowerment of the students under Project APEX.

Another move identified in this study is called the *sharing move*, which consists in how the teachers engage themselves in exchanging knowledge, skills, methods and strategies. Similarly, Motala (2001) stated that when teachers share their knowledge with one another, it may lead to different education reforms. As implied, sharing of experiences and best practices can initiate better assessment among educators through a close examination of their teaching strategies and the determination of whether or not these strategies contribute to their students' learning and development. This move challenges every school to have such practice of sharing because through this, senior faculty members can guide the new faculty members with their experiences, and in exchange, the new generation of educators can share their knowledge with regard to new strategies and technologies.

Moreover, the sharing move also involves the use of dialogues which allows teachers to exchange ideas and practices inside the classroom and enables students to become highly engaged in activities and classroom discussions. Such practice is related to the study of Mozghan et al. (2011), in which they identified that experience in classroom and school environment, such as students being appointed as a leader and their engagement in several school activities can contribute to the development of the students. As seen in this study, the relationship between and among students and teachers may result in the development of their leadership skills. It may be inferred that leadership opportunities provided by Project APEX deepens and nurtures student's creativity and management skills through their participation as satellite leaders. Through the sharing move of the project, teachers are hereby challenged to initiate student-centered lessons.

It is interesting to note that in this study, Project APEX embraces the *facilitating move* that is typified by how the local government and project head support the education sector in rural areas through their provisions and up-to-date teaching and learning resources. In relation to other studies, the involvement of different facilities, tools and equipment in an educational project may result in a competitive output and outcome (University of Wisconsin-Extension, 2003; Frechtling & Westat, 2002; McLaughlin & Jordan, 1999). Further, similar studies proved that investment in education can solve issues and debates among people in the institution (Heyneman, 2004) and that, government funding and support can bring improvement to education (El Ansari, 2005). The use of advanced facilities could make a significant change in students' academic performance considering the kind of experience that this project gives to them through the following activities: hands-on learning using the different equipment, educating students to gain better understanding of new technologies, and gaining deeper knowledge on how to apply their lessons in the school in the real-life workplace. The unique role of facilitating move challenges both the government and educational institutions to prioritize the availability of different facilities, equipment and tools especially in the rural areas.

Conclusion

The major intent of this study was to conduct an initial assessment of Project APEX. Interestingly, in this study the quality moves of Project APEX surfaced, namely: the *linking, sharing, and facilitating moves*, and they offer a number of implications. From the themes identified, this study has eiditically described how the project head, together with the school and local government, initiates activities that will improve the project and the education sector in the rural areas. The *linking move* invites school administrators and local government units to initiate tie-up projects and activities that focus on the empowerment of the students under Project APEX. The *sharing move* challenges every school to the practice of sharing because through this, senior faculty members can guide the new faculty members with their experiences, and in exchange, the new generation of educators can share their knowledge with regard to new strategies and technologies. Lastly, the *facilitating*

move challenges both the government and educational institutions to prioritize the availability of different facilities, equipment, and tools especially in the rural areas.

Only a few studies have been done on external assessment of an educational project. Although this study offers limited student and teacher involvement, it can still offer practical approaches and improvement in other education programs in the Philippines. It is important that this study be replicated by considering the same model and process used in this educational project in evaluating other projects and programs to gain more eidetic description of the phenomenon. Such studies would contribute to a better understanding of different education programs.

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Notes on Contributor

John Christian Cabasal Valeroso was on the faculty of the Department of Social Sciences. He is currently pursuing his PhD in Development Studies at the University of Santo Tomas (UST) where he also earned his MA in Development Studies. His master's thesis, on which his paper in this issue was based, was given the grade benemeritus by the UST Graduate School. Some of his papers have been published by the Asia-Pacific Rural and Agricultural Credit Association (APRACA) based in Bangkok, Thailand; the Ontario International Development Agency (OIDA) with offices in Canada and Jakarta, Indonesia **email address: jcvaleroso@yahoo.com**