



Rethinking the Challenges Faced by the Quality Assurance System in Chinese Higher Education from the Perspective of Quality Culture

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How to cite this paper: Yang Yang. (2024). Rethinking the Challenges Faced by the Quality Assurance System in Chinese Higher Education from the Perspective of Quality Culture. *The Educational Review, USA*, 8(8), 1015-1022. DOI: 10.26855/er.2024.08.001

Received: June 30, 2024

Accepted: July 28, 2024

Published: August 26, 2024

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Abstract

This paper primarily discusses the challenges facing China's higher education quality assurance system, reexamining it from the perspective of quality culture. The article highlights that current assessment practices often focus solely on classroom teaching quality, neglecting broader factors such as curriculum coherence and student engagement. Additionally, the paper explores the concept of quality culture in higher education, emphasizing the importance of fostering a culture of diversity and innovation to enhance teaching quality. Furthermore, it identifies existing issues, including the ambiguity of quality assessment standards, unclear responsibilities of management departments, and the uniformity of top-level design. The paper underscores the central role of quality culture in higher education quality assurance and calls for universities to prioritize long-term investments in quality through policy guidance and resource allocation, aiming to achieve continuous improvement in the quality of higher education.

Keywords

Higher education; quality assurance system; quality culture; China's higher education

1. Introduction

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) identified three major challenges facing higher education in 1995: quality, financing, and ethics (UNESCO, 1995). This was further emphasized at the inaugural World Conference on Higher Education in October 1998, which underscored a shift towards quality over quantity for the 21st century, encompassing teaching, research, and facilities (Xue & Guo, 2022). Since the large-scale expansion of universities in 1999, China's higher education has experienced significant growth, grappling with balancing quantity and quality. By 2022, China had 3,013 higher education institutions with a total enrollment of 46.55 million students and an overall enrollment rate of 59.6% (MOE, 2023). This raises a crucial question: Can the quality of higher education keep pace with its quantitative growth?

The higher education institutions in China are diverse, with different focuses on talent training, academic structures, and funding sources. Higher education reform is primarily driven by government policies, which have facilitated rapid development through continuous policy introductions (Wang, 2019). To address the differences in focus of the diverse institutions, the government has proposed several quality initiatives such as "211," "985," and "Double First-Class" for undergraduate institutions, as well as "National Demonstration Vocational Colleges," "National Quality Polytechnics," and "Double High" initiatives for vocational institutions. (Tang & Fu, 2023). These initiatives, supported by financial and

policy incentives, guide the reform and development of institutions. Given China's vast geography and uneven regional economic development, disparities in higher education necessitate region-specific quality assurance strategies. Therefore, "The National Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)" emphasizes improving quality, encouraging institutional differentiation, and promoting diverse educational approaches.

Significant disparities exist between the eastern and western regions of China. The eastern region is generally more developed, with advantages in faculty qualifications, funding, and infrastructure. Conversely, higher education institutions in the Western region face resource limitations that constrain efforts to enhance educational quality. For these Western institutions, fostering a strong quality culture is crucial for ensuring educational quality, as quality culture is central to educational excellence (Hong & Wang, 2021).

This study focuses on Xi'an in the western region, selecting three types of higher education institutions: an institution jointly maintained by provincial and ministerial authorities, one solely maintained by the provincial government, and a private college. Through in-depth structured interviews with 14 individuals, including university presidents, academic directors, student employment guidance staff, educators, and students, along with document reviews, the research explores the common challenges and quality culture characteristics in Western universities' quality assurance systems. Based on these findings, the study offers suggestions on strengthening quality culture to improve quality assurance systems in higher education institutions in the Western region.

2. Quality assurance system of higher education

The importance of quality has been intensified by globalization and informatization. When the term "quality" is mentioned, it often evokes thoughts of product or service quality. However, the definitions and operational approaches to quality differ significantly between businesses and higher education. In the business realm, product quality is often measured by specific, perceptible, and quantifiable standards, such as durability and safety (Wang, 2010). In contrast, higher education quality includes quantifiable metrics like academic performance, graduation rates, and employment rates, and more subjective aspects such as academic atmosphere, teaching enthusiasm, and students' learning experiences. These complexities challenge the establishment and refinement of quality assurance systems in higher education. As Interviewee A1 stated, "Regarding the quality of higher education, what should we measure, how should we measure it, and indeed, should we measure it at all?" Besides, the concept of "quality" evolves with societal changes and is influenced by various external factors, continuously acquiring new connotations (Wu, 2022).

Therefore, research on quality assurance systems in higher education has become a core topic for the international community, higher education institutions, policymakers, and academics. Scholars have explored the quality assurance system from various perspectives. Federkeil (2008) examined the relationship between rankings and quality assurance, offering insights for self-assessment and improvement in higher education institutions. Given that students are the primary subjects of education, Tian (2020) emphasized their involvement in the quality assurance system is crucial. Elassy and the other researchers (2013) presented a theoretical model highlighting the multidimensionality and hierarchy of student participation, promoting educational democratization, transparency, and efficiency. Strydom (2004) explored the relationship between culture, quality, and change in South African higher education, facilitating the integration of quality assurance systems across diverse cultural and institutional backgrounds. Anaam and the other researchers (2009) delved into Yemen's higher education quality assurance and accreditation system, offering insights crucial for developing countries. These studies underscore the ongoing need for adaptive, innovative, and refined quality assurance systems to meet evolving demands and expectations.

3. Quality culture of higher education

Recently, the concept of "quality culture" has emerged as a central focus in research, representing a deeper exploration of educational quality beyond specific measures within quality assurance systems (Bie & Yi, 2021; Wu, 2022). Defining "quality culture" in higher education presents challenges similar to defining educational quality itself (Lei, 2022).

In China, Liu Defang (2000) initially proposed the concept of quality culture in higher education, encompassing explicit factors such as institutional norms and faculty development, alongside implicit factors like educational philosophy and values. While explicit factors are observable and measurable, implicit aspects, although more difficult to quantify, significantly influence the enhancement of educational quality. Thus, quality culture in higher education is holistic, prompting multidimensional research. Researchers such as Katiliute and Neverauskas (2009), Vilcea (2014), Jawad and other scholars (2015), Bendermacher and other scholars (2017) have explored various dimensions of quality culture in higher education. They have investigated its developmental trajectories, impact on educational processes, internal frameworks, inhibiting and promoting factors, and effectiveness through empirical studies and theoretical frameworks.

However, comprehensive research focusing on constructing internal quality assurance systems from a quality culture perspective in higher education remains limited. The development of internal quality culture often lags behind the implementation of quality assurance practices (Yorke, 2000).

4. The current situation of quality culture in higher education in China

While interconnected, quality culture and quality assurance systems are distinct concepts in higher education. The quality assurance system is tangible, using quantifiable indicators and methodologies such as accreditation and audits to assess institutions. In contrast, quality culture is intangible, focusing on values, philosophies, and behaviors that drive educational excellence. A strong quality culture enables universities to uphold high standards independently of external regulations.

Quality assurance measures significantly influence the development of quality culture (Johnson, 2015). Recognizing this, China has implemented national policies to promote quality culture. The Ministry of Education's directives from 2018 and 2019 emphasized internalizing quality culture as a shared value among faculty and students, focusing on self-reflection, self-discipline, and continuous improvement (Educational Higher [2018] No. 2; [2019] No. 6). The "Implementation Methods for Teaching Assessment and Evaluation of Undergraduate Education in General Higher Education Institutions (2021-2026)" includes "quality culture" as a key audit element, highlighting its importance.

However, challenges persist. Influenced by policy guidance and resource disparities, some institutions prioritize short-term achievements over long-term qualitative investments, leading to homogenization and formalism in quality assurance. Interviewee C2 noted a tendency towards imitation rather than innovation among universities. Without a unified understanding and commitment to educational quality, institutions may struggle to address issues proactively.

In summary, while quality assurance systems provide a structured framework for evaluating educational quality, cultivating a robust quality culture is essential for maintaining high standards independently and sustainably. Strengthening quality culture in higher education faces challenges but is crucial for fostering genuine excellence and continuous improvement.

4.1 Problems in the internal quality assurance system of Xi'an universities

Quality culture and the quality assurance system are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Issues within the higher education quality assurance system often reveal underlying aspects of the quality culture, beyond mere operational or technical concerns. Therefore, analyzing problems within a university's internal quality assurance system requires understanding the quality culture reflected by these issues. By addressing deficiencies in the quality culture identified through these challenges, universities can strategically enhance their quality culture, thereby improving the overall quality of higher education.

4.1.1 Unclear rights and responsibilities of the quality assurance management department

Among the interviewees, both teaching staff and students expressed doubts about the effectiveness of their university's quality assurance system, contrasting sharply with the views of the academic affairs office and other quality assurance management departments.

Many universities in China have established Teaching Quality Monitoring and Evaluation Centers or Teaching Quality Management Offices to uphold educational standards. However, these administrative units often operate broadly, leading to ambiguity in their roles (Liu, 2021). Traditionally, the academic affairs department oversees teaching activities, with individual faculties lacking the autonomy to establish separate departments. While these centers were intended to enhance teaching quality, specific tasks, authorities, and divisions of labor vary widely among institutions. Consequently, overlapping responsibilities and conflicts among the quality assurance management department, academic affairs, and faculties have undermined the university's teaching quality assurance system.

These centers or offices are frequently linked with academic affairs departments, sometimes operating under dual titles. While this integration may leverage teaching resources and information, it poses long-term challenges. The dual role of setting and evaluating teaching standards within the same department raises conflicts of interest, akin to "being both the athlete and the referee" (Mo, 2016). Such arrangements can compromise the objectivity of evaluations, potentially undermining the credibility of the university's quality assurance efforts.

Moreover, when academic affairs departments themselves require assessment and oversight, maintaining an objective monitoring process becomes challenging, hindering opportunities for meaningful improvements in teaching quality and educational outcomes.

In summary, while Chinese universities have made strides in establishing quality assurance mechanisms through

specialized centers and offices, the integration with academic affairs departments and the lack of clear delineation of responsibilities have created systemic challenges. Addressing these issues is critical for strengthening teaching quality assurance systems and upholding educational standards.

4.1.2 Quantitative and superficial issues in the evaluation index system

Current university evaluation systems heavily emphasize measurable quantitative indicators like student employment rates, research funding levels, and academic paper output. This approach highlights significant deficiencies in how indicators are structured, often detached from social contexts and fragmented. While higher education assessment has begun integrating qualitative aspects with quantitative metrics (Wang, 2023), quantitative measures still lack depth and specific focus. Influenced by technical approaches, universities aim to enhance educational quality management through detailed, quantified, and systematic evaluation systems. Their goal is to standardize quality monitoring and institutionalize management practices, addressing challenges with specific, measurable methods (Wang, 2010).

However, these indicators often prioritize educational outputs over the diverse social contexts and qualitative aspects crucial to education. For example, student employment rates may not reflect job quality, research funding may not foster innovation, and published papers may not measure teaching effectiveness.

Analysis reports from universities predominantly present statistical data without qualitative analysis or interpretations, suggesting a superficial approach. For faculty, compiling extensive data can feel burdensome and irrelevant, adding to workload challenges, particularly for young teachers balancing teaching quality, evaluations, and administrative duties. This can divert their focus from essential teaching and research activities. Interviewee C1 expressed concerns, stating, "We have limited energy, and managing everything is challenging. As educators, we aim to innovate in teaching, but administrative tasks often take precedence."

When faculty perceive their efforts as disconnected from meaningful impact, it can lead to negative emotions, and disengagement from evaluation processes, and potentially affect educational quality, team cohesion, and innovation. Over time, this may undermine genuine quality culture development, favoring technical outputs over educational depth and innovation. This shift risks sidelining meaningful educational practices, compromising the holistic goals of higher education.

4.1.3 Homogenization and simplification of teaching evaluation forms

Interviewee A1 highlighted a prevalent trend in higher education where leading universities influence others to adopt new practices aimed at enhancing educational quality. However, the effectiveness of these practices remains uncertain and requires further investigation.

During the interviews, it was evident that the three universities studied showed minimal variation in their approaches to monitoring and evaluating teaching quality, signaling a troubling trend towards standardization. The primary evaluation method involved classroom inspections by experts (Qu, 2020). While each university had procedural differences—such as random checks at University C and application-based assessments at University A—the fundamental reliance on expert observation remained consistent. Despite these variations, common shortcomings emerged, including narrow evaluation criteria and ambiguous assessment standards.

This evaluation approach tends to be superficial and focused mainly on short-term classroom observations. While classroom teaching quality is crucial, this narrow focus overlooks broader factors like curriculum coherence and student engagement, essential for effective teaching. Moreover, the lack of clear, publicly accessible evaluation criteria allows for subjective interpretations by evaluators, potentially introducing biases. Teachers categorized based on these assessments may face unwarranted scrutiny, sometimes for trivial matters unrelated to teaching quality. This compliance-driven culture discourages innovation and diversity in teaching methods, hindering meaningful long-term improvements in teaching quality.

In conclusion, current evaluation practices in higher education, while aiming to enhance teaching quality, often fail to address broader educational goals and foster an environment conducive to genuine innovation. Addressing these issues requires revisiting evaluation criteria, promoting transparency, and adopting a more comprehensive approach to assessing teaching effectiveness beyond immediate classroom performance.

4.1.4 Lack of effective communication and feedback mechanism

Interviewee A1's observation reveals the hierarchical management structure in China's higher education system, where teaching management remains centralized within functional departments. This top-down approach, aimed at ensuring decision-making consistency and efficiency, historically marginalizes frontline educators and students, essential stakeholders whose insights are critical for informed governance.

In contrast, contemporary management philosophies advocate for inclusive, bottom-up approaches. Empowering

grassroots employees in decision-making fosters effective management outcomes and a supportive organizational culture. Engaging frontline staff and students not only enhances decision accuracy but also cultivates stakeholder ownership and engagement.

However, existing feedback mechanisms in many universities often lack flexibility and transparency, hindering effective information flow between administrative and academic departments. Xu and Luo's (2022) research underscores the need to improve communication channels across hierarchical levels within universities.

Initiatives like "President's Mailboxes" aim to bridge this gap, allowing faculty and students to directly communicate with institutional leaders. Yet, as noted by Interviewee A3, awareness and effectiveness of such platforms in promptly addressing issues remain low, potentially drowning out voices from grassroots levels and fostering a perception of neglect.

Without robust bottom-up communication, faculty and students may adopt a passive stance towards university affairs, eroding trust in management decisions and diminishing their institutional belonging. This could weaken organizational cohesion and execution efficiency, impacting the university's quality assurance efforts.

To address these challenges, universities must adopt strategies promoting transparent communication, active feedback loops, and inclusive decision-making processes. Fostering a culture where all stakeholders feel valued and heard enhances operational efficiency, strengthens team cohesion, and improves the delivery of quality education.

5. Strengthen quality culture to improve the quality assurance system

The European Universities Association (2006) articulates that the quality culture of universities includes both "hard" aspects, such as quality management, strategies, and processes, and "soft" dimensions, including values, beliefs, and commitments. This holistic perspective provides a comprehensive framework for understanding quality culture at a macro level. Fundamentally, quality culture represents a core set of values and behaviors deeply embedded within higher education institutions.

As societal norms evolve, perceptions of educational quality also change. Adapting and refining the quality assurance system to meet contemporary demands necessitates a deep exploration and enhancement of these "soft" aspects of quality culture, particularly fostering shifts in mindset and beliefs. A robust quality culture enables universities to proactively and thoughtfully address new challenges and issues.

5.1 Reshaping the quality culture atmosphere

Neglecting the importance of quality culture undermines its potential to enhance educational quality and transform the organizational culture of higher education institutions (Luo & Wang, 2013). Reshaping the quality culture environment is crucial for addressing existing issues within the quality assurance system effectively.

Creating an open and egalitarian atmosphere entails fostering regular training sessions or discussions to encourage all institution members, including teachers, students, academic staff, administrative personnel, and leadership, to share experiences and perspectives. Embracing diverse viewpoints enables universities to move beyond simplistic quantitative metrics in assessments, facilitating a nuanced evaluation that reflects overall educational quality.

Emphasizing a culture that values diversity and innovation encourages creative thinking about teaching methods and assessment criteria. This departure from rigid norms allows for holistic assessments, accommodating varied teaching styles and student needs.

Cultivating a culture of trust promotes open communication and timely feedback among stakeholders. Trust encourages individuals to share ideas, offer constructive criticism, and suggest improvements, fostering a responsive feedback mechanism that enhances teaching quality and management practices.

In summary, prioritizing openness, diversity, innovation, and trust in reshaping the quality culture environment enables universities to effectively address current challenges in educational quality assurance. This proactive approach not only tackles immediate issues but also establishes a resilient foundation for future institutional development.

5.2 People-centered

The concept of "people-oriented or human-centered" in Chinese philosophy traces back to the Spring and Autumn period. Today, its application in education reflects varied interpretations shaped by economic foundations and cultural differences between China and the West.

In educational contexts, a people-centered approach prioritizes the perspectives of students and teaching staff over administrative processes or institutional regulations. While the West emphasizes a "student-centered" approach focusing on meeting student needs, the Chinese perspective extends this to encompass "everything for the student, for every student, and all for the benefit of the student." This holistic view emphasizes addressing educators' needs first, as articulated by

Deng Xiaoping: "Education is the foundation of a century-long plan, and at its core are the educators themselves."

A people-centered education mandates that institutions promote educational quality by fostering the well-being and growth of both students and teaching staff. This approach values humanistic care, psychological attention, and emotional exchanges throughout the educational process. It transcends traditional quality supervision by prioritizing listening to students' and teachers' voices, addressing their needs, and valuing their perspectives. This creates an environment conducive to mutual growth and development.

Involving educators and students in decision-making enhances the relevance and efficacy of policies, fostering communication between teachers, administrators, and students. Open communication cultivates a culture where teachers and students freely share views and suggestions, enhancing their sense of ownership and stimulating active participation in learning and teaching.

Embracing a people-centered approach in education emphasizes nurturing a supportive and collaborative environment where the well-being and perspectives of both educators and students are central to achieving educational excellence and continuous improvement.

5.3 Strengthening the sense of agency

The promotion of agency, emphasizing individual responsibility and initiative, catalyzes enhanced quality in higher education institutions. Active participation of students, faculty, and administrative personnel in educational quality ensures assessment systems avoid oversimplification and purely quantitative evaluations. Teachers acknowledging their pivotal role in ensuring teaching quality are more likely to engage actively and provide personalized feedback, fostering comprehensive supervision and clearer standards. Effective communication and feedback mechanisms prioritize school management, faculty, and students, promoting a "bottom-up" approach that enhances educational refinement. Clarifying roles and responsibilities among stakeholders is crucial, fostering proactive assumption of responsibilities and continuous improvement in management and teaching practices. Emphasizing and nurturing agency ensures stakeholders actively promote and safeguard educational quality while fostering innovation, enabling institutions to develop tailored quality assurance systems that mitigate homogenization risks.

5.4 Internalization of quality culture

Quality culture must extend beyond rhetoric or policy documents; it must permeate every decision and action within an institution, genuinely embraced and practiced by all members. If confined to paper or rhetoric alone, it signifies a lack of internalization within the institution, indicating that the university's values, philosophy, and behavioral norms regarding quality have not been fully integrated into daily teaching and management practices. Effective quality assurance systems and measures, while essential, rely heavily on proactive implementation and enthusiastic support from faculty and students. Failure to achieve this suggests that the institution's quality culture has not taken root, potentially leading to a lack of sustained commitment to excellence in educational and teaching activities. There is a risk of prioritizing external compliance over genuine improvement of the higher education quality assurance system and teaching quality enhancement from within.

Internalizing a quality culture requires that every member of the institution shares a clear understanding and commitment to delivering high-quality education, consistently striving towards this goal. In such an environment, comprehensive teaching supervision moves beyond narrow perspectives and simplistic quantitative metrics. A widely accepted quality culture enhances communication and feedback mechanisms, emphasizing dialogue with teachers, students, and stakeholders to ensure their voices shape decision-making processes. These strategies foster collaboration and effectiveness in implementing quality improvement initiatives. Within this cultural framework, supervision and evaluation are seen not just as administrative duties but as critical endeavors to uphold and elevate educational quality. When all stakeholders deeply value quality, these tasks receive enhanced attention and support.

6. Conclusions and discussions

The challenges discussed in this study are tangible, yet the interactions and underlying causes in the pursuit of educational quality within universities are profoundly complex. Issues often intertwine, creating cycles that are difficult to break. Moreover, a single issue can have multiple causes, and one cause can contribute to several problems simultaneously, complicating the analysis and formulation of effective solutions.

For example, unclear responsibilities among quality assurance agencies can blur institutional roles, hindering effective communication and feedback mechanisms. This lack of clarity exacerbates the negative impact of an overemphasis on

quantitative indicators in evaluation processes, potentially causing institutions to overlook critical feedback. These intertwined issues pose significant challenges for higher education institutions striving to refine their quality assurance systems.

Recognizing that a strong quality culture underpins the quality assurance system (Qi, 2020), fostering such a culture becomes imperative. Addressing quality assurance system issues through the lens of quality culture emerges as a crucial strategy.

Establishing a robust quality culture in higher education requires a comprehensive, systemic effort. Its significance extends beyond institutional structures to encompass the agency and accountability of every teacher, student, and administrator. As higher education expands and emphasizes quality amid growth, universities must transcend traditional constraints, adapt to contemporary demands, and forge innovative collaborations with external stakeholders.

A university's quality culture embodies not only educational quality management but also fundamental educational values and aspirations. Creating an environment conducive to quality culture demands concerted efforts, mutual support, and close collaboration among all members of the academic community.

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