Credibility Of Third-Party Evaluation Of Vocational Education Quality: Obstacles And Mitigation Strategies

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Based on existing literature, the credibility of third-party evaluations of vocational education quality has been thoroughly examined. These studies indicate that third-party evaluation institutions face issues such as a lack of professionalism, difficulty in ensuring fairness and authority, and challenges in maintaining public welfare. The reasons for these problems include the weakening of non-governmental organizations' credibility by traditional "government-dependent" trust relationships, the negative effect of diversified value demands during social transitions, the breakdown of the "familiar" trust model in a "mobile" society, and the trust crisis caused by information asymmetry between market stakeholders. On this basis, it is recommended to establish a credibility assurance system grounded in the rule of law, enhance professionalism through scientific certification and management, and promote the transformation from personalized trust to institutionalized trust.
	Key words: vocational education, third-party evaluation, credibility

INTRODUCTION

Since the *National Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)* encouraged specialized institutions and social intermediaries to evaluate the quality of higher education institutions, China's education sector has entered a new phase of comprehensive reform in the education quality evaluation system with the participation of multiple stakeholders. It has become a significant trend for the government to commission social third-party organizations to conduct quality evaluations of vocational education. However, the credibility crisis of third-party vocational education quality evaluation agencies still exists, becoming a fundamental issue causing the public to remain skeptical and cautious towards them. Credibility is a form of social system trust, based on relationships of trust and reliance, with its core being thegeneral recognition and trust of society. The evaluation practices of third-party vocational education quality evaluation agencies in China are still in the exploratory stage. As the evaluation practices gradually progress and deepen, enhancing the credibility of evaluation agencies has increasingly become a conscious pursuit for the scientific development of educational evaluation, gaining recognition from senior government officials and evaluation organizations. Understanding the credibility crisis faced by third-party evaluation agencies and alleviating public skepticism are crucial for boosting the credibility of these agencies.

I. STUDY OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study were as follows:

To discuss the obstacles to the credibility of third-party educational quality evaluation agencies, To analyze the roots of the credibility crisis faced by third-party evaluation agencies,
To propose strategies to mitigate these credibility issues.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study employed the method of literature analysis. The foundational steps included an extensive review of the China National Knowledge Infrastructure database and the library resources of Universiti Teknologi

Malaysia. The databases searched included Web of Science, Academic OneFile, and ProQuest (all databases were selected). Through this approach, a substantial collection of research findings on third-party evaluation, credibility, and vocational education in China was accumulated. Additionally, platforms such as Baidu Scholar and Google Scholar were utilized to gain contemporary insights into third-party evaluation in the context of vocational education in China.

III. RESULTS

A. Obstacles to the credibility of third-party educational quality evaluation agencies

Peer recognition and social trust are crucial for the effective conduct of educational evaluation activities. However, third-party evaluation agencies in China are still in the early stages of development. Compared to traditional evaluation agencies, non-governmental third-party evaluation agencies are "weak and lacking" in terms of number, evaluation quality, and social influence. They face skepticism from various sectors of society and are mired in a credibility crisis. This credibility deficit is specifically manifested in the following aspects:

1) Lack of professionalism
The professional evaluation capacity needs authoritative recognition and review. Bernard Barber views trust as an expectation for maintaining a morally ordered social structure, which specifically includes two connotations: the expectation of technically competent role behavior and the expectation of credit obligations and responsibilities [1]. In his view, when some individuals in a social relationship or some members in a social system lack certain specialized knowledge, trust is necessary to control behavior. In modern society, the increasing refinement of labor division in the production chain, job positions, and workers' skills has led to distinctions among professional, semi-professional (quasi-professional), and non-professional sectors. People usually refer to jobs in professional fields as "professions". Brandeis emphasizes that professions have three fundamental attributes: a formal full-time occupation, possession of profound knowledge and skills obtainable through education and training, and the provision of high-quality, selfless service to clients and the public [2]. In short, a profession requires expertise, and those without serious study in a specific field find it difficult to engage in that profession.

The professionalism of third-party evaluation agencies refers to their possession of professional competence and standards recognized and trusted by the public. The main body of professional evaluation capacity is a team of experienced evaluation experts, and professional standards refer to the use of professional judgment criteria to standardize the evaluation process and present evaluation results. According to a survey, more than half (55%) of the provinces and cities in China have established professional educational evaluation agencies or functional departments for evaluation. These agencies include both official subordinate public institutions and private third-party evaluation monitoring companies registered with civil or commercial departments [3]. However, whether these evaluation organizations or agencies possess the corresponding professional capabilities has not been authoritatively recognized and reviewed, and how to conduct such recognition and review is an urgent issue that needs to be addressed.The expert intellectual support system is weak. Education evaluation is a highly specialized activity that must operate based on a large amount of reliable information. This information includes both internal and external conditions of educational development, as well as the relationship between education and social development, and the internal relationships and states of various educational elements. Evaluation professionals are required to have a very strong professional capability, and many evaluation experts are needed to provide intellectual support.

Currently, the expert intellectual support system of third-party evaluation institutions is very weak [4]. This is reflected in the lack of professionals with an educational evaluation background in society. Furthermore, the existing evaluation experts are mainly part-time. As they age, their energy and professional perspective are gradually diminishing. With the increasing demand for third-party education evaluations, the limited number of professionals may be competitively recruited by evaluation institutions, potentially raising the "appearance fee" for experts. At present, the level of professionalization of full-time evaluation personnel in Chinese higher education evaluation institutions still needs further improvement. The certification of entry qualifications and the external supervision system for evaluation personnel need to be further improved. Additionally, as the evaluation work progresses, issues such as uneven levels of evaluation personnel and poor operation of the evaluation mechanism are becoming increasingly apparent.

Information asymmetry in the evaluation process. The evaluation process involves the dynamic combination and interaction of various elements and stages, where evaluators utilize and regulate these elements to orderly move towards their objectives. Trust in the fairness of the educational evaluation process stems from the recognition and acceptance of the system or rules by participants and stakeholders, as well as the norms, transparency, and stability during the formation and implementation of the evaluation system [5]. However, in the practical operation of evaluation work, there are issues such as the unequal cooperative relationship between the evaluation team and teachers and students, insufficient disclosure of information by the

evaluation team to teachers and students, and the evaluation mechanism's inability to provide the necessary foundation for broad participation, dialogue, and consultation by teachers, students, and the public [6]. Regarding the use of evaluation results, there are issues such as the difficulty for the public to access the results, the content being hard to understand, and arbitrary interpretations of the evaluation results.

2)   Difficulties in ensuring impartiality and authority

The lack of independence and authority of current third-party evaluation institutions makes it difficult to ensure their fairness. The fairness of third-party evaluation institutions pertains to the evaluation subjects, meaning they should not be related to the interests of the evaluation subjects. If third parties are not independent of the evaluated subjects and other stakeholders, it will affect their credibility. Cai Yanhou, chief expert of the University Research Team of the China Alumni Association Network and professor at Central South University, points out that most current third-party evaluation institutions cannot fully guarantee a neutral stance. Instead, they rely on entities such as universities and other public institutions. For instance, the academic rankings of the Shanghai Jiao Tong University World-Class University Research Center and the journal evaluation of the China Science and Education Evaluation Research Center of Wuhan University both serve as both referees and players, making it difficult to ensure the objectivity and fairness of the evaluations. Chinese education management institutions both lead the formulation of higher education evaluation systems and guide educational evaluation activities. Even within schools, a large proportion of members of academic institutions such as academic committees and title committees are administrative officials. Many of these officials do not have the professional technical titles suitable for participating in evaluation activities or have not engaged in academic research in the field of evaluation for many years, leading to widespread doubts about the fairness of such evaluation results.

The authority of third parties relies on gradually accumulating scientific and reasonable evaluation results over long-term evaluation work. Authority is the power and prestige that makes people trust and follow, originating from professional skills and work performance. Only by maintaining high-quality work performance and gaining public trust in long-term evaluation work can they achieve authority in the professional field. Most third-party evaluation institutions in China have not been established for long and their notable evaluation achievements are not yet significant. Therefore, improving social credibility still needs to be gradually accumulated in practice. Wang Boqing, president of My COS Data Co., Ltd., believes that the main obstacle for third-party evaluation institutions is the low marketization of educational evaluation and management consulting. In the past, the educational management consulting service industry of local professional companies was virtually nonexistent. People's skepticism towards private or overseas-returned enterprises fundamentally stems from being unaccustomed to the marketization in this field. The historically weak inertia and the current uneven quality of third-party vocational education quality evaluation institutions make them naturally lack public trust genes. When their potential service or cooperation targets (such as students, parents, and other interest groups) need to make interest-based judgments, they often experience anxiety due to unclear sources of authority information.

3)   High difficulty in ensuring public interest

The public welfare nature of third-party educational evaluation institutions can be understood as these institutions not being profit-oriented, possessing a spirit of actively serving society, and bringing benefits to the public beyond the project clients. At this stage, ensuring the public welfare of third-party evaluation institutions faces several main challenges:

First, ensuring the funding sources for third-party evaluations so they are not controlled by stakeholders, thereby guaranteeing objective and fair evaluations. In 2015, the Ministry of Civil Affairs issued the *Guiding Opinions on Exploring the Establishment of a Third-Party Evaluation Mechanism for Social Organizations,* suggesting that funding sources for third-party evaluation institutions include financial department support, government procurement of services, and donations from social forces. When the government funds or becomes the "client" of evaluation institutions, establishing an economic relationship between the two may impact the independence of the evaluations. There is also the question of whether government procurement of evaluation services is sufficient to support the growth and development of third-party evaluation institutions.

Second, addressing the information gap between third-party evaluation institutions and the public. It is crucial to gain the trust and support of educational administrative departments, schools, and students to access evaluation sites and accurately convey information to the government and schools.

Third, resolving the conflict between the public welfare nature of education and the profit-seeking nature of capital. China's third-party evaluation market is not yet fully developed, and relevant regulatory frameworks are incomplete. Third-party evaluation institutions need to find a balance between public welfare and private interests, as well as between fairness and efficiency.

B.   Tracing the roots of the credibility crisis in third-party evaluation agencies

Educational evaluation is a practice of value judgment that weaves together the demands of various stakeholders. While it focuses on the value or economic interests of different entities, it also needs to consider the political power, social culture, and other factors behind the facts, taking into account the root causes of these facts. Lynne G. Zucker identifies three types of trust patterns: process-based trust, characteristic-based trust, and institution-based trust. Institution-based trust refers to the reliance of people on the social institutional environment in which third-party evaluation institutions operate [7]. Historically, China has had a long-standing and typical planned economy and centralized administrative management model, which means that the institution-based trust pattern accumulated over a long time in the political, economic, and social spheres still lingers.

1)   The traditional "government-dependent" trust relationship has weakened the credibility of non- governmental organizations

The Chinese public's trust in the central government has consistently been at a high level, affecting their trust in other non-governmental organizations. Chinese long feudal society shaped a political system with imperial power at its core, leading to a dependency relationship and mentality towards the central government among the Chinese people. The concept of almighty government is deeply rooted, with people accustomed to relying on the government and its nationwide institutions to meet public service needs [8]. This inevitably affects and hinders the establishment of trust between other social organizations and the public. This is evidenced by the China Credit Well-off Index and the annual Edelman Trust Barometer report, which indicate that among 34,000 respondents in 28 major global economies, Chinese people's trust in their government reached 90%, ranking first among the world's major economies for three consecutive years [9].

Additionally, Chinese non-governmental organizations are in a growth stage towards maturity, and in their current underdeveloped state, they face certain negative developmental effects. These include undefined organizational nature, lack of regulatory laws, unclear operational mechanisms, and imperfect management systems, which temporarily prevent non-governmental organizations from competing with government organizations in terms of social image and trustworthiness. Consequently, they are unable to fully express public welfare and carry public opinion.

2)   The negative effect of diversified value demands during the social transition period have led to a trust crisis

China is currently undergoing a comprehensive social transformation, with the economic field transitioning from a planned economy to a socialist market economy. Social structures are shifting from traditional agricultural societies to modern industrial ones, cultural paradigms are moving from closed to open societies, and urban-rural relations are evolving from separate traditional structures to integrated ones. The diversified

interest patterns emerging during this transitional period have led to conflicts in local interests. Changes in people's ideological values in modern society are accompanied by a decline in moral ethics, which inevitably hinders interpersonal interactions, causing local disruptions in social norms and leading to localized trust crises. The demands for education quality from diverse interest groups cannot be effectively coordinated in the short term.

The diversified interest patterns are caused by changes in resource allocation and labor product distribution methods during the social transformation period, resulting in diversified interest groups and varied demands from different groups. Specifically, in vocational education evaluation activities, the interest groups are even more diverse, including the central government, local governments, society, the market, industries, enterprises, schools, students, and parents. However, the policy coordination mechanisms that can ensure the effective participation of these diverse interest groups in vocational education evaluation are still being explored.

3)   The breakdown of the "familiar" trust model in a "mobile" society

British sociologist John Urry believes that the mobility of different actants in modern society is accelerating, leading to the reorganization of traditional spatial relationships, shifting from spaces of places to spaces of flows [10]. Mobility has become the essential characteristic of modern society. Since the reform and opening, China has been gradually transitioning from a traditional "static society" to a "mobile society", with an accelerated pace of life and increased cross-regional flows of people, capital, information, and other elements. Traditional society is characterized by a static balance in social order, akin to the localized social circles described by Fei Xiaotong [11], where people's activities are geographically limited, and normal life occurs within a familiar social environment where people form order mechanisms and trust models based on intimacy, tacit understanding, and social expectations. Trust is transparent and stable, with well-established "rigid boundaries".

In a mobile society, the boundaries of people, objects, information, time, and space are broken, and social relationships, group identities, and even the spirit of the times need to be reinterpreted and reconstructed in

the context of mobility. Under the macro background of the current social transformation, large-scale social mobility is gradually overturning the previous interpersonal trust models. The traditional trust model, constrained by geographical, kinship, or clan ties, is weakening under the impact of population mobility. While a new trust model that meets the needs of a modern mobile society is beginning to take shape, it has not yet been fully established, resulting in a breakdown of social trust models.

4)   The trust crisis caused by information asymmetry between market stakeholders

Information economics theory posits that information asymmetry among stakeholders is a common state, referring to the situation where there is a disparity in the amount of information held by different stakeholders regarding a particular event [12]. The varying amounts of information possessed by the parties determine the nature of the event. The party with the information advantage holds more information, while the disadvantaged party has less, making it difficult for the latter to accurately grasp the transaction characteristics, strategic space, and payment function information of the former. This asymmetry makes it challenging to maintain a state of trust between the parties, leading to uncertainty in the outcomes of the event.

In the field of education quality evaluation, stakeholders similarly experience an uneven distribution of information. One party often holds more information about educational quality. For instance, in education quality evaluation activities, the evaluators (such as educational management departments and higher education institutions) have more comprehensive information about educational inputs, teaching quality, graduates' capabilities, and development potential than the consumers of education (employers, parents, and social employment units). Driven by the motivation for profit, the evaluators may have the possibility of concealing information about educational quality to present inferior quality as superior, minimizing their costs while obtaining higher returns.

Information asymmetry between the two parties is inevitable; it is the foundation of market division of labor and transactions and is an issue that can never be eliminated. The trust crisis inherent in this asymmetry is equally difficult to eradicate.

C.   Strategies to mitigate the credibility issues of third-party educational evaluation agencies

The rebuilding of the credibility of third-party educational evaluation institutions is a long and arduous task. Gaining public trust is not the goal of rebuilding the credibility of evaluation institutions but is one of the means to improve evaluation efficiency. Establishing a credibility assurance system, forming a rule-of-law-based evaluation system, and establishing a comprehensive governance system through multi-party collaboration are necessary to guide third-party educational evaluation institutions in continuously building their credibility. Establishing a Credibility Assurance System Based on the Rule of Law

The New Public Service theory posits that the role of the government is not to "control or steer society", nor to dictate or direct its development, as the complexity of modern society renders such roles inappropriate and unlikely [13]. With the deepening development of the socialist market economy, the government's role in managing higher education must also be adjusted, transformed, and even restructured accordingly. The government should shift from administrative management to governance according to the rule of law, implementing the "streamline administration and delegate powers, improve regulation, and upgrade services" policy, without overstepping its authority or being absent.

The government should appropriately decentralize power and guide the establishment of a legally competitive evaluation market. It must transition from the traditional "government-dominated" model of educational quality evaluation, where the government and its educational administrative departments act as the "leading evaluators", to becoming "evaluation guides" and "macro regulators of evaluation" [14]. This shift will better meet the diverse needs of a socialized system. The government's role should focus more on promoting dialogue and consultation among evaluation stakeholders regarding development directions and goals, encouraging stakeholders to form common evaluation values, a collective consciousness, and coordinated evaluation actions.

Moreover, the government has the responsibility to uphold principles of justice, fairness, and equity, ensuring that the solutions generated through dialogue and consultation fully comply with the spirit of the rule of law. It must prioritize meeting the educational quality demands of evaluation stakeholders, thereby fostering a stable and enduring system of credibility assurance for evaluations.

1) Enhancing Professionalism through Scientific Certification and Management

Russell Hardin posits that trust is a tripartite relationship. For mutual trust between parties A and B to be established around a central event, two requirements must be met: first, B must have both the motivation and the ability to do X; second, A must also have the capability to judge B [15]. Similarly, for third-party evaluation institutions to gain recognition and acclaim in society and the market, it largely depends on whether they

possess professional evaluation capabilities and whether their evaluation processes and results meet professional standards. Third-party evaluation institutions should perfect and standardize a series of management systems and strengthen their professional capabilities, such as standardizing the selection, qualification recognition, and regular training of evaluators. They should also improve third-party quality evaluation standards to ensure the scientific and professional nature of evaluations. This includes building a third-party quality evaluation standard system, clarifying the goals and mission of third-party evaluation institutions, and establishing basic quality standards for various aspects, including admissions, teaching, management, and services.

2)   Promoting the Transformation from Personalized Trust to Institutionalized Trust

The traditional trust relationships in Chinese society are based on "familiar society" trust, which is built on communities (private relationships, family relationships, or quasi-family relationships). Trust exists tacitly among acquaintances, with a certain exclusivity, where people trust acquaintances and "their own people", carrying strong emotional overtones. This personalized trust model was termed "particularistic trust" by Max Weber [16], in contrast to the "universalistic trust" found in Western societies.

After experiencing a series of frequent social population movements and migrations, such as the restoration of the college entrance examination, the return of educated youth to cities, the reform and opening-up, layoffs and reemployment, going into business, and rural workers migrating to cities, Chinese society has entered a modern era characterized by deepening marketization, globalization, industrialization, informatization, and decentralization. The foundational basis for this trust model has gradually disintegrated, with previously stable and long-lasting relationships among acquaintances being replaced by rapidly changing, short-term interactions, resulting in uncertainty in trust relationships between individuals.

Institutional trust, on the other hand, is safeguarded by regulations or laws, providing a legal foundation for both parties and incorporating corresponding punitive mechanisms to prevent breaches of trust. This is the prevailing form of trust relationships in modern society. Further deepening administrative reforms and promoting the transformation from personalized trust to institutionalized trust will provide the institutional basis needed to enhance the credibility of third-party educational quality evaluation institutions.

IV. CONCLUSION

Third party evaluation of vocational education quality has become an important trend in the future of educational assessment. Enhancing the credibility of evaluation agencies is gradually becoming a conscious pursuit for the scientific development of educational evaluation. Third party evaluation agencies can mitigate conflicts of interest and information asymmetry in evaluations, balance evaluation discourse power, and achieve evaluation goals with professional standards. However, they face challenges in terms of professionalism, impartiality, and public interest.

The traditional "government-dependent" trust relationship weakens the credibility of non-governmental organizations. Additionally, the negative effect of diversified value demands during the social transition period, the breakdown of traditional trust models, and the trust crisis caused by information asymmetry among market stakeholders all contribute to these challenges. Establishing a comprehensive governance system with multi-party collaboration is essential to guiding third-party educational evaluation agencies in continuously building their credibility.

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