

Developing Learning Focused Quality Assurance in Chinese Higher Education (0257)

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In the past two decades Chinese higher education has been through a process of profound restructuring, decentralisation, introduction of market incentives, university mergers, internationalisation, and enlarging student enrolments. Along with the shift into mass higher education, the issue of quality has become a concern and attracted a lot of attention in the sector of Chinese higher education. While quality assurance is becoming integrated into the fabric of Chinese higher education, higher education globally is entering an era in which a more nuanced understating of what quality assurance and quality process can or cannot do prevails (Stensaker, 2008). This study is conducted in the background of the prevailing quality culture, and focus on student learning against the widely adapted top-down quality assurance schemes. The purpose of this study is to develop a learning focused quality assurance in Chinese higher education to achieve continuous quality improvement.

In Chinese higher education, quality assurance schemes have been initiated by the national authority (Ministry of Education), with a quasi-independent agency (Higher Education Evaluation Centre) responsible for conducting various types of evaluations of higher education according to a predefined set of criteria. This national government agency directly controls evaluation process, and indirectly supervises institutional quality assurance schemes which are designed by the national authorities based on their identified problems in Chinese higher education and the agreed policies to address these problems. In the external quality evaluation practice, Undergraduate Teaching Evaluation Index provides the picture of a technical process where 'checks and balances' according to the pre-defined criteria are seen as a central part of the processes. Obviously, this is a top-down process. At the receiving end of this process are Chinese higher education institutions in the external quality assurance system, and academics and students in the quality assurance systems inside Chinese universities. Although in the implementation process the involvement of higher education institutions, academics and students at the receiving end is in principle encouraged, this involvement is expected to support the top-down agenda, and not supposed to interfere with the influence the implementing process. The role of the quality assurance agency, Higher Education Evaluation Centre, is safeguarding the expected understanding and implementation. The rationale here is that the outcomes should match the original policy aims, objectives and indicators. The implicit understanding is that the receiving end of both academics and students should not interfere with and influence the process. This pattern of quality assurance is a 'retrospective' one which looks back to what has already been done and makes a summative judgement against external standards. With this approach, procedures are top-down and bureaucratic with accountability as a high priority and quantifying some of presumed indicators of good teaching and good management, and coming to some kind of cost-benefit decision (Biggs, 2001).

Although the pace and intensity of quality assurance activities have accelerated greatly in Chinese higher education, their effects on the improvement of student learning are proved to be quite limited. There is a great number of studies and publications on the issue of quality assurance in higher education, but most of the studies have difficulties in providing substantial evidence that the

core processes of higher education – teaching and learning --- are improved as a consequence (Stensaker, 2008). The intuitive answer is that most studies have not reached the needed level of sophistication, but as Stensaker (2008) points out, it is not necessary a problem just related to methodology, but the underlying assumption of quality assurance and the standard top-down implementation approach. Here is a conflict between the use of a retrospective quality assurance focuses on control, and the intention to achieve the mission which may not be sustained by control only. Therefore, it is the time for us to explore changing quality assurance into a new paradigm directly addressing learning.

At the theoretical level, there are several well-articulated models in the literature of higher education quality assurance (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002) which focus on student, including *the transformative model* (Harvey & Knight, 1996) focusing on student experience; *the engagement model* focusing on student, faculty and administrative engagement in teaching and learning (Haworth & Conrad, 1997); *the university of learning model* emphasising that the quality of a university is in the quality of learning, which has a lot to do with qualities of different ways of seeing (Bowden & Marton, 1998); *the responsive university model* emphasising student-centred programmes, community-centred outreach and nation-centred research; and *the holistic model for quality*, emphasising learning and organisational culture in quality management with the advocacy for system ideas and systematic action in higher education (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002, 2005). The proposed learning focused quality assurance is based on the above models and aims at improving the quality of Chinese higher education.

In the learning focused quality assurance, the focus of quality assurance moves away from on good teaching in the sense of good presentation and management of subject content towards good learning, which is significant, up-to-date, and enduring in both value and depth (Sadler, 2000, p.3). Learning focused quality assurance has the following features:

- More internally driven at Chinese higher education institutions, with emphasis on self-regulation, self-planning, self-evaluation, and the support of institutional infrastructures.
- Student learning centred: It emphasises how and to what extent students engage with activities that are likely to lead to productive learning.
- Transforming quality management from senior management-based to teacher-and-student-based: teachers and students should be involved, and should engage themselves in the quality development of their own teaching and learning.
- Knowledge based: Every university, with its own knowledge repertoire and knowledge map, may achieve better quality management and improvement through managing its knowledge repertoire and optimising its quality-generation processes.
- Learning focused quality assurance focuses overall on the empowerment of the course team across all of the boundaries to facilitate a dialogue centred on learning.
- Learning focused quality assurance encourages and disseminate pedagogical research, the scholarship of learning and teaching, and research-informed teaching in higher education with the aim of empowering students to acquire knowledge, skills and the will to learn.

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