Quality Assurance in Education

Validity, assessment and accountability: contemporary issues in primary, secondary, and higher education

Guest Editors:
Professor Madhabi Chatterji and Professor Kevin G. Welner
We are pleased to present this special issue of *Quality Assurance in Education (QAE)*, which marks a new beginning by expanding the scope and content of the journal in two ways. First, we are now broadening the focus of articles published in *QAE* significantly, to include assessment, evaluation, and quality assurance topics at all levels of education – ranging from pre-primary, primary and secondary education to higher and professional education. Second, we are introducing a new section on assessment policy in this special issue.

Given our expanded focus, this special issue is titled “Validity, assessment and accountability issues in primary, secondary and higher education.” It is organized into two sections focusing respectively on: assessment policy and quality assurance. We begin with a brief orientation to volume 22 and a rationale for the need to examine the topic of validity with the larger framework of quality assurance in education.

**Assessment policy section: understanding validity issues around the world**

As the section’s sub-title makes clear, with this special issue our hope is to improve understandings of the concept of “validity” as applied to large scale, standardized tests and testing programs. In the typical application, educational tests generate information on student performance in defined domains, providing a window into their levels of proficiency. Today, however, the data from standardized tests are often aggregated, processed or manipulated through complex statistical models before assessment reports reach the hands of practicing educators and policy makers. In such complicated applications of tests in education, what does “validity” mean and how does it play out?

The articles in section 1 discuss and clarify the meanings of the term “validity” as it plays out in popular international settings where visible tests and test-based information are employed. As will become obvious to readers, validity could apply to the built-in qualities and psychometric characteristics of tests (for example, how well test items and metrics capture the intended domains and attributes). Validity could also refer to the quality and meaningfulness of processed assessment reports that may be several steps removed from the original test data. The term could also apply to the defensibility of the actions taken with test-based information by educators, leaders and policy makers – the end users who may not be fully aware of or even grasp all the technical nuances of test design (see Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing by the American Education Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education (AERA, APA, and NCME, 1999)).

Because we are witnessing an exponential rise in standardized achievement testing programs and accountability mandates in education systems around the world, we believe it is important to turn our attention to validity now. The number and size of large scale testing programs is multiplying in both developed and developing regions as of this writing (Ryan and Feller, 2009). The *Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)*, which administers English, mathematics and science literacy tests every three years to more than half a million 15- and 16-year-old students from 65
countries, is a visible example of this shift in international priorities. PISA is operated by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the PISA 2012 results were just released in the first week of December, 2013. As two of the policy briefs in this special issue elaborate, PISA results in different nations command instant attention from educators, the media, political leaders and policy-makers alike.

When carefully interpreted, PISA results yield useful benchmarks within nations, opening opportunities for education systems to improve. But, to what degree are PISA’s inter-country rankings valid indicators of the overall functioning, merits, or demerits of education systems? As the policy briefs will detail, public test users tend to make direct connections from results of testing initiatives like the PISA to the successes or failures of particular education reforms, and to a country’s economic prospects (see for example, http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/12/04/shanghai-students-again-top-global-test/?_r = 0). Over-ambitious interpretations of educational assessment results reflects a larger syndrome of information gaps among public users about what validity means with respect to test use, and its central role in making sound appraisals of the quality of schools and educational institutions.

In the assessment policy section, we present four policy briefs focusing on the topic of validity aimed at improving understandings of what validity means, and illustrating how standardized test developers, practitioners and policy-makers in education can become more discerning about factors that can maximize validity in applied decision-making settings where data from educational tests are employed. Audiences who may not have had extensive formal training in the measurement and evaluation sciences, but still need to use tests or test-based information in their professional or other capacities might find the articles useful. Likewise, technically trained academics and professionals in educational measurement-evaluation might also find the recommendations in the policy briefs to be relevant to their practice settings.

The policy briefs in this special issue are co-edited by Madhabi Chatterji of the Assessment and Evaluation Research Initiative (AERI) at Teachers College, Columbia University and Kevin G. Welner of the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) at the University of Colorado at Boulder, in the US. Labeled as AERI-NEPC eBriefs – as they were originally intended for web-based dissemination – this first series of policy briefs are derivative publications from previously published conference proceedings (see footnotes to articles). As indicated, they are intended to serve as accessible resources for broader educational audiences. However, for more in-depth treatment of the issues, we encourage readers to access the original articles cited and listed in the references section of each eBrief.

**Quality assurance section: frameworks and models in higher education**

The second section of this special issue of QAE is titled, “Quality assurance: frameworks and models in higher education.” This section continues the journal’s traditional focus on assessment and evaluation issues in higher education. The international perspective of the journal is reflected in the three papers in this section.

The first paper by Sylvia Chong, recognizes the important role that teachers play in providing high quality education. The author then provides insights into the provision of high quality teacher education in Singapore. A quality management framework for the provision teacher education in Singapore is described and related back to the
context, inputs, process and product model that is intended to prepare the student teacher for a career in education.

The second paper in this section, by Yingxia Cao and Xiaofan Li, explores the development of the private higher education system in China. The rapid growth of the private sector in education complements the public sector's provision of educational services, in an economy that is creating a demand for highly credentialed individuals. The authors relate to the elements of academic quality, administrative quality and relationship quality and advocate the case for quality in private higher education being addressed by representation from government, the market and academia. The likelihood of such an arrangement being introduced in private higher education in China is discussed.

The final paper in the section by Gerardo Blanco-Ramirez and Joseph Berger examines the trends toward third party recognition of quality in the higher education sector. External recognition is increasingly being provided by agencies and organizations that operate in the international arena, rather than the national arena. The form that recognition takes may be as league tables, external accreditation by organizations on a global scale for particular discipline areas or for whole institutions. The authors present a model that incorporates quality coupled with access, investment and relevance that contribute to value in higher education.

Our commitments
To conclude, QAE remains firmly committed to its original mission and invites theoretical and empirical research papers that are original and critical examinations of issues related to assuring quality in education, coupled with the management of educational change and improvement. As before, all the articles will be rigorously peer-reviewed and edited. As co-editors of this special issue QAE, we welcome new submissions aligned with the journal's new foci and invite a broader readership. We appreciate the contributions of all the authors to this special issue. We hope readers find the articles to be informative.

John F. Dalrymple and Madhabi Chatterji
Co-editors

References
AERA, APA, and NCME (1999), Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, American Psychological Association, Washington, DC.

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