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Discrepancy in Quality Assurance: A case study of the influence of the first nation-wide evaluation of universities in China (0183)

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Over the last two decades, higher education in China has experienced an unprecedented expansion. The number of undergraduates increased from 3,174,362 in 1997 to 22,077,870 in 2010. In the meantime, the growth of the number of teachers did not correspond with the increase in the number of students. In 1997 there were 404,471 full-time teachers and in 2010 the number had only reached 1,343,127. Serious concerns arose over the quality of undergraduate education. Consequently, the government initiated the Undergraduate Teaching Evaluation (UTE) to ensure the quality of teaching.

The UTE was the first nation-wide evaluation of universities in China. From 2003 to 2008, 589 universities were evaluated. Many articles have been published discussing the influence of the UTE in China. However, the majority of them are commentaries, which express personal opinions based on professional judgement. In these articles there is a limited amount of empirical research and very little of this empirical research focuses on how the UTE influences teachers and their practice.

To understand the influence of the UTE on university policy and on teachers' day-to-day practice, this study adopted an in-depth case study approach. One university was selected for this case study. Within this university, a humanities department, a social sciences department and a sciences department were chosen for interview. In each department, two heads of department, two professors and two lecturers were interviewed.

This research has found that major discrepancies exist in quality assurance. It means that the UTE has little influence on the university's quality assurance mechanisms and neither the UTE nor the university's quality assurance mechanisms are among those factors that have made major contribution to the improvement of teaching.

The university quality assurance mechanisms implemented at departments were: class observation by leaders or inspectors, student evaluation of teachers and teacher appraisal, but none of these quality assurance mechanisms were initiated by the UTE. The case university started to prepare for the UTE one year before the inspection. Although the government did not mention any consequence of failing the UTE, the university leaders were worried about potential consequences, as the government had control over so many resources such as funding, appointing university leaders and quotas for student recruitments, teacher recruitments and professorships and so on. Bad results in

the UTE might be punished by cuts in funding, a dismissal of university leaders or a decrease in quotas. Because of the potential consequences associated with the UTE, the university leaders treated the UTE inspection seriously. To ensure a good result, the university leaders requested departments to focus on areas that could be presented to evaluators, such as student examination papers, dissertations, laboratories and libraries. The heads of department and some teachers considered that one of the prominent influences of the UTE was the standardisation, for example the standardised management in archiving syllabuses, examination papers, students' examination results and analysing students' examination results. However, other heads and teachers regarded the UTE as a distraction of teaching. Neither the heads of department nor the teachers mentioned that the UTE contributed to the improvement of teaching.

In relation to the existing quality assurance mechanisms at the case university, the heads of department supposed that class observation by leaders or inspectors, student evaluation of teachers and teacher appraisal were contributing to quality teaching. However, none of the mechanisms was mentioned voluntarily by teachers when they were asked what had helped them to improve teaching. When teachers were asked particularly about these mechanisms, only the class observation by leaders or inspectors was considered helpful and mainly by teachers from the humanities department. The lesson learned from the humanities department was: in order to be able to contribute to the improvement of teaching the class observation by leaders or inspectors had to be conducted in a way that made teachers feel that leaders or inspectors were peers.

The heads of department assumed that the student evaluation of teachers was effectively working to ensure the quality of teaching. In fact, many teachers did not think it was helpful for improving teaching, because they doubted about the reliability of student evaluation. They questioned students' abilities to rate teachers objectively. Because of this, many teachers were not interested in knowing the results of the student evaluation of teachers. On the other hand, the university and the departments were reluctant to inform the teachers about their results in student evaluation. Consequently, the student evaluation of teachers was unable to help teachers to improve teaching. The researcher argues that the content and the management of the student evaluation of teachers should be reformed in order to help teachers to improve teaching.

The teacher appraisal policy at the case university appraised teachers on the basis of their teaching and research. In terms of teaching, professors and lecturers were requested to complete certain teaching workload. Although this policy was fully implemented across the three departments, this requirement could only ensure the quantity of teaching. The quality of teaching was ensured by the practice of promotion committees. At each department, there was a committee responsible for taking promotion decision. The committee considered both teaching and research achievements. Results from the class observation by leaders or inspectors and the student evaluation of teachers were only used as reference for teachers' teaching achievements. However, despite university's effort to bring balance between teaching and research, the teachers still felt that

there was more pressure on them to deliver high quality research than high quality teaching in higher education.

Interestingly, what teachers perceived helpful for improving teaching were neither national nor university quality assurance mechanisms. They were: passion, professional ethics, students and close colleagues. Indeed, these areas have been either overlooked or undermined by current quality assurance mechanisms. The researcher argues that new quality assurance mechanisms should be put forward to facilitate these areas. The finding of this research is able to cast some light on the transformation of the existing quality assurance mechanisms into the new mechanisms that can effectively help teachers to improve teaching.