Marketization attempts by universities in Hong Kong:An appraisal analysis of institutional responses to quality audit evaluations

Abstract

Drawing upon Appraisal Theory as the analytical tool, the study attempts to provide evidence for the marketization of tertiary education by showing how universities in Hong Kong achieve a positive self-presentation with appraisal resources in constructing their responses to quality audit evaluations. The study reveals that a positive self-presentation could materialize through the universities' use of appraisal resources in pursuing four possible strategies, depending on the favourability of the evaluations: (1) highlighting and emphasizing the audit panels' positive evaluations, (2) making positive self-evaluation through reformulating the panels' positive evaluations, (3) including positive evaluations made by a third party, and (4) making positive self-evaluation of their current and future practices and plans. The study discusses the way appraisal resources can be used to achieve the marketization of tertiary education through positive self-evaluation and sheds light on the construction and interpretation of a high-stake but relatively little-researched written genre.

1. Introduction

Drawing upon Appraisal Theory as the analytical tool, the study attempts to provide evidence for the marketization of tertiary education by showing how universities in Hong Kong achieve a positive self-presentation with appraisal resources in constructing their responses to quality audit evaluations. The quality of higher education has been emphasized by national governments worldwide in recent decades for reasons including governments' concern for the performance and quality of educational institutions, the accountability of the institutions, and the desirable consequences of stimulating competitiveness among institutions (Billing, 2004; Hoecht, 2006; Shore and Wright, 1999; Stensaker, 2003). However, to avoid being seen as exercising direct control over the supposedly autonomous tertiary institutions, delegation of quality assurance responsibilities to government-related agencies is common practice (Tang and Zairi, 1998). For example, the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency of Australia, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education of the United Kingdom, the Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan, and the Higher Education Evaluation Centre of China have been established and commissioned to conduct quality audits of tertiary education institutions on a regular basis for quality assurance purposes. In Hong Kong, the Quality Assurance Council (QAC) of the University Grants Committee (UGC) of Hong Kong is the agency responsible for conducting academic quality audits of the city's eight publicly-funded tertiary institutions. For each academic quality audit exercise, the QAC forms an audit panel which prepares an audit report detailing evidence-based findings including commendations, affirmations, and recommendations. Commendations are findings expressed as good practice, affirmations as recognition of the improvements made by the institution resulting from its self-review, and recommendations as suggestions for improvement (UGC, 2007). The institutions concerned are then invited to respond to the findings. The responses are included in the report as an appendix before the report is submitted to the QAC for consideration and approval for publication.

The publication of the audit reports has considerable implications for the institutions concerned. The stakeholders of the tertiary institutions including prospective university students, parents, and teachers will eventually be informed of the academic quality audit results through the media -- press conferences are usually held by institutions upon report publication and subsequently coverage of various extent will materialize in the press. The report therefore plays a key role in shaping the image of the institutions concerned, and in turn affects student intake to some degree. The reports also have an impact on the institutions in other areas like their local and international status (Haug and Tauch, 2001; Stensaker, 2003), quality of teaching and learning (Dill, 2000), and the transparency of the operation of the institutions (Hoecht, 2006). Thus, one cannot afford to underestimate the implications of the publication of the audit reports. In fact, the QAC is aware of such implications. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the institutions are invited to respond to the audit panels' evaluations before the report is finalized. The institutions therefore have an opportunity to self-promote by making explicit their strengths and good practices through further highlighting and emphasizing the areas identified in the favorable findings (commendations and affirmations), countering or clarifying issues identified in the less favorable ones (recommendations), or showing their acceptance of the comments and evaluations made by the audit panels. These self-promoting attempts can be, as the paper will argue, achieved with the use of evaluative language.

The institutions' attempt to make explicit their strengths and good practices is, in effect, an act of marketization of their discursive practices which is indeed ''one dimension of marketization of higher education'' (Fairclough, 1993: 143). The present paper, guided by the two research questions below, will attempt to investigate the way tertiary institutions in Hong Kong marketize their discursive practices in constructing responses to quality audit report evaluations:

1. What elements of evaluative language are deployed by the universities in their response to the QAC audit panel's findings?
2. How do universities employ these elements in their responses to quality audit report evaluations as an opportunity for marketization?

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 gives a brief background to the present study -- it discusses the various ways tertiary education has been marketized. Section 3 critically reviews relevant studies in academic quality audit. Section 4 introduces the framework -- Appraisal Theory -- drawn upon in analyzing the data. The data and its analysis are explained in Section 5. Section 6 presents and discusses the findings -- the use of appraisal resources by universities in their responses to audit panels' evaluations. Section 7 further discusses the implications of the findings and Section 8 serves to conclude the paper.

2. Marketization of tertiary education

Marketization of the discursive practices of British universities was first investigated more than two decades ago. Fairclough (1993: 143) refers to this marketization as ''the restructuring of the order of discourse on the model of more central market organizations'', where the order of discourse stands for ''the totality of discursive practices of an institution, and relationships between them''. Marketization of higher education, however, is not limited to discursive practices. It also involves the acceptance and adoption of the free market ideology (Kwong, 2000; Wedlin, 2008), which is probably the driving force for the institution's discursive practices. The adoption of the free market ideology leads to fundamental changes in an institution's policies and practices including, for example, its attempt at competing with other institutions for students, research funding, or attention (Askehave, 2007; Bhatia, 2004) and construing its work from teaching to providing services (Kheovichai, 2014).

These changes can manifest themselves through the (multi-modal) discourse of the various text types produced by the universities including annual reports, prospectuses, websites, and job advertisements for academics (e.g. Askehave, 2007; Han, 2014; Xiong, 2012; Zhang and O'Halloran, 2013). We can see the use of expressions originating in the business world in the universities' discourse, for example, students are categorized as clients (who pay to receive services) to whom universities sell (but not teach) their courses and as products (but not graduates) upon graduation, and knowledge is regarded as research output (which is measurable and quantifiable) that is produced (but not discovered, refined, or advanced) by academics (Askehave, 2007; Mautner, 2010). We can also see the manifestation of the free market ideology in the website of a Singaporean university where the texts and images shown reflect the values of managerialism and capitalism (Zhang and O'Halloran, 2013). University discourse containing business- or market-oriented expressions has thus become more promotional and bears a stronger resemblance to business discourse (Fairclough, 1993).

Promotional discourse, a key element of the free market ideology, has been found in discourse produced not only by universities, but also the oversight body of university education (Tian, 2010). In his study of the teaching quality assessment (TQA) reports prepared by an expert team sent by the Ministry of Education of the Chinese Government, Tian (2010) found that the team recontextualized the discourse of the promotional self-assessment produced earlier by the universities being assessed, resulting in authoritative TQA reports with a certain degree of promotional nature. We can see that there are both similarities and differences between TQA reports in China and quality audit reports in Hong Kong. They are similar as they both report and evaluate the quality of teaching of universities. They are different as the quality audit reports include the universities' responses to the audit panels' evaluation and comments.

3. Academic quality audit

Various aspects of the issue of quality assurance in higher education have been explored extensively, for example, its purposes (Hodson and Thomas, 2003; Hoecht, 2006; Tang and Zairi, 1998; Thomas, 2001), the desirable and undesirable effects it has on the institutions (Carr et al., 2005; Shore and Wright, 1999; Stensaker, 1999; Strathern, 1997), and its implementation and problems (Billing, 2004; Mok, 2000). However, comparatively fewer studies have focused on the discourse of the academic quality audit reports -- the main document detailing the evaluation of the quality of the teaching and learning activities of a higher education institution (e.g. Morley, 2003; Stensaker, 2000). These studies have only discussed one type of the findings, recommendations (Stensaker, 2000) or the function of the language used in the report, namely the promotion and masking of political agendas (Morley, 2003). Other key features of the audit report discourse like the lexicogrammar of the clauses constituting the discourse of the findings and the move structure of the discourse leading up to the findings have gained minimal research attention (Ho, 2016).

Likewise, the discourse of the institutions' responses to the evaluations made by the quality assurance agencies

has also received scarce research attention. The institutional responses have only been analyzed in a 'material' or 'mental' sense, borrowing the concept of material process and mental process from systemic functional linguistics (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). That is, previous studies exploring this written genre focused on what the institutions had done in response to the academic quality audit exercise -- thus 'material' (e.g. Nilsson and Wahlén, 2000; Scott and Hawke, 2003), or how the faculty concerned felt about or viewed the academic quality audit -- thus 'mental' (e.g. Anderson, 2006; Newton, 2000, 2002). Nilsson and Wahlén (2000) reported a number of changes the institutions had made as a result of the academic quality audit. These changes included the development of quality enhancement programs and the inclusion of concrete goals that could be monitored and followed up in the programs. Scott and Hawke (2003) discussed the approach to dealing with quality audits adopted by technology universities in Australia. They focused on the preparatory work done by the universities before the audit visit. The preparatory work included the use of electronic self-assessment in identifying aspects of quality management that needed improvement; the establishment of a central coordinating group to identify, distil and disseminate good practices; and the specifying and enhancing of the place of performance measurement and planning while developing useful quality assurance and assessment frameworks. Anderson (2006) discussed academic's resistance to managerialism practised in their universities. Newton (2002) highlighted the academics' negative views of the audit exercise which included the huge workload associated with the exercise, the extra pressure and burden on the already resource-starved system, and the loss of professional trust and consensus. Exploration of the written responses given by educational institutions to the audit agency's evaluations from a linguistic, discursive perspective, as the preceding discussion indicates, has yet to be conducted.

This study will focus particularly on the tertiary institutions in Hong Kong for two main reasons. First, the city's tertiary education sector has undergone rapid expansion since the first Chief Executive of the city announced his target of providing tertiary education to 60% of eligible youngsters. Second, the rapid expansion was fueled by the second Chief Executive's decision to designate tertiary education as one of the six main economic industries of the city. The initiatives of both Chief Executives have resulted in a large and sudden increase in the student population of the city's eight publicly-funded tertiary institutions. The implications of the audit panels' evaluations will therefore carry remarkable weight for the institutions, making their written responses to the evaluations, and the analysis of such, interesting and important.

Table 1
Language of evaluation.

Regions	Sub-regions	Examples[a]
Attitude	Affect	*The panel was satisfied/disappointed with the performance of the candidate during the interview.*
	Judgment	*The new secretary is always able to provide the right and timely assistance to her boss.*
	Appreciation	*The new campus shows a fine combination of modernity and tradition.*
Engagement	Disclaim	*Staff don't appreciate the newly-furbished classrooms.*
	Proclaim	*The new course will undoubtedly attract a lot of students.*
	Entertain	*It seems that our colleagues do not support this new initiative.*
	Attribute	*According to the latest government figures, recession is indeed happening.*
Graduation	Force	*We do need to solve the problem now.*
	Focus	*The management is still kind of hesitant on this issue.*

[a] It should be emphasized that the examples of lexicogrammatical resources given are by no means exhaustive as appraisal can be realized ''across a range of grammatical categories'' (Martin and White, 2005: 10). For a more comprehensive list of lexicogrammatical resources for evaluation purposes, please see Martin and White (2005).

4. Appraisal Theory -- the language of evaluation

Given the importance and possible impact of the audit panels' findings and institutional responses, we can assume that the discourse of the written responses will have desirable effects on the institutions. The achievement of such desirable effects requires, as the author will argue below, the highlighting of received positive evaluations and countering of negative ones. Both the highlighting and countering need strong support in the form of evaluative descriptions of what the institutions have been doing or are going to do. To investigate how such highlighting and countering are achieved, Appraisal Theory (Martin and White, 2005) will be drawn upon as the main analytical framework for the reasons stated below.

A number of frameworks can be drawn upon to analyze the evaluative discourse of the present study, for example, the ones proposed by Vestergaard (2000), Thompson and Hunston (2000), and Kong (2008). However, compared to Appraisal Theory, they are inadequate in some aspect. While Vestergaard's (2000) framework focuses primarily on grammar, Appraisal Theory encompasses both lexis and grammar, recognizing the potential discursive functions lexis can perform. The two frameworks proposed by Thompson and Hunston (2000) and Kong (2008) cover a narrower range of semantic categories -- the former only deals with four parameters, namely good-bad, certainty, expectedness, and importance; and the latter only covers warrantability, comprehensibility, desirability, normativity, usuality, importance, and humorousness. According to Appraisal Theory, the language of evaluation can be categorized into three regions, namely Attitude, Graduation, and Engagement.[1] Attitude concerns writer's/reader's feelings and emotion, Graduation concerns

the ways the writer/speaker strengthens or softens their attitudinal evaluations, and Engagement concerns the ways the writer/speaker (writer thereafter) engages or interacts with the reader/hearer (reader thereafter). In other words, Appraisal Theory allows us to appreciate the use of evaluative language by analyzing lexicogrammar from the perspective of the writer's feelings and emotions (Attitude), the intensity of such feelings and emotions (Graduation), and the writer's intention or willingness to negotiate with and involve the reader (Engagement). Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Theory is therefore chosen for the present study. The language of evaluation can be summarized in Table 1:

The Attitude region construes a writer's feelings and has three sub-regions: Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation. Affect is concerned with ''registering positive and negative feelings'' (Martin and White, 2005: 42). Judgment is concerned with first the assessment of traits that we admire or criticize -- how special, capable, and dependable an individual is; and second the behavior that we praise or condemn -- how honest and ethical an individual is. Appreciation is concerned with the assessment of the value of things and phenomena.

The Graduation region serves to strengthen or weaken an attitudinal evaluation by modifying the Force or Focus of such (Martin and White, 2005: 137). In modifying the Force the writer may strengthen or weaken the intensity of the attitudinal evaluation. In modifying the Focus, the writer can sharpen or blur the attitudinal evaluation to emphasize or weaken prototypicality.

The Engagement region concerns the construal and advancing of a writer's position with respect to 'the value position being advanced and with respect to potential responses to that value position' (Martin and White, 2005: 36). It has four sub-regions, namely Entertain, Attribute, Disclaim, and Proclaim. Both Entertain and Attribute function to engage the reader by ''opening up the dialogic space for alternative positions'' (Martin and White, 2005: 103). Entertain first signals to readers that the writer's position is just one of the possible ones, and then invites them to advance their alternative value positions. Attribute sources the value position to a third party and through such sourcing, the writer can disassociate him-/herself from such position. Disclaim and Proclaim, contrary to Entertain and Attribute, engage the reader by challenging, fending off, or restricting the scope of alternative value positions. To disclaim, one can deny or counter an alternative position. To proclaim, one can emphasize one's own value position.

Researchers have been actively investigating the use of evaluative language in a wide range of discourse types including news articles and editorials (Le, 2009; Stenvall, 2008), political interviews (Partington, 2007), and professional request e-mails (Ho, 2014). Some studies discussed the functions served by evaluative language (e.g. Hyland, 2005; Hyland and Tse, 2004; Jensen, 2009). Hyland (2005) and Hyland and Tse (2004) argued that Ph.D. and M.Phil. students could use metadiscourse markers like hedges, boosters, and evidentials (corresponding respectively to Entertain, Proclaim, and Attribute) to enhance the persuasiveness of their dissertations as such markers could function to establish a credible persona for the students themselves and make rational appeals to the readers. Jensen (2009) in her study of email negotiation between two businessmen, a Dane and a Taiwanese, found that both email users employed evaluative resources in achieving various purposes such as building identities and trust in different phases of the negotiation. Also studying the discourse of email, Ho (2014) focused on the way senders managed rapport with recipients and found that evaluative language was one main resource for rapport management.

Researchers, however, have not yet investigated institutional responses to audit panels' evaluation from a linguistic perspective (as discussed in Section 3). The use of evaluative language in the institutions' written responses is therefore unexplored even though the responses should be interspersed with such linguistic resource. The present study attempts to apply Appraisal Theory in the analysis of the institutions' written responses to the audit panel's commendations, affirmations, and recommendations.

5. Methods

The audit reports of the eight UGC-funded tertiary institutions in Hong Kong prepared by the QAC audit panels responsible for conducting the first round of audit exercises between 2008 and 2011 were downloaded from the UGC website at http://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/qac (a total of eight reports, one for each institution, were downloaded for analysis). The institutional responses appended to the audit reports form the data of the present study.

Each numbered entry of the commendations, affirmations, and recommendations in the audit reports was mapped against the responses the institutions made. Some institutions have explicitly stated to which entry a particular discourse unit (a clause, a series of syntactically unrelated clauses, a clause complex, or a series of syntactically unrelated clause complexes) they were responding to. Others did not provide such explicitness and the author would need to first analyze the content of the responses and then map the responses onto the entries of the commendations, affirmations, and recommendations. The types of the evaluative language used in both the panels' evaluations and the institutional responses were then identified with reference to Appraisal Theory and coded using Nvivo10. To ensure internal reliability of the results, the same set of data was also analyzed by another linguist. An inter-rater reliability rate of 72% was obtained. Only those instances of the use of evaluative language agreed by both raters were further analyzed.

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[1] The first letter of the regions/sub-regions or categories of evaluative language is capitalized to distinguish the regions/sub-regions or categories from the rest of the text.

6. Strategies used in institutional responses

6.1. Quantitative results

The total numbers of entries of commendations, affirmations, and recommendations made by the QAC audit panels in the eight academic quality audit reports and the numbers of such entries that were addressed by the institutions are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Number of entries of findings and institutional responses.

	Commendations	Affirmations	Recommendations
Total	72	56	73
Received institutional responses	65 (90.3%)	51 (91.2%)	71 (97.3%)

Table 2 shows all three types of evaluation have received a remarkably high level of attention from the universities -- 97.3% of recommendations, 90.3% of commendations, and 91.2% of affirmations were addressed. The high level of responses indicates the universities' serious attitude toward these reports and suggests that they saw the act of responding as an opportunity to promote themselves. That recommendations had received the most institutional attention suggests that institutions found it necessary to respond to less favorable or even negative evaluations in an attempt to minimize the impact of the evaluations. More details will be given in Section 6.2.

Table 3
Frequencies of use of appraisal resources in institutional responses.

Attitude (total: 341)			Graduation (total: 148)		Engagement (total: 55)			
Affect	Judgment	Appreciation	Force	Focus	Entertain	Attribute	Disclaim	Proclaim
75	97	169	147	1	17	0	19	19

Table 4
Frequency of use of appraisal resources in addressing commendations, affirmations, and recommendations.

	Commendations	Affirmations	Recommendations
Attitude	174 (51%)	78 (23%)	89 (26%)
Graduation	53 (36%)	18 (12%)	77 (52%)
Engagement	21 (38%)	7 (13%)	27 (49%)
Total	250 (46%)	104 (19%)	193 (35%)

The frequencies of use of the various types of appraisal resources used by the institutions in their responses to the audit panels' evaluation are shown in Table 3, and the frequencies of use of these resources in addressing commendations, affirmations, and recommendations are shown in Table 4.

Table 3 shows that among the three regions of evaluative language, Attitude was used most frequently in the responses -- a total of 341 instances of use were recorded. Institutions showed the highest tendency to evaluate objects and phenomena (through Appreciation), followed by behaviors (through Judgment) and then feelings and emotions (through Affect). A closer look at the instances of use of the three sub-regions of Attitude reveals that they were all positive -- institutions expressed desire, happiness, and satisfaction (with Affect); spoke highly of their staff and students saying that they were special, capable, dependable, honest, and beyond reproach (with Judgment); and recognized the importance, sophistication, and value of their practices and systems (with Appreciation).

Table 4 shows that responses addressing commendations, the most favorable type of evaluation made in the report, saw the most frequent use of Attitude (171 instances, 51%), and those addressing affirmations and recommendations recorded respectively 78 (23%) and 89 (26%) instances. Extracts 1--3 show the use of Attitude in addressing each of these three types of evaluations made by the audit panels.[2]

Extract 1 (Addressing commendation, Affect emboldened)
Institution A is pleased to see endorsement of its bilingual policy.

Institution A in Extract 1 expressed its pleasure in receiving the audit panel's commendation concerning its adoption of the bilingual policy in teaching and learning.

Extract 2 (Addressing affirmation, Judgment singly-underlined, Appreciation doubly-underlined)
. . .the QAC's affirmations of our work in effectively engaging the academic community in developing rigorous performance indicators, . . .

Institution D in Extract 2 above further highlighted the strengths that had already been affirmed by the audit panel in the report -- engaging the community in developing performance indicators -- with an instance of Judgment (*effectively*) and Appreciation (*rigorous*).

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[2] The names of the institutions, activities, and programs are replaced with either letters of alphabet (e.g. Institution A, B, or C; activity X, Y, or Z) or numerals (e.g. program 1, 2, or 3).

Extract 3 (Addressing recommendations, Appreciation doubly-underlined)
The Academic Board has just approved at its June 2011 meeting a new academic administration structure with <u>*streamlined*</u> *decision-making processes in line with Recommendation 1.*

Institution E addressed the audit panel's recommendation concerning its academic administration structure by presenting its improved decision-making process with an instance of Appreciation (*streamlined*).

Extracts 2 and 3 demonstrate the use of Judgment and Appreciation in achieving a positive self-presentation (Affect, as shown in Table 3, was used least frequently), thereby allowing the universities to promote themselves and marketize their education.

Accompanying these 341 instances of attitudinal evaluation were 148 instances of Graduation, that is, 43.4% of these instances of attitudinal evaluation were strengthened through Graduation. Unlike Attitude, Graduation was used most frequently in addressing recommendations, the least favorable type of evaluation. The abundance of Graduation found in addressing commendations, affirmations, and recommendations was respectively 53 (36%), 18 (12%), and 77 (52%). Extracts 4--6 show the use of Graduation in addressing the panel's evaluation.

Extract 4 (Addressing commendation, Focus emboldened, Appreciation double-underlined, Judgment singly-underlined)
As a research university, institution F especially values the <u>*close*</u> *relationship of its highly* <u>*qualified,*</u> <u>*international*</u> *faculty with students. The Panel observed* ''*that there is a strong sense of community among and between staff and students*''

In responding to the panel's commendation regarding the strong sense of community among and between staff and students, Institution E further took the opportunity to positively evaluate its faculty with an instance of strengthened (with *highly*) Judgment (*qualified*) and Appreciation (*international*).

Extract 5 (Addressing affirmation, Force emboldened, Judgement singly-underlined, Appreciation doubly-underlined)
The University's strong <u>*commitment to*</u> <u>*excellent*</u> *teaching is reinforced by well designed support for academic staff.*

In its response to the audit panel's affirmation of its good practices in teaching and learning, Institution G further strengthened such practices (*commitment to excellent teaching*) with an instance of Force (*strong*).

Extract 6 (Addressing recommendation, Force emboldened)
. . . refining the existing Performance Indicators to align <u>more closely</u> with the desired learning outcomes . . .

In responding to the panel's recommendation about the alignment between its performance indicators and learning outcomes, Institution H stated clearly that it would refine the indicators so as to achieve a closer alignment between the two with an instance of Force (*more closely*).

Extracts 4--6 above demonstrate the use of Graduation by the universities in their attempt to further highlight either their existing strengths (the quality and composition of staff in Extract 4, commitment to teaching and learning in Extract 5) or their effort in making improvements (developing a closer link between Performance Indicators and learning outcomes in Extract 6). Such use could all function to promote and marketize the education these universities provided by contributing to their positive self-presentation.

The institutions on a number of occasions also attempted to strengthen their own evaluations by emphasizing them with Proclaim or fending off alternative opinions with Disclaim. The institutions also accommodated alternative opinions with Entertain. Like Graduation, Engagement recorded a similar level of abundance across the three types of evaluation -- it was used most frequently in addressing recommendations (27 instances, 49%), followed by commendations (21 instances, 38%), and then affirmations (7 instances, 13%). Extracts 7--9 show the use of Engagement in the addressing the panel's evaluations.

Extract 7 (Addressing commendations, Proclaim emboldened, Appreciation singly-underlined)
These commendations demonstrate the <u>*effectiveness*</u> *of the student-centred approach to teaching and learning undertaken* . . .

Institution C reinforced the strength identified in the audit report (that the teaching and learning approach was effective) with an instance of Proclaim (*demonstrate*).

Extract 8 (Addressing affirmation, Entertain highlighted)
Given the affirmation from the QAC, Institution D's work in this area would clearly be of benefit to the Hong Kong Higher Education sector as a whole.

Institution D received an affirmation for its good practice in conducting student feedback surveys. It elaborated on the value of such practice/affirmation, with reservation with an instance of Entertain (*would*), by claiming that it would benefit the Hong Kong Higher Education sector.

Extract 9 (Addressing recommendation, Disclaim highlighted)
The teaching and course feedback questionnaires are currently under review but this will have to be done in concert with the 2012--2015 Academic Development Proposals Exercise . . .

Institution F responded to the panel's recommendation concerning its teaching and course feedback questionnaires by first stating that such questionnaires were under review at the time of writing the response, and second managing readers' expectation that the review would be done at a later stage with an instance of Disclaim (*but*).

Extracts 7 and 8 show how the universities made use of Engagement resources in reinforcing their strengths strongly -- effective teaching and learning approach with Proclaim (*demonstrate*), or gently -- elaborating on their good practice in conducting student feedback surveys with Entertain (*would*). Both instances of the use of Engagement could directly or explicitly contribute to a positive self-presentation. Extract 9 shows the use of Disclaim (*but*) in constructing a positive self-presentation in an indirect way -- it served to manage readers' expectation so that on the one hand, readers would know that the university was acting in accordance with the panel's recommendation, and on the other, that such action would not be completed as soon as they might expect.

It is worth noting that the universities did not use any instances of Attribute --they did not source the value position to a third party to disassociate themselves from such a position. In other words, the universities were willing to commit themselves to, and be accountable for, their value positions forwarded in their responses. This could further contribute to their positive self-presentation.

The universities' strong preference for positive attitudinal evaluation -- they praised and admired their staff and students, and affirmed the importance and value of their systems and practices -- strongly suggests that marketization attempts were being made. They were probably trying to depict themselves as universities that excelled in various aspects to appeal to their various stakeholders, including their funding sources, donors, the international academic community, and prospective students. The strengthening of these positive attitudinal evaluations with Graduation provided further evidence for the institutions' intent to marketize their education services.

Sections 6.2 and 6.3 will illustrate and discuss the use of the various regions and sub-regions of evaluative language. Both sections will show that the institutions were attempting to achieve a positive self-presentation to marketize their education by reinforcing their strengths and good practices with four strategies: (1) highlighting and emphasizing the panels' favorable evaluations, (2) making positive self-evaluation through elaborating on or condensing the panels' favorable evaluations, (3) including positive evaluations made by third parties, and (4) making positive evaluation of their practices and plans that had been in place before the QAC visit, had just emerged right after the QAC visit, or would be implemented in future. The extracts in Sections 6.2 and 6.3 were chosen as they can best illustrate the use of appraisal resources in realizing the four strategies above.

6.2. Marketizing through responses to favorable evaluations -- commendations and affirmations

The institutions attempted to reinforce their strengths and good practices by reformulating the panels' favorable evaluations as their self-evaluations. Such reformulation was usually achieved through highlighting, emphasizing, and elaborating on or condensing the panels' evaluations.

Extract 10 shows a commendation concerning Institution A's approach to quality assurance for teaching and learning, and the respective response given by Institution A. Instances of favorable evaluation are highlighted.

Extract 10
Panel's commendation:
The QAC commends Institution A for its proactive approach to improving quality assurance for teaching and learning through the development of institution-wide approaches to facilitate greater consistency in the implementation of quality assurance policy and procedures.
Institution's response:

The QAC's commendation that Institution A takes "a proactive approach to improving quality assurance for teaching and learning through the development of institution-wide approaches to facilitate greater consistency in the implementation of quality assurance policy and procedures" demonstrates that the University places the quality of its educational provision as a major priority, and remains determined to rigorously apply principles of continuous quality improvement to all areas of its work. The proactive approach taken by Institution A is further evidenced by the Audit Panel's commendations for . . .

The audit panel in its commendation made two main positive evaluations about the quality assurance mechanism of Institution A: (1) the approach was proactive; and (2) institution-wide approaches to facilitating greater consistency in the implementation of quality assurance policy and procedures were developed. Within this piece of evaluative discourse are two embedded positive evaluations, one being the *consistency in the implementation of quality assurance policy and procedures*, focusing on consistency; and the other being the modifier *greater*, strengthening the evaluation of the degree of the consistency.

In its responses, Institution A first highlighted the positive evaluation with a verbatim quote of the panel's evaluation (a proactive approach to improving quality assurance for teaching and learning through the development of institution-wide approaches to facilitate greater consistency in the implementation of quality assurance policy and procedures). This act of quoting verbatim should be strategic as Institution A could have chosen to rephrase the QAC's discourse as in The QAC's commendation shows/indicates that the University . . . It is likely that Institution A was trying to emphasize to readers that it was the audit panel who made the commendation. Institution A then emphasized such positive evaluation with the projecting verb demonstrate, a token of Engagement-Proclaim. What was projected was a self-evaluation elaborating on the panel's evaluation -- Institution A furnished details concerning its effort made in providing quality education as in the University places the quality of its educational provision as a major priority, and remains determined to rigorously apply principles of continuous quality improvement to all areas of its work. The proactive approach taken by Institution A is further evidenced by the Audit Panel's commendations for . . . In other words, it was evaluating its own behavior, and such a self-evaluation belongs to the Attitude-Judgment category. Embedded in this judgment are a total of five instances of positive self-evaluation: (1) it was determined (Attitude-Judgment), (2) the quality improvement work it was doing was continuous (Attitude-Appreciation), (3) its application of the principles of continuous quality improvement work was rigorous (Attitude-Judgment; Graduation-Force), (4) its approach to quality assurance was proactive (Attitude-Appreciation), and (5) such a proactive approach was further evidenced (Graduation-Force). Instances (4) and (5) also functioned to highlight and emphasize the panel's evaluation as the former repeated the word used by the panel proactive and the latter chose evidenced but not other verbs that carry a weaker meaning like supported or echoed.

We can see that Institution A reinforced the strengths and good practices commended by highlighting the panel's favorable evaluation with Engagement-Proclaim and Graduation-Force, and self-evaluated favorably through elaborating on the panel's positive evaluation with various evaluative resources of the Attitude-Judgment and Attitude-Appreciation categories. These instances of the use of evaluation all functioned to promote the institution by presenting a positive image of itself.

Extract 11 is an affirmation concerning the support services for students provided by Institution E.

Extract 11
Panel's affirmation:
The QAC affirms Institution E's use of a wide range of academic and non-academic support services for students and the development of an academic advising system for the new 4-year curriculum, to support students in making more informed course selection.
Institution's response:
The Report reinforces the University's strategies for enhancement of teaching and learning through ensuring that students are adequately supported in both academic and non-academic matters.

The audit panel's affirmation contained one instance of favorable evaluation -- the institution's support services for students and academic advising system could support students in making more informed course selection. An embedded favorable evaluation is found -- *a wide range of*. Responding to this affirmation, Institution E concisely evaluated its effort in supporting its students with an Attitude-Judgment token as in *ensuring that students are adequately supported in both academic and non-academic matters*. This evaluative token is actually a condensed version of the audit panel's affirmation. Within this evaluation is an embedded one specifying the degree to which the students were supported -- *adequately*, a Graduation-Force token strengthening the judgment.

The reinforcement of the panel's positive evaluation as Extracts 10 and 11 show has not been reported as a way of marketizing education by tertiary institutions. Previous studies found that institutions mainly resorted to the use of

elements of business discourse like ''clients'', ''products'' and ''output'' (Askehave, 2007; Mautner, 2010), or the adoption of the free market ideology including managerialism and capitalism Zhang and O'Halloran, 2013). The act of marketizing tertiary education has also been observed on occasions that are conventionally dominated by authoritative discourse -- the delivery of president's speech during the graduation ceremony of Chinese universities. Han (2014) reported the use of conversational discourse in the President's speech during the ceremony for building rapport with graduates, which would lead to a stronger alumni-university tie and more alumni donations.

While the present study mainly focuses on the audit panel's evaluation, the author would also like to discuss one interesting case in which the institutions used the evaluative discourse of a significant third party -- graduates' employer -- for their own benefits. Extract 12 shows how Institution B attempted to reinforce its strengths and good practices by including a third-party evaluation.

Extract 12
Panel's commendation:
The QAC commends Institution B for requiring all students to pass a student IT Proficiency Test as a graduation requirement.
Institution's response:
Employers find Institution B graduates not only knowledgeable in their disciplinary areas, but also well-trained in generic skills, and the IT Proficiency graduation requirement is one means to achieve this; the University is pleased to see this recognized.

The panel commended Institution B for its adherence to the stringent graduation requirement in that students had to pass an IT proficiency test to graduate. Institution B responded to the commendation by an indirectly represented discourse produced by the employers of its graduates. It first emphasized to the readers that the employers' evaluations were strong and valid with *find*, a token of Engagement-Proclaim. It then went on emphasizing the employers' evaluations with an Engagement-Disclaim device *not only . . . but also*. The emphasized evaluations here being the graduates were *knowledgeable* and *well-trained*, both evaluating the capability of the graduates and thus belong to the Attitude-Judgment category. The incorporation of the third-party evaluation by Institution B has therefore also served to reinforce the institution's strengths (that the institution was able to produce *knowledgeable* and *well-trained* graduates) and good practice (that the institution required its students to pass an IT proficiency test to graduate), thereby establishing a positive self-presentation of the university which would subsequently help with the university's marketization attempt.

The use of third-party's evaluation has also been observed in Zhang (2017) who investigated the discourse of the homepage of Chinese universities. The study found that the discourse of the country's top leader was quoted verbatim or paraphrased in the President's welcoming remarks, strengthening considerably the credibility and credentials of both the President and the university.

Third-parties' positive evaluation for the institutions' advantage, despite its value and importance to the institutions, has not yet been fully utilized. It has only been used by one institution for establishing a positive self-presentation while, in contrast, it has been highlighted by the audit panels in five (out of eight) audit reports, for example:

Extract 13a
The Panel considered the evidence of the success of graduates in employment and positive feedback from employers which supported a conclusion that a B University education adds value to the capacities of students.
Extract 13b
The employer views were positive and focused on what were considered to be notable characteristics of the graduates, namely their depth of expertise in pedagogy and their passion and enthusiasm for teaching as a profession.

6.3. Marketizing through responding to less favorable evaluations -- recommendations

The written responses to the recommendations made by the audit panels also contained evidence of positive self-presentation made possible with the use of evaluative language. The institutions focused their attention on the practices and plans that had been in place before the QAC visit, that had just emerged right after the QAC visit, or that would be implemented in the future. Extracts 14--16 show how these three ways of self-evaluation were achieved with evaluative language.

Extract 14 shows how Institution F responded to the panel's recommendation by positively evaluating its current grading practice.

Extract 14
Panel's recommendation:

The QAC recommends that the Committee on Undergraduate Studies take a stronger role in monitoring the distribution of grades and awards that fall outside Institution F's guidelines on percentage bands.

Institution's response:

Since 2006, the University has moved away from a policy of grading-to-a-curve to grading based on students' demonstrated achievements of learning outcomes. Historical experience with course-grade distributions is made available, but only for information, not as "recommended bands". The Panel has called on the University to reintroduce grading-to-a-curve. The University is proud of its reputation for high academic standards, standards that are confirmed by academic accreditation, external review, annual benchmarking with course grades gained by Institution F students on exchange, and the experience of a very qualified international faculty. Institution F remains confident in its arrangements for course grading, and strongly believes that maintaining academic standards is consistent with course grades that reflect students' achievements.

The panel's recommendation suggested indirectly that Institution F's practice concerning the monitoring and distribution of grades and awards was not as satisfactory as it should be as in *take a stronger role in monitoring the distribution of grades and awards*. Institution F, instead of showing bold disagreement, resorted to a brief recount of history as in *Since 2006, the University has moved away from a policy of grading-to-a-curve to grading based on students' demonstrated achievements of learning outcomes. Historical experience with course-grade distributions is made available, but only for information, not as 'recommended bands'*. Recounting history as a way to marketize a university has also been observed in Zhang's (2017) study where four top Chinese universities gave a brief history of themselves, evaluated positively (instances that would have been classified as use of Judgment or Appreciation had Appraisal Theory been adopted as the analytical framework), as in ". . . has developed at a breathtaking pace into a comprehensive research university . . .", ". . . with a long history and was one of the earliest modern academies of higher learning" (tokens of Judgment and Appreciation highlighted in bold) (Zhang 2017: 72).

The history was then followed first by a reformulation of the recommendation as in *The Panel has called on the University to reintroduce grading-to-a-curve*, and second a description of its grading policy, embedding a series of favorable self-evaluations of its current grading system: (1) the reputation for high academic standards (Attitude-Appreciation), and this favorable evaluation was emphasized by the use of *confirmed* (Engagement-Proclaim) as in *standards that are confirmed by academic accreditation, . . . international faculty*, (2) the current grading system could consistently reflect and maintain academic standards as in *maintaining academic standards is consistent with course grades that reflect students' achievements* (Attitude-Appreciation), and (3) Institution F also engaged their readers with an instance of upscaled Engagement-Entertain as in *strongly believes* (with *believe* being a token of Engagement-Entertain and *strongly* a Graduation-Force [upscaling]) while making the preceding self-evaluation.

The reformulation and description have allowed the university to achieve three goals: (1) disagree implicitly with the audit panel's negative comment on its grading and award system with facts; (2) highlight its strengths -- a high reputation for maintaining a grading system that lead to high academic standards -- with the two instances of Appreciation and the accompanying Proclaim; and (3) portray a credible image for itself by balancing its certainty and authority (through the use of *strongly*) with cautiousness (through the use of *believes*). The combined effect of these three goals would be the creation and presentation of a highly positive image of the institution.

Extract 15 shows how Institution A responded to the panel's recommendation by positively evaluating its measure that emerged right after the QAC visit.

Extract 15
Panel's recommendation:

The QAC recommends that Institution A undertake a review of the composition of thesis examination panels to ensure that the University is in step with best practice at local and international level.

Institution's response:

Since the QAC visit, the composition of thesis panels has been changed to reflect our own observations and those of the QAC Panel and to ensure we are now in step with best practice.

The panel's recommendation implies that the practice concerning the composition of thesis examination panels of Institution A might fall below the local and international standards. In its response to the recommendation, Institution A first stated plainly that it had acted on the recommendation in a timely manner as in *the composition of thesis panels has been changed to reflect our own observations and those of the QAC Panel*, an invoked Attitude-Judgment suggesting the university's commitment to continued improvement. It then used directly part of the panel's discourse *to ensure we are*

now in step with best practice as in *in step with best practice,* a token of Attitude-Judgment that served to evaluate favorably the capability of the institution. The use of these two instances of positive Judgment has allowed the institution to turn the negativity brought about by the recommendation into positivity, allowing itself to emerge as a university that was committed to making improvement and adopting the best practice.

Extract 16 below shows that Institution C intended to act upon the panel's recommendation in future.

Extract 16
Panel's recommendation:
The QAC recommends that Institution C develop a systematic process to assure the quality of its programmes between the six-yearly Academic Consultation Panel visits; and ensure that this is embedded into the roles of relevant committees and those individuals with responsibility for the quality assurance of teaching and learning.
Institution's response:
Along this vein, the University will follow the Panel's advice to systematically monitor individual programme/ department's progress in between the six-yearly cycles of the Academic Consultation Panel visits.

The recommendation implies that the existing practice of Institution C in regard of the assurance of quality of its programs between the six-yearly Academic Consultation Panel visits might not be satisfactory. Institution C stated that it would follow the panel's advice with only one count of favourable self-evaluation -- *systematically monitor* (Attitude-Judgment) -- and some direct use of the panel's discourse as in *to systematically monitor individual program/department's progress in between the six-yearly cycles of the Academic Consultation Panel visits*.

One interesting phenomenon that is worth our attention is that instead of agreeing with or echoing the panels' negative evaluations while constructing their responses, the institutions presented themselves positively by detailing and evaluating the current practices, the practices emerged right after the QAC visits, and the practices that would be implemented in future, thereby turning negativity into positivity.

We can see from the above analysis that the universities have attempted to marketize the discourse in a number of ways. First, they responded to most of the recommendations, affirmations, and commendations, indicating their serious attitude toward the evaluation made by the audit panels and their intention to promote themselves through the responses. Second, the universities reformulated audit panels' positive evaluations (commendations and affirmations) in a way that could further emphasize the strengths identified by the panels. Third, the universities included third party's endorsement in their responses -- positive evaluations by their graduates' employers. When responding to less favorable evaluations, that is, recommendations, they evaluated positively the practices and plans that had been in place before the QAC visit, that had just emerged right after the QAC visit, or that would be implemented in future.

7. Further discussion

The discourse of the institutional responses, as discussed above, recorded the use of evaluative language in modifying the discourse produced by the institutions and by the audit panels or employers. Previous research found that evaluative language could be used as a tool for managing rapport in the workplace (Ho, 2014; Jensen, 2009), and for interacting with readers (Hyland, 2005). The paper has found that this important linguistic resource could serve not only to address the audit panels' evaluations, but also to reinforce the strengths and good practices of the institutions, promoting or marketizing their education. Probably two factors have attributed to the marketization of the institutions' discourse we have just witnessed. The first factor is the interpretation of the term audit -- it has been interpreted as "public inspection", "submission to scrutiny", "rendering visible" and "measures of performance"(Shore and Wright, 1999: 559). It should therefore not be surprising to see institutions responding to the evaluations to tell their various stakeholders how well they have been performing by achieving a positive self-presentation through evaluating themselves positively. The second factor is the increasing competition among universities for students and research funds (Bowl, 2018; Mautner, 2015). In their responses to commendations and affirmations, the institutions employed evaluative language to highlight and emphasize the audit panels' favorable evaluations, reformulate the panels' evaluations as their self-evaluations by elaborating on or condensing them, and incorporate third party's evaluations into their own. In their responses to recommendations, the institutions employed evaluative language in their positive self-evaluations of their current, newly formulated and emerged, or planned future practices and initiatives. Their responses could function to reinforce the institutions' strengths and good practices. Such reinforcement is necessary and justified as academic quality audit or external assessment has also been seen, despite possible controversy, as a marketing opportunity (Hodson and Thomas, 2003). For the institutions to seize the opportunity, it would mean that they will need to promote themselves. Such promotion can be conveniently and effectively achieved by reinforcing their strengths and good practices as identified in the audit exercise and made known to the public through the publication of the audit reports. For those institutions that may

not (want to) see the audit exercise as a marketing opportunity, it is still necessary for them to achieve the same reinforcement as they are supposed to be accountable to their stakeholders including the government, the QAC, the employers, the students and their parents and teachers (Billing, 2004; Hoecht, 2006). Thus, it is desirable and necessary for them to let these various stakeholders know through marketizing their discourse, for example, how well they have spent the public money they have received, and how well they have equipped the graduates for future challenges in life. As argued in this paper, evaluative language can be employed strategically to achieve all these marketization attempts.

8. Conclusion

The present study has demonstrated the successful application of Appraisal Theory to the analysis of an important but little-researched discourse type -- institutional responses to quality audit evaluations. It has shown that the universities in Hong Kong have effectively used different types of appraisal resources in their responses to achieve a positive self-presentation. More precisely, the study has revealed the discursive strategies the institutions used in the construction of the written responses to the evaluations made by the quality assurance agencies in an attempt to (1) demonstrate to their stakeholders that they are performing well in upholding their academic quality as measured against external credible criteria, (2) seize the marketing opportunity available to them as a result of the audit exercise by positively evaluating themselves, and (3) demonstrate their accountability to stakeholders.

For both pedagogical and political reasons including improved transparency, accountability, and staff development and teaching quality (Billing, 2004; Brennan et al., 1997; Hoecht, 2006; Massy, 2003), enhanced collaboration within academic units (Dill, 2000; Stensaker, 1999), and the availability of means of control of higher education to the government, academic quality audits will probably gain both significance and popularity in the future (Massy, 2003). It is thus highly desirable for institutions to be able to respond to the quality assurance agency's evaluations in a way that would not only address the concerns raised by the audit agency, but also allow them to present a positive image of themselves. It is hoped that the present study will be able to make contribution concerning the use of evaluative language in achieving positive self-evaluation on one hand, and the construction and interpretation of such appropriate and strategic institutional responses on the other.

Future research along the same line of inquiry can use a larger sample size to allow for higher reliability and validity. Both qualitative and quantitative --statistical -- analyses can be conducted to compare institutions of different geographical regions in terms of the use of the different types of evaluative language. To achieve methodological triangulation, a larger sample would be needed -- audit reports of local universities available upon the completion of the next round of audit visits and of overseas universities (those in mainland China included) can be also be collected for analysis.

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