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Towards Learning-Focused Quality Assurance in Chinese Higher Education

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1. Introduction

The concept of 'quality' has been contemplated throughout history and continues to be a topic of intense interest today (Reeve & Bednar, 1994). A concern about quality and standards is not new in higher education. Since the mid-1980s, the concept of quality has increasingly influenced discussion around the globe about the role and future of higher education institutions and the academics that constitute those institutions (Watty, 2003). Quality has become a universalising metanarrative (Morley, 2003). Quality and quality assurance issues in higher education have risen to prominence both nationally and internationally (Dunkerley & Wong, 2001). Quality parades as a universal truth continually extends its domain (Morley, 2003). The concern for quality is articulated by university managers themselves, by external agencies deliberately established to assess and reward quality and, increasingly, by the 'clients' of higher education – the students, the employers and, importantly, the state (Dunkerley & Wong, 2001). Despite the prevailing use of the concepts and models of 'quality', many researchers believe that the language and tools of industry-born quality models are an imperfect fit to higher education (Houston, 2008) and the concept of customer-defined quality is problematic (Eagle & Brennan, 2007; Houston 2007; Meirovich & Romar,2006).

There is a great number of studies and publications on the issue of quality assurance in higher education, but most of the studies have difficulties in providing substantial evidence that the core processes of higher education – teaching and learning – are improved as a consequence (Stensaker, 2008). The intuitive answer is that most studies have not reached the needed level of sophistication, but as Stensaker (2008) points out, this is not necessarily a problem solely related to methodology, but to the underlying assumptions of quality assurance and the standard top-down implementation approach. This study is conducted against the background of the prevailing quality culture, and focuses on student learning rather than the widely adopted top-down scrutiny of teaching as the main component of quality assurance schemes. Both systematic literature review and document analysis are adopted to explore how student learning experiences can be integrated into the quality assurance systems in Chinese universities for continuous quality improvement. Based on the discussion of the literature on quality and quality assurance in higher education and a

detailed analysis of the current quality assurance practice in Chinese higher education, a learning-focused quality assurance is proposed to offer insights into integrating student learning generically into the quality assurance process for the purpose of the continuous improvement of higher education quality.

2. Quality in higher education

Quality had by tradition been seen as an implicit and natural element of university-level learning and research and an integrated part of academics' professional responsibilities. This changed in the 1990s, with a requirement that higher education institutions should demonstrate, through their institutional leaders and expressed in comparable measures, the quality of their activities (Harvey & Askling, 2003). There is substantial agreement that the quality imperative in higher education was based on pressure from the market and from governments to adapt to an external political agenda (Dill, 2000; Harvey, 1998; Salter & Tapper, 2000). Brooks and Becket (2007) point out that the introduction of the quality imperative in higher education is mainly an externally driven process related to increased demand for accountability and efficiency in the sector.

In fact, the concept of quality is not always made explicitly, though it is used so often by so many people inside and outside higher education. 'Quality' is a highly contested concept, which has multiple meanings for people from different tracks of higher education. Barnett (1992) argues that there is a logical connection between concepts of higher education and different approaches to quality. In his opinion, what we mean by, and intend by, 'quality' in the context of higher education is bound up with our values and fundamental aims in higher education. We cannot adopt a definite approach toward quality in this sphere of human interaction without taking up a normative position, connected with what we take higher education ultimately to be. In turn, what we take higher education to be will have implications for how we conceive of quality, how we attain it, how we evaluate our success in achieving it, and how we improve it. So if we want to offer a particular view on quality we should be prepared to declare where we stand on the key purpose of higher education (Barnett, 1992). He categorises concepts of higher education into two groups:

Group 1:

Four dominant concepts of higher education underlie contemporary approaches to, and definitions of, quality: 1) higher education as the production of qualified manpower; 2) higher education as training for a research career; 3) higher education as the efficient management of teaching provision; 4) higher education as a matter of extending life chances. This group of concepts reflects the thinking about higher education of the national policy makers, funders and institutional managers, and other national interest groups. These concepts are external to the process of higher education, but are driving national debate and development work in quality assessment and are informed by a systematic approach to education (Barnett, 1992). If higher education is perceived as a process of filling particular slots in the labour market with individuals who are going to be 'productive', then one way of assessing quality might be to examine the destinations of the students. Under this conception, students take on value as, and are described in the vocabulary of, 'products' of the system (Barnett, 1992).

Group 2:

This group of concepts is concerned with the students' development, or the educational process to which students are exposed. Such concepts include higher education seen as: 1) the development of the individual student's autonomy, with students acquiring intellectual integrity and the capacity to be their own person; 2) higher education as the formation of general intellectual abilities and perspectives; 3) the enhancement of the individual student's personal character; 4) the developing of competence to participate in a critical commentary on the host society. The concern of this group of concepts is with the educational process that students undergo, not with inputs and outputs and their relationship. This group is not obviously reflected in contemporary debate over quality assurance in higher education. It contains ideas about higher education that do not lend themselves to institutional practice easily captured by system-wide and systematic evaluation procedures such as numerical performance indicators. But their not fitting the standard model of performance assessment does not affect the validity of such conceptions of higher education (Barnett, 1992). As pointed out by Barnett, if we believe that the quality of higher education is more demonstrated in the nature of the intellectual development that takes place in students' minds, in the depth and breadth of understanding that students achieve, in their ability to be self-critical, and in their capacity to apply that understanding and self-critical capacity to all they experience and do, then 'quality' of higher education takes on a quite different character. Under this conception of higher education, the appraisal of quality will not rest content with economic indicators of output, but will turn to exploring the educational process within our institutions. Since there is a logical connection between the development of a worthwhile state of mind and the experiences and educational processes to which students are exposed in their course, a conception of higher education of this kind will prompt an examination of the types of intellectual challenge presented to students, and that in turn will begin to produce an illumination of the internal life of our institutions.

3. Quality assurance in higher education

There are many definitions of 'quality assurance' in the literature (e.g. Ball, 1985; Birnbanum, 1994; Frazer, 1992; van Vugh and Westerheijden, 1993; Woodhouse, 1999). The term 'quality assurance' refers to 'systematic, structured and continuous attention to quality in terms of quality maintenance and improvement' (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). Girdwood (1997) defines the term 'quality assurance' as the policies, systems, and processes designed to ensure the maintenance and enhancement of quality within a programme or institution. Quality assurance is about ensuring accountability, which gives assurance that it is good quality. Harman (1998) suggests that in essence, quality assurance refers to the systematic management and assessment procedures adopted to ensure achievement of specified quality or of improved quality, and to enable key stakeholders to have confidence in the management of quality and the outcomes achieved. Quality assurance may in other words be seen in the context of the regulation of higher education.

Quality assurance is not new. It was originally an integral part of craftsmanship and professionalism (Morley, 2003). Before the quality imperative prevailed globally, the concern for quality and development of quality management arose within higher education institutions. Teachers and administrators within universities and colleges identified what was right for them to teach and made sure it was taught in the accepted way. In the past two

decades, the quality imperative in higher education has come from the market and from government (Houston, 2008). More recently, it has been disaggregated from the professions, and formalised and transformed into an object of inquiry (Hart, 1997).

The changes, as analysed by Harvey and Askling (2003), occurred for both pragmatic and ideological reasons. Quality had by tradition been seen as an implicit and natural element of university-level learning and research and an integrated part of academics' professional responsibilities. In the 1990s, universities were required to demonstrate the quality of their activities. Universities were used to seeing excellence or transformation as the self-evident key indicator of higher education quality, but now a self-evident property of higher education became transformed into a mechanism of control.

Systematic procedures for quality assurance and improvement through formal evaluation have been in place in Western Europe since the mid 1980s (Bornmann, et al., 2006). Quality assurance is slowly but steadily becoming an integrated part of higher education (Stensaker, 2008). Quality assurance is by no means a new idea in higher education. For many years, most major higher education systems have had in place various mechanisms of review and assessment. What is new, however, apart from the language, is a more systematic and far-reaching approach to ensuring that institutions and systems have in place mechanisms for review and assessment, and for renewal and improvement (Harman, 1998). Compared to past approaches, the new mechanisms also put much more emphasis on external scrutiny, seeking the views of employers and graduates and, in various ways, making the results of assessment more widely available (Harman, 1998). Stensaker (2008) summarises this process as:

- In the beginning emphasis was given to design issues and the relationship between quality assurance systems and the governance of higher education (Neave, 1988);
- There was a period with greater interest given to methodological issues;
- Much attention was drawn to the human factors (Vroeijenstijn, 1995; Neave, 1996);
- Interest in quality stimulated by leadership and the ways to stimulate staff and student involvement and ownership (Brennan & Shah, 2000);
- More and more governments and quality assurance agencies, and higher education institutions, are held accountable for the impact and outcomes of all this (Stensaker, 2003, 2008; Westerheijden, et al., 2006);
- Currently, higher education is entering an era in which a more nuanced understanding of what quality assurance and quality processes can or cannot prevails (Stensaker, 2008).

3.1 The rationale of quality assurance

Harvey and Askling (2003) argue that from the start quality has been used as a vehicle for delivering policy requirements within available resources. Quality assurance operates as a mechanism to encourage policy driven change. It makes higher education more relevant to social and economic needs, widening access, expanding numbers and doing it with a decreasing unit cost. The rationale for quality assurance is often opaque (Harvey & Newton, 2007). Quality assurance has two underlying broad rationales: accountability and improvement. The perpetual debate about accountability and improvement is as old as quality assurance in higher education (Harvey & Newton, 2007).

Accountability

The term 'accountability' has been widely used in higher education ever since the 1990s. Accountability relates to processes which assess whether minimum standards are in place in a higher education institution or programme. Lewis et al. (2001) defines accountability as demonstrating the worth and use of public resources. Campbell and Rozsnyai (2002) define accountability as the assurance of a unit to its stakeholders that it provides education of good quality. Harvey & Newton (2007) identify accountability as a dominant rationale in quality assurance, but they argue that what exactly accountability is, or requires of the sector, and how that is related to the quality of higher education is less clear. In their view, the often stated reason for the rise of accountability include the cost and potential problems of expansion, the concomitant need to account for increasing amounts of public money, the need to ensure value for both private and public monies, lack of clear lines of accountability within higher education systems, globalisation and the need to keep control of an increasingly unrestricted market (Harvey, 2002). Accountability is seen as a major purpose of external quality processes. Harvey (2002) suggests that accountability has five main functions:

- To ensure that the institution or programme is accountable for the money it receives;
- To ensure that the core principles and practices of HE are not being eroded;
- To ensure that the programme is organised and run properly and that an appropriate educational experience is both promised and delivered;
- To provide proper public information for funders to aid funding allocation decisions, and for prospective students and graduate recruiters to inform choice;
- To ensure compliance with policy.

Improvement

Quality improvement focuses on developmental processes. Improvement potentially depends on the development of definitions and interventions that reflect the interests and concerns of those in the sector (Houston, 2008). Continuous improvement aims at continual increase of performance by emphasising learning and adaptation as keys to success of an organisation, which is also one of the core values of quality management (Deming, 1994; Evans & Lindsay, 2001). Harvey and Askling (2003) point out that improvement has been a secondary feature of most quality assurance systems despite the claims of most external reviews to encourage improvement.

Temponi (2005) suggests the adoption of a continuous improvement approach requires not only upper administration commitment, but also uncovering the current underlying culture and examining the appropriateness of objectives to adopt continuous improvement. Creating a quality culture and long-term commitment to continuous improvement within an academic institution means engaging the administrative and academic systems, and all stakeholders of higher education institutions.

The tension between accountability and improvement

Harvey (2002) points out there has been increasing uniformity of practice for quality monitoring in higher education. This is a pragmatic response to government requirements to demonstrate value for money and fitness for purpose. Nevertheless, what purpose and what constitutes fitness is unclear. The links between accountability mechanisms and

quality improvement are rarely clear. Vroeijenstijn and Acherman (1990) point out the tension between accountability and continuous quality improvement. Arguably, accountability is about value for money and fitness for purpose, while continuous improvement in teaching and learning is about enhancement of the student experience, and empowering students as life-long learners. They also argue that the improvement essence of quality is sidelined in the assurance process by a focus on demonstrating compliance. Thune (1996) argues that accountability and improvement are based on different methods based on the ownership of the evaluation system. He identifies that the improvement process has a different form and is independent of control. He argues from his Danish case that accountability and improvement may be combined in a balanced strategy. Middlehurst and Woodhouse (1995) explore whether it is feasible to combine the function of accountability and quality improvement in national arrangements for quality assurance in higher education. They identify that accountability and improvement must be conceptually and practically distinct with separate resourcing. The failure to address different purposes will damage the quality and the integrity of higher education by imbalances of power.

The accountability-led view sees improvement as a secondary function of the monitoring process. Following this approach, external monitoring of quality will lead to improvement as a side effect (Harvey and Newton, 2007). In other words, requiring accountability will lead to a review of practices, which in turn will result in improvement. Harvey (1994) questions this accountability-led view. First, facing a monitoring system demanding accountability, academics will tend to comply with requirements and to minimise its interruption in their existing practice. Second, improvement comes from a changed culture and local ownership, which is in conflict with the principle of compliance in accountability. Third, the extra burden of responding to external scrutiny leads to the feeling of lacking trust, which will demotivate staff who are already involved in innovation and quality initiatives. Harvey and Newton (2007) suggest a view counter to the accountability-led one, which will result in quality improvement: improvement is its own accountability. In other words, if an organisation continually improves it is accountable. This returns the ownership of the quality assurance system to academics. In their view improvement is not something regulated but something attained through critical engagement.

Harvey and Askling (2003) point out the most effective improvement occurs when external processes mesh with internal improvement activities. It is more difficult for external quality assurance to encourage the learning-teaching interface. They argue that the improvement function of quality assurance procedures is to encourage institutions to reflect upon their practices and to develop what they do. Therefore, quality assurance needs to be designed to encourage a process of continuous improvement of the learning process and the range of outcomes.

3.2 The approaches to quality assurance

In one of the earliest classifications of the different approaches to quality assurance, Dill (1992) distinguishes between three forms: the reputational approach, the student outcome approach, and the total quality (management) approach. The reputational approach uses peer review to assess the quality of higher education institutions or programmes. The student outcome approach measures student achievements both when attending higher education and after graduation. The total quality management approach is based on

participation, customer orientation, organisational learning and coordination. Over time, approaches to quality assurance are widely discussed and analysed at theoretical level and vary widely among countries.

Billing (2004) explores international comparisons of the purpose of quality assurance in higher education and the extent to which the main national quality assurance frameworks meet this. He concludes with a general model, which summarises the purposes of quality assurance into:

• Improvement of quality
• Publicly available information on quality and standards
• Accreditation (i.e. legitimisation of certification of students)
• Public accountability for standards achieved and for use of money
• To contribute to the higher education sector planning process

Van Vught and Westerheijden (1993) summarise the common elements of quality frameworks in European countries:

• A national agency to co-ordinate and support quality assurance within institutions, which is independent of government;
• Self-evaluation as the vital focus of the external quality assurance process;
• External peer review to explore the self-evaluation with the higher education institution (normally by a site visit);
• Public reports of these evaluation activities;
• No direct relationship of the results of external quality assurance to the funding of higher education institutions.

Thune (2002) summarises the important procedural elements shared among European quality assurance systems: internal self-evaluation; visits by external expert review panel; external evaluation; and public reporting. Harvey (1998) summarises the approaches of quality assurance into: accreditation and evaluation of institutions, audit of procedures within an institutions, accreditation of programmes of study, assessment of teaching quality in subject areas or of programmes, research assessment, and standards monitoring. Harvey and Askling (2003) point out that external quality monitoring takes many forms, ranging from accreditation and institutional audit, through subject assessment and standards monitoring to customer surveys. They have varied objects, foci and purposes and relate to different notions of quality and standards. Harvey and Askling (2003) summarise the object, focus, rationale, approach and mechanisms for quality evaluation under four headings: accountability, control, compliance and improvement.

In Harvey and Askling's (2003) model, the main objective of the quality monitoring process may be the provider in institutional review, medium of delivery, output in programme review, or learners in some cases. The focus may be governance and regulation, curriculum design and administration, learning experience or qualification. The specific purposes of quality monitoring fall under four broad headings: accountability, control, compliance and improvement. External quality monitoring takes several forms, ranging from accreditation and institutional audit, subject review and standards monitoring to customer survey.

Objective	Focus	Rationale	Approach	Mechanism
Provider	Governance & regulation	Accountability	Accreditation	Self-assessment
Medium of Delivery	Curriculum Design, Administration	Control	Audit	Performance Indicators
Output	Learning Experience	Compliance	Assessment	Visit
Learner	Qualification	Improvement	Standards Monitoring	Customer Surveys

Table 1. Object, focus, rationale, approach and mechanisms for external evaluation (Source: adapted from Harvey & Askling, 2003)

Accreditation

Accreditation is a public statement that a certain threshold of quality is passed (Campbell et al., 2000). The formal public recognition embodied in accreditation is seen as being based on agreed, pre-defined standards or criteria (El-Khawas, 1998). Accreditation has two nuances: first, the abstract notion of a formal authorising power, enacted via official decisions about recognition and; second, the quality label that institutions or programmes may acquire through certain accreditation procedures (Haakstad, 2001, as cited in Harvey & Askling, 2003). Accreditation may be of an institution or a programme of study. Accreditation tends to focus on inputs, for example, resources, curriculum and staffing. It may address the teaching process but not focus on outcomes of education, for instance, graduate attributes and employability (Harvey & Mason, 1995). In principle accreditation is based on recognition that the institution has in place appropriate control and monitoring processes to ensure satisfactory quality and standards. Accreditation is usually based on an evaluation of whether the institution meets specified minimum (input) standards such as staff qualifications, research activities, student intake, and learning resources (Harvey & Askling, 2003).

Audit

Quality audit is the process of checking to ensure externally or internally specified practices and procedures are in place (Harvey & Askling, 2003). Audits ensure that the institution has clearly defined internal quality monitoring procedures linked to effective action. An audit is often considered as having the potential of meeting many of the expectations of external control at the same time as it might support improvement (Dill, 2000).

Assessment

Quality assessment sets out to measure the level of quality of inputs, processes and outputs (Harvey & Askling, 2003). Quality assessment may be a judgement of the overall quality of an institution or programme, or of specified component elements. Many assessments are supposedly of fitness for purpose. Institutions or programmes are assessed against mission based criteria. Assessment might include a complex grading system or might be based on a simple satisfactory/non-satisfactory dichotomy (Harvey & Askling, 2003). Assessments may benchmark against other institutions, national norms, or against oneself over time. Assessment may also focus on inputs (for example, teaching staff, learning resources), or process (for example, teaching, learning, support services), or outcomes (for instance,

students' academic standards of achievement or professional competence, employment rates, students' perception of their learning). Assessment evidence includes statistical indicators, observation, direct evaluation of research outputs, student and graduate views, employer views, student performance, self-assessment and other documentation, discussion and interviews with teachers, students and managers, and perceptions of other agencies, such as professional bodies (Harvey & Askling, 2003).

Standards monitoring

Standards monitoring makes use of external examiners and has a longer history than external quality evaluation. Harvey and Askling (2003) summarise two main foci of standards monitoring: first, academic standards of a programme of study, identified by the academic work produced by students; second, standards of professional competence, identified through the ability or potential to undertake professional practice. They also argue that standards monitoring may specify standards that are appropriate, or it may endeavour to ensure that standards are at appropriate levels, possibly by checking or grading student work or performance. The purpose of standards monitoring may also be ensuring comparability of standards across the sector or across specific subjects within subject disciplines. Sometimes external examiners grade directly but usually standards are inferred by scrutiny of a sample of work or by monitoring award statistics.

Customer surveys

Quality evaluation often includes participant or client satisfaction with service provision which is at institutional, programme or module level in the higher education context. The feedback from students, graduates or employers is collected to enhance the normal process of self-assessment, statistical indicators and peer review (Harvey & Asklilng, 2003).

Different quality assurance procedures affect universities in many ways. These procedures exert both direct and indirect impact on universities. In the process of implanting external quality assurance, new management and self-regulation, as alternatives to the former models of quality management are institutionalised. Westerheijden (2001) argues that external quality monitoring leads to uniformity rather than diversity. External quality monitoring actually inhibits innovation because of the application of conservative or rigid evaluation criteria. Dano and Stensaker (2007) argue that the role and function of external quality assurance is of great importance for the development of an internal quality culture in higher education. Harvey and Askling (2003, p. 81) argue that:

Individual teachers within fields of teaching and learning and didactics have inspired each other and also challenged university teachers to make powerful contributions to improve university teaching. These researchers and teachers contribute in turning the quality issue, which was originally imposed by governments, into something empowering teachers and students.

3.3 The role of students in quality assurance

In recent years, the role of students in the quality assurance of higher education has been recognised across the world. Across the world, students increasingly play their role in the quality assurance process through providing feedback on the courses they have taken and on the general satisfaction with their educational experiences. Reviewing the literature relating to this topic, we may find that students are more and more involved in measuring

quality and in improving their own learning experiences. Student voice is increasingly heard through providing feedback, contributing to the development of learning and teaching, participating in the university decision making process, and presenting student views in a number of ways (Alaniska et al., 2006).

Giving feedback is the most common way through which students participate in quality assurance. The increasingly competitive environment in higher education leads universities to monitor levels of their student satisfaction (King et al., 1999). There is a wide diversity in how, when and what kind of feedback students give. It is typical that feedback is given after each course or at least once in a term. It is believed that student feedback can be used as an effective tool for quality improvement. Harvey (1995) suggests that student satisfaction goes hand in hand with the development of a culture of continuous quality improvement. Rowley (2003) identifies four main reasons for collecting student feedback:

- To provide students opportunities to pass comments on their courses and to collect information for improvement;
- To encourage student reflection on their learning;
- To allow institutions to benchmark and to provide indicators that will contribute to the reputation of the university in the marketplace; and
- To provide students with an opportunity to express their level of satisfaction with their academic experiences.

Both student feedback on courses and these national student surveys are increasingly used by higher education institutions across the world as an important component of quality assurance processes. Students are playing a more and more important role in quality assurance through these surveys. Though student learning experiences are internal issues inside higher education institutions, the publication of survey results and league tables produced accordingly make the internal things external. These surveys provide a means for students, their parents, employers and other stakeholders to assess the quality of these institutions. Therefore, student surveys have become a very useful tool for higher education institutions to benchmark themselves in the higher education market and to monitor the quality of higher education provision.

4. Quality assurance in chinese higher education

Over the last two decades the landscape of Chinese higher education has changed greatly through a process of profound restructuring, decentralisation, introduction of market incentives, university mergers, internationalisation, and enlarging student enrolment. The higher education sector in China has expanded and become more differentiated, especially vertically through reputational differences and funding differentiation. Most universities have expanded their campuses and have shifted to a more market-led culture. The student body has become more diverse with the greatly and rapidly increased numbers, which means students enter higher education with different entry levels and for a greater variety of purposes. Universities compete strongly for their teaching and research funding, and are expected to be more accountable for the funds they receive and tuition fees they charge, and to be more relevant to the economic and social needs of the nation. Along with the expansion of Chinese higher education, the issue of quality has become a concern and has attracted a lot of attention in the Chinese higher education sector. Developing quality

assurance schemes has been given priority in the agenda of most Chinese higher education institutions. The nationwide implementation of quality evaluation since 2002 is the main means used by the Chinese government to address the potential quality decline and to realise a macro level control over Chinese higher education institutions.

4.1 The structure of quality assurance in chinese higher education

In the past decade, the introduction of quality assurance regimes into Chinese higher education has covered a broad spectrum of initiatives, from national policy, methodologies of quality evaluation, institutional adoption of quality assurance schemes, to a matrix of quality evaluation systems (with teaching quality evaluation and discipline-based evaluation as the main focus supplemented by a range of other evaluations). In China, at the national level, the responsibility for quality assurance lies with the National Education Evaluation Centre, the specialised agency set up by the Ministry of Education in 2004. It is mandated to coordinate evaluation processes, develop appropriate methods for future quality assessment, guide institutions in their quality assurance development, and compile and publish information on higher education quality. Overall, the structure of the quality assurance system in Chinese higher education can be summarised into external quality assurance processes, and systems within higher education institutions (Figure 1).
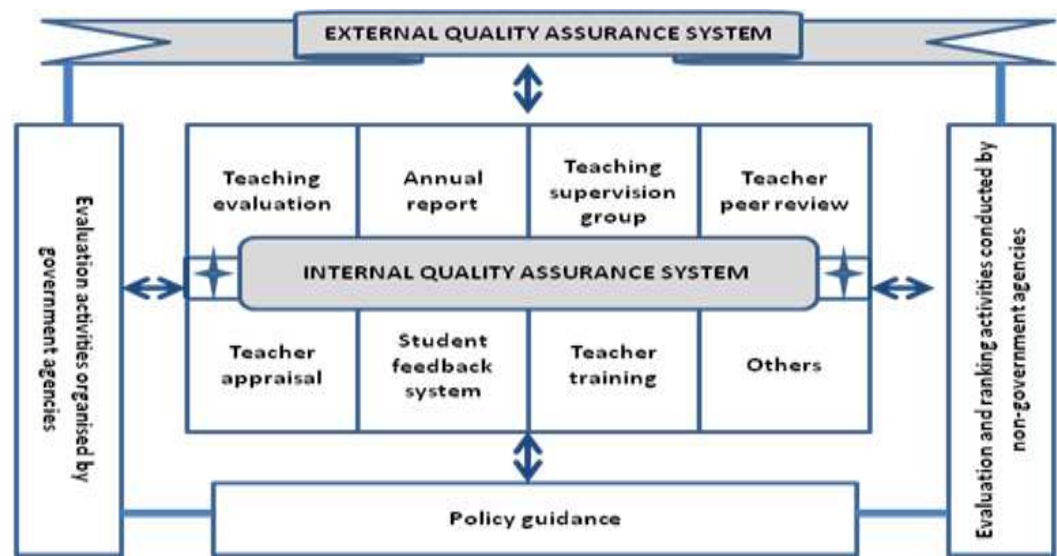

Fig. 1. The structure of quality assurance in Chinese higher education (Li, 2010, p. 66)

The external system can be characterised by three main components: the government's supervision through policy guidance; the government's monitoring through various evaluations carried out by government agencies, among which the most influential ones are the national teaching quality evaluation and the discipline based reviews; the newly emerging non-governmental evaluation agencies and university rankings produced by various non-governmental institutions.

Various measures have been adopted to enhance the quality of education and research activities in Chinese higher education, especially the launch of *Project 211* and *Project 985.* These have had a great impact on quality enhancement in Chinese higher education (Huang, 2005). In addition to these two big projects, other efforts have also been made to

assure and improve the quality of education in all Chinese higher education institutions since 2002, including:

- Requiring all professors to teach undergraduate courses and encouraging senior professors to teach core courses and undergraduate courses;
- Setting grants for learning resource renovation;
- Setting grants for developing courses of excellence;
- Setting grants for compiling textbooks of excellence;
- Selecting and awarding the "national outstanding professors in teaching";
- Establishing the Higher Education Evaluation Centre to coordinate various kinds of quality evaluation activities.

Up to now, the education evaluation network in China has been based on evaluation agencies at both national and regional levels (Ding, 2008). At the national level, the Evaluation Office of the Higher Education Department, Ministry of Evaluation, is the government administrative unit in charge of education quality evaluation. The Higher Education Evaluation Centre and the China Academic Degrees & Graduate Education Development Centre are agencies affiliated to Ministry of Education, specialising in conducting evaluations in the Chinese higher education sector. At the regional level, most provincial governments have established their own education evaluation agencies, responsible for education quality evaluation in their provinces.

Currently higher education quality evaluation in China is compulsory and operated by evaluation panels appointed by Higher Education Evaluation Centre. The process of higher education evaluation in China, as in many other countries, includes five basic elements:

- Standards and guidelines issued by the quality evaluation agency and an evaluator panel appointed by the government agencies;
- An institutional self-review report is provided;
- The evaluation panel conducts on-site visits;
- The panel reports back to the institution and Ministry of Education;
- Higher education institutions write their self-improvement report and carry out their self-improvement activities.

In the past decade institutions have been faced with an increase in levels of legislation and involvement from national and local governments, especially in attempts to assure the quality of higher education through formal evaluation techniques and accountability processes. The development of internal quality assurance systems in Chinese universities is the current main emphasis of the quality movement in the Chinese higher education sector. Following the first five-year cycle of national teaching quality evaluations (2002-2007, with an extension to 2008), higher education institutions in China are now encouraged and required by the Ministry of Education to develop their own institutional based quality assurance systems. The common features of internal quality assurance systems in Chinese higher education institutions are (Ding, 2008; Li et al., 2008; Shi et al., 2008):

- The establishment of institutional teaching evaluation centres. These centres are affiliated to or in cooperation with the teaching management office of the institution. Those universities without independent teaching evaluation centres have their own sub-section playing similar roles under the supervision of the teaching affairs/management office. The main responsibilities of these centres are developing and operating the internal quality assurance system.

- The formation of teaching supervision/steering groups. This is also a common practice among Chinese higher education institutions. The group members are the senior teaching staff or retired senior staff with expertise in teaching and teaching management. They are under the supervision of the Vice President for teaching. They are expected to carry out their work directly with teachers and students by observing classes, talking with teachers and students after class. Their responsibilities are to find problems in teaching, and to provide advice on the solutions.

- Peer review. Class teaching observation is also a common practice in most Chinese higher education institutions. Teachers are required to observe each other's classroom teaching, which is considered as a useful way for teachers to learn from each other and to monitor each other's teaching. Besides peer teaching observation, leaders at different levels inside the higher education institutions are required to observe teachers' teaching.

- Student feedback, which is considered as one of the most important quality assurance components, is conducted through surveys, individual and group interviews, student representative reporting, etc. Student surveys are the most commonly used form of student feedback collection, which covers course evaluation, teaching evaluation, and other fields of interest.

- Annual report. Annual institutional self-review report is also a component of internal quality assurance systems. Though the main purpose of such annual self-review reports is not specifically for the sake of quality assurance, it indirectly contributes to realising quality assurance in those institutions.

- Teacher training. Teacher training includes pre-work training, in-service training, and other types of training for teachers. Teachers' pre-work training is considered as the most important of all training schemes. All new teachers are required to attend such training in all Chinese higher education institutions.

4.2 The discrepancy between the current quality assurance and student learning

There has been a tendency to take a 'top-down' approach to the identification and classification of quality assurance issues in Chinese higher education. As a result of the nationwide teaching quality evaluations from 2002 to 2008 and of international exchange, there is a growing body of experiences and knowledge of quality and quality assurance paradigms and cultures. Building up internal quality assurance systems was initiated by the Ministry of Education after the first round nationwide of external teaching quality evaluations. A new round of experimentation and exploration has followed. Various theories, paradigms, and models are being adopted in the Chinese universities' exploration of the quality jungle.

From analysing quality and quality assurance in both Chinese higher education and across the world, we may find that the objectives of quality assurance are largely external influence driven and targeted at efficient and effective management of teaching. The problem observed is that the ultimate aim of higher education, namely the intellectual development and growth of students, has not been given enough emphasis. Most quality assurance policies are generally initiated by the government. The external quality assurance is controlled by the government agencies, and the internal quality assurance is in the hands of teaching administrators. This top-down implementation remains dominant and controls

quality assurance activities. The problem observed in this top-down quality assurance is that it has not involved teachers and students actively. Teachers are used as the objects of quality scrutiny and students as the providers of information for teacher and teaching appraisal.

The areas covered by external quality assurance in Chinese higher education can be seen from the institutional quality assurance regulations and procedures. It is the product of the universities' compliance with the national education policies. The areas covered by internal quality assurance mainly include the systematic regulations on teaching, teaching management, teacher appraisal, and students' feedback on teachers and teaching. We may see that the current quality assurance does not address directly the processes of student learning.

The procedures of quality assurance establishment and development in Chinese higher education institutions are a top-down, external influence driven process. They are initiated by the Ministry of Education, and their implementation is guided and supervised by the Higher Education Evaluation Centre. This requires the compliance of higher education institutions in establishing and developing elaborate and comprehensive internal procedures to support the assertions of quality. Such top-down procedures have very little effect on the actual process of student learning and development. In addition, the information collected through quality assurance procedures focuses on resources, teacher qualifications, teaching management, and performance indicators measuring learning outcomes, for example, graduate employment rates. Such information may indicate institutional resources and management and provide a snapshot of what is happening at a certain point in time. However, it is not sufficient to inform quality improvement and student learning development.

Across the world, the exploration of 'quality' in higher education has been dominated by compliance with external agencies' definition of 'quality' as – assurance, accountability, audit and assessment (Houston, 2008). Compliance with the definition imposed from outside the university largely ignores the views of academics, students and others inside who are positioned as the affected but not involved (Ulrich, 2001). We may see the discrepancy between student learning quality and what the current quality assurance assures from the above summary. If we intend to improve the quality of higher education, we should consider how we can incorporate the student learning experience into quality assurance systems to inform the university, teachers, administrative staff, students what and where to work on for improvement. The key issue here is how to incorporate student learning into quality assurance and how to make sure the direct factors influencing student learning quality are managed in a meaningful way, so that continuous quality improvement becomes realisable.

5. Learning-focused quality assurance

Many problems analysed above are linked to a teaching oriented conception of education. The efforts to improve student learning have been underpinned by the belief that learning quality can be assured by teaching quality. Subtly but profoundly it is time to shift higher education institutions from the conception of being an institution complying with external requirements and providing instruction to the ones producing quality learning. It is necessary and urgent to construct a learning-focused concept of education and a way of ensuring the quality defined under this concept.

This learning-focused concept is put forward against the background that the prevailing teacher centred concept of teaching fails in producing quality learning, and the context that the current quality assurance play a very limited role in assuring and promoting student learning. As previously noted, in current quality assurance systems, quality improvement procedures stated in the institutional follow-up reports are mainly about improving teaching profiles and teacher qualifications, but in reality the responsibility for quality enhancement is left to the sense of responsibility or to the priorities of individual teachers. Teachers tend to view external imposition of evaluation and changes as a burden. The quality enhancement initiative, mostly in the form of teaching projects, will only work for those teachers who have an interest in it. Their research usually ends in their publication. It is unlikely to initiate an overall improvement in teaching and learning. Most teachers still teach in the same way, and the quality of learning still relies on who the students are.

Learning-focused quality assurance, as shown in its name, shifts the focus of quality assurance, away from scrutinising institutional compliance with external requirements and scrutinising teaching, towards focusing on improving student learning quality. Learning-focused quality assurance, shown in Figure 2, adopts a more student-oriented approach to learning and teaching and is more sensitive to student learning development. It appreciates student learning experiences, emphasises the interface of teaching and learning, and focuses on student learning activities and approaches.

To improve education quality, universities need to identify and address the characteristics, needs and expectations of students, to respond to different levels of student preparedness while maintaining academic standards, to re-conceptualise teaching and learning in the new paradigm of higher education, to reposition its knowledge functions, and to managing multiple external forces influencing them.
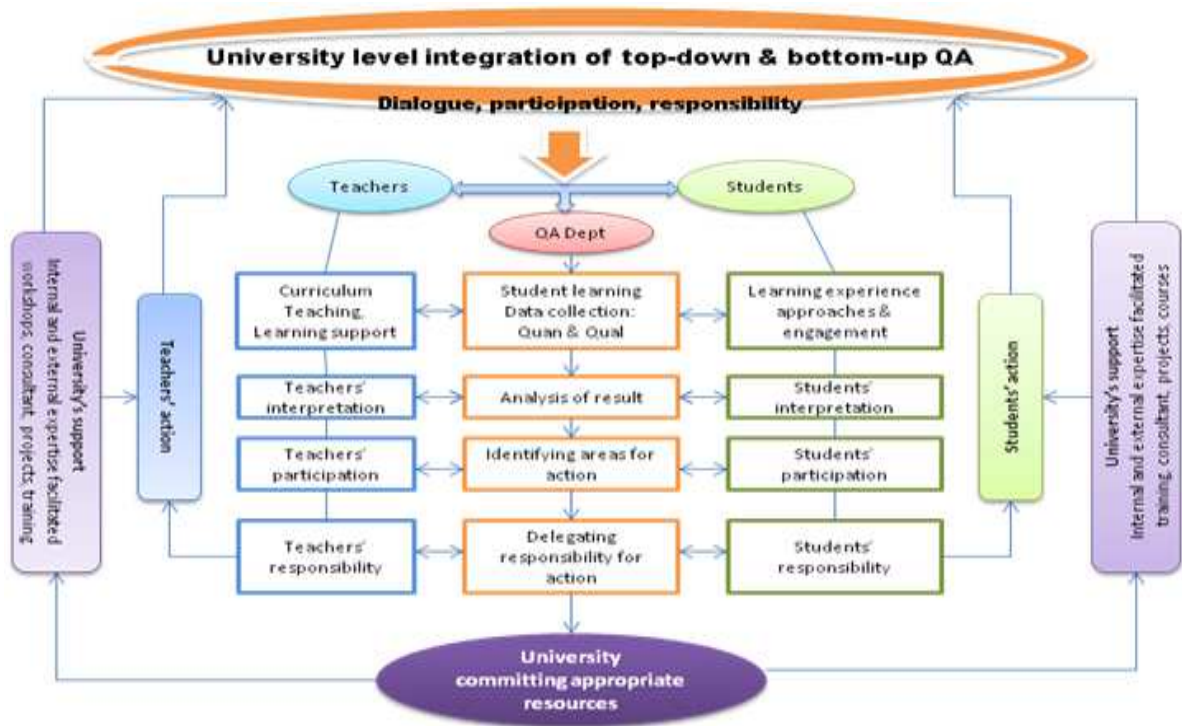

Fig. 2. Learning focused quality assurance

Quality improvement is a complicated process, which needs a holistic system and the engagement of teachers, administration staff, and students. Students' learning experiences need to be integrated into a regular and continuous cycle of data collection, analysis, reporting, transforming into feasible enhancement plans and action, and integrating into learning and teaching practice. Enhancing student learning quality requires a system which may collect appropriate learning and teaching data, identifying the areas for improvement after analysis, delegating responsibility for action to the agents involved, encouraging the ownership of improvement action through the facilitation of the appropriate institutional support of both internal and external resources that can be used, exchanging experiences among students, teachers and administration staff, and stabilising positive experiences into learning and teaching practice.

Learning-focused quality assurance is student learning focused, quality improvement oriented and research informed. It is a holistic system and requires the engagement of teachers, administration staff, and students. In learning-focused quality assurance, students' learning experience are integrated into a regular and continuous cycle of data collection, analysis, reporting, transforming into feasible enhancement plans and action, and integrating into learning and teaching practice. Establishing this is not an easy task, and needs a holistic system of dialogue, participation and responsibility. Learning-focused quality assurance is student learning oriented and supported by the principle of dialogue, participation and responsibility.

Dialogue is the first principle in learning-focused quality assurance. The agents of quality improvement are teachers, students, quality assurance administrative staff, and other staff related in universities. *Dialogue* is the communication between them. This dialogue will enhance students' understanding and motivation to learn and teachers' understanding of student learning and their support for this process. The dialogue among teachers will help them be more reflective in their teaching, improve the curriculum, and give better teaching to students. The dialogue between teachers and quality assurance administrators and other staff will help teachers communicate their expected support to their teaching and student learning and keep the university informed of resources needed. The dialogue between university and students through quality assurance systems will help students to understand the vision and values of their universities and help the staff understand student learning needs so that they may configure the necessary support appropriately.

Participation is the second principle in learning-focused quality assurance. Quality improvement is unlikely without the active participation of the three main agents inside higher education institutions: teachers, students, administrators. In almost every step in learning-focused quality assurance, their participation is necessary. Quality learning at any universities requires the active participation of both teachers and students. This process is guaranteed by quality assurance staff's action of involving both teachers and students in designing how to collect student learning data, to best understand and grasp the information about student learning and to disseminate the information to related departments and people. This participation at the stage of data collection can be in multiple forms: by contributing ideas in designing questionnaires and themes of qualitative enquiry, giving feedback to the designed questionnaires, communicating opinions and insights in discussion groups, and providing reliable information in any student learning data collection processes. The participation at the stage of analysing results is mainly in the way

that all related agents contribute their interpretation, which will make the next step of identifying necessary action more evidence based and will better address the needs in reality. The participation at the stage of identifying areas for action is to discuss what and how to improve quality and to reach a consensus, so that the appropriate quality enhancement procedures will be established. Participation at this stage of delegating responsibility for action implies that all involved agents are to take their respective responsibilities in taking action.

Responsibility is the third principle in learning-focused quality assurance. It is essential for any quality enhancement initiatives to have effects. Teachers' responsibility is to undertake the quality enhancement initiatives actively, to reflect on their own teaching, to understand student learning, to explore how to better align their teaching to student learning, to organise a better learning environment through their teaching and their dialogue with other stakeholders, to develop their curriculum regularly, to provide appropriate feedback to students, and to encourage them to take their own responsibility for learning. Students' responsibility is to become the owners of their own learning by thinking and developing their learning objectives, participating actively in learning, managing their learning time and activities appropriately, reflecting on their own learning approaches and engagements regularly, communicating their learning needs and questions to teachers and other staff promptly, participating in the quality assurance process, providing feedback actively, and making good use of resources and support to reach the best learning outcomes. University administrators are the facilitators and coordinators in the whole process. Their responsibility is to manage data collection and analysis, to coordinate the participation of teachers and students in the process of data collection, analysis, interpreting results, and identifying areas for action, to ensure the quality of their participation and the feasibility of the enhancement plan, to identify and provide effective support to both teachers and students in the process of their undertaking the quality enhancement actions by organising training, workshops, courses, forums, consulting sessions with the support of internal and external experts and resources.

In learning-focused quality assurance, the responsibility for quality enhancement will not be left to the sense of responsibility or to the priorities of individual teachers, as the current quality assurance does. Universities will take their responsibilities in providing the incentives and support structures for teachers to enhance their teaching, and for students to become the owners of their learning. Both teachers and students are not staying passively at the receiving end of quality assurance; instead, they are the key agents and drivers of continuous quality improvement. It is also important to approach quality holistically and combine cultural elements, structural dimensions and competencies into one holistic framework, in order to enable stakeholders to develop visions, shared values and beliefs, and to delegate the ownership of learning and improvement at all institutional levels.

6. Conclusion

To summarise, improving quality is about a change in culture, which involves a slow process of evolution (Harvey, 1998). Quality assurance should not be the synonym of formalism and conformism; instead, it can be used as catalyst for change from teaching-focused higher education to a new paradigm with more focus on student learning.

Learning-focused quality assurance is built on a more holistic understanding of the relationship between quality assurance and learning enhancement. The role of learning-focused quality assurance involves monitoring and managing the complex learning situation, and improving the quality of student learning. The core of learning-focused quality assurance is learning: student learning quality and how universities and teachers facilitate students to improve their learning.

We are clear that 'quality' in the context of higher education is bound up with our values and fundamental aims in higher education. It is never unnecessary for higher education institutions to ask themselves what the term 'quality' means to them. In this chapter, we have taken the view on quality from student learning and development. Therefore, the implications we draw here are based on the viewpoint that student learning quality should be the focus of a university's quality.

- A sophisticated quality assurance system does not mean students' learning quality can be assured. It is not necessarily a problem related simply to methodology, but to the underlying assumptions of quality assurance and the standard top-down implementation approach. The quality assurance mechanisms should focus on the quality of student learning.

- It is necessary to create a structure for teachers, students and administrators to have dialogue on learning, to actively participate in the quality improvement actions, and to take their responsibility in assuring and improving learning quality. Keeping the ongoing dialogue, sustaining active participation of students, teachers and administrative staff, and encouraging them to take responsibility for learning and improving quality play a significant role in assuring and improving learning quality.

- The student learning experiences need to be integrated into a regular and continuous cycle of information collection, analysis, reporting, transforming into feasible enhancement plans and action, and integrating into learning and teaching practice. Integrating individual learning into a learning-focused culture will strengthen quality learning on campus and nurture the learning of individuals involved.

- Universities should also encourage and support teachers with all possible resources to reflect on their own teaching, to understand student learning, to explore how to better align their teaching to student learning, to organise a better learning environment through their teaching and dialogue with other stakeholders, to develop their curriculum regularly, to provide appropriate feedback to students, and to encourage them to take their own responsibility for learning.

Institutional support in sustaining the quality engagement of teachers, administrators, and students is critical because quality improvement is not something regulated but something attained through critical engagement of all stakeholders involved. The learning-focused quality assurance proposed in this study encourages care for quality at all levels in institutions through care for learning. Such a quality assurance system requires higher education institutions to establish clear learning orientation, to actively involve students, teachers and administrators, to ensure dialogue among teachers, students, and administration staff, to support teachers to research and improve their teaching, and to create and sustain an environment which may enable students to be the owners of their own learning, and further to realise the continuous quality improvement in higher education institutions. At the end of the chapter, we need to say that the learning-focused quality

assurance proposed in this study is very conceptual. Further studies investigating how to translate this conceptual model into real world practice to motivate teachers, students and administrators to commit themselves in improving learning quality might be needed.

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The purpose of this book is to present new concepts, state-of-the-art techniques and advances in quality related research. Novel ideas and current developments in the field of quality assurance and related topics are presented in different chapters, which are organized according to application areas. Initial chapters present basic ideas and historical perspectives on quality, while subsequent chapters present quality assurance applications in education, healthcare, medicine, software development, service industry, and other technical areas. This book is a valuable contribution to the literature in the field of quality assurance and quality management. The primary target audience for the book includes students, researchers, quality engineers, production and process managers, and professionals who are interested in quality assurance and related areas.

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