

# **Evaluator's Aplomb and Decorum at Accreditation Visits – A proposed guideline of Conduct for Malaysian evaluators**

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## **Abstract**

Malaysia is currently a provisional member of the Washington Accord and the Engineering Accreditation Council (EAC) in the country is shifting its paradigm to an outcome-based approach instead of being prescriptive in their periodic institutional accreditation exercise. Changing from quantitative to qualitative evaluation complicates further the decision making process as it becomes more subjective. Evaluators are expected to triangulate the information/evidence obtained before arriving at a decision. Evaluator's code of conduct or its aplomb and decorum is often a subject of discussion or point of contention by the receiving institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. Dissatisfaction as to the behaviour of evaluators, who are regularly charged by institutions among others as self-centred, hot-tempered, inconsiderate, disrespectful, ignorant and unprofessional, is not inconceivable. After all evaluators are human and to err is human, as many would like to make a defence. A common sense rule of engagement is neglected and instead is justified by the unreasonable approach and attitude (that is cynical, biased, arrogant, or destructive). Evaluators can soar to exhibit excellent qualities when delivering their evaluation. Knowledge must be accompanied with practice and with experience, an evaluator should be improving and be a leader by example. The voluntary work should not result in evaluators placing less emphasis or not full hearted in conducting evaluation. Being professional is neither to be obsessively compulsive nor having lackadaisical attitude, but giving the most and the best and operating within the accepted boundary. This paper discusses conducts and traits expected of evaluators. These are discussed and used as learning tools in the training of new evaluators in Malaysia.

## **Introduction**

Malaysia is currently a provisional member of the Washington Accord and the Engineering Accreditation Council (EAC) in the country is shifting its paradigm to an outcome-based approach instead of being prescriptive in their periodic institutional accreditation exercise. Changing from quantitative to qualitative evaluation complicates further the decision making process as it becomes more subjective. Evaluators are expected to triangulate the information/evidence obtained before arriving at a decision (Aziz, 2004; Mohd Noor et al, 2005).

A society demands adherence to a set of rules to ensure continuous peace and tranquility. Similarly, evaluators for accreditation need a set of rules that must always be observed to provide assurance or confidence to those being evaluated that due diligent has been exercised with fairness and accuracy. There is always a tendency for those being evaluated to lower their level or status below that of the evaluators, possibly out of "fear" or as a courtesy. Evaluators on the other hand should not take advantage of the situation to demand respect and obedience. The relationship should be as cordial or friendly but with earnestness or seriousness. Accreditation is a peer assessment process and thus being collegial is demanded. The rules that govern evaluators are usually common sense though at times has to be laid down clearly as a reminder. Work and life experiences may allow accumulation of both good and bad behaviours/attitudes but evaluators are expected to be able to exert control on undesirable traits and exude exemplary characters. The voluntary nature of evaluators' involvement should speak for itself of the caring and professional attributes to be exhibited. It is the aim of this paper to expound further on the aplomb and decorum of evaluators in order to provide useful information that allows for best conduct during accreditation visits. These are discussed and used as learning tools in the training of new evaluators in Malaysia.

### **Definition**

The word “aplomb” can be understood as assurance, self confidence, composure, cool, style, ease and poise, whereas “decorum” can be understood as good manners, good behaviour, modesty, politeness, respectability, correctness, etiquette and protocol. It is expected that evaluators be full of composure and well mannered in undertaking the accreditation exercise. There should not be at any point of time during the accreditation visit that disgusting behaviours such as making degrading remarks, being disrespectful and outburst be exhibited. Professionalism as opposed to unpreparedness should govern all evaluators.

### **Appearance**

Accreditation is an official function and as such evaluators are expected to dress formally. It is preferred that male evaluators include the wearing of a coat and tie whereas female evaluators are to dress decently. The way evaluators dress portrays that the occasion is serious, and that they are there not for a social reason but to conduct a fair and accurate assessment.

### **Gracious**

Upon arrival, it is a norm that evaluators will be greeted by officials and academic staffs from the institution where accreditation is to be conducted. Evaluators will then be meeting them and other relevant individuals during the course of the accreditation process. A few of them may be close friends, relatives or ex-students. It is imperative that evaluators do not exhibit “over-friendly” gestures, such as hugging or burst into laughter, and making statements, such as “these were my students” or “how’s the wife and family?”. This is to avoid the onlookers from having the perception of possible biasness. Accreditation is an official function and there is the need to create an atmosphere of seriousness where impartiality must not only be practiced but also be seen to be practiced.

### **Impartial**

Sometimes friendship may blind judgement in the evaluation process. Evaluators become uneasy to conduct the evaluation exercises or anxious to please for afraid of offending or souring the established closeness. If that would be the situation, evaluators must shy away from volunteering for the job. This is especially so when there are many close friends and collaborators in work. Evaluators must also be able to make independent judgement without fear of retaliation or reprisal.

### **Composure**

Being an official function, it does not mean that one cannot smile nor crack jokes and thus render the session dull. However, evaluators must tread carefully so as not to overdo things. Prior preparation is necessary to ensure composure or control of the situation. This includes preparing for and understanding the subject matter, and the approach to be taken prior to the visit. One must then be able to read the situation and adjust accordingly. For the head of the delegation (team leader), when confronted with a high ranking official such as a vice chancellor (usually present at the opening and/or exit meeting), there is the need to rise to the occasion and not feel subdued. Prior communication (via the accreditation establishment or directly) with the institution on the issue of protocol and associated practice should have been resolved before the meeting. Being composed means being able to communicate effectively at all situations, regardless of who may be the audience.

### **Industrious**

Prior preparation in the form of identifying gaps from the submitted self-assessment report is important. It is a best practice to write them down so that there is a flow of thoughts during questioning. It is hard work for the evaluators but it is also being fair to the institution/programme for their equal or if not greater effort in coming out with the self-assessment report. Evaluators should not be quitters despite the heavy expectation. With the limited time available for the accreditation visit, the prior preparation is highly essential and it also calls for being meticulous. Every single

minute available at the accreditation visit must be filled with efforts to investigate or determine compliance and performing advisory role. There should not be the wasting of time or the allowing of time to be wasted.

### **Patient**

Students and technicians may not be forthcoming and this may irritate evaluators. Patience is a virtue. Indeed evaluators need to be patient in their work. Sometimes evaluators become impatient at the request of information, throwing sarcastic remarks on the late or suspicious document retrieved. Being patient with fellow colleague is also sought for. Evaluators may not be contented working with a new or a senior evaluator due to inexperience or preconceived perception. Tolerance is needed to ensure the evaluation team can function effectively.

### **Polite**

Questions to students such as, “who is your poorest lecturer?” or “what is your worst course?” may be construed as trying to bring down a particular lecturer in front of the students. There is a need to always think of what information is being sought. If the evaluator wants to find out how the learning process takes place, he could ask for the student’s favourite course, and why he or she likes it so much. This would make them relate their interesting experience. There is no need to make the students feel uneasy or speak poorly of certain lecturers. Evaluators must focus on identifying the extent of the learning process (delivery mode) and not leading to character assassination.

### **Inquisitive**

Asking the staff to explain through using words like “how”, “what” and “why” would encourage them to open up, rather than direct questions, such as, “Have you done this?” or “Is this your work scope?”, where the answer would normally be a single word of “yes” or “no”. Too many of “yes” and “no” answers create not only a dull environment for both parties but also not moving forward in getting the information. Evaluators should be prepared to ask the right question to the right person. They must be clear and concise in formulating the questions. Similarly, evaluators must also speak with a clear voice but not in an interrogative or aggressive manner. Facial expression of lost or uncertainty on the part of those being questioned should lead evaluators to rephrase the question for clarity. Sometime by referring to records generated from an activity or policy document, evaluators could provide greater clarity to the questions.

### **Equality**

Evaluators should try placing the staff or student at the same level during the meeting, not that of a “boss” or a “worker”. They should feel the importance of their contribution or participation to the programme or institution. This would surely make them convey the true situations or conditions of the programme/institution. Assurance that anonymity will be maintained but that the issues brought forward would be highlighted to the management. However, evaluators must be able to distinguish between responses from disgruntled and destructive staff to that with constructive views.

### **Punctuality**

Time management is the essence in conducting an evaluation process. The agreed time has to be kept as it forms part of evaluator’s professionalism. Otherwise staff, students and invited guests would have to wait beyond their arranged time and also reduces the much needed time for evaluating other equally important criteria. If ever the appointed time is exceeded, apologies must be extended. However, repeated disregard of time management although accompanied with apologies reflects evaluator’s lackadaisical attitude.

### **Objective**

In any situation, obtaining the evidence is important, and especially when there are issues of concern or there exist weaknesses. There is a need to resolve the issues amicably through a triangulation process. Institutions must be

made known of the gaps or shortcomings clearly. Too general (or ambiguous) a statement and not supported (or not detailed out in the report) would not help the institution to identify the root cause. No assumption should be used as evidence. For example, an institution is not asked by the evaluator to furnish particular evidence due to shortage of time, but it is a requirement that the item be addressed in the evaluation report, and the evaluator unilaterally assumes that there is no evidence. Some may even be tempted to go further to fabricate evidence of non-compliance for the sake of trying to justify a decision.

### **Analytical**

Evaluators may at times be approaching accreditation in a simplistic mode. Not much effort is placed to be analytical and evaluative. A single non-compliance is not pursued further to examine its extent or if there are any supportive evidence to negate the non-compliance. Accreditation is not a fault-finding exercise as some evaluators may have approached. No institution/programme would be without shortcomings. However, evaluators must determine how serious are the shortcomings and whether they could be clustered together and deemed as major or isolated and minor. Only with an analytical approach from the triangulation process that one can be fair in arriving at the conclusion.

### **Honesty**

Evaluators may try to massage the information obtained in order to fit in with the earlier drawn conclusion. This may or may not benefit the institution/programme. As an example, it may be that the standard of final examination is clearly low i.e., below the expectation for an engineering programme, and yet the evaluator would prefer to hide the fact or write it in a way that may camouflage the evidence. This act of trying to help the programme to beat the rules despite in good faith should be shunted. Similarly, retaliation or vengeance on the institution/programme due to unfavourable past experience should not happen. If a person from the institution happens to have differences with the respective evaluator, the onus is upon the evaluator not to be involved with the person but instead get a colleague to pursue on the matter. This is also an issue of conflict of interest.

### **Demeaning and cynical**

The act of demeaning officials, academic staffs or students must be strictly avoided by evaluators. Statements that may offend the institution such as, “the programme is only attracting below par students” or “the programme has no prospective future” should not be used. Instead, evaluators could say “the programme designed does not fit with the capability of the students enrolled” or “the institution may need to consider to conduct a market study”.

Cynical or sarcastic statements to academic staffs’ response, such as “I think you know better than the students or technicians”, whereas the academic staffs were dumbfounded (and they knew that the evaluator was being cynical) when asked on the same issue as the students or technicians. Other examples of sarcasms, “you have written an extremely good report such that we cannot make any sense of it”, “can you spell the word Bloom (the taxonomy)?” or “is Bloom spelt as Bluem?”, neither create a collegial environment nor facilitate the accreditation process.

Evaluators should avoid rebutting student’s reply in a cynical manner. For example, a student may have made a comparison between the workload at his university with other universities where his colleagues are studying, and the evaluator feels that it is not appropriate or incorrect and rebut it by saying that the student is spiteful or a slow learner. The evaluator may then brag on his own university life experience to counter the student further. This argumentative and opinionated behaviour is unbecoming of an evaluator. Additionally, statements to students which kill their enthusiasm like “I think I can counter on that...” or “I think it is dangerous to make that statement...”, should be avoided. Instead evaluators should approach with, “what do you think of it?”, “how would you consider it?”, “have you ever thought of it?”, “don’t you think it would be appropriate?”. These sentences prompt them to open up or make them think before they answer.

### **Irritant**

The cordial relationship between the institution and evaluators should also be extended to between evaluators. Disrespectful or disregarding attitude among evaluators during the accreditation visit creates distrust and breakdown in the teamwork. Often evaluators are unaware that they irked their fellow colleagues due to unmindful behaviour (be it unintentionally) by not allowing them to participate (say, asking questions) in the meeting. For example, even before the staff or student being posed the question is about to answer, the irritant evaluator undertakes by himself to rephrase the question fielded by his colleague as if the question needs clarity. Such repetitive behaviour or persistent cutting off another panel evaluator from asking question generate ill feeling among evaluators, and consequently may explode into a war of words in front of those being interviewed. The “I know all and you keep quiet” attitude is unbecoming of evaluators and against the spirit of “helping” one another to excel in their work. Similarly, being respectful and letting the staff or student complete their answers should be practiced. Ending a conversation requires tactfulness or else it would be very irritating on the part of those trying to answer.

### **Unprepared**

Unprepared evaluators tend to depend on information provided by the institution on the day of visit and would not be able to focus on the real issue. Evaluators thus could not have a complete picture of the status of the programme and may be barking at the wrong tree. Sometimes evaluators question on the information that has been furnished in the self- assessment report, which indicates that they may not have read the report. It is the task of evaluators to be able to triangulate evidences submitted in the self-assessment report and those made available at the visit to resolve any issues identified (whether earlier or during the visit).

### **Nitpickers**

Nitpickers are those evaluators that raise insignificant issues and highlight them and yet these do not influence the overall quality of the programme. Examples of insignificant issues raised are: the covers of final-year project reports are not consistent or are not adhering to the guidelines; the font sizes used in the design project reports are not in accordance to the specified guidelines; safety notices on display have some misspells; and students are not able to memorise the programme outcomes. The act of following through on an issue is not nitpicking. For example, when an evaluator noticed that the final examination questions are not challenging or not examining the depth, he may pursue further with the academic staff responsible for the course to seek other assessments, to ascertain the depth assessed. He would also look at the moderation process and follow through with the teaching plan. It is an act of triangulation before he can ascertain the extent of the shortcoming. He would also seek clarification from other academics on their courses as well. That is an act of being thorough and fair before concluding on the seriousness of an issue.

### **Receiving gifts/asking for favour**

Institutions usually feel obliged to present some mementoes to evaluators at the end of the visit. The reason given is that being Asian/Malaysian it is customary to give as a sign of respect or of being appreciative. Accreditation exercise is an official function that eventually would determine whether a programme would receive or be declined accreditation. As such the element of decision present in the accreditation exercise should not cloud the institution to think as if it is a social visit. The onus is on the institution to understand the situation and not to provide any form of gifts to evaluators. It is suffice to facilitate evaluators in the process of accreditation. Evaluators should politely decline the gifts. Evaluators should not request for assistance for personal reasons. For example, the act of asking the host institution to provide transport for sightseeing before or after the accreditation visit is considered as having received favours.

### **Body language**

The body language is equally important, as any signs of disrespect shown by the evaluators could create an atmosphere of tension that does not help both parties. Similarly, aggressive tone by evaluators can intimidate the staff or create ill feeling. There is a need to break the ice, and thus evaluators must be able to bring those involve in the

accreditation process at ease through skilful questioning with the right tone. Introducing who you are at the beginning of a session with a pleasant smiling face rather than a stern facial expression would help to calm the situation. Making hand gestures or deep sighing as a result of dissatisfaction should not be exhibited especially within the company of the staff and students. The act of throwing files or documents on the table as a result of disappointment should not occur.

### **Conflict of interest**

Conflict of interest may come in many ways (ABET, 2009). Some conflicts may be inevitable and at times only known during the visit. Evaluators must be able to assess the situation as to whether there is a conflict that may result in a favourable or unfavourable decision. An evaluator may refrain himself from participating in the meeting session in the presence of the person that may induce the conflict. An evaluator may also disqualify himself from the evaluation team depending on the seriousness. Clear conflict such as having spouse/child/close relative studying at the institution of concern, involvement as an external examiner/adviser/part-time lecturer at the institution or having disputes/dissatisfaction/poor perception with the institution should be avoided.

### **Unreasonable demand**

Demands made to accreditation establishment for the provision of facilities such as accommodation/meeting place (though seem reasonable) or else “threaten” that the accreditation report could not be completed within time, tantamount to placing the establishment under ransom. The spirit of volunteerism and professionalism in evaluators is thus questionable. Reasonable requests are acceptable but not placing the establishment on a tight spot, as the establishment has no other option but to wait for the report. Similarly, participation at training courses or workshops that are supposed to improve competency of evaluators should be taken seriously. Commitment to accreditation visits and any programmes is expected once evaluators have committed. Absence without valid excuse or taking the course/workshop lightly is an act of irresponsibility.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Evaluators are not susceptible to commit mistakes; however, equipped with the right knowledge on best behaviour or conduct, evaluators can soar to exhibit excellent qualities when delivering their evaluation. Knowledge must be accompanied with practise, and practise makes perfect. With evaluation experience increases, an evaluator should be improving and be a leader by example. The voluntary work should not result in evaluators placing less emphasis or not full hearted in conducting evaluation. Being professional is neither to be obsessively compulsive nor having lackadaisical attitude, but giving the most and the best and operating within the accepted boundary.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors acknowledge the contribution by other evaluators in the discussions held prior to the write-up of this paper.

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