

Chapter 2

Higher Education Quality Assessment and University Change: A Theoretical Approach

2.1 Introduction

Many authors have studied the impact of quality assessment on universities and found that the impact relates to the characteristics of external quality assessment schemes and the national and institutional context of the evaluated universities, as well as their initiatives and responses (Brennan and Shah 2000; Haapakorpi 2011; Hodson and Thomas 2003; Malau-Aduli et al. 2011; Stensaker 2008). However, there has been little analysis of the way in which quality assessment interacts with the evaluated institutions and generates different outcomes. In order to analyse the impact of the Chinese quality assessment schemes, this chapter proposes theoretical approaches to understanding how quality assessment causes university change.

The first part of this chapter focuses on quality assessment in higher education. Firstly, it illustrates the context in which quality assessment emerged in higher education systems and its intended objectives. Secondly, it describes the approaches to operating quality assessment. Before that, the definitions of quality in higher education are discussed, which are linked to the approaches to assessing it. Thirdly, having reviewed impact studies of quality assessment, the main effect of quality assessment on the evaluated universities is summarised. The determining factors of the impact are also proposed tentatively. The second part of the chapter explores the ways in which quality assessment affects the internal life of universities at the theoretical level. Related theories of organisational change, the working processes and structures of higher education systems, and the operating mechanism of quality assessment are examined. Building on these theories, a perspective for understanding the ways in which quality assessment causes university change is proposed.

2.2 Quality Assessment in Higher Education

2.2.1 *Higher Education Reforms and the Rise of Quality Issues*

Concern about quality in higher education is not a new phenomenon. Universities have always possessed mechanisms for assuring the quality of their work as part of the academic tradition, until the mid-1980s. However, these were mainly internal to the higher education institutions and systems, and had never been imposed by external authorities. Beginning in the 1980s, state policy-makers in the USA, quickly followed by national policy-makers in France and the UK, became concerned with academic quality and began experimenting with new policy instruments designed primarily to assure and improve the quality of teaching and student learning in the tertiary sector. This interest in academic quality spread rapidly to other nations, and we now have over a quarter of a century of experience with new forms of external academic quality assurance (Dill 2010). The context in which it became a concern to the outside world has been examined by many researchers (Vroeyenstijn 1995; Brennan and Shah 2000; Morley 2003; Huisman and Currie 2004; Trow 1996). They argue that the main drivers of the quality assessment movement include the massification and diversification of higher education and the decreasing unit funding, the changing relationship between higher education and the state, the general quest for better public services derived from the New Public Management theories, and the internationalisation and globalisation of higher education.

Massification and diversification of higher education

As proposed by Brennan and Shah (2000), Trow (1996), Morley (2003) and Dill (2010), the expansion of higher education has drawn attention to the issue of quality. The prime traditional mechanisms for achieving quality (namely exclusiveness or selectivity) have been removed and replaced by the need to demonstrate it. With expansion has come diversity. The growth and diversification of higher education, along with associated changes in pedagogy, require higher education systems to surrender any idea of broad common standards of academic performance between institutions and even between subjects within a single university. Students gain their degrees or credentials with widely varying levels of proficiency and at different levels of difficulty. The same qualifications have different values for students from different universities or departments. Consequently, quality assessment has been initiated as a way to control the quality of provisions in various higher education institutions, as well as to publish information about quality to stakeholders.

Decline of unit funding

As argued by Brennan and Shah (2000), expansion has made higher education more costly everywhere. Hardly anywhere have funding levels kept pace with expansion. Higher education may not always have been asked to do “more with less”, but in recent years, it has been asked to do “more with not enough” from the point of view of most higher education managers (Brennan and Shah 2000, p. 23).

Pulled in the direction of both expansion and squeezed resources, doubts about the quality of the higher education came to the fore (Barnett 1992; Vroeijenstijn 1995). As a result, quality assessment systems were introduced to help to maintain and improve the quality of provisions in the evaluated institutions.

Changing relationship between higher education and the state

Neave and van Vught (1994) describe the changing pattern of the relationship between higher education and the state as a shift from the model of state control to the model of state supervision. The state is supposed to refrain from making a detailed scrutiny of the daily life of institutions and to steer the higher education system from a distance. This raises a fundamental question, i.e. how will more autonomous institutions behave in a market-like competitive environment? Will institutions comply with existing and emerging governmental policies? In this context, governments tend to introduce mechanisms to ensure that institutions behave as they want them to behave (Rosa et al. 2006a). Consequently, quality assessment emerged, and *ex post* evaluation has replaced *ex ante* regulation.

New Public Management

New Public Management has dominated the restructuring of the public sector in Western countries over the last two decades with the aim of making them more effective and responsive. Higher education, regarded as one public service setting, has also been influenced by this new managerial thinking. One of the main principles behind New Public Management is that public actors should maintain core public service values and they should place emphasis on achieving the desired results or outcomes of service, rather than on the processes and rules of service delivery. It is assumed that efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery will be achieved by means of using private sector management techniques, and performance measurement is one of the most important techniques (Ferlie et al. 1996; Meek 2003). When it comes to higher education institutions, students tend to be viewed as customers or clients. Thus, influenced by New Public Management, quality assessment has been implemented to enhance the efficiency of universities and colleges and to try to ensure that academic provision can meet the needs of students as their clients.

Globalisation and internationalisation

In the context of globalisation and internationalisation, the exchange of students and staff, as well as the cooperation of institutions and programmes, requires condensed and reliable information about the quality provided by higher education institutions in the global space (Brennan and Shah 2000; Dill 2010). Thus, quality assessment has been employed as an information publisher to support international communication and cooperation. In addition, the growth of “policy borrowing” and the prosperity of supranational organisations have also facilitated the prevalence of quality assessment schemes in the era of globalisation (Morley 2003; Huisman and Currie 2004).

As a consequence of these new forces, the processes of academic quality assurance that traditionally were employed within universities to assure academic standards, including disciplinary norms, external examining and existing academic

governance structures, have become less effective or outmoded (Dill 2010). External quality assessment in higher education is exactly a response to the changing circumstances. Based on the context in which it emerged, the main purposes of quality assessment can be summarised as follows:

- *Improvement*: to maintain and to improve the performance quality of higher education institutions;
- *Accountability*¹: to provide accountability to society for the use of public funds;
- *Compliance*² and *control*: to ensure that higher education institutions do what governments want them to do (Vroeijenstijn 1995; Brennan and Shah 2000; Harvey and Newton 2004; Billing 2004).

Whether these purposes have been realised successfully was examined by empirical studies in specific contexts, which will be discussed in the following sections.

2.2.2 Definitions of Quality in Higher Education

Like “freedom” or “justice”, “quality” is an elusive concept. Although everyone has an instinctive understanding of what it means, it is difficult to articulate. Many people have provided a definition of quality in higher education (e.g. Harvey and Green 1993; Harvey 1995; Melrose 1998; Van Kemenade et al. 2008). One of the most cited articles on quality in higher education is by Harvey and Green (1993) entitled “defining quality”. They chose to group differing concepts of quality into five discrete, but interrelated categories: exceptional, perfection (or consistency), fitness for purpose, value for money and transformative. The *exceptional* notion of quality accepts as axiomatic that quality is something special, which can be viewed as distinctiveness, excellence or passing a set of required standards. In terms of higher education, this may equate to most people’s perception of Harvard and Cambridge universities. The *perfection (or consistency)* approach to quality focuses on process and sets specifications which it aims to meet perfectly, with two dictums: zero defects and getting things right first time. *Fitness for purpose*, which is adopted by most analysts and policy-makers in higher education, means that quality is judged in terms of the extent to which the product or service fits its stated purpose(s). The *value for money* approach to quality implies a “high standard” specification at reduced cost, and the notion of accountability is at the heart of this approach. The last definition, *quality as transformation*, does more justice to education as a process which places learners at the centre of the action: they get added value, and transformation lies in added value (Harvey and Green 1993).

¹Accountability is “the obligation to report to others, to explain, to justify, to answer questions about how resources have been used and to what effect” (Trow 1996, pp. 311).

²In the context of organisational change, compliance means conforming to a rule, such as a specification, policy, standard or law.

It seems that all the definitions of quality share an interest in doing something well, but the family of concepts differs by which criteria or by whom “doing something well” is to be judged (Barnett 2003, p. 91). Quality is a relative concept. It depends upon a “benchmark”, and it means different things to different stakeholders: governments, employers, students, academics, society and so on (Harvey and Green 1993; Vroeijenstijn 1995; Houston 2008; Iacovidou et al. 2009; Newton 2010; Olaskoaga-Larrauri et al. 2015). In governments’ eyes, quality may mean that as many students as possible finish the programme in the scheduled time with a degree of the international standard with reduced costs. Employers may focus on the knowledge, skills and attitudes graduates obtain during their period of study. For students, the quality of education may be connected to the contribution to individual development and the preparation for a position in society. The academic will probably define quality as a good academic training based on good knowledge transfer, a good learning environment and a good relationship between teaching and research (Vroeijenstijn 1995, p. 13). Anyone in a position to define quality is in a position to decide what is good and what is not good. In the words of Robert Pirsig, “quality for sheep is what the shepherd says” (Pirsig 1974, p. 392). Thus, different interest groups will have their own ideas about what constitutes quality and how to measure it (De Weert 1990; Vroeijenstijn 1995; Barnett 1992, 2003; Tam 2001). In this regard, Barnett (2003) takes quality as “ideology”. He claims that people are apt to regard quality as something which is prearranged, but quality is not a given. As an ideology, quality can never be neutral: it is not independent of certain kinds of interest (Barnett 2003; Brown 2004). In fact, quality “stands as proxy for those interests which, in turn, it masks” (Barnett 2003, p. 95).

After initial, sometimes vehement, discussions on the meaning of “quality”, a rather pragmatic consensus was reached in practice that quality means *fitness for purpose* as well as *fitness of purpose* (Westerheijden et al. 2007a). These terms originate from two basic distinctive quality assessment approaches: mission-based and standards-based evaluations. In mission-based evaluation, the higher education institution’s own statement is taken as the standard to be achieved: *fitness for self-defined purpose*. In standards-based evaluation, “external evaluation will first of all establish the ‘*fitness of purpose*’ judged against an externally given standard” (Westerheijden et al. 2007a, p. 81). To some extent, *fitness for purpose* and *fitness of purpose* are empirical terms: they can mean anything, depending on what is given as purpose(s), because there is no single understanding of what the purpose(s) of higher education is in current society (Westerheijden et al. 2007a). In this case, a quality assessment may be a process of examining *fitness for/of purposes* in universities, or a tool to direct the changes of universities’ *purposes*, or both.

In summary, from the perspective of benchmarks, interest groups and the like, many authors became engaged in defining quality in higher education. Although they did not find a generally accepted definition of quality, they found out that quality is a relative concept. There are different ways to understand quality, depending on the benchmarks adopted and the person who judges it. The understanding of quality links to the approaches to quality assessment, which is discussed below.

2.2.3 Approaches to Quality Assessment in Higher Education

Quality evaluation involves the judgment of performance against either internally or externally defined criteria (Green 1994). An external quality assessment in higher education is defined as a means of assessing the quality of what is actually provided by higher education institutions against external criteria by external experts (Pearce 1995). A general model about the specific operation of external quality assessment was proposed by van Vught and Westerheijden (1994). Based on a survey in Europe, they indicated a number of common features of national quality assessment frameworks, as follows:

- There is a national agency, tasked with the responsibility of co-coordinating and setting out the procedures and methods to be used for quality assurance of higher education institutions. They suggest that such an agency should have a legal status but be independent of government.
- Based on the procedures and methods set out by the national coordinating agency, institutions should undertake regular self-assessment and report to the assessment agency on a regular basis. For this process to be effective, the self-assessment should be undertaken by the academic staff of the institutions themselves.
- The institutional self-assessment would form the basis of an external peer review. Such an evaluation should include discussions with academic and administrative staff, students and alumni. External peers would need to be selected to represent specific expertise (such as academic and management), depending on the focus and purpose of the visit.
- A report setting out the findings of the peer review visit should be published. The main purpose of the report should be to make recommendations to institutions in order to help them to improve their quality.
- They suggest that there should be no direct link between the outcome of quality assessment and the funding of institutions (van Vught and Westerheijden 1994).

Based on several reported comparisons, Brennan and Shah (2000) and Billing (2004) suggest that, although most elements of the general model of external quality assessment apply in most countries, it does not completely apply in all countries. There are considerable variations in the methods used which reflect differences in purposes and national contexts. For example, quality review processes in the USA, primarily discharged by institutional accreditation, focused largely on resources and processes 20 years ago, but they are dominated by the need for institutions to directly assess and provide concrete evidence of student learning nowadays (Banta 2010; Ewell 2010). Thus, the “general model” established by van Vught and Westerheijden (1994) is not applicable everywhere, but it provides a starting point from which to map deviations (Billing 2004).

In Dill and his colleague’s recent research (Dill 2010; Dill and Beerkens 2013), they presented a framework that states suggested to design for universities to assure their academic standards, based on an examination of academic quality

assurance exercises in the USA, Europe, Asia, Australia and South America. The framework is depicted as follows:

- There is a national agency for overseeing external quality assurance independent of both the universities and the government. They suggested that this agency should be shared financial support by both the government and the university sector, sufficient funding to permit the development of a professional staff and governance structure that limits the ability of governments to intervene and instantly alter the mission and methods of the organisation.
- A government policy requiring or supporting the provision of essential academic quality information is necessary. Valid information is essential for assuring academic quality, but because first-degree students are by definition “immature consumers” and because the misinformation provided by commercially produced league tables has distorted behaviour in the academic market, they suggest that academic quality information is more apt to contribute to assuring academic standards if we place greater emphasis on its provision and use by academic staff than by students.
- There is a well-designed external evaluation process for institutions, which is best carried out via evaluations or academic audits that can help reform and strengthen the core processes that institutions themselves employ to assure and improve the standards of their academic programmes.
- About the focus on academic audits, it is found that the assurance and improvement of academic standards in all institutions in the future will likely depend upon the validity, reliability and rigour of the core processes of quality audits and the extent to which they utilise evidence-based decision-making, which should guide the design and focus of national external quality assurance practices.
- The evaluation of external academic quality assurance agencies and practices is required. The activities of external quality assurance agencies and their policies should themselves be regularly evaluated publicly by established and respected national evaluation or audit agencies, which should have the capacity to assess the social costs and benefits of this regulatory activity.

In addition, a new trend that quality assurance is becoming transnational was also noticed by Ewell (2010). The Bologna process in Europe is probably the most visible multinational transformation in the world today and, of course, has a quality assurance dimension discharged through such multinational organisations as ENQA (the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education). Similar regional networks have been established in Asia, as well as in Central and South America (Ewell 2010; Hou et al. 2015).

Differences of ways of operating quality assessment are to be found in who assesses what and how. Firstly, the “who” question can be divided into a whole set of subsidiary questions: who initiated the assessment? Who carries it out? In other words, it involves the owner of quality assessment schemes and the practical evaluators. In practice, quality assessment may be set up by governments, or collectively owned by the institutions, or owned by completely independent bodies (Brennan and Shah, 2000; Rosa et al. 2006a). As mentioned above, external evaluators should have specific

expertise in terms of the focus of the evaluation (such as academic and management). They often come from the academic world, while including minority representatives from other stakeholders is a widespread practice (Schwarz and Westerheijden 2004).

The “what” question is partly a matter of level: the whole institution, a faculty or department, a subject or programme, and individuals. It is also a matter of focus: teaching, research, management, etc.

The “how” question involves the procedures and methods of implementing the quality assessment, as well as the ways of producing and using the evaluation results. Basically, there are two ways of measuring the quality of education: by adopting fixed procedures, often quantitative, associated with performance indicators, or by means of the intrinsically subjective process of peer review, or a combination of both (Westerheijden 2007). A distinction can be noted between standards-based and mission-based evaluations in terms of the criteria used to judge quality. If an evaluation is standards-based, it refers to objective and ideal standards; in contrast, if it is mission-based, it makes comparisons, not against assumed ideals, but against the general pattern of performance to be found in the type of activity being evaluated. Performances are thus ranked in relation to one another rather than judged in absolute terms (Becher and Kogan 1992).

The evaluation results are either quantitative or qualitative. There is also a concern about the use of quality assessment results in terms of whether or not evaluation results directly influence institutional resource pay-offs. Westerheijden (1990) suggests that there is an inherent contradiction in quality assessment linked to financial rewards. If real rewards and punishments are attached to the results of the assessment, the result may be a “game” of compliance, and the potential benefits of learning, self-criticism and improvement may all be lost. On the other hand, if quality assessment has no consequences—if there are neither rewards nor punishments attendant upon its outcomes—then why should anyone take it seriously? Despite this dilemma, every quality assessment scheme has, in practice, to find a point in the continuum from the high level of financial consequences, i.e. performance funding, to the low level of no consequences (Ewell 2007).

The different approaches to quality assessment discussed above are summarised in Table 2.1. It is worth mentioning that factors which differentiate the approaches to quality assessment are interrelated. For example, performance indicators often lead to quantitative evaluation results, and the financial consequences are often associated with unambiguous, preferably quantitative and comparable evaluation results.

Table 2.1 Different approaches to quality assessment in higher education

Who	Evaluation's owner	State, institutions collectively, independent bodies
	Evaluators	Representatives with expertise
What	Evaluation levels	Institution, faculty/department, subject, individuals
	Evaluation focuses	Teaching, research, management
How	Evaluation methods	Performance indicators, peer review
	Evaluation criteria	Standards-based, mission-based
	Evaluation results	Quantitative, qualitative
		Consequences of evaluation results

2.2.4 Impact of Quality Assessment on Higher Education Institutions

Measurement problems

The previous impact studies found that there are some noticeable methodological problems attached to studying the impacts of quality assurance on higher education (Stensaker 2003; Harvey and Newton 2004; Rosa et al. 2006a). The methodological limitations might have biased the research findings more or less. First of all, research on the impacts of quality assurance is complicated because it is almost impossible to control all related factors to find out the causal relationships. Secondly, the complex forms of information-processing and decision-making traditions of universities and colleges made it further difficult to measure impact. Thirdly, a particular problem when analysing effects relates to the fact that quality assurance has many purposes, and quality improvement is not the sole concern of the external schemes. Finally, the potential political and economic gains of being a “good implementer” of quality assessment also blurred the research findings, making them more positive than the reality.

Overview of impact studies

A number of studies on the impact of higher education quality assessment schemes have been conducted in many countries throughout the world. Baldwin (1997) looked at how the national quality assurance system of the early 1990s in Australia impacted on universities. Baldwin (1997) argued that a combination of external and internal processes had resulted in three main areas of gain: more rigorous course approval procedures; increased awareness of students’ perspectives on teaching and learning; and a perceptible shift in the climate, with a new attention to teaching issues and an intensification of debate about effective learning. On the deficit side were four key issues: an excessive bureaucratisation of procedures, with associated pedantry and legalism; a greatly increased administrative workload for academic staff, taking them away from their “core business”; a formalism that can stifle creativity and individuality, the very qualities that universities should foster; and a deprofessionalisation of academic staff, associated with a policing mentality and a lack of trust (Baldwin 1997).

Based on case studies in 14 countries, Brennan and Shah (2000) investigated the impact of quality assessment on higher education institutions. They used a model which distinguishes between the institutional level and the mechanism of impacts. In this model, the impact could occur at the level of the individual, the basic unit (faculties/departments), the institution or the national system, and through three mechanisms: rewards, adjusting policies and structures, and changing higher education culture.

- Firstly, quality assessment could lead to rewards through an enhanced reputation, status allocation, increased funding and greater influence. Direct financial rewards were rather rare, while rewards in terms of reputation, influence and status allocation were quite common. These were more likely to occur when

the assessment included a clear summative, preferably quantifiable, judgment. These rewards could result in increased morale among both staff and students, and hence in higher levels of productivity. By the same token, quality assessment could also lead to the opposite of all these benefits when a bad result was obtained. Rewards could occur at all levels, from the salaries of individual academic staff, to the influence of basic units in an institution, to the status designation of a whole institution.

- Secondly, they analysed the impact through changing institutional structures and policies in terms of fundamental structural and policy changes within institutions and substantive changes in a specific area of policy or part of an institution. They found that, on the one hand, it was the general complexity of the environment, rather than the specific impact of external quality assessment systems, which seemed to be the prime generator of fundamental structural and policy changes within institutions. On the other hand, assessment activities may have led to substantial changes in a specific area of policy or part of the institution, such as the curricular and organisational changes. These changes were heavily dependent upon the contextual features of the institutions. An external quality assessment, particularly when focused on the institutional level, tended to be associated with the development of institution-wide quality management policies and procedures. This process generally involved a shift in authority from basic academic units to the administrative centre of the institution.
- Thirdly, the impact of quality assessment through changes in institutional cultures manifested itself in two main ways, the first of which was in the promotion of a managerial ethos across institutions by developing evidence-based approaches to decision-making. The second was in terms of attitudes towards teaching. The introduction of a quality assessment of teaching caused considerably more attention to be paid to the teaching function within institutions, such as talking about teaching, monitoring teaching and seeking ways to improve it. In addition, subject-based culture at the level of basic units appeared to have been weakened by the centralisation of internal quality management procedures. This was done by weakening the group boundaries between departments and other units, and by supporting the imposition of increasingly explicit values and regulations from the centre of the institution (Brennan and Shah 2000).

Minelli et al. (2006) also adopted a comprehensive perspective and paid attention to the impact of quality evaluation in three respects, namely organisational learning, the development of resources and power systems. They also discussed the undesired consequences of quality evaluation. The details of the impact involved are as follows:

- **Organisational learning:** This means the capacity to gain knowledge, amend aims and adopt innovative behaviour and schemes for action. It involves impact on strategies and policies, culture, changes in professional practices, growth in knowledge of university practices and attention to evaluation;
- **Development of resources:** This involves impact on technical infrastructure, reputations, university funding, allocation of economic funding within the university and human resource management;

- **Power systems:** This includes impact on institutional relationships, organisational structure, management operating systems, the evaluation system and bodies in charge of it and variation in decision-making capabilities and leadership;
- **Undesired consequences:** This involves increased paperwork, overriding of institutional purposes, standardisation and flattening of processes, and behaviour aimed at maximising evaluation results.

Minelli et al.'s (2006) framework was developed from studies on organisational change, to analyse the impact of quality evaluation. The empirical study conducted by Huisman et al. (2007) in three European universities in the Netherlands, the UK, and Italy adopted this framework and demonstrated that the most significant impact of evaluation has occurred in the field of organisational learning, while the change in terms of the development of resources is least.

Stensaker (2003) studied the effects of external quality assurance on the “inner life” of European universities regarding teaching and learning, and organisational and academic leadership. He argued that the impact of quality assurance on teaching and learning seemed quite mixed. There were positive effects, such as more institutional attention towards teaching and learning, and increased discussions and cooperation between academic staff. Some negative effects were also revealed, such as the feeling academics had of being scrutinised and inspected, and the evaluated institutions' compliance with the requirements of quality assessment. As for the impact on organisations and management, he concluded that the procedures of organisational decision-making have been more centralised, and thus, higher education institutions became more “bureaucratic”. Another trend was that institutional management became more autonomous, such as greater responsibility of managers to take actions to follow up external evaluations (Stensaker 2003). Hayes and Winyard (2002) also discussed the results of quality assessment in terms of teaching and learning, and organisational management. They focused on the negative results and argued that quality assessment drives academic activities to further standardisation and leads to modern forms of bureaucracy where rules and regulations are substituted by internal evaluative mechanisms which produce legitimacy. Banta (2010) concerned with the impact of accountability schemes only on teaching and learning in the context of USA. He found that the internal quality assurance processes had been improved, including pedagogical techniques, academic staff development, curricula, student supporting systems like advising and learning communities and measurement instruments. But there is limited evidence supporting that student learning had improved, which is the ultimate outcome we expect from quality assessment schemes. More recently, Stensaker et al. (2011) started to concern with the impact of different types of quality assurances schemes and the perceptions of different stakeholders in the Norwegian context. They found that different forms of accreditations and evaluations may be not as distinct as usually believed, and so far the most positive effects of the schemes occurred to the groups of institutional leadership and administration.

Similarly, Shah's (2012) study focused on the impact of external quality assessment on Australian higher education institutions over the past ten years. He found

that the impact mainly involved two dimensions, i.e. organisational and academic leadership, and teaching and learning. He found that the external quality assessment has contributed to the improvement of strategic planning processes, the establishment of self-review schemes of university committees and the formation of evidence-based decision-making culture to enhance quality. This study suggested that the external quality monitoring has indeed improved quality assurance processes of Australian universities in their core areas. But they have concentrated too much on the input and processes of quality assurance and did not pay much attention to the education outcomes and standards. As a result, it is hard to see that external monitoring has transformed quality in Australian higher education and, more importantly, improved the student experience and satisfaction. When exploring the impact of three types of programme accreditation on Taiwanese universities, Hou et al. (2015) measured the impact on the following dimensions: organisation, curriculum design, faculty efficiency and learning outcomes. They found that the external accreditation schemes did have affected the Taiwan's higher education institutions significantly in various ways. They have assisted universities to establish a closer partnership among faculty and staff, but they have also brought more workload on staff. More attention has been paid to students' learning outcomes and the relationship between teaching methods and learning outcomes. Continuous internal quality assurance mechanisms have been developed in universities and colleges. But the impact of these accreditation schemes on the faculty sufficiency of research and teaching is not quite clear. At the same time, they found that the international and regional accreditation schemes have pushed the internationalisation of higher education institutions.

Some other researchers tended to devote themselves to exploring a single dimension of impacts. For example, Wahlen (2004) assessed the impact of national quality audit on Swedish higher education institutions between 1995 and 2002, especially the impact on the different organisational levels of institutions. His study found that the external audits have contributed to the development of policy and structure of institutional quality work, such as the monitoring of student experience and efforts to increase the number of degrees awarded. But the cultural adjustment at the departmental level was not obvious. The assessments on the subject and programme levels have significant impact on the departmental level (Wahlen 2004). More recently, Rosa et al. (2006b) discussed the Portuguese situation and the perceptions of different stakeholders inside universities were examined. The evidence supported that rectors have a degree of optimism about the external quality processes and academic staff have a lesser degree. They reported that rectors focused on the results, while coordinators paid more attention to the processes. Moreover, the institutional leaders were more centred on the internal procedures and services, strategic management and institutional management structures, while the actual improvements in the student learning experience got less concern from them (Rosa et al. 2006b).

Morley (2003) focused on the power relations involved in higher education quality assessment. Empirical evidence for her study was derived from a sample of 36 academic and administrative staff in 35 universities and colleges in the UK. She

investigated how quality assurance influenced cultures, relationships, subjectivities and identities in the academy. In her opinion, the quality assurance mechanisms could become instruments of suppression, resulting in overt compliance, “counterfeit reflexivity” (which means academics are forced to present themselves in the language and discourse of quality assessors), declined creativity and less meaningful teaching and learning. In some instances, the emergence of quality regimes has led to more surveillance and a decline in trust in the power relationships within higher education institutions (Morley 2003). Some of the findings of Morley (2003) seemed quite radical and less reliable. For example, the “counterfeit reflexivity” of academics was not evidenced by the other research (Hoecht 2006), and quality audit was often regarded as symbolic regulation instead of power control over the work of individual academics in the England context (Cheng 2011). Nevertheless, Hoecht (2006) and Cheng (2012) found that academics indeed felt that they were less trusted and more controlled. The power relations have been shifted as a result of external quality assessment (Eaton 2012).

Based on empirical studies in specific contexts, Baldwin (1997), Brennan and Shah (2000), Minelli et al. (2006), Huisman et al. (2007), Stensaker (2003), Morley (2003), Banta (2010), Shah (2012) and Hou et al. (2015) examined the impact of quality assessment on various dimensions of the evaluated universities and colleges. Their findings helped to develop a framework of the dimensions that external quality assessment could have effects on, although their conclusions of the extents to which these dimensions have been affected might not be applicable in other national contexts such as China.

From a broader perspective, Stensaker (2007) summarised the impact of quality evaluation on the dimensions of power, professionalisation and permeability. Firstly, power issues are heavily related to quality assessment (Barnett 1994). There is a rather clear trend that quality processes push the development of a more powerful institutional leadership in higher education (Askling 1997). “This can be seen by the increasing centralisation of information quality systems produce, and the much clearer lines of responsibility that most institutions develop in this area” (Stensaker 2007, p. 60). In the process, responsibilities that used to belong to the individual academic have been removed (Henkel 2000). On the other side, accompanying the external quality assessment, discussions and debates about the institutional identity of higher education institutions often emerge, which may force them to rethink their development purposes, mission and profiles, as organisations (Stensaker 2006). Secondly, quality evaluation tends to make the internal quality assurance work more systematical and professional. “Perhaps the most noticeable effect is the formalisation that has swept over so many higher education institutions in forms of written routines, scripts and rule-driven handbooks providing hints of when to do what, and the persons in charge” (Stensaker 2007, p. 60). That is to say, there is increased bureaucracy in the sector, or it may be viewed as being necessary to visualise the old “tacit knowledge” which dominated quality assurance in the past. These processes may also trigger new forms of communication and cooperation between academic colleagues, and between academics, administrators and students. The practice regarding teaching and learning can be

discussed and tested (Massy 1999). Thirdly, quality evaluation produces information which has increased the transparency of universities and colleges. As a result, the data and information about performance, relevance and quality of higher education institutions are used more systematically in the decision-making processes and an evidence-based decision-making culture has kind of formed (Brennan and Shah 2000). Based on a brief summary of the various dimensions of effects that have happened, Stensaker (2007) illustrates a paradox of quality evaluation: while improving teaching and learning is the main purpose of quality evaluation, surprisingly few studies show that this link exists. He found that many studies have indicated the changes in organisations, infrastructure, attitudes and responsibilities, which might indirectly improve teaching and learning. Notwithstanding, he suggested that thorough studies about the impact on teaching and learning would greatly contribute to the whole field of quality assurance (Stensaker 2007).

Main impact of quality assessment on evaluated institutions

Empirical studies show that the impact of quality assessment is quite complex, with both direct and indirect effects on various dimensions of higher education. As Stensaker (2007) indicates, it is almost impossible to find a one-dimensional and “pure” effect of quality processes, or to enumerate all of the impacts of quality assessment. Moreover, as previously discussed, the emergence of quality assessment schemes per se is the response of higher education systems to the changing external and internal environments. Thus, it is very difficult to distinguish whether the change in a university is a response to quality assessment schemes or to changing circumstances: the causal relationship is hard to map (Stensaker 2003; Harvey and Newton 2004; Rosa et al. 2006a).

By and large, the main effects of quality assurance on higher education institutions can be summarised from the empirical studies cited above (Brennan and Shah 2000; Huisman et al. 2007; Stensaker 2003; Hayes and Winyard 2002; Stensaker 2007; Morley 2003; Wahlen 2004; Rosa et al. 2006a; Banta 2010; Shah 2012; Hou et al. 2015). Four dimensions of impact are involved, including resource allocation, professionalisation of quality management, teaching and learning, and organisational reidentification.

- **Resource allocation:** Resources include funding, reputation, status allocation and the like. Resource allocation associated with quality assessment includes the allocation of resources among higher education institutions and within universities. The latter involves resource deployment among basic units (faculties and departments), among individual staff through incentive schemes and among various fields (such as teaching and research) within universities. Resource development can result in the improvement of technical infrastructure, the adjustment of staffing policies and a change in the morale and attitude of staff and students within universities, which will probably indirectly influence the process of teaching and learning.
- **Professionalisation of quality management:** The systematisation and increased professionalisation of work related to quality processes is another consequence of evaluation, such as the establishment of internal quality assessment

committees and more explicit regulations for quality management. In this process, the authority shifts from the basic academic units to the administrative centre of the institution, and this may lead to a modern form of “bureaucracy”. In addition, the information provided by quality evaluation contributes to a more rational and evidence-based approach to decision-making. However, this information may also be manipulated and become a tool of a power struggle among interest groups. In the decision-making process, this information could be used in favour of certain kinds of actions and considerations which would strengthen the position of some groups rather than others (Brennan and Shah 2000, p. 38). They are more likely to lead to action when such action does not run counter to the interests of powerful groups within the institution.

- **Teaching and learning:** Firstly, quality assessment has resulted in greater attention being paid to teaching and learning, and this is often related to the issue of redressing the balance between teaching and research (Ewell 2010). This kind of attention may give rise to increased productivity through related incentive schemes, but it may also lead to the reverse because academics may feel that they are not trusted. Furthermore, quality evaluation also stimulates more active discussions and cooperation with respect to teaching and learning within academic units. This process may contribute to sharing experience and learning from each other, and at the same time, it may also result in the standardisation of academic work. On the whole, the impact of quality assessment on teaching and learning could be either positive or negative.
- **Organisational reidentification:** As already mentioned, as a result of the ambiguity of the purpose(s) of higher education institutions, quality assessment may be not only a process of examining *fitness for/of purposes* in universities, but also a tool to direct changes in universities’ *purposes*. With the increase in knowledge of university practices, a university may rethink its mission and development purposes and define a new organisational identity.

In summary, the previous impact studies found the impact of external quality assessment schemes may involve various dimensions of quality provisions, including resource reallocation, the professionalisation of quality management, teaching and learning, and organisational reidentification. The impacts on these dimensions are not discrete but interrelated, and they may occur on three structural levels of higher education institutions: institutions, basic units (faculties and departments) and individuals. The impact may occur before the quality assessment is carried out or after (Brennan and Shah 2000). The conclusions from the impact studies of various quality assessment schemes have both similarities and differences. For example, they have opposite findings on whether external quality assessment has led to overcompliance from academics or just symbolic regulation for them (Morley 2003; Hoecht 2006). This might be resulted from the differences of evaluation methods and/or the variance of institutional contexts. On the other hand, one of the common conclusions is that the impact of quality assessment on university change, especially on teaching and learning, is not as great as expected. Harvey and Newton (2004) argue that most of the impact studies they

reviewed reinforce the view that quality is about compliance and accountability, and contributes little to any effective transformation of the student learning experience. The three functions of quality evaluation indicated before have been performed to different extents. Compared to the extrinsic functions—accountability and control, its intrinsic function, namely improvement, seems to be less realised. Quality assessment is more like a strategy with consensus and orthodoxy to show that “something is being done” under the pressure of accountability, rather than an effective way to facilitate the reforms of the evaluated higher education institutions and improve their quality provision (Cartwright 2007; Findlow 2008; Harvey and Williams 2010; Hoecht 2006; Huisman and Currie 2004; Milliken and Colohan 2004; Pratasavitskaya and Stensaker 2010; Power 1997, 2003; Rowley 1995; Shin 2010; Westerheijden et al. 2007b). Another important finding is from Huisman et al.’s (2007) work. They indicated that, among the various dimensions of university operations, the impact of external evaluation on organisational learning is most significant but that on the development of resources is least, based on the investigations in three European countries. Some researchers also started to examine the similarities and differences of various evaluation schemes’ impacts and the perceptions of different stakeholders about the impact, such as Stensaker et al.’s (2011) work about Norway and Hou et al.’s (2015) research about Taiwan. However, this kind of research is still inadequate.

Factors which determine the impact of quality assessment

The factors which determine the impact of quality assessment on the evaluated institutions have been explored by many authors based on empirical studies. Brennan and Shah (2000) and Huisman et al. (2007) concluded that the impact of evaluation can be understood as being a function of the characteristics of the evaluation systems and the universities that use them. The structure of the evaluation system, the concept of evaluation, the methodology used, the characteristics of the evaluation bodies and the ways of using the evaluation reports all influence the impact of evaluation on universities. At the same time, the impact of evaluation also depends on the specific characteristics of the universities being assessed, as well as their initiatives and responses. In this regard, Hodson and Thomas (2003) argued that an impact analysis needs to be sensitive to the historical and changing relationship between state and institution, and to the managerial and academic culture of institutions. Rebora and Turri (2011) also indicate that “an accurate analysis of organisational aspects within universities and the meaning that organisational actors give to the use of evaluation” is very important (p. 534).

Thus, empirical studies show that the impact of quality evaluation schemes is firstly determined by the characteristics of the assessment schemes, i.e. “who evaluates what and how”. Furthermore, the impact also depends on the national and institutional context of the evaluated institutions and their initiatives. Relatively speaking, the organisational features of universities have not been emphasised as much as the technical and methodological aspects in impact analysis of quality assessment, as indicated by Rebora and Turri (2011). In this regard, Stensaker (2008) suggests that the perspectives of the studies on the outcomes and impact

of quality evaluation depend on understanding how organisational change is to take place. He criticises the phenomenon that most of the current studies around the world focus on implementation: the belief behind them is that there is a well-understood and defined problem to be resolved, that it is easy to identify and agree the aims and objectives of policies to address the problem and that change is a consequence of hierarchical control, enforcement and technical support. This belief is regarded to be an important reason behind the failure of change interventions (Clegg and Walsh 2004; Kondakci and Van den Broeck 2009). Stensaker (2008) suggests applying a perspective of “translation” instead of “implementation”. This perspective originates from an organisational theory that change is not perceived as being either top-down or bottom-up, but interactive, where dimensions such as organisational learning, actor and network interaction and translation come to the fore. In this case, the context surrounding institutional behaviour is exposed, enabling an explanation of the rationale behind the given decisions and solutions rather than only decision-making per se. At the same time, how individuals working in, and studying at, a given institution interact and relate to each other should be identified (Newton 2000, 2002; Stensaker 2008).

In summary, impact studies on quality assessment have explored the main dimensions of impacts, and the timing and levels at which they may occur. At the same time, many studies argue that quality assessment has not caused university change as much as expected. These empirical studies have found that the impact of quality assessment is related to the characteristics of the quality assessment scheme, the context of the evaluated institutions and their initiatives. By and large, a few authors have mentioned these factors in the specific context of their empirical studies. However, there is still not much analysis of how external quality assessment schemes interact with the evaluated higher education institutions and generate change there in general. The suggestions of Stensaker (2008) will be followed in the next section with a view to finding theoretical approaches to understanding the impact of quality assessment on university change.

2.3 Quality Assessment and University Change

2.3.1 *External Quality Assessment Causing University Change: A Theoretical Perspective*

There is substantial agreement that quality assessment is an effective technology for supporting change in higher education institutions (Kogan and Hanney 2000; Daniel 2004; Stensaker 2006; Houston 2010; Hazelkorn 2011). In some countries, “quality assurance has proven to be the most potent change agents” (Kogan and Hanney 2000, p. 240). As indicated by Daniel (2004, p. 36), “many changes that we might like to see will remain dead letters unless they are supported by a credible system of evaluation”. The potential of quality assessment as an external force

to influence the behaviour of universities is embodied in its functions, as summarised by Trow (1996). He indicates that quality assessment is claimed to sustain or raise the performance quality of institutions by forcing those involved to critically examine their own operations by means of self-assessment and by subjecting them to critical review from outside. Furthermore, quality assessment can be (and is) used as a regulatory device, through the kinds of reports it requires, and the explicit or implicit criteria the reporting institutions are required to meet. That is to say, both improvement and control functions of quality assessment have link to change. Change could be generated when the evaluated universities improve their performance and when they meet the evaluation criteria.

This section will focus on exploring the ways in which external quality assessment affects the internal working of universities by referring to the literature about the working processes and structures of higher education systems and the operating mechanism of quality assessment. Becher and Kogan (1992, p. 10) separate two components in the everyday life of the academic world which are not sharply distinguished in practice. The first of these is designated as the normative mode, which relates to the monitoring and maintenance of values, i.e. what people in the system perceive as being important. The second, the operational mode, refers to the business of conducting practical tasks at different levels within the system, i.e. what people actually do, or are institutionally required to do (Becher and Kogan 1992, p. 10). The normative and operational modes interact. In principle, the normative mode would be expected to exercise dominance over the operational mode, in that value preferences tend to be represented through actions, rather than actions defining value preferences. However, there are many instances in which internal operations arguably condition internal norms (Becher and Kogan 1992, p. 16).

Each mode is further seen as having an internal and an external aspect. The internal norms and operations embody the features which stem directly from the nature and purpose of the enterprise of higher education as a whole, while the external norms and external operations denote those which impinge on the system from outside in some way (Becher and Kogan 1992, p. 10). As shown in Fig. 2.1, the outer framework, with both external norms and external operational requirements, impinges on the inner core of the system in a variety of ways.

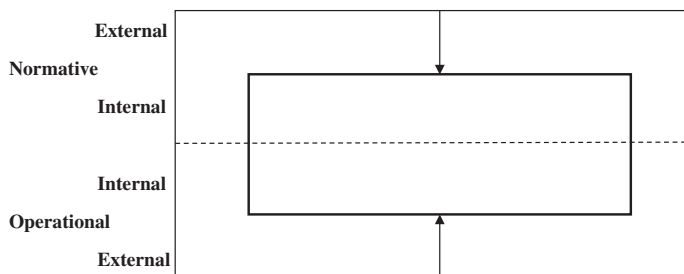


Fig. 2.1 Model of higher education systems and its elements (adapted with the permission from Becher and Kogan (1992), p. 11, Fig. 2.1)

An external quality assessment can be regarded as being one of the ways in which external norms and operational requirements impinge on the internal components. It is defined as a means of judging the operational performances of higher education institutions against external criteria by external experts (Green 1994; Pearce 1995; Vroeijsenstijn 1995). Based on empirical studies, Brennan and Shah (2000, p. 1) indicate that quality assessment is a way of linking the private micro-world of the institution with the public macro-world of society, economics, cultures and politics. In the process of quality assessment, a group of external evaluators examine the internal operational performance and make judgments against certain evaluation criteria. The evaluated institutions are supposed to match their behaviour to the evaluation criteria (Trow 1996), and change is expected to emerge in the process. The adjustments may be made either before or after the quality assessment (Brennan and Shah 2000; Bovens 2007; Trow 1996). The awareness that quality assessment is going to happen can induce change based on a critical examination of their own operations in a self-evaluation and the anticipation of the assessment criteria, to satisfy the expectations of the external quality assessment. After the site-visits of the evaluators, the institutions may initiate changes to improve themselves in the light of the information revealed by the quality assessment (which could show them the gap between their behaviour and the evaluation criteria), as well as suggestions from the external evaluators (Brennan and Shah 2000).

Quality assessment is also a means of challenging and attempting to change existing educational values (Brennan and Shah 2000, p. 14). As argued by many authors (Brown 2004; Cheng 2011), quality is a relative concept, and different interest groups have their own ideas of what constitutes quality. The evaluation criteria of an external quality assessment reflect the certain values and norms of “good” higher education from outside. As Barnetson and Cutright (2000) argue, although performance indicators are objective on the surface, they are “conceptual technologies that shape what issues we think about and how we think about those issues by embedding normative assumptions into the selection and structure of those indicators” (p. 277). That is to say, external values and norms are introduced into the evaluated institution through the evaluation process. In this regard, Barnett (2003) takes “quality” as meaning “ideology”. According to his illustration, it is ideology which has the power to shape the understanding of what constitutes good practice in higher education, and alternative visions for the institution are undermined or cast aside in the process. The motives for changing the curriculum, hiring practices or course delivery methods are accepted without question under the cover of terms which are difficult to find fault with, like “quality” (Barnett 2003).

However, the change which accompanies a quality assessment is not certain to equal improvement. Barnett (2003) argues that quality, as an ideology, has the potential to become either pernicious or virtuous, depending on the ways in which it is realised. However, as Brennan and Shah (2000) found, “in much of the literature on quality assessment, the question of impact is treated as one of the extent of presumed improvement or enhancement” (p. 13). They argue that this is one of the ideological problems of debates about quality in higher education.

The notion of “improvement” is ideological, assuming values and criteria against which educational quality is to be judged as good. However, quality is a relative concept: what is “improvement” from one point of view may be “damage” from another. For example, some people believe that the use of advanced educational technology (such as multimedia-assisted teaching) is beneficial to teaching effectiveness, while others hold an opposite view. Moreover, there is a failure to distinguish between organisational action and educational consequences, and intentions do not mean outcomes (Brennan and Shah 2000, p. 13). Thus, it should not be assumed that the change generated by an external quality assessment is necessarily an improvement.

Thus, having referred to the literature about the operating mechanism of quality assessment and the working processes and structures of higher education systems, quality assessment can be regarded as being an external force. It can impinge on the internal life of universities and generate the adjustment of operations and/or the alteration of norms. Based on this understanding, change processes and possible outcomes will be explored in the next section.

2.3.2 Change Processes and Outcomes

Becher and Kogan (1992, p. 16) describe the process of university change based on the binary model of higher education systems (operational and normative modes). They believe that, as long as the normative and operational modes are in phase with each other, the whole system retains a dynamic equilibrium: if not in harmony, then at least in a state of balanced tension. However, when the two modes become significantly out of phase, some form of adjustment is necessary to restore the possibility of normal functioning. In other words, the process of change can be observed to involve disequilibrium between normative and operational modes and their subsequent realignment within a new equilibrium. The most effective, because ultimately the most stable, change depends on the alignment between normative and operational modes, the one having interacted with the other to achieve a state of equilibrium (Becher and Kogan 1992). In the context that an external quality assessment causes university change, the normative mode concerns what constitutes good practice of higher education, while the operational mode is how to achieve high quality, that is the approaches to good higher education. As previously described, universities are expected to adjust their actions (operational modes) to match the evaluation criteria; at the same time, the norms of good practice of higher education defined by the external quality assessment are expected to replace the existing ones in the evaluated institutions. According to Becher and Kogan’s (1992) model, change or no change depends on whether the external quality assessment can break the existing equilibrium, or correct the previous disequilibrium between the normative and operational modes in the evaluated institutions, and then create and maintain a new equilibrium.

Becher and Kogan's (1992) understanding of change can be regarded as the application of social cognition models of organisational change in higher education. The social cognition model is one of the ways to understand the nature of organisational change (Kezar 2001; Kezar and Eckel 2002; Kezar 2013; Morgan 1986; Scott 1995; Weick 1995). Change is regarded as being a reaction to cognitive dissonance. People in an organisation reach a point of cognitive dissonance at which values and actions (norms and operations) clash, or something seems out-moded, and they decide to change (Collins 1998). Habits and organisational identity are examined within social cognition models. Facilitating change is sometimes explored as a process of assisting people to let go of the habits (operational mode) and identity (normative mode) attached to past strategies (Morgan 1986; Argyris 1982; Levy and Merry 1986). The social cognition model is different from other models of organisational change, such as the evolutionary model which focuses on the impact of external environment on organisational change and the teleological model which concerns the roles of leaders and internal environment (Kezar 2001). The social cognition model pays particular attention to organisational identity and values, which are believed to be very important for higher education institutions (Kezar 2001, 2013; MacDonald 2013; Stensaker 2015; Weerts et al. 2014). Stensaker (2015) has developed a conceptual tool linking organisational identity to different change processes in higher education. It regards organisational identity as integration, interpretation, image and innovation, respectively, in the following four types of university change: designed change with internal constituencies; organic change with internal constituencies; designed change with external constituencies; and organic change with external constituencies (Stensaker 2015).

Argyris's single- and double-loop learning theory reflects the social cognition perspective, and it is a key concept in organisational learning and change. This theory describes the tension between normative and operational modes (values and actions) and the possible outcomes (Argyris 1999). Single-loop learning refers to retaining the existing values and norms (the governing variables in the word of Argyris) and improving on current actions. It seems to be present when goals, values and frameworks are taken for granted, and the emphasis is on techniques and making them more efficient. It occurs to create a new equilibrium and/or to correct the existing disequilibrium by changing actions. In contrast, double-loop learning refers to a process which involves both the alteration of existing values and the shift of strategies. It involves critical reflection upon goals, beliefs, values, conceptual frameworks and strategies. Argyris (1999) indicates that it may be difficult for individuals and organisations to accomplish double-loop learning, because it is hard to remove the existing value systems (governing variables). The single- and double-loop learning can be also regarded as the different degrees of change. The single-loop learning is adjustment, which only involves behavioural change, and the double-loop learning is usually considered to be transformative change, with paradigmatic shift (Eckel and Kezar 2003).

Besides single- and double-loop learning, Argyris (1999) indicates that, in some cases, the new norms and values are espoused but without the corresponding changes of actions and operations. In this case, people may state that they have

initiated a change or believe in a change, but may not enact it. Some people may hold certain views, but they may not act on them. This can be explained by the theories of action, which typically include an espoused theory of action and a theory-in-use. The espoused theory of action is a theory of action to which individuals or a whole organisation gives allegiance and which they communicate to others when they are requested to do so. However, the theory which actually governs their action is their theory-in-use, which may or may not be compatible with their espoused or publicly stated theory. People may live with the incompatibility of two theories without even being aware of it. In this case, there is equilibrium between the theory-in-use and the practical operations in organisations. However, at the same time, they state that they espouse some other values and theories (Argyris 1999).

Based on the single- and double-loop learning theory, the possible outcomes of an external quality assessment could be inferred. Firstly, universities may only adjust their strategies and techniques of achieving high quality (operational mode), with the aim of matching their operations to the external evaluation criteria, while the norms of “good” higher education they believe (normative mode) remain the same. This is defined as single-loop learning. Secondly, the change may not only involve the strategies and techniques of achieving high quality but also involve the understanding of what constitutes “good” higher education. When both normative and operational modes are transformed, double-loop learning will occur. In this case, people in the evaluated institutions not only act differently, but also think differently. That is to say, there might be two different degrees of changes: the ones with operational change only (single-loop learning) and the ones with both operational change and normative transformation (double-loop learning). Thirdly, there is also a case where the normative mode defined by the external evaluation may be espoused by people within the university, but without a corresponding change of operations. Of course, there may be a fourth type of outcome, i.e. neither operational adjustment nor normative shift, in which case no change occurs. Table 2.2 depicts the possible outcomes caused by external quality assessment.

This research intends to examine whether the quality assessment scheme in China has pushed universities to change their ways of achieving high quality (operations) and brought the new understanding of “good” higher education (norms) into these universities. Compared with behavioural change, it is more difficult to empirically examine the transformation of norms. On the one hand, Becher and Kogan (1992) think norms are represented through actions. The norms governing actions, which are defined as theory-in-use, could be inferred from the organisational actions as suggested by Argyris (1999). On the other hand,

Table 2.2 The possible outcomes of external quality assessment

Operational mode	Normative mode	
	Change	Continuity
Change	Double-loop learning	Single-loop learning
Continuity	Accept the norms but not change the operations	Neither operations nor norms change

the espoused theory of action, i.e. the norms people give allegiance to, could be gained through inquiring the perspectives of organisational members. Whether they espouse the norms of “good” higher education defined by external quality assessment schemes will be explored. It is worth mentioning that the theory-in-use and the espoused theory of action might be incompatible, as indicated by Argyris (1999). Thus, the norms people espouse orally might be different from the ones inferred from their behaviours. Both sides of the norms will be considered in the empirical study of this research.

Empirical studies show that whether or not an external quality assessment can generate operational changes of institutions and/or bring a new understanding of “good” higher education depends on the interaction between quality assessment schemes and the evaluated institutions. The forces of change in the interactive process will be analysed in the next section.

2.3.3 Forces of Change

Two general different forces of change are noted as being external forces and internal forces within organisational change theories (Burnes 1996). That is to say, besides the changes driven from the organisational insider, change could also be a response to external circumstances, situational variables and the environment faced by each organisation. In other words, change happens because the environment demands change for survival (Morgan 1986). In the case of higher education, universities and colleges are regarded as being open systems, vulnerable to external environmental factors, such as accreditation and legislature, which are perceived to play a more direct role in higher education affairs (Ramirez and Christensen 2013; Shattock 2010). Historically, it has even been questioned if universities and colleges should be seen as coherent and purposeful organisations to any great extent. The classical observations related to universities being “organisational anarchies” (Cohen and March 1974) or “loosely coupled institutions” (Weick 1976) are typical in this respect. These descriptions also pointed to universities as quite inward-looking organisations (Stensaker 2015; Fumasoli and Stensaker 2013). However, other accounts of universities and their functions have pointed to the need for universities to pay more attention to their external constituencies (Clark 1998), which sound more convincing in the modern society (Stensaker 2015).

Resource dependency theory is often used to explain why organisations need to meet the external environment’s demands. This theory assumes that organisations need a sufficient supply of resources to survive, and because these resources often cannot be produced by the organisations themselves, they must interact with other organisations that control the required resources (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003). Thus, resource dependency theory concludes that an organisation will be more likely to follow the requirements of external forces when it depends on resources that the external entities provide. It assumes that “the organisation will tend to be influenced more the greater the dependence on the external

organisation, or alternatively, the more important the external organisation is to the functioning and survival of the organisation” (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003, pp. 59–60). Quality assessment is regarded as one of the external forces causing university change. According to resource dependency theory, it is hypothesised that greater rewards associated with good evaluation results give rise to more submissive responses from the evaluated institutions. This phenomenon has been noticed by Westerheijden (1990) in his empirical studies examining the impact of quality assessment. In reality, a direct impact of assessment on institutional income may be rare (Brennan and Shah 2000), and indirect forms of financial impact are through markets (students, employers, research funders), who may themselves be influenced by reputational gains and losses which can occur as a result of assessment (Brennan and Shah 2000). For example, in the case of a state-run quality assessment, even if there is no financial reward from the state, when the evaluation results have strong implications for the university’s academic standing and attractiveness to student applicants, the evaluated institutions may be also quite responsive to the external quality assessment.

Apart from the influence of the evaluation results on resource allocation among evaluated institutions and their reputations, the governing forces of the evaluation’s owner also push the evaluated institutions to meet the requirements of an external quality assessment. Clark (1983) proposes a triangular model of state, market and academic oligarchy coordinating higher education systems. A combination of different degrees of these three elements constitutes the coordinating forces of the higher education system in each country. The distance between the ownership of a quality assessment scheme and the current coordinating force of the higher education system is a factor which influences the responses of the higher education institutions involved. For example, in a case where the state is the dominating force in coordinating higher education and the public budget is the main financial resource of the evaluated institution, if a quality evaluation scheme is dependent on the state, the institution would attach more importance to it. However, if its owner is far away from the state, the institution may give it less consideration. Thus, there is an external impetus from quality assessment schemes to university change, which is derived from the governing forces of the evaluation’s owner and the influence of the evaluation results on the financial resources and reputations of institutions. In the case of state-run quality assessment, the power of both market and state in Clark’s (1983) triangle are incorporated to intervene in the evaluated universities. The extent to which the evaluated universities will respond to external quality assessment is related to the characteristics of the quality assessment scheme, such as its owner and the consequences of its evaluation results; at the same time, it is also determined by the features of the evaluated universities, such as how much their reputation and funding are vulnerable to external quality assessment and how much they are governed by the state. That is to say, both the characteristics of a quality assessment scheme and the features of the evaluated universities (such as their reputations, existing financial resources and the autonomy they enjoyed) influence their responses to the external pressures from quality evaluation.

Resource dependency theory also indicates that organisational environments are not objective realities. Perceptions, attention and interpretation of participants come to define the context for the organisation. The organisation responds to what it perceives and believes about the environment. Thus, the organisational managers need to assess the context and determine how to respond to the constraints of the context (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003). In this sense, the responses of the evaluated higher education institutions to an external quality assessment depend on their perceptions and judgement on the evaluation's implications for the organisations' survival and prosperity.

At the same time, resource dependency theory notices that organisations are not completely shaped by external pressures. They are also trying to manage their environments to pursue their own interests. They "seek to avoid dependencies and external control and, at the same time, to shape their own contexts and retain their autonomy for independent action" (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003, p. 261). Higher education researchers also found that the institutional status of universities must be noted when considering external forces causing university change. They found that universities are maintaining their characteristics as knowledge organisations, not least in respect of the influence academic staff have over their own work and important decision-making processes (Locke et al. 2011; Watson 2009). As indicated by Olsen (2005), universities have an institutional status, which is "a relatively enduring collection of rules and organised practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources" (Olsen 2005, p. 5). They have long-standing mission; their internal values cannot be easily changed by the intrusion of external forces, and thus, they should be treated differently from business and industry enterprises, which are more directly affected by market demands. That is to say, even though researchers argue that external forces play a more direct role in higher education affairs, universities have their internal consistency and logic (Watson 2009). They try to pursue their own maximum independence, being resilient to the preferences and expectations of external circumstances. In the process of adapting to the external environment, universities have "room to manoeuvre" (Kogan and Hanney 2000; Reed et al. 2002; Maassen and Stensaker 2003; Stensaker 2006). So, external determinism is not identified as being applicable within higher education (El-Khawas 2000).

Studies on change have found that strategic planning that focuses only on external threats and challenges is largely unsuccessful in higher education (Chaffee 1983; Keller 1997; Birnbaum 2000), while those considering internal factors are more successful (Rowan 2006; Shin 2010). Internal factors influencing organisational change include both the capacity and motivation of implementers (McLaughlin 1987; Cohen et al. 2007). Capacity includes both financial and human resources. Motivation reflects, in part, an implementer's assessment of a policy's value or a strategy's appropriateness. At the same time, the initiatives of universities are also involved in the change process. Sporn (1999) found that adaptation may be triggered by external demands, but they are defined internally as being either a crisis or an opportunity by the institutions. People in universities tend to interpret the external environment through internal mechanisms (Gioia and Thomas 1996), and they may even reconstruct the external requirements in the

process (Kezar 2001). In the case of external quality assessment causing university change, the initiatives of the evaluated institutions are also noted by empirical studies (Askling and Stensaker 2002; Huisman and Currie 2004). The requirements of external quality assessment systems have to be interpreted and given meaning by the organisational actors involved (Rebora and Turri 2011; Newton 2000, 2002), and in this process, universities “translate” external definitions of quality to fit their own needs (Stensaker 2006). Thus, when examining the impact of external quality assessment on the change of the evaluated institutions, internal factors of universities, both the capacity and motivation of implementing change, should be noticed.

Thus, facing external quality assessment, it is supposed that the evaluated institutions would not be completely subjected to the steering of the external forces. The compatibility between the requirements of the external quality assessment and the internal values and norms of the institution is a very important factor to determine whether or not universities will respond to the external requirements. When the external norms of what constitutes good higher education (which are embodied in the evaluation criteria of the quality assessment scheme) are compatible with the internal cultures of the evaluated institutions, they are more likely to meet these requirements. Furthermore, the evaluated institutions are able to define the role of external quality assessment schemes from their own perspectives. They make decisions as to whether or not they should respond to the external pressure based on a calculation of whether or not meeting its requirements would be beneficial to themselves. They may even reconstruct the requirements of the external quality assessment scheme in their own way to maximise their own benefits.

In theory, external quality assessment can provide the impetus for university change. Both the governing forces of the evaluation’s owner and the influence of the evaluation results on the financial resources and reputations of institutions push the evaluated institutions to meet the demands of the external quality assessment. However, universities are not completely shaped by external pressures, so the internal environment of universities and their initiatives in creating change should also be noted.

2.4 Summary

This chapter has discussed quality assessment in higher education and its impact on university change by referring to both empirical and theoretical studies. Firstly, the context in which quality assessment emerges in higher education and the purposes it is intended to realise were described. The definitions of quality were examined from various perspectives, and the ways of operating a quality assessment in higher education were depicted. The main effects of quality assessment on the evaluated institutions were summarised, based on the empirical impact studies of quality assessment. These discussions provided an important reference for the present study to understand the emergence of the quality assessment schemes in China, their operation and their expected impact on the evaluated institutions.

In addition, the empirical studies found that the impact of quality assessment is determined by the design of quality assessment schemes and the characteristics of evaluated institutions. However, how they interact with each other and generate change was not analysed in depth or discussed at a theoretical level. So, in the second part of the chapter, a theoretical perspective was proposed to understand how a quality assessment affects the internal life of universities. The related theories about the working processes and structures of higher education, the operating mechanisms of quality assessment and organisational change were referred to. The ways in which quality assessment impinges on the internal life of the evaluated institutions were depicted, as well as the possible outcomes, which include the adjustment of operations and the alteration of norms within universities. The driving forces of change were also explored, which involve both the external impetus from a quality assessment and the internal initiatives of the universities. However, how the external and internal forces interplay with each other and engender various outcomes has not been discussed yet, and this research will make an attempt to answer this question using the Chinese case.

The next chapter will move on to the Chinese context. The national context and organisational characteristics of higher education institutions will be outlined, which will provide sufficient background information for the analysis of the Chinese quality assessment system.

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