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Shuiyun Liu

Quality Assurance and Institutional Transformation

The Chinese Experience



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Preface and Acknowledgements

It is well known that the Chinese economy has attained marked success during the last 30 years. But higher education still faces great challenges. Though the Chinese government has pronounced to build world-class universities since the mid-1990s, it is recognised that Chinese universities have enormous difficulties in becoming world-class with their own characteristics. Recently, the State Council issued the notice of further promoting the construction of world-class universities and subjects. In the process of pursuing world-class universities, quality has become a central focus in the public debate about higher education. A systematic quality assurance system has been established to ensure higher education quality in China.

This book concentrates on the quality assurance system of higher education in China. It seeks to find out whether the quality assurance schemes have brought real transformation of universities and explore the reasons why the intended changes have or have not been generated in the evaluated universities. This book systematically describes the quality assurance system of higher education in China, including its emergence, evolution, and *status quo*. In particular, the *Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education* (QAUE) and the *Subject Evaluation*, two of the most influential external quality assessment schemes, are described in detail. They are conducted on the institutional and subject levels respectively. Findings show that there are both similarities and differences between the Chinese higher education quality assessment system and its Western counterparts. The conclusions regarding the Chinese higher education quality assurance system could contribute to the research of Chinese higher education but also beyond the Chinese context: The quality assurance experience drawn from the Chinese practices could be extended to other contexts, including other Asian economies and the global South.

QAUE is used as an example for investigating the impact of quality assurance schemes on institutional transformation in this book. A case study method has been used to collect data. The empirical studies show that, to a certain extent, the QAUE has caused universities to change in China; yet, not all the expected changes have been made. Moreover, the effects on the various dimensions of

quality provisions at different universities were not the same. The impact of quality assessment was not a linear consequence of policy implementation, but the result of an interaction between the external quality assessment scheme and the individual universities. Thus, the impact of the QAUE was not only determined by the design of the quality assessment scheme, but was also related to the characteristics of the evaluated universities and their initiatives.

Based on the empirical findings from the QAUE and theories about organisational change and the operating mechanism of external quality assessment, a model is proposed that describes how quality assessment interacts with the evaluated universities and causes them to change (or not). In this model, quality assessment is regarded as being an external force that brings the external norms of “good” higher education into the evaluated universities and pushes them to adapt their operations to these norms. Change, however, will only occur when the external force is integrated with the evaluated universities’ internal motivation and its capacity to implement change. Previous studies already indicated that the impact of quality assessment is related to the characteristics of both assessment schemes and the evaluated institutions. How external quality assessment and the evaluated institutions interact with each other and generate impact has, however, never really been discussed in depth or theorised. This model helps to fill the theoretical gap. It could be used to explain the outcomes of quality assessment schemes in both China and other national contexts.

This book is grounded on my doctoral thesis, *impact of the Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education on university change in China*, completed at the Institute of Education, University of London (IOE, and it is called Institute of Education, UCL now). A three-year project funded by the National Social Science Funding of China gave me the possibility to conduct further research on this topic, which helped me to gain a deep and comprehensive understanding of the Chinese higher education quality assurance system and the impact it has on institutional transformation.

My deepest gratitude goes first and foremost to my supervisor, Dr. Paul Temple in IOE. His constant encouragement and supervision were crucial in the process of completing my Ph.D., and writing this book. His selfless support lightened the way of my academic career. High appreciation is extended to Prof. Jeroen Huisman in Ghent University, Prof. Claire Callender, Prof. Paul Morris, and Dr. Denise Batchelor in IOE. Their suggestions have been very constructive and helpful for my research. I am particularly grateful to Prof. Fuxing Liu in Beijing Normal University (BNU), Prof. Jiayi Wang in Northwestern Normal University, Dr. Honggao Zhang in Linyi Normal College in China: Without their help, my fieldwork could never have been completed. My appreciation is extended to all the people who allowed themselves to be interviewed. Moreover, I am highly indebted to my friend, Dr. Ye Liu in Bath Spa University. She spends so much of her time listening to me and helping me work out my problems during the difficult course of this book. I also owe my sincere gratitude to my younger sister, Shuiqin Liu, for her big help in doing transcriptions. Furthermore, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Centenary Scholarships of IOE and the National Social

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In fact, my research on higher education quality assessment started from my master study at the University of Oslo, University of Tampere, and University of Averio. I own my sincere gratitude to Prof. Maria Rosa, Prof. Bjorn Stensaker, and Prof. Alberto Amaral, who together led me into this fantastic research field. Finally, I am indebted to my family, my parents, my husband Xu, my sister Shuiqin and her husband Mark, who are always there for me. Their loving considerations and great confidence support me to keep exploring in the academic world. I also want to thank all of my friends from IOE and BNU for their continuing support in my life.

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Appendix C: Development of the Variables and Interview

Schedule in the Case Studies 227

Abbreviations

ADCSC	Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council
BERA	British Educational Research Association
BNU	Beijing Normal University
CCCPC	Central Committee of the Communist Party of China
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CDGDC	China Academic Degrees & Graduate Education Development Centre
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
HEEC	Higher Education Evaluation Centre of the Ministry of Education
LYNC	Linyi Normal College
MOE	Ministry of Education
NWNU	Northwest Normal University
QAUE	Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education

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