

Original Paper

Research on Evaluating the Social Service Functions of Local Universities in the Context of High-Quality Development

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Abstract

The current transition of China's economic and social development into a stage of high-quality development brings with it new and higher levels of expectation for higher education institutions and their role within society. Local universities play a key role as nodes within a regional innovation ecosystem, and therefore require their capabilities for service to the region to be assessed in terms of traditional methods. This research outlines a methodology for developing an assessment framework based upon high-quality development for local universities and how that assessment will be achieved through reform of evaluation focus, assessment criteria construction and execution. The result of this effort will be a startup type of framework of multidimensional evaluation that utilizes the concepts of regional contribution, incorporation of innovation and sustainable development as fundamental to its viability while serving local universities as a practical source of evidence.

Keywords

high-quality development, local universities, social services, functional evaluation, evaluation system

1. Introduction

As higher education becomes more integrated with regional communities, universities now have a new, historical role to play in providing social services to their surrounding areas through the high-quality economic development of these regions. However, traditional methods of assessing the social service function of universities have relied heavily on counting the number of scholarly outputs produced; thus, there are difficulties in accurately capturing the contributions made by universities to local industry, cultural preservation, and improvement of citizens' quality of life. As a result, universities' social service efforts often remain at a very surface level and do not accurately meet the needs of the

community. Exploring an acceptable and commensurate means by which universities evaluate their social service efforts will provide benefits for both the internal construction of universities, as well as the creation of better regional innovation environments.

2. Theoretical Interpretation of Social Service Functions in Higher Education Institutions from a High-Quality Development Perspective

2.1 Core Essence of High-Quality Development and New Demands on Higher Education

The notion of high-quality development has caused an overall transformation in higher education's focus from an emphasis on generating volume of academic papers to an emphasis on producing quality internally and through efficiency within the institution. Thus, higher education's importance to society has become increasingly significant and many institutions will need to create better value measures to determine how extraordinary they have been in fulfilling this role. While most institutions have relied on the traditional model of counting the number of academic papers published as their method to evaluate their competence; this approach is becoming less useful, as high-quality development continues to elevate the importance on the social service function that local universities need to provide not only to provide for themselves but also to provide real, measurable impacts that can help to create prosperous regional economies, improve cultural prosperity, and raise quality of life for individuals in the regions of where local universities are located. To achieve this goal, local universities will need to shift away from operating at a superficial level to utilizing more practical, "down to earth" methodologies in selecting research topics for the local knowledge economy. Additionally, local universities will need to provide education and training for local business and industry and also provide cultural dissemination, and identify and measure the contributions that they make beyond what is currently being measured through traditional means (Lü & Zhang, 2017).

2.2 Historical Evolution and Contemporary Characteristics of Social Service Functions in Local Universities

Local universities have transitioned to providing support for economic and industrial development through a much more proactive approach. Initially, universities were primarily involved in providing talent through training programmes and limited amounts of technical assistance, but these tended to be reactive and unstructured activities. However, increasing demand for solutions to economic and industrial restructuring has resulted in growing numbers of different ways in which local universities provide services, including technology development, cultural consulting and community development. As the demand for services continues to increase in terms of quality and quantity, local universities will need to go beyond providing solely short-term, project-based partnerships and look to develop long-term organisational partnerships that will allow for deeper integration into the regional innovation and ecological systems. The shift is shifting local universities from a support role to being key drivers of innovation and empowerment in the processes of regional economic development.

2.3 Intrinsic Logic Between High-Quality Development and Evaluation of Social Service Functions

High-quality development is focused on the dimensions of efficiency and sustainability; the overall objective of providing social service functions will be the foundation for evaluating them. Instead of simply accumulating stats on collaborative projects, evaluations need to provide an in-depth analysis of the benefits and impacts that are actually generated from the experience of delivering these services over a significant period of time. Universities that do not have a mechanism for evaluating social services based on the principles of high-quality development are likely to seek out only short-term visible results, which limits their ability to build a sustained and effective capacity to support regional development over time. An evaluation system that utilises scientifically sound methodologies will enable universities to understand which of their service activities are actually addressing the fundamental needs of the local economy and facilitate the accurate allocation of high-quality resources into those areas that require the greatest attention. Thus, the guiding function of a sound evaluation system serves a very practical purpose by enhancing the effectiveness of university-based social service functions (Resident, 2013).

3. Current Status and Problem Analysis of Evaluating Social Service Functions in Local Universities

3.1 Types and Characteristics of Existing Evaluation Systems

In practice, social service function evaluations at local universities demonstrate various typical forms at present. The administrative model for evaluation often translates social service accomplishments into a number of quantitative items for evaluation and promotion of professional titles by focusing on quantitative amounts of measurable horizontal project funding or patent transfer contract number. A second widely utilized model for evaluation is that of short-term successful evaluation around specific projects of cooperative school-business ventures or government commissioned projects, which are primarily based on project task completion and attainment of predetermined technical specifications. Quantitative oriented evaluations are characterized by being fairly straightforward and easy to execute, but are yet capable of directing greater amounts of university resources toward service areas for which results may be produced quickly and explicitly. The project based evaluation method may (render) severe disconnect and discontinuity in the activities associated with university service functions which make it difficult to evaluate and measure the societal benefits and cultural impact of university service functions through a broader timeframe perspective. The previously mentioned characteristic of university service functions collectively create a perceived gap between the evaluation results of university service functions and the broad and complex needs for regional development.

3.2 Deviation of Evaluation Orientation from High-Quality Development Goals

Due to the focus of the various evaluation systems on obtaining immediate results, there is a conflict between the operational logic of the evaluation system and the desired systematic and long-term focus necessary to produce high-quality development. As a result of the evaluation system, local colleges and

universities have dedicated themselves to developing areas of technological service that will produce immediate revenue, either through contract funding or patent applications, while they may overlook other service areas with longer cycles and slower rates of productivity such as regional cultural heritage, local community governance, and common technology development for industry. Many evaluations will more readily assess the monetary benefits of each individual collaboration rather than assess the cumulative effect of a university's intellectual resources on upgrading the local industries, or improving the social environment and/or cultural environment in a region. The social services provided through the universities, due to the influence of the evaluation system, may eventually be regarded as fragmented and temporary, and will therefore prevent a meaningful integration of services and a comprehensive support of the long-term strategies for regional economic and social growth and development.

3.3 Insufficient Systemic and Scientific Nature of Evaluation Indicators

The primary issue with how most evaluation indicators are designed is generally due to their reliance on explicit quantitative data with little adherence to the many complexities associated with social service functions. There is little emphasis on soft contribution areas that are not easily quantifiable, such as local cultural heritage, local-level grassroots community governance and regional technical and skill talent development, in favour of indicators that tend to focus exclusively on easily quantifiable factors. As a result of this bias, the way in which universities allocate resources and expend energy toward providing social services has been affected negatively. Consequently, some jobs that could produce significant social value and, therefore, should be considered as social service jobs, are frequently marginalised because they do not provide immediate economic return. A second problem with existing evaluations is that they provide a relatively static view of social service delivery by universities, thereby making it a challenge for universities to be able to respond to the diverse and changing social service delivery needs experienced by specific regions and based on the developmental stage of the region. Scientific improvements in the area of developing future social service evaluation indicators will require that qualitative descriptions of the underlying processes used by universities and of the long-term implications of those processes should be reflected within the overall structure of social service evaluation indicator designs.

3.4 Low Efficiency in Evaluation Implementation Mechanisms and Application of Results

In the specific implementation process, the organization and implementation of evaluation activities often have a temporary and closed color, and the process relies heavily on the summary materials and limited data reports provided by the university itself. There is a lack of in-depth participation from multiple stakeholders such as industry enterprises or community service recipients in the evaluation process, and there is also a lack of effective mechanisms for long-term tracking and dynamic monitoring of the service process. The evaluation conclusions generated from this are often based on fragmented information, which makes it difficult to fully reflect the true benefits and sustained impact of social service activities. The evaluation results are often presented in a simple level assessment or

work summary report, which contains less specific diagnosis and cause analysis of service shortcomings, and lacks clear guidance on future improvement directions. This situation makes it easy for evaluation activities to evolve into a cyclical management process, failing to fully utilize their intended decision support and continuous improvement functions, resulting in a significant gap between valuable evaluation resource investment and actual efficiency output (Tan, 2013)

3.5 The Contradiction between Homogenization of Evaluation Standards and the Development of Local University Characteristics

There is a profound tension between the homogenization standards commonly present in evaluation activities and the characteristic development paths formed by local universities relying on regional endowments. The current evaluation framework often tends to use a relatively unified set of quantitative indicators to measure the social service effectiveness of all universities, which fails to fully consider the significant differences in industrial structure, cultural resources, and development stages among different regions. Universities serving the transformation of old industrial bases and those located in ecological tourism or agricultural production areas should have different focuses, models, and core values of social services. However, homogeneous evaluation criteria guide them to pursue similar types of cooperative projects and outcome forms. This orientation forces some local universities to invest limited resources in service areas that are not closely related to their own disciplinary strengths and regional needs, in order to gain recognition in evaluations. As a result, the service characteristics of universities gradually become blurred, and it is difficult to establish deep and long-term connections with local development needs (Han & Dong, 2013).

4. Establishing an Evaluation System for Local Universities' Social Service Functions Guided by High-Quality Development

4.1 Core Principles and Value Orientation of Evaluation

The construction of a new evaluation system must first establish the fundamental principles on which it operates, which directly determine the focus and value judgment criteria of evaluation activities. The primary principle is to adhere to the orientation of real needs, which means that evaluation activities must have the ability to penetrate written agreements and summary reports, deeply analyze whether the intellectual services of universities accurately respond to specific technological bottlenecks encountered in regional industrial upgrading, practical difficulties faced by public governance, or practical needs for regional cultural inheritance and development. The evaluation process needs to adhere to the principle of equal emphasis on both process and results. While paying attention to terminal outputs such as horizontal funding and patent quantity, equal emphasis should be placed on the depth of cooperation between university research teams and local enterprises in research and development, the adaptability and stability of technical solutions in practical application scenarios, and the dynamic matching degree between talent training programs and local labor market demands (Zhang, 2012). The system design also needs to adhere to the principle of diverse collaboration, which is

reflected in the systematic inclusion of important external perspectives such as the strategic satisfaction of local government departments, the utility evaluation of technical services by industry enterprises, and the perceived benefits of cultural public welfare projects by communities and the public into the scope of evaluation evidence collection and comprehensive analysis. These principles together form a stable value framework aimed at guiding evaluation activities beyond the measurement of isolated outcomes, and instead examining the substantive depth and sustainability of the connection between the social service functions of universities and the high-quality development process of the region.

4.2 Designing a Multi-Dimensional Evaluation Indicator System

The design of a multidimensional evaluation index system must be rooted in the real-life scenarios of social service activities in local universities, and its architecture aims to comprehensively capture the breadth, depth, and sustained impact of service activities. The first key dimension focuses on the substantive benefits of technology services and industrial support, and specific indicators need to consider the actual number and quality of cases of the transformation of university research achievements in the local industrial chain. The focus is on evaluating whether the technological solutions have truly solved the common technical problems of enterprises or promoted the upgrading of specific processes, rather than just counting the number of signed contracts. The second dimension focuses on the degree of integration between cultural leadership and community construction, with observation points including the adoption of university think tank reports by local governments and their transformation into specific policies, as well as practical examples of the improvement of the humanistic environment brought about by the continuous participation of faculty and student teams in community governance, cultural heritage protection, and other projects. The third dimension points to the adaptability of talent cultivation and knowledge dissemination (Xia, Gao, & Cheng, 2011). The indicator design should measure whether the scale and structure of industrial and technical personnel trained and trained by universities for local orientation meet the evolving needs of the regional labor market, and evaluate the social cognitive enhancement effect generated by science popularization activities and open courses for the public. The fourth dimension requires evaluating the organizational mechanism and sustainable development capability of service activities, such as observing the stable operation period of school enterprise joint R&D platforms or practice bases, the iterative deepening of joint research projects, and the long-term cooperation network formed thereby. These interrelated dimensions together form a three-dimensional observation network, designed to guide the social service work of universities from scattered project driven to systematic empowerment deeply integrated with regional development.

4.3 Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Evaluation Methods

The effective implementation of evaluation work needs to go beyond the limitations of a single method, and its core lies in the organic integration of qualitative tools that reflect the depth of the process and the perception of the subject with quantitative means that provide objective comparison benchmarks. Qualitative methods focus on obtaining fresh first-hand information through in-depth interviews and

field observations, such as conducting semi-structured interviews with local enterprise managers who have received technical services to gain a deeper understanding of whether university solutions have truly solved long-standing technological problems in actual production environments, or conducting follow-up interviews with teachers, students, and residents who have participated in community planning projects to carefully examine the specific impact of the project on local social networks and residents' sense of identity. Case studies, as another important qualitative tool, can provide a panoramic analysis of typical service platforms or landmark service projects jointly built by universities and local governments. The focus is on sorting out the entire process logic from demand matching, resource integration to output and application of results, revealing the internal mechanism of successful experiences and the common challenges faced (Ruan, 2025). Quantitative methods are responsible for systematically collecting and analyzing observable and statistically significant elements, such as classifying and analyzing technical service contracts signed between universities and local institutions within a specific period, monitoring the direct economic benefits generated by patent conversion, or quantifying the number of participants, coverage, and follow-up feedback data of training programs aimed at local areas. The integration of these two methods is not simply parallel, but emphasizes mutual verification and supplementation at different stages of evaluation. Qualitative findings can provide background and mechanism explanations for the interpretation of quantitative data, while quantitative trends can verify the universality and representativeness of qualitative judgments, ultimately serving a more three-dimensional and credible judgment of the comprehensive effectiveness of social service functions in universities (Li, 2024).

4.4 Evaluation Implementation and Dynamic Monitoring Mechanisms

The evaluation implementation subject should be an independent third-party professional organization or a specialized committee composed of education departments, industry representatives, and university experts. The subject is responsible for formulating detailed evaluation work procedures and schedules. The specific operation begins with designing standardized data collection forms and qualitative research outlines around a multidimensional indicator system, clarifying the source requirements and format specifications for each piece of evidence. The evaluation team conducted document analysis on the annual social service report submitted by universities in accordance with regulations, and organized multiple rounds of interviews and on-site visits covering local government departments, cooperative enterprises, community organizations, and relevant teams within the university to cross validate the actual effectiveness of services and feedback from all parties. The dynamic monitoring mechanism is established based on a continuously updated social service project management database, which not only records the basic information and funding data of the project, but also tracks the long-term effect indicators generated after the project is completed, such as the stable application of technical solutions in the production line, the retention and development status of graduates in local key industries, etc. The monitoring activities adopt a combination of regular sampling review and in-depth tracking of key cases, such as conducting follow-up visits every two

years to service projects identified as excellent in the previous evaluation, evaluating their sustainability and benchmarking with new regional development needs. The design of the entire mechanism emphasizes the transformation of evaluation activities from periodic evaluation to normalized and accompanying monitoring. The continuous data and regular analysis reports produced by it provide real-time and reliable basis for universities to adjust their service direction and optimize resource allocation, and also enable the evaluation conclusions to be continuously iterated and improved with the deepening of service practice (Ren & Bu, 2012).

4.5 Dynamic Adjustment and Iteration Mechanism of the Evaluation System

There is a significant amount of flexibility in an evaluation system's ability to change based on internal and external developments; therefore, an evaluation system requires an organisation to manage clearly defined systems and processes to keep the systems dynamic through time. Each evaluation cycle must have a representative, who will provide an annual summary of the results of the evaluation cycle, and indicate how the indicator data was distributed throughout the cycle, summarise the common issues identified in the evaluation process, and highlight the recommendations for improvement made by the various stakeholders, including localities and universities. A permanent revision committee consisting of regional development researchers, evaluation experts, and university representatives will receive the summary reports to identify specific changes to make to indicator weights, observation points, or methods for collecting data. Proposed revisions must have small-scale pilot operations conducted prior to full implementation, including selecting different types of local universities to use in a simulated evaluation to quantify the validity and practical application of the new indicators or methods proposed. The pilot results, along with the reasons for revision, need to be publicly solicited for opinions from the society. After necessary modifications, they will be formally included in the implementation plan for the next round of evaluation. This institutionalized iterative process ensures that the evaluation system will not become rigid and can actively adapt to the new requirements and expectations for the social service functions of local universities in the stage of high-quality development. It also enables universities to maintain reasonable expectations for the evolution of evaluation standards and make preparations in advance.

5. Optimizing Implementation Pathways for Evaluating Local Universities' Social Service Functions

5.1 Strengthening Evaluation Orientation Toward Moral Education and Regional Development

The specific implementation of evaluation activities must fundamentally establish a value scale that emphasizes both moral education and service areas. This orientation needs to be transformed into actionable evaluation points and integrated into practice. Evaluators should pay systematic attention to whether the project design provides students with real production practice scenarios or social research opportunities when examining social service projects, and whether the social responsibility, practical innovation ability, and teamwork spirit demonstrated by students during the participation process are

effectively recorded and feedback is obtained. For the strengthening of regional development orientation, it is required that the evaluation process directly connects with local development planning documents and industrial policies, focusing on whether the service resource layout of universities accurately responds to the industrial chain needs of regional key development, specific pain points of rural revitalization, or weak links in public service improvement. Evaluation activities can establish a dedicated section, requiring universities to state the corresponding relationship between their key service projects and local development needs, as well as their expected contributions, and invite local governments and industry representatives to conduct evaluation and verification on this matter (Song, 2011). This deep embedding process makes evaluation itself a driving force that guides university teachers and students to closely integrate professional knowledge learning, character cultivation, and solving real regional problems, ensuring that social service activities not only produce practical benefits but also return to the essence of education.

5.2 Improving Evaluation Mechanisms for Multi-Stakeholder Collaborative Participation

The key to building an effective evaluation mechanism lies in breaking the internal closed loop of universities, and its core operation lies in establishing a permanent evaluation committee composed of relevant departments of local governments, local key industry associations, technical representatives of cooperative enterprises, and community public representatives. The committee is responsible for jointly reviewing the social service effectiveness materials submitted by universities during the evaluation period, with a focus on conducting multiple rounds of discussions on topics such as the match between service projects and regional actual needs, the industrial applicability of technical solutions, and the community acceptance of cultural service projects. Design a specialized section for the evaluation process, inviting the responsible person of the beneficiary enterprise to provide a detailed presentation on the specific improvement effects and remaining issues of the university's technical services on the production line, or to have community representatives provide on-site feedback on the actual changes and sustained expectations brought about by the public welfare project. These qualitative opinions and satisfaction survey data from multiple stakeholders will be included in the comprehensive evaluation and analysis framework together with the quantitative evidence provided by universities, forming a multi perspective mutually confirmed evaluation basis. The mechanism guarantee is reflected in granting the committee the power to revise the preliminary conclusions of the evaluation, ensuring that the perceptions and demands of different stakeholders are substantially reflected in the final evaluation report, thereby enhancing the credibility and broad recognition of the guiding role of the evaluation results (Tang & Jin, 2016).

5.3 Promoting Evaluation Data Platform Construction and Information Integration

The evolution of evaluation work through science will occur through the development of an ongoing data platform that will continually collect and process information from many sources. The development of the data platform will begin with the harmonization of the different standards and formats of data collected by each of the various schools' departments and service providers. The

platform will have a structure that will include basic modules such as project management, progress reports, partner feedback, and regional economic data connections. The primary purpose of the platform will be to allow university departments to enter the necessary detailed project and service information, as well as evidence of the service provided and accomplishments made at each phase through use of a standardized template. Additionally, the technology framework of the platform must include a means to provide a secure data interface to permit access for authorized users to the local government, industry databases, labor market information networks, and important business and industrial systems. This will enable ongoing access to important, timely macroeconomic indicators and external evaluation information. The embedded verification logic and correlation analysis features will assist in completing and verifying the accuracy of data on the platform through the generation of comprehensive multidimensional statistical reports that will assist with ongoing monitoring. The data management standards must clarify the update cycle, access permissions, and anonymization rules for various types of data, ensuring the security of sensitive information while guaranteeing that members of the evaluation committee can access and analyze the necessary materials within their authorized scope, thus integrating scattered information fragments into a coherent evidence chain that supports comprehensive evaluation.

5.4 Enhancing Feedback of Evaluation Results and Closed-Loop Management for Improvement

The final report issued by the evaluation agency must go beyond simple rating, and its core content should include a detailed diagnosis of the strengths and weaknesses of social services in universities, as well as evidence-based analysis of the causes. Within the prescribed time limit after the completion of the report, the evaluation agency shall convene a special feedback and communication meeting with relevant management departments, representatives of the main service teams, and local and enterprise members in the evaluation committee of the university, to interpret the evaluation findings item by item and listen to inquiries and supplementary explanations from all parties. Universities must develop targeted improvement plans in subsequent semesters based on report recommendations and conference consensus, specifying improvement goals, specific measures, responsible departments, and expected completion deadlines. The plan must be submitted to the evaluation committee for record. The dynamic monitoring mechanism will subsequently include the items listed in the improvement plan in the scope of regular tracking, requiring universities to regularly submit progress reports and provide corresponding evidence. The committee may conduct mid-term inspections of key improvement items. When the next round of evaluation activities is launched, the evaluation party must conduct a special review of the improvement situation of the problems pointed out in the previous round, and use the review results as an important basis for measuring the development ability and continuous improvement willingness of social services in universities, thus forming a complete management loop from evaluation, feedback to improvement and review (Fan & Shen, 2024).

6. Conclusion

From the perspective of assessing social service delivery through the lens of high-quality development, a new model of educational value should shift to emphasise the full depth of social benefit, sustainability and component components of institution service delivery as central to institution quality assessment and evaluation. When integrated and implemented with a scientific evaluation model, the goals of linking institution theory with practice is best served by directing institution resource flow toward defined areas of focus for the regional development of key communities. In order to implement the positive changes initiated by development of evaluation models for social services delivered by institutions, local policies and local resources must be coordinated. In addition, further research into how feedback loops help to motivate institutions internally to generate a virtuous cycle of social service delivery and educational outcomes will provide insight into the most effective ways to increase access to quality educational services.

Topic source:

1. Key Research Project of the Chinese Society of Higher Education in 2025: "Research on the Evaluation Index System of Local Universities Serving the High Quality Development of Local Economy" (Project No. 25DF0206)
2. Shandong Federation of Social Sciences 2025 Humanities and Social Sciences Project Cooperation Special Project: "Research on the Construction of Evaluation Index System for High Quality Development of Preschool Education"

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