

# High Academic Standard with Undesired Result: the Quandary of Quality Management in Higher Education

-- A Case Study on Higher Education Quality Management in China

## 1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, higher education worldwide has gone through a significant change in the form of increased students and institution, diversification in student body, programmes and institutions as well as funding cuts that have occurred in many countries (Green, 1994; Brennan & Shah, 2000; Harvey & Askling, 2003). And public concern on the quality of higher education has increased considerably in this context. Since 1999, the Chinese higher education system has also been expanding. And the main concern of higher education in China has shifted from the previous insufficient opportunities with relatively excessive demand to its quality. The Chinese government has also taken various steps, such as institutional evaluation on undergraduate teaching, the 'Quality Project', etc., in order to assure and enhance the quality in spite of the rapid expansion. With the governmental emphasis and public concern on quality of higher education, the higher education institutions are also making their endeavor to enhance the quality of their educational provision.

This study will first review the quality management steps taken by the Chinese higher education institutions, and then focus on the impact of the graduate rate indicator on academic standard-keeping. The empirical basis of the study, including content analysis of national and institutional policies and interviews with teaching staff, is drawn from a PhD project on the quality of higher education with a case study of China. The PhD study in general looks into the role of teaching and learning in higher education quality and quality assurance, and the ways this is understood in institution discourse, by teachers and by students.

## 2. The changed context of academic quality assurance

With the expansion and external concern on the quality of higher education, management cultures from business and manufacturing industry has been gradually imported in the higher education sector. Consequently various approaches of quality assurance and enhancement have been established. The establishment of formal quality assurance agencies in many countries is only one conspicuous incarnation of the quality concern. And within higher education institution, the traditionally enjoyed personal autonomy and individualism is more and more challenged by policies and regulations concerning quality.

Institutions of higher education have always possessed mechanisms for assuring the quality of their work such as qualification for admission and degree conferment, for professor-promotion, appointment for an academic post, peer review of research and publications (Brennan and Shah, 2000: 2). Small, elite systems of higher education could rest their claims to quality on selectivity: only the 'best' were admitted as

students, only the most able were allowed to teach them (Brennan and Shah, 2000: 20-21). The mass higher education systems resulted from expansion have no basis for such claim. Expansion drew attention to the quality of higher education while removing the principal argument for it – exclusiveness. Now the institutions have to demonstrate that they have satisfactory performance.

Under such situation, one way of rebuilding quality confidence is to implement rigid managerial control of the educational process. And this is one of the main approaches taken by the Chinese higher education institutions.

### **3. Quality management in Chinese higher education**

At national level, China has taken quite a few steps in the quality management of higher education. Shortly after the expansion in higher education, China began to develop a nation-wide formal evaluation system known as the Chinese approach to quality assurance. Most noticeable are the undergraduate teaching evaluation and the 'Quality Project'.

In response to the national policies concerning quality of higher education, the institutions are also active in demonstrating their quality. One of the outstanding steps they took was to show that they have comprehensive and well-implemented documents regulating all internal operation, including their planning, codes of practice, frameworks, rules, procedures, regulations and policies (Zou et al, forthcoming).

### **4. The quandaries of the Chinese institutional quality management**

When the university takes action for quality enhancement, one of the approaches is to implement stricter management (For example, to guarantee the attendance rate of courses by requiring the teachers to call the roll in class to make sure that the students are attended) and stick to higher academic criteria.

The problem of sticking to higher academic criteria is serious for both the university and teachers, and also the students. Strictly implementing the academic criteria and the university policy means, if a student doesn't pass the exam, the teacher gives him/her a non-pass; and if the non-passes of a student rise at a certain number he/she will be flunk out according to the university policy, which decreases the graduate rate. Besides, the non-pass record can further undermine the students in job-haunting.

For the teachers, the strict requirement can make him/her a bad reputation among students (for example, being called 'killer teacher') and make his/her course unpopular among students or make him/her get a low score in the students' assessment on teaching. The non-pass rate is also relevant in the assessment on teachers. There is the assumption that well-designed examinations will result in a normal distribution of the student scores; and the standard deviation will not exceed a certain amount. And if the non-pass rate of a course exceeds a certain percentage (for example 50%), it symbolizes either a low quality of teaching or the exam has been given in a too difficult way by the teacher (In China, most of the course exams are constructed and held by the teacher who teaches the course).

For the university, the graduate (completion) rate and employment rate are among the references the Ministry of Education employs to evaluate the universities. Rising academic criteria will decrease both graduate rate and employment rate, which gives the institution a low placement.

## 5. Conclusion

Employing a case study into the quality management of Chinese higher education, this study demonstrates a quandary in higher education quality management caused by the different values attached to the concept of quality. On one hand, quality means the higher education institution keeps a high academic standard. On the other hand, it means students, as many as possible, have achieved the academic level stipulated by the standard, and in the managerial system this is indicated by graduate rate. The quandary is: when the academic standard is raised or rigidly implemented (realization of academic quality), more students tend to fail in getting their diploma (low graduate rate), which indicates low quality in the managerial system.

## Reference

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