

**Research Paper**

# **A Comparison of Learning and Teaching Quality Assurance in Chinese and British Undergraduate Education**

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## **Contextualisation**

Quality assurance emerged as a principal methodology of management in the industry and business sectors throughout the 1950s and in the early 1960s (Bounds *et al*, 1994). Quality assurance was introduced into the higher education sector by the governments of most Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in the mid 1980s, while the public sector in these countries was introducing Total Quality Management (TQM) for improving accountability and effectiveness in the use of public resource and delivery of public service. Now quality assurance has become a central concept and core policy of higher education in many countries. According to the OECD, over the last fifteen years more than 60 countries have established their own national quality assurance systems for higher education (El-Khawas, 2001).

**Abstract:** *This paper reviews Learning and Teaching Quality Assurance (LTQA) systems in Chinese and British undergraduate education and compares the similarities and differences of LTQA between the two countries. This study identifies the common problems of LTQA in both Chinese and British undergraduate education, and considers how to solve these problems and to improve LTQA as a continuous process. There exist remarkable differences between China and United Kingdom in initiative, organisation, focus, methods and functions of LTQA in undergraduate education. Despite differences in culture, tradition and educational system between the two countries, there are also some common tasks, similar situations and difficulties with regard to LTQA. Some good experiences have been derived from a comparative analysis of quality assurance systems in the two countries.*

## **Introduction**

Since the introduction of quality assurance into higher education from industry and the business world in the 1980s, different organisations have developed varying definitions of the concept. Quality assurance was first introduced into the higher education system of the UK in the early 1990s. The Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) defines it as:

Quality assurance is all those planned and systematic activities to provide adequate confidence that a product or service will satisfy given requirements for quality.

(HEQC, 1994).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) states:

Quality assurance is the systematic review of educational programs to ensure that acceptable standards of education, scholarship and infrastructure are being

maintained.

(UNESCO, 2010).

The International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) states:

Assurance of quality in higher education is a process of establishing stakeholder confidence that provision (input, process and outcomes) fulfils expectations or measures up to threshold minimum requirements.

(INQAAHE, 2009).

So quality assurance is often referred to as a relative concept with each agent having a different perspective and standard on quality assurance.

The quality assurance system includes both external quality assurance systems and internal quality assurance systems. The external quality assurance system is organised and utilised by government and quality assurance agencies; the internal quality assurance system is organised and implemented by the university itself. This study compared the external quality assurance system in two countries – the People's Republic of China and the United Kingdom from 2001 to 2008 using literature and documentary review.

## **Learning and Teaching Quality Assurance in Chinese Undergraduate Education**

In the process of reforming the higher education management system and expanding the size of higher education in China, the number of regular higher education institutions increased rapidly, from 1,016 in 1985 to 1,909 in 2008 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2009). The Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of China stipulated that the "operation of higher education institutions and the quality of education should be subject to the supervision of the educational administrative department as well as the evaluation organised by the department," rendering the legal basis of evaluation the responsibility of the government. The Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) has conducted different teaching assessments for quality assurance.

The MOE, as an administrative department of higher education, is the main organiser for learning and teaching assessment of undergraduate education. There are three major organisations responsible for the assessment of learning and teaching in higher education institutions. They are all governed by the MOE. The Higher Education Department of the MOE has set up a Higher Education Assessment Office (HEAO) whose main responsibilities were to conduct research and to draft guidelines, regulations and internal documents for higher education assessment. The HEAO organised the Expert Committee of the MOE which considers the outcomes of assessments and deals with any objections about assessment outcomes. The Expert Committee of Undergraduate Education Assessment was established in 1999. It consists of 2,000 government administrators and university professors whose tenure is five years. The secretariat of the Committee runs its every day affairs. The Higher Education Evaluation Center (HEEC) was established in August 2004. Its main responsibilities were to organise and implement evaluations based on the guidelines, regulations, and evaluation criteria laid down by HEAO.

The learning and teaching assessment of undergraduate education, an important aspect of education assessment, was the process of providing reliable, valid, relevant and useful information to make corresponding judgments about performance and value. The main priorities in this process are educational goals, teaching facilities, and teaching and learning resources. The assessment examines the performance of both teachers and students, and the

extent to which teaching has been achieved through reviewing teaching systems and testing students. The history of the development of learning and teaching assessment of undergraduate education can be divided into three stages:

### ***Stage 1: Exploration (1984-1994)***

It was in this exploration stage that education quality received attention and an increasing number of researchers started to explore assessment theories. The focus of research on education quality was on introducing assessment theories and practice in Western higher education. The Chinese government initiated a series of studies on teaching quality assessment in some specific disciplines. In the meantime, the government formulated the outline for quality assessment.

An exploration of the issues in the field of higher education learning and teaching assessment started in the 1980s. China resumed university entrance examinations in 1977, and has been reforming the university enrolment system ever since. Steady progress has been made in systemic and structural reform of the higher education system. In order to assess the results of educational reform, there was an urgent need to research the theories of educational assessment and to undertake educational assessment. Many articles and monographs on education evaluation have been introduced in several educational periodicals in China and a series of national and international teaching assessment seminars have been held since the 1980s. China formally joined the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement in January 1984. In 1985, when the State Education Commission (1985) published the “notification on research and experimental education assessment of higher engineering education”, a number of colleges and universities began experimental assessment of their standards of managing schools, disciplines and curricula. In 1989, China established the first professional journal on education evaluation, *China Higher Education Evaluation*. In 1990, a “Draft Regulation of Higher Education Institution Assessment” was issued by the Ministry of Education (1990), which prescribed the nature, purpose, mission, guiding ideology, and basic forms of higher education learning and teaching assessment. Learning and teaching assessment was an important form of supervision adopted by the State. It was administered by the Chinese government at all administrative levels and by the administrative authorities in charge of education. The purpose of learning and teaching assessment was to strengthen universities’ abilities, to satisfy the needs of society and the nation, to maintain the socialist orientation in education provision, and to improve the quality of education.

### ***Stage 2: Trial (1994-2002)***

The feature of this trial stage was that the government adopted different assessment methods for different categories of higher education institutions. With the specified assessment index and guidelines, nationwide teaching quality assessment was carried out.

In 1994, a problem was identified in relation to the development of higher education and the inadequate conditions under which universities operated. In order to help the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to improve their facilities for teaching, increase the quality of management and improve the efficiency of education, the MOE began to conduct research into the practice of learning and teaching assessment and learning and teaching assessment plans. At this stage, the higher education learning and teaching assessment went through three forms: Eligible Assessment, Excellent Assessment and Randomised Assessment. Eligible Assessment started in 1994 and was mainly used for universities with a comparatively shorter history in undergraduate education. The purpose was: to enable these HEIs to meet the educational and quality standards according to the national requirements; to help these HEIs to further clarify their orientation; to strengthen the conditions for the running of these

institutions; and to improve the level of teaching management. There were three possible results of the assessment: "Qualified," "Conditional pass," and "Unqualified". Excellent Assessment, which began in 1996, was mainly used for universities with a sound basis, high teaching quality and a comparatively long history of undergraduate education, ie, universities of Project 211. The main purposes of Excellent Assessment were: to achieve the principles of classified guidance; to promote HEIs' self-motivation, self-restraint and self-operating mechanism; to support outstanding HEIs identified by performance appraisal; to stimulate healthy competition between HEIs; and to improve the quality of education. There were three possible assessment results: "Excellent," "Conditional pass," and "Not excellent". Randomised Assessment, which started in 1999, was mainly used for universities between pass level and excellent level. Randomised Assessment was a random evaluation based on institutions' self-evaluation. It put a high premium on the ability of institutions to carry out assessment. There were four possible assessment results: "Excellent," "Good," "Qualified," and "Unqualified". In 2001, the document "Opinions on the strengthening of undergraduate education teaching to improve learning and teaching quality" was issued by the MOE (2001) and put forward twelve highly targeted requirements for strengthening higher education learning and teaching. In 2002, the aforementioned three types of assessment were combined into one: "Undergraduate learning and teaching assessment" which has been implemented since 2003. The results of various quality assessment methods and schemes' experiments showed that it was necessary to have the unified assessment methods and index system for the reason that Chinese HEIs often had different ideas compared to the government's classification of HEIs, and at the same time, that the government also often faced difficulties in arranging and managing quality assessment practice.

### ***Stage 3: Institutionalisation (2003-Present)***

At the institutionalisation stage, the specialised assessment agency was set up together with the system of assessment regulations. Thereafter, nationwide quality assessment started to be institutionalised by the specialised agency with the unified methods and schemes.

To change the situation to focusing on research instead of teaching quality and to enable universities to shift the focus of their work to teaching and teaching quality, the "Action Plan of Education Innovation 2003-2007" was announced by the MOE. It announced that it would assess all institutions in a five-year cycle and establish the Higher Education Evaluation Center (HEEC) with responsibility for implementing the assessment (MOE, 2005a). Learning and teaching assessment of undergraduate education mainly serves regular higher education institutions. A "Teaching assessment of undergraduate education project" was developed by the MOE in 2002 and modified in 2004 (MOE, 2004). The guiding principle for the assessment was to promote "evaluation to enhance improvement, to facilitate change, and to strengthen management, emphasising change". The assessment results can be divided into four categories: "Excellent," "Good," "Qualified," and "Unqualified". The 2007 "No. 1 Document", approved by the State Council, was jointly issued by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Finance, implemented the "Quality Project" (MOE and MOF, 2007). It aimed to promote undergraduate teaching, and to effectively improve the quality of undergraduate education. It was a milestone, indicating that higher education assessment in China has stepped into an institutionalised phase.

It is believed that learning and teaching assessment of undergraduate education is valuable in the long term. But at the same time reform of its content is also necessary (Zhao, 2009). The following are the main areas for further improvement, such as the organisation, the method and the standard of teaching assessment which does not take into account the variety of teaching practice, inaccurate information, a lack of discriminating power from the assessment results, too many institutions being awarded the "Excellent" rating, and the heavy burden on institutions and assessment experts (Zhong *et al*, 2009; Liu and Gong, 2008). But overall, the

learning and teaching assessment process does much more good than harm. It has played an important role in improving the quality of teaching against the backdrop of the dramatic expansion of provision of higher education. The positive effect in promoting a change in the role of the government in higher education management has been widely recognised. For instance, the operation of the university complies with regulations and there has been investment in teaching by both central and local government. The higher education administrators have begun to attach importance to undergraduate teaching. To realise the higher education goals, the priorities are those involving practice and development, systematic research and continuous reform.

## **Learning and Teaching Quality Assurance in British Undergraduate Education**

Higher education institutions in the United Kingdom were subject to overlapping systems of quality assurance for teaching and learning. External quality audit systems and quality assessment have supplemented a range of existing arrangements that include professional accreditation in certain subjects, regional accrediting consortia, inter-institutional subject-based networks, an external examiner system, and the internal quality control mechanisms within many institutions (Stanley and Patrick, 1998). Quality assurance systems may be classified as self-regulating (regulated by the institution or provider of the educational program), externally regulated (regulated by an external agency), or a combination of the two (mixed or collaborative regulation) (Kells, 1992; Jackson, 1997a). There are four main organisations responsible for learning and teaching quality in British undergraduate education, The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), The Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), The Higher Education Academy (HEA), and The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), created by the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, is an organisation playing an active role in government processes in managing higher education by the distribution of funding to universities and colleges of Higher and Further Education in England since 1992, though it is not part of the government agency of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in the United Kingdom. It provides both a contribution to core funding, and ring-fenced funding for special initiatives, projects and strategic aims. HEFCE currently supports five teaching initiatives: Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL), the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme, the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), and the Higher Education Academy (HEFCE, 2009).

The Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) was founded in May 1992 by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals of the Universities of the United Kingdom (CVCP), Committee of Directors of Polytechnics (CDP), Conference of Scottish Centrally Funded Colleges (SCFC) and the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP). It sought to support institutional self-regulation and to demonstrate to the system's various stakeholders that effective regulatory mechanisms were in place.

The Higher Education Academy (HEA), an independent organisation, founded in May 2004, was funded by grants from the four UK higher education funding bodies, subscriptions from higher education institutions, and grant and contract income for specific initiatives, and was established as the result of a merger of the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE), the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN), and the TQEF National Co-ordination Team (NCT). The vision of the HEA is for students in UK higher education to enjoy the highest quality learning experience in the world. HEA works with individual academics to give them access to professional recognition, advice and support, as well as networking and development opportunities to enhance their teaching (HEA, 2009).

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), established in April 1997, is a charity and a company limited by guarantee. It is an independent body, governed by a Board and managed by an Executive committee, funded through subscriptions from higher education institutions and through contracts with the major funding councils. One of the QAA's core functions is to carry out reviews and audits and report publicly on how universities and other higher education providers maintain the quality of the learning opportunities they offer to students and the academic standards of the awards they make. The QAA currently uses four main review methods: institutional audit, integrated quality and enhancement review, enhancement-led institutional review, and institutional review. There are various types of schemes for assuring the quality of learning and teaching at the national level. Accreditations' evaluations, audits, and assessments are most widely adopted (Frazer, 1997; Stensaker, 2007).

Quality audits in the United Kingdom were carried out by the Divisions of Quality Audit of HEQC from 1993 until 1997 and QAA after 1997. Audits focused on the effectiveness of an institution's quality assurance structures and mechanisms, the accuracy, completeness and reliability of the information that an institution publishes about quality and standards, and the resulting recommendations implemented. Quality assessment has been conducted separately by each of the funding councils in England (acting also for Northern Ireland), Scotland, and Wales with assessment of particular subjects. The purpose of quality assessment is to ensure accountability, to inform the public, to reward excellence and to facilitate quality improvement. This is shown in HEFCE's (1993) statement of its assessment purposes:

to ensure that all education for which HEFCE provided funding was of satisfactory quality or better, and to ensure speedy rectification of unsatisfactory quality, to encourage improvements in the quality of education through the publication of assessment reports and an annual report, and to inform funding and reward excellence.

(HEFCE, 1993).

The White Paper, "Higher Education: A New Framework" distinguished between quality audit and quality assessment. Quality audit was external scrutiny aimed at providing guarantees that institutions have suitable quality control mechanisms in place. Quality assessment was an external review of, and judgments about, the quality of teaching and learning in institutions (DES, 1991). The United Kingdom's systems of external quality assurance of teaching and learning were changed significantly in order to combine and simplify the external quality assessment and quality audit procedures, and to address concern over the educational standards attained by graduates. The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE) echoed the frustrations that developed after the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 increased the size and diversity of the system. The committee saw the way forward:

lying in the development of common standards, specified and verified through a strengthened external examiner system, supported by a lighter approach to quality assessment.

(NCIHE, 1997).

This called for a framework with high and respected standards, the quality assurance external examiner system, and the well organised quality assessment activities. There was also a warning:

In the absence of the infrastructure and arrangements of the kind we propose, pressures for increased and direct intervention from outside [the] higher education system will intensify.

(NCIHE, 1997).

NCIHE advocated the establishment of a national framework of qualification-recognition. The committee recommended that the framework should have:

a standardised nomenclature for awards, agreed and common credit points at relevant levels, and the inclusion of additional and recognised 'stopping-off' points.  
(NCIHE, 1997).

## **The Differences between the Learning and Teaching Quality Assurance (LTQA) Systems in Chinese and British Undergraduate Education**

The distinctiveness and complexity of the learning and teaching quality assurance mechanisms were indicative of the evolution of individual processes to serve widely differing circumstances and publics in the United Kingdom and China. The main differences between LTQA in China and the UK are outlined in Table 1 below and were discussed in more detail in the following sections from the points of responsible agencies, initiatives, source of power, scope, standards, reference policies, evaluators, focus, assessment methods, functions, dissemination, financial impact, and both internal and external impacts.

**Table 1.** The Differences between LTQA in Chinese and British Undergraduate Education

Items	China	UK
Responsible Organisation	HEEC (government)	QAA (government and institutions)
Initiative	Supervision	Autonomy
Source of power	Executive Department	Committee
Scope	Institution level	Subject area
Standards	Uniform	Mission-dependent
Reference policies (standards)	Government's policy (standard)	QAA, HEFCE and international QA policy (standard)
Evaluators	Experts from institutions	Peer review, external assessors of private sector and the professions, Student representative
Focus	Teaching	Learning
Methods	Summative assessment	Formative assessment
Functions	Quality assurance	Quality enhancement
Dissemination	No	Funding Councils, QAA, institutions, potential consumers, press
Financial Impact	Indirect	Direct
Internal Impact	Limited	Significant; a more structured approach to the assurance of high-quality teaching and learning
External Impact	Significant; publish assessment outcomes	Modest; dissemination of best practice and reports on findings published

Sources: (Chen, 2009; Smith, 2006).

The nature of organisations responsible for LTQA was different in China and the UK. China's HEEC was an administrative body governed by the MOE of China. Its funding mainly came from the budget allocated by the Government, and its main responsibility was to organise and implement evaluations based on the guidelines, regulations, and evaluation criteria laid down by the MOE. The UK's QAA was a charity and a company limited by guarantee. It was an independent body, governed by a Board and managed by an Executive Committee, funded through subscriptions from higher education institutions and through contracts with the major funding councils. One of the QAA's core functions was to carry out reviews and audits and report publicly on how universities and other higher education providers maintain the quality of

the learning opportunities they offer to students and the academic standards of the awards they made.

Quality assurance schemes are being developed in higher education systems as one of the necessary instruments to adapt higher education institutions to the increasing demands put upon them (Westerheijden *et al*, 2007). The drivers for quality assurance may be seen in the context of the regulation of higher education (Westerheijden *et al*, 2007), and it came from the government with universities passively accepting the supervision. In the UK, quality assurance is linked to maintaining academic standards while respecting the British tradition of HEI autonomy. This calls for the active participation of academics. While in China, the government imposed quality assurance schemes on educational institutions with the supervision power rooted in history and structures. English higher education institutions have a tradition of maintaining academic standard and quality, which was also the widely accepted responsibility and obligation of the higher education institutions. In contrast, Chinese universities rely heavily on state policy coordination and guidance.

In Chinese universities, the president's office was in charge of formulating quality assurance policy, and the teaching affairs office was in charge of the implementation of teaching quality evaluation. Most quality assurance offices in the majority of Chinese universities were just temporary and were composed of the staff from the teaching affairs office and would be dismissed after the external quality evaluation. In the British Universities, there was an independent committee working specifically on the quality policy and work manual, coordinating the practice of quality assurance.

The learning and teaching assessment in China was institution based. The first round of undergraduate teaching and learning evaluation was a holistic and systematic process for education and teaching construction. Various aspects were developed and improved during the process, from the basic facilities for teaching to the teaching management system and the development of educational concepts and notions. During the evaluation process, nine to thirteen experts generally spend five days on campus verifying each index item for its state of realisation, visiting almost every academic and administrative unit, inspecting various stages of teaching in laboratories and practical sites, as well as spot-checking undergraduate theses, lab reports, and exam papers (Li *et al*, 2009). The criteria for assessment included seven core components: institution mission; faculty; facility and utilisation; academic programs and innovation in teaching; administration of academic affairs; academic culture; and student learning outcomes. Four possible outcomes ("Excellent," "Good," "Qualified," and "Unqualified") result from the extended standards: A, B, C and D. But in the UK the scope of learning and teaching assessment involved only subject area, focused on six core aspects of provision: curriculum design, content and organisation; teaching, learning, and assessment; student progression and achievement; student support and guidance; learning resources; and quality assurance and enhancement. Each of the six core aspects of provision was graded on a four-point scale.

In the UK, Universities framed their own quality assurance according to nationally and internationally agreed standards, such as the QAA Code of Practice, the Quality Assurance Framework/Teaching Quality Information (HEFCE), the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications, Subject Benchmarks and European standards and guidelines etc. In contrast, Chinese universities established their internal learning and teaching quality assurance only by referring to nationally agreed standards, that is to the "Teaching assessment of undergraduate education project" developed by the MOE in 2002 and modified in 2004 (MOE, 2004).

The evaluators in China came from all kinds of institutions. In the UK the evaluators were academic peers, external assessors from the private sector and the professions, and student representatives. In UK higher education, institutions frequently relied on their external

examiners to assure them that the aims of the programmes with which they were associated were consistent with the relevant subject benchmark statement(s) and that students had demonstrated achievement of the appropriate benchmark standard. External examiners and student representatives play an important role in the quality assurance systems. In some institutions such close links extend to the inclusion of student members on high-level management and working groups. Within formal committee arrangements students are generally represented at the higher level by their elected officers and, at operational level, by representatives elected from students in departments, or following particular programmes of study. Institutions developed a number of initiatives designed to enhance student participation, including the appointment of student liaison officers and representation coordinators (QAA, 2009). In contrast, external examiners and student representatives did not participate in the quality assurance system in Chinese universities.

Chinese universities' LTQA focused on teaching as revealed in the undergraduate quality assessment index system. In contrast, British universities' LTQA gave more weight to students whose representatives gave a separate submission of their own alongside the institution's report. In British universities great importance was attached to the students' learning outcomes, experiences, performance and their achievement and offers a very high level of personal support for students, for example careers services and training skills. But in Chinese universities great importance was attached to how the teachers teach.

The quality assurance method used in the Chinese higher education sector was inspection (external evaluation), which was in a summative form with the emphasis on the result. This method employed was the main reason why the evaluation procedure was over-elaborated and involved a substantial amount of time and a number of experts (Li *et al*, 2009). Most British universities used peer review and formative assessment, which focused more on the process.

The institutional audit report and other related data were available to the public for the scrutiny of all stakeholders in British Universities. In contrast, quality information on Chinese higher education institutions was not completely open to staff, students and other stakeholders. Only leaders and government inspectors know the quality status of the universities. The information on assessment and quality was primary evidence used by students when choosing schools. So the students in China can only refer to the university rank.

On the aspect of function of LTQA, for Chinese universities this was quality assurance while for British universities it was quality enhancement. Quality Assurance is not equivalent to Quality Enhancement. Quality assurance is about improving and stabilising production and associated processes to avoid or at least minimise the issues that led to the defects in the first place. In the higher education sector quality assurance prioritises accountability, which is the assurance of a unit to its stakeholders that it provides education of good quality (Harvey and Newton, 2007). Quality enhancement is the process of taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities (QAA, 2006). Chinese universities relied on an external quality assurance system - that is government assessment. However, quality assurance in British universities relied on internal quality assurance mechanisms such as programme approval, annual monitoring and periodic reviews. In British universities there were a range of methods to maintain and enhance the quality of teaching such as external and internal student feedback questionnaires, effective staff development, peer review of teaching, effective team teaching, and induction and mentoring of new staff. Many institutions have mandatory student feedback questionnaires as summative evaluations at the end of each course, using standard questions across all courses. In China, the government did not ask for assessment from students. Some universities have students' assessments on a particular course but this was not routine for all courses. There were also no clear rules for staff development and review.

The financial impact of LTQA was directly linked to government funding in British universities

but not in Chinese universities. The external quality audit was related to the funding distribution in the UK, which was in contrast with the practice in Chinese higher education. In Chinese universities, most funding went to research and the funding of teaching was hard to secure. Some provincial governments grant certain awards to the universities that have achieved a good performance in their external evaluation, but this practice was not routine.

The impact of LTQA for Chinese universities was limited. There were some effects of the evaluations: Teaching administrators were more positive about the evaluation than academic staff; the effects of the evaluation on teaching and teaching administration were greater than their effect on students' learning; the evaluation's extrinsic effects were stronger than its intrinsic effects on teaching work; and the evaluation's effects on teaching work may gradually weaken as time passes (Gao *et al*, 2009). The impact of LTQA for British University was significant. Universities adopted a more structured approach to the assurance of high-quality teaching and learning. The external impact of LTQA in China was significant through published assessment outcomes and in the UK was modest through dissemination of best practice and the publication of findings.

In China, government policy directly influenced Chinese universities' LTQA. In practice, a government assessment indicator tended to be seen as tools for management and required the compliance of Chinese universities. Chinese universities used the "Draft Regulation of Higher Education Institution Assessment" as guidance to draft their quality management regulations and standards. In the UK, the government indirectly influences universities' quality assurance via QAA or HEFCE. For example, all universities in England are regularly audited by QAA and the universities adopted an internal quality review process that mirrored the external process conducted by QAA.

British universities have clear procedures to supervise the work of LTQA. University Committees have a complaints and appeals procedure. Institutions should have fair, effective and timely procedures for handling students' complaints and academic appeals and make publicly available easily comprehensible information on their complaints and appeals procedures. Faculties and colleges also have a written policy about complaints and appeals. The QAA Code of Practice has a clear definition of Academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters. In China, many universities did not have clear procedures and channels for complaints concerning the assessment work and academic matters. The government regulations also did not clearly define the procedures and organisation responsible for complaints and appeals.

## **The Common Issues of the Learning and Teaching Quality Assurance Systems in Chinese and British Undergraduate Education**

Despite differences in culture, tradition and educational system between the two countries, there were also some common tasks, similar situations and difficulties with regard to LTQA.

### ***Accountability and Autonomy***

The accountability system has been implemented in higher education in both countries. In the UK, the regulatory framework has become more elaborate and formalised, and there has been a tendency for new external and mixed forms of quality assurance to be superimposed on existing internal arrangements, in some cases by legislation (Stanley and Patrick, 1998). Externally imposed systems have usually not been well accepted by internal stakeholders and have been more effective for regulation. So improvement has generally been acknowledged to be primarily the internal responsibility of individual institutions. Graham *et al* (1995) have

argued that improvement depended on self-criticism and effective internal reviews with greater attention to teaching and learning. Jackson (1997b) similarly proposed a shift in the United Kingdom from external accountability review to an emphasis on self-criticism and internal review with appropriate external safeguards.

In China, from 2003 to 2008, all 592 regular higher education institutions underwent assessment by HEEC. Although there was no doubt that assessment of undergraduate education was valuable in the long term reform of the content, the people have been aware of the deficiencies of the first round teaching assessment such as conflicts of interest among the government, community and higher education institutions in terms of supervising and being supervised, evaluating as well as being evaluated. The practice has shown that direct and unified evaluation posed great challenges and that slight or careless mistakes would thrust the educational department into an undesired spotlight (Li *et al*, 2009). The lack of reliable, open and transparent information was widely discussed and considered as a barrier to the public's awareness of higher education quality.

## ***Unity and Diversity***

The concrete assessment standards not only need to meet international and national quality frameworks but also need to reflect characteristics of different types of universities. The Dearing Report argues that:

It would be both impractical and undesirable to try to achieve close matching of standards across the whole of higher education in all its diversity.

(Dearing, 1997)

It was nonetheless practicable 'to develop threshold or minimum standards, which set an agreed level of expectations of award, and we were convinced that this should be done now' (NCIHE, 1997). Governments in countries such as Australia, South Africa, New Zealand and the United Kingdom have established systems of third-party quality assurance of higher education and have developed a National Qualifications Framework (NQF). QAA has developed and verified that the framework for higher education qualifications (FHEQ) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland was compatible with the qualifications framework set up through the Bologna Process (2010), the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA). On the other hand, differences of institutional mission and diversity have increased dramatically in both countries. Middlehurst (1997) discussed a framework that considers accountability, development, and market principles. Meantime, differences have occurred as the numbers of both universities and students have increased. Quality as excellence is self-evident if we look back into the centuries of the university's existence in Europe (Harvey and Green, 1993). With the expansion of higher education across countries, there is an increasing diversity in higher education in terms of the types of institutions, and the types of students. The self-evident meaning of quality as excellence has given way to fitness for purpose. To respond to increased diversity, quality assurance systems would need to develop new and different approaches to the judgment of quality, both for traditional higher education programs and for those based on alternative structures and technologies (Ikenberry, 1997).

Most Chinese universities used a "Draft Regulation of Higher Education Institution Assessment" as the guidance to compose their quality management regulations and standards without thoroughly understanding its essence (MOE, 1990). Therefore, it was not likely for them to integrate it into their teaching quality assurance procedures, not to say enhancing their quality culture. The Government's standardised assessment practice cannot meet the needs of a diverse and mass system of higher education, which did not reflect the reality of the situation in China's higher education. Comparisons of higher education institutions of different

kinds within the same framework brought about pressure to various institutions, thus causing some to be overly grade-focused and utilitarian (Li *et al*, 2009).

## **Assurance and Improvement**

Learning and Teaching quality assurance and improvement were encouraged in both countries. The Further and Higher Education Acts 1992 abolished binary system, created national unitary funding councils, removed colleges of further education from local government control, and created quality assessment arrangements (Richards, 1997). The Dearing Report has given the responsibility for maintaining standards and quality in British higher education to the QAA. The Report of the Joint Planning Group listed the objectives of the QAA as: the promotion and maintenance of quality and standards in higher education, the enhancement of teaching and learning with a special responsibility to identify and promote innovation and good practice, to provide information and publish reports on quality and standards in higher education, and to offer, as requested, advice to governments (Joint Planning Group, 1996). The English system of teaching quality assessment and the United Kingdom's system of quality audit sought to improve quality through the publication of findings and the dissemination of best practices. The preparation of internal self-assessments as part of these approaches has the most potential to provide an immediate and effective mechanism for achieving improvement in teaching and learning (Stanley and Patrick, 1998). Houston (2008) has argued that authentic quality improvement was more likely to result from approaches to systemic intervention that encourage exploration of questions of purpose and of the meaning of improvement in context than from the imposition of definitions and methodologies from elsewhere).

In China, developing a teaching quality assurance system was a priority for current Chinese higher education policy. In order to improve the quality of higher education, China has been implementing a number of projects: including "Project 211", "Project 985" and the "Quality Project" (MOE and MOF, 2007). The MOE issued the document "Opinions on further strengthening undergraduate education teaching". The regulation required that universities established the basic awareness that quality was the lifeblood of institutions (MOE, 2005b). According to the Action Plan, the MOE established the HEEC and implemented assessment for all institutions in a five-year cycle (MOE, 2005a). Teaching evaluations were a critical measure for improving the quality of teaching. The work of evaluating teaching at institutions of higher education was of major significance and produces significant results; it must be strengthened, not weakened (Zhou, 2009).

## **Expertise and Experience of Assessment Expert**

In English higher education, external examiners play an important role in the quality assurance systems. However, in a few cases external examiners did not have the necessary expertise to meet the expectations of institutions with regard to monitoring and confirming the relationship between standards and subject benchmark statements (QAA, 2008). For example, many external examiners appointed were not familiar with the context, academic norms and procedures of overseas collaborative programmes. There was often the absence of clear articulation of how to induct and support external examiners' practice. The efficiency and the reliability of external examiners' reports was also a blurred area (QAA, 2005).

The problems among experts in Chinese teaching quality evaluation practice were mainly found in the following three fields: first, two-thirds of the experts were the senior administrators of Chinese universities, of which university presidents or party secretaries were the majority. The number of teaching managers was the second largest, while the number of academics among inspecting panels was very limited; second universities often felt unsatisfied with the evaluation feedback and recommendations given by the evaluation panel for the reason that they lacked concrete recommendations convincing to the universities due to experts' limited

expertise in the specific fields of the universities; and third, the average age of experts was quite high. There was a great need to involve and train younger experts. These problems show the barriers in realising quality assurance and improvement through external assessment. The overuse of senior administrators may lead the external quality assessment to rely on a favourable social network among universities which may undermine the essence of quality assessment. The evaluators of greater age mostly received their higher education and did their work under the old Chinese higher education system. Their expertise of teaching management is often in line with their experience. Their understanding and judgment of quality may have conflicts with the current higher education guidelines in China.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The learning and teaching quality assurance systems in the United Kingdom and China reflect the differing cultures and traditions of the two countries. There were many differences and similarities between the LTQA systems in undergraduate education in Chinese and British universities. There were also some common tasks, similar situations and difficulties with regard to the LTQA in both countries. On the one hand, university teaching affairs should be supported financially with adequate policy, and on the other hand, the external measures of quality assurance should be geared to teaching practice with simplified assessment procedure and concise content assessment.

In order to further improve learning and teaching quality, the governments need to establish some channels for communication and consultation between macro and micro levels in learning and teaching quality assurance. Both sides should develop the strong awareness of taking responsibility; we should develop some mechanisms to communicate a common and shared understanding of meaning of academic quality and the principles and purposes of national reference points; the data collection, analyses and publishing of teaching quality should be strengthened and valued to construct a unified teaching quality information database; and we should develop an adequate accreditation system for selecting, training and appointing assessment specialists with the aim of professionalising assessment experts and external examiners.

From the comparison of the QA systems and practices of the two countries, we can see that there are good practices in the UK QA practices that could be providing some useful lessons for China, such as the use of quality assurance agencies, quality assurance external standards such as academic infrastructure facilitation to the establishment and improvement of HEIs' internal quality assurance systems, and the various quality assurance methods. In brief, the great challenge for universities in China and the UK is to adapt and improve the learning and teaching quality assurance system. With continuing dialogue, each will be able to learn from the other, and will be the greatest beneficiaries of the continuing development of effective learning and teaching quality assurance processes.

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