

Outline of Paper Proposal

The impact of the Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education scheme on the evaluated higher education institutions in China (0164)

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Research background

Quality has become a central focus in the public debate about higher education in China over the last decade. Based on some earlier informal evaluation regulations, the Ministry of Education (MOE) issued the *Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education* (QAUE) project in 2002. In this project, all HEIs should be evaluated within a period of five years on a rolling basis. It focuses on the teaching quality on the institutional level. The first round of review was finished in mid-2008, with 589 HEIs evaluated (HEEC, 2008). After working for one full cycle, academic research is necessary to explore its impact on the HEIs that have been evaluated.

The research question

What is the impact of the QAUE scheme on university change in China?

Research methods

This research used a case study to investigate the impact of the QAUE. Three universities with different statuses were chosen as cases. The data of these cases were collected through document analysis and semi-structured interviews. At first, the related documents of these three institutions were reviewed, including the published self-evaluation reports and the reform projects based on the recommendations of external evaluators. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the internal stakeholders (university leaders, teachers and students) to explore their perceptions of the change that happened in the evaluated universities as a result of the QAUE.

The expected impact of the QAUE

In terms of the context underlying the emergence of higher education quality

assessment, the objectives defined in the QAUE policy discourse and its evaluation criteria, the impact of the QAUE might involve the following dimensions:

- *Resource commitment*: The QAUE intends to push universities (and local states) to increase resource commitment to undergraduate education, improving their infrastructures and teaching staff, in order to bridge the “quality gap” (Barnett, 1992) caused by the expanding student enrolments and the diminishing unit costs;
- *University identification*: In the context of the isomorphism of higher education institutions in China, the QAUE stimulates them to rethink their positioning in the whole higher education system, and encourages them to develop brand programmes rather than blindly imitating other institutions;
- *Quality management*: The QAUE intends to push universities to adapt their administrative ways to the growth and diversification of both student and teacher bodies. It encourages strict but personalized management. Furthermore, it urges universities to set up the quality standards for every procedure of teaching and to establish their own internal quality monitoring and assurance mechanisms;
- *Teaching and learning*: The QAUE impels universities to improve their teaching and learning (both teaching contents and teaching methods), in order to respond to more and more criticisms on quality decline of higher education in China;
- *Teaching-research balance*: In the context that research gets more and more concerns from Chinese universities, the QAUE expects to direct the balance between teaching and research, from the resource allocation of institutions to the commitment of individual teachers.

The empirical results

- The case study shows that, firstly, the QAUE has significantly facilitated the improvement of teaching infrastructures and staff in the evaluated HEIs, which was regarded as one of the most noticeable effects of the QAUE by the interviewees.
- Secondly, the QAUE has pushed the evaluated universities to reflect on their positioning in the whole higher education system and how to prepare students for

their future career; it has also made them realize the importance of creating brand programmes. However, the QAUE did not tell universities what brand programmes to develop, which considerably depends on their own initiatives.

- Thirdly, the QAUE has stimulated the evaluated institutions to revise their administrative regulations, which have brought on the stricter disciplines for teachers and students. Furthermore, the specific quality standards for every procedure of teaching and complete internal quality monitoring systems have emerged in most of the evaluated institutions.
- Fourthly, the impact of the QAUE on the teaching/learning process is trivial. It has not triggered visible change of curriculum design and teaching methods, except that the advanced teaching aids have been used more and the practical training courses have increased, as a result of the improvement of teaching facilities, such as multi-media and experimental equipment.
- Fifthly, in order to respond to the requirements of the QAUE for teaching-research balance, the evaluated institutions have increased the funding allocation for teaching. They have also adjusted their assessment criteria of teacher performance, adding the weight of teaching relative to research productivity. However, the impact of these strategies on teachers' behaviours is limited. Research still engages most of their time and energies.

Discussion of research findings

The case study indicates that, as an external pressure, the QAUE indeed has stimulated university change in China, although not as much as expected. The extent of change is a result of the interaction between the designs of the quality assessment scheme and the characteristics of the evaluated institutions.

- Firstly, the effects of the QAUE on the various dimensions of quality provisions are not equivalent. The improvement of resource commitment and quality management is much more significant than the change of teaching and learning. The indicators with quantitative standards easily assessed by the external

- evaluators seem more influential than those with ambiguous evaluation criteria;
- Secondly, the changes driven by the QAUE in the institutions with various statuses are also not the same. By and large, as we move from the top institutions to the low-level ones, the effects are more and more significant. The extent of change is related with the gap between the existing condition of an institution and the standards that the QAUE set up, as well as the resources and capabilities that the institution possesses.
 - Thirdly, with regard to the continuity of the change that the QAUE has triggered, the case study reveals that when the new ways of quality provisions are accepted by the stakeholders involved in the changing process, the change would continue properly; if not, the impact tends to be transitory.

References:

Barnett, R. (1992). *Improving Higher Education: Total Quality Care*. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press.

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