Quality assurance in higher education in China: Control, accountability and freedom

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Abstract

Quality assurance (QA) has received increasing attention in the Chinese higher education (HE) sector. This paper examines the QA system in HE in China and its influence on university governance and academic performance. It starts with an introduction into the development of the QA system, and is followed by a discussion of how QA affects accountability and autonomy from the perspective of the faculty. Given that different stakeholders have different understandings of education quality, the next section contributes to the debate on whether the current system is designed for improvement of learning experience, or as a means of effective government control. This paper concludes by highlighting the importance of involving faculty and students in the current QA system to enhance the quality of HE.

1. Introduction

The introduction of quality assurance (QA) to higher education (HE) has become a global phenomenon, and similar practices are found in the US, Europe, and Asia, among other regions (Ng, 2008; Rhoades & Sporn, 2002). Many of the QA projects are initiated by the state in the context of globalization. The emergence of global markets has placed modern states under pressure to maintain and/or enhance national competitiveness. Realizing the importance of productivity, efficiency and effectiveness, governments are being pushed to change their rigid bureaucratic administration, while a managerialist model is introduced to sow the seeds of an entrepreneurial spirit in the field of public management (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). The public sector, which includes the HE sector, is transformed accordingly to enhance efficiency. Under the influence of both managerialism and neo-liberalism, the Keynesian welfare state is being reformed according to the 'New Public Management' (NPM) model to highlight efficiency, effectiveness and evaluation of performance.

Determined to enhance their global competitiveness in a knowledge-based economy, governments across the world have tried various means to promote the ranking of their universities in global university league tables. The quest for a 'world-class university' identity, as well as a high global university ranking, has fundamentally affected university governance. In fact, an emerging global model (EGM) is noticed as a response to the growing pressures to enhance the global competitiveness of universities across the world (Mohrmana, Mab, & Baker, 2008). One prominent feature of the EGM is diversified funding. The combination of HE expansion and limited public funding forces universities to

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seek funding from the non-public sector. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are becoming increasingly active in marketization and privatization strategies in order to generate additional revenues. The wide adoption of user-pay principle in HE requires that universities be answerable to their students. Moreover, an increasing fraction of public funding is allocated by means of performance based funding. QA, as an effective means to assess and improve university performance, has thus been widely adopted in the HE sector.

There are different understandings of quality for different stakeholders. As a concept developed from the manufacturing sector, quality historically emphasizes 'zero defects', 'consumer satisfaction', and 'synthesis of conformance, adaptability, innovation and continuous improvement' (IIEP, 2011: p. 8). Based on these factors, quality of HE is often viewed in terms of exceptional standards, conformance to standards, fitness for purpose, effectiveness in achieving institutional goals, and meeting customers' stated or implied needs (Green, 1994). Because of the multi-facet nature of quality, there are different approaches and procedures for QA in different context. Standards-based approaches assess universities against a set of pre-determined qualitative and/or quantitative standards, which are often externally developed by a reference group; beyond this, a fit-for-purpose approach adopts the internally set goals and missions of an HEI as lens to analyze university performance. On the other side, different requirements may apply when evaluating university performance. The minimum requirement approach is often adopted for compliance purposes. It is also used to ensure universities fulfill minimum standards in the absence of a sophisticated QA system. With the development of QA system and quest for improving performance, high standard approach receives more attention to assess HEIs against higher benchmarks (IIEP, 2011). A comprehensive QA framework involves inspection into a number of areas, including mission and purpose, faculty output, instruction, library, laboratory, physical facility, and administration, among other areas.

Different from the manufacturing industry that produces tangible goods, education provides a unique type of service that students would not be able to evaluate until experience it. As Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) rightly pointed out, quality of services is different from quality of products and is thus measured differently. Service quality is more difficult for consumers to determine, because evaluation of service quality involves both the process and outcome of the service. In addition, the perception of service is often affected by a comparison between the expected and the actual performance. Parasuraman et al. (1985) identified ten determinants of service quality, including reliability, responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, under-standing/knowing the customer and tangibles. This provides a useful guideline to examine student satisfaction of the HE they receive. Unfortunately, as will be illustrated in more details, few of these elements are considered when it come to HE quality control in China, because the current system views students more as product of university training than as consumer of HE service. Consequently, many crucial aspects affecting student experience are missing.

There are various agencies inspecting HE quality. First of all, universities themselves are often active in self-regulation. Indeed, self-regulation is a preferred model of QA when academic freedom and institutional autonomy are emphasized. With the quest for 'world-class' status, many universities have strong incentives to monitor and improve their performance to become globally competitive. Others, however, could do little but rely on established reputation (Blackmur, 2004). Scholars notice that global ranking exercises have had limited influence on either top-tier universities that are widely considered world leading, or lower ranked institutions that are far from 'world-class' (Lo, 2011). Therefore, external QA is necessary to provide reliable information in HE quality by credible means. Independent third party QA agencies play an important role in both designing a QA framework and assessing university quality. For example, governments in many countries and regions, including, but not limited to, the US, UK, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and Hong Kong, have established national standards for education quality. Professional associates are also a key player in forming and promoting professional standards in HE (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002). Moreover, an external QA process could be carried out as a result of legal action. Juridical determination on disputes between students and HEIs is very likely to have effects on university performance standards and practice (Blackmur, 2004).

Against this backdrop, QA has received increasing attention in the Chinese HE sector. Many universities are establishing self-regulation mechanism in order to improve their performance, while the state is developing a comprehensive QA framework to monitor the quality of HE and provide evidence for allocation of performance based funding. This paper examines the QA system in HE in China and its influence on university governance and academic performance against this context. It starts with an introduction into the development of the QA system. This is followed by a discussion on how QA affects university governance and academic autonomy from faculty's perspective. Given that different stakeholders have different understanding of education quality, the next section contributes to the debates