

**Towards a reformed quality assurance system in the People's Republic of China: Lessons from Russia and the United Kingdom**

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## **Towards a reformed quality assurance system in the People's Republic of China: Lessons from Russia and the United Kingdom**

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*China's higher education system has long been renowned for its centralised management and state control; however, the massification which started in the late 1980s impacted the developing pattern of the framework. Meanwhile, the system started expanding rapidly in both the quantity of the institutions and the number of students. During the process, private institutions and cross-border education cooperation emerged as complementary providers to the public ones in order to help meet the demands created by higher education expansion. As a result, the central government of China does not have the capacity to conduct quality assurance on all the higher education institutions, while at the same time it tries to establish the quality assurance sector. This paper focuses on how to enhance the performance of the external quality assurance bodies in China's higher education in terms of reforming the current external quality assurance system, with the help of examining the practices from the U.K. and Russia. The suggested quality assurance model expects to meet the demand of the transformation period, and to minimise the possible resistance usually encountered by any reform in higher education.*

Key words: external quality assurance, quality assurance reform, hybrid model, Chinese higher education.

### **Introduction**

With respect to external quality assurance, modern universities experience antagonistic pressures of global convergence and socio-cultural divergence (Billing, 2004). On the one hand, supranational entities like the European Union and international organisations like OECD and the World Bank promote seemingly “universal” but de facto Western standards and mechanisms. On the other hand, countries differ greatly in the size of their higher education sectors, their legislative base, and in the way they position themselves on the scale between quality improvement and quality control. In addition, Western models are modified in accordance with local demands (Altbach, 1989).

The World Bank and OECD frequently assist emerging economies (in Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Latin America, Africa, etc.) with establishing external quality assurance in higher education. By funding development projects and providing expert guidance, these organisations disseminate a “general model” of quality assurance (QA) and facilitate globalisation. Thus, for example, Gounko and Smale (2007) trace the origins of the educational reforms in Russia in 2000s, including quality assurance procedures, to the influence of OECD, the World Bank, and the Bologna Process.

Furthermore, governments and universities are motivated to embrace the “general model” because of their global and/or regional ambition. Accelerated mobility of students and faculty, together with the import and export of international branch campuses, have induced competition for human resources, reputation, and associated revenues. Subsequently, conformity with common quality standards is often sought to ensure recognition and enhance the attractiveness of the country’s higher education institutions.

Policy makers and education managers may argue that in a successful market economy complemented by neoliberal ideology, the features of effective higher education systems, the criteria for quality and excellence, and the modes of governance are similar – that is why changes are uniform and imminent all around the world (Heyneman, 2010). However, despite policy borrowing and looking up to the best Western practices and solutions to the problems, QA systems in other countries are not cast in the same mould (Deem, 2001).

It appears that debates about quality are usually interrelated with debates about power and change in tertiary education (Brennan, 1997). External QA is an element of overall system architecture, where, according to Clark’s classical model that has been widely used and amplified by researchers (Clark, 1983), the precise mode of organisation and governance results from an interplay of three forces: state, academia, and the market. Recent developments indicate that in the U.K., higher education is moving towards greater marketisation, and academics have more autonomy from the state, while in Russia and China, the state dominates the coordination of the sector. Hence, a straightforward policy transfer from the U.K. to Russia and/or China would hardly be possible.

China, in particular, seems to be divided between two alternatives. On the one part, it aspires to become an educational exporter, an important player and a trendsetter in higher

education in Southeast Asia and beyond, and, on the other part, it needs to maintain its sovereignty and upholds the notion of preeminence of its QA regulations over the models imported with the branch campuses from the U.K., the US, etc. (International Consultants for Education and Fairs, 2015a). What results from this tension is a QA system in transition that partakes in the overarching cross-border process while resisting absolute convergence due to its peculiar socio-cultural characteristics (Marginson, 2011; Maringe, Foskett, & Woodfield, 2013).

A key problem underlying China's QA transitional process is how to deal with the diversified presence of the higher education institutions with one QA model, not to mention the potential resistance resulting from the traditional bureaucratic governance and the rigid mindset. The U.K. has long been renowned for its excellence in higher education, which prompts many developing systems such as the Chinese higher education, to begin researching on how its quality is assured in order to find out what could be learnt to improve the relatively inefficient system. Russia, on the other hand, used to be the learning model for the Chinese government in the times of the Soviet Union, including the basic framework and general regulation of the higher education sector. Although now Russia is seldom mentioned in this respect, especially after its big transformation in the 1990s, the countries had common premises, and it still makes sense to look into the latest status of Russian higher education and how it has been framing its quality assurance lately. The chief reason for this paper lies in the obvious absence of comparisons between the Chinese QA system and its multiple western counterparts in the Chinese higher education discourse, especially with regard to the U.K. which is not a typical learning model for China in this field. Given the disparities in the three higher education sectors and the limitations of an academic paper vis-à-vis "Realpolitik", this research does not call for a direct policy transfer. It merely aims at suggesting an idea for future reference and attempts to explore an innovative QA model that could be effective in the Chinese higher education context, by drawing on the practices and experiences of QA in the U.K. and Russia through the examination of their QA instruments.

The remainder of the paper will provide an overview of quality assurance systems and procedures in the aforementioned countries - the U.K., Russia and China, - including an analysis of their effectiveness in each case. The latter part of the paper discusses the proposal of a new hybrid model of quality assurance for China based on practices taken

from Russia and the U.K., suitable for China's unique socio-political context. The term "quality assurance" here comprises, but is not limited to processes such as evaluation and accreditation.

### **The U.K.: The Quality Assurance Agency**

#### *Overview*

The higher education sector in the U.K. is subject to a wide range of compliance measures, the most stringent of which are placed on institutions which are in receipt of public funds (Universities U.K., 2015). A culture of autonomy and accountability is strongly endorsed by the government, of which quality requirements and measures play a large role. As well as requirements from the main funding body for institutions - Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), providers must adhere to the quality stipulations of accreditation, professional and statutory regulatory bodies which are independent of the sector. Since the publication of the Reynolds reports in 1984 and the formal introduction of quality assurance in universities, the sector has seen an array of different processes under the jurisdiction of various monitoring bodies (Green, 1994) until the establishment of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in 1997, which marked a turning point in quality assurance management. The QAA, founded as a result of the Dearing report in 1996, is an external regulatory body responsible primarily for safeguarding the standards of higher education and encouraging the continual improvement of management of quality standards among all higher education providers (QAA, 2014).

The QAA, over the last two decades, has built an admirable reputation not just nationwide but internationally. Its self-regulatory approach is a unique model and is fundamental in the maintenance of high academic standards (Universities U.K., 2015). It is important to note that the QAA does not assess the standard of qualifications themselves but the processes that universities have in place to ensure quality. The QAA utilises two principle methods for reviewing higher education providers and ensuring quality provision - the Higher Education Review and the Quality Code. The former is a process carried out by a panel of peer reviewers selected from staff and students of other higher education providers, and the latter is the guidance that reviewers use to inform their judgments (QAA, 2014). In addition to these primary functions, the QAA is also engaged in

consultancy services for the Privy Council in deciding whether education providers should be granted degree awarding powers.

The Higher Education Review provides assurance to students and the wider public, that institutions are meeting specified standards across four key areas; provision of information, setting and maintenance of academic standards, provision of learning opportunities and enhancement of quality of opportunities provided. In sum, the monitoring of these four areas of performance hold a dual purpose of providing accountability for all stakeholders whilst encouraging continual improvement of higher education services. As mentioned, in order to carry out the review, reviewers consult the Quality Code, a publicly available guide, which outlines the expectations of higher education providers and serves as a set of guidelines developed as a reference for institutions when they are creating new courses. The Quality Code also includes subject benchmark statements which provide students with information about what students can expect to be able to know and do after studying their chosen discipline. In line with their public standing as a transparent and inclusive organisation, these statements are compiled in conjunction with higher education experts, professional bodies and employers in the relevant industry (QAA, 2014).

### ***Review of QAA***

Since its inception in 1997, the QAA has honed its processes and practices to achieve the world-renowned reputation it enjoys today. Arguably, one of the primary contributory factors to their esteem is their commitment and success in placing students at the heart of the system. From including students in review teams, working with their providers in response to review outcomes to giving advisory roles to student representatives, the QAA ensures that student's voices are heard and that their judgments are valued in the review process (Universities U.K., 2015).

The QAA allows institutions the freedom to maintain their autonomy in an educational environment which is becoming increasingly more restrictive. The QAA achieves this by not directly assessing the institutions quality, but assessing how the universities assess themselves, taking on the role of something similar to a protective parent (McGhee, 2014). The QAA operates on a peer-review basis and selects reviewers who are the very best fit for the role, that is, those who are academics and administrators from across the

higher education sector, nationally and internationally. Together, they created the U.K. Quality Code, which included input from academics across the field on a wide range of dimensions which make up quality programs and provision for students. This shows a rigorous effort by the agency to establish a comprehensive guide of expected standards to benchmark against.

The QAA has more than proved its capacity to adapt and evolve to the changing higher education sector by creating specific reviews for private providers and has also gone great lengths to uphold the U.K.'s reputation for high class, quality education provision (McGhee, 2014), however this is not the opinion held by all. Whilst generally heralded as an asset to the U.K. higher education system, not all are in agreement with the advantages that the QAA brings to the sector and quality assurance specifically. Following HEFCE recent announcement about quality assurance (discussed further in the next section), there has been particular concern about the QAA's ability to adapt to the rapidly changing higher education landscape, especially with the increase of private providers in the sector. However, others have argued in their defence that they have managed thus far, and there is little evidence to suggest that this would be a problem for the flexible system in the future (McGhee, 2014).

### ***The Future of QAA***

In October 2014, HEFCE announced that they would be reassessing the way that quality review system was managed in the near future (HEFCE, 2015). As part of this, the contract for this position will be put out for public tender, effective of 2017. This is the first time that the system has been up for competitive review and the prospect of a new system has been approached. Such news has spiralled debate among higher education professionals and the general public as to the effect that this will have on the reputation of British higher education, and all that the QAA has done for it in the last couple of decades. There is also much speculation as to why the review is taking place; some say it is due to the underperformance of private providers and further education colleges whilst other say it's just standard procedure according to procurement rules (McGhee, 2014). The review has been proposed in part, because of the major changes taking place in higher education e.g. increase in student tuition fees and increase in private providers (HEFCE, 2015). It is anticipated that the review will initiate substantial change in the monitoring of quality in higher education programs.

As mentioned, there is an eclectic mix of responses to the news. There is concern that the end of the QAA's monopoly over quality assurance could lead to an unnecessarily messy system (Grove, 2014). Those in favour of a rethink of the quality assurance systems note that the reviews carried out by the QAA have become too routine and constitutional, culminating in a status quo of standards, instead of the continual improvement that they advocate for (Grove, 2014). There has also been discussion among higher education experts about the opportunities provided by having multiple regulatory bodies which could cater for the diversity of providers in the sector (Brown & Bekhradnia, 2013). Of note, two years prior to the October announcement, HEFCE conducted a similar review to the one proposed, however, they concluded that the current system was sufficiently operational and rejected the need for a fuller assessment (HEFCE, 2012).

Furthermore, the release of a new higher education green paper in November 2015, *Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice*, makes ambitious proposals to further reform quality assurance procedures in the coming years (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015). The model outlined by the government proposes that quality evaluated through student satisfaction surveys, retention rates, graduate outcomes and teaching quality will be linked to tuition fee quotas. Early responses to the publication have sparked anger, particularly in the current National Union of Students, who believe that teaching excellence should not be linked to the ability to increase tuition fees (International Consultants for Education and Fairs, 2015b).

The government also wishes to introduce a new regulatory system - Office of Students (OfS) - which would replace the role of HEFCE and the Office for Fair Access, this streamlined model would make OfS responsible for quality assurance (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, 2015), although they did not explicitly outline the specifics of this aspect of their role.

The U.K. presents a unique model which is due, in part, to the autonomy given by the government to universities and subsequently to regulatory bodies related to the higher education sector. We turn now to Russia, which in contrast has multiple accreditation

bodies, both public and private, in addition to a plethora of processes which have undergone significant reform over the years.

## **Russia: A Hybrid System of External Quality Assurance**

### *The Development of the System*

The evolution of external quality assurance in Russia has been conditioned by a wide range of factors, such as global and local socio-economic trends, the legacy of the totalitarian past, and the immediate political setting. The Russian government first introduced QA procedures in 1992 with the Federal Law on Education, shortly after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. They were soon reinforced by the Federal Law on Higher and Professional Education (1996), but it was not until 2000 and a series of Acts on State Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions that various procedures were assembled into a uniform complex consisting of licensing, attestation, and accreditation. A license proved a university's right to provide educational services, attestation testified to the conformity of its educational programs with the federal standards, and accreditation validated its status and reliability. Gradually, state accreditation became a principal and integrative QA instrument. It was expected to create and maintain a compatible level of quality of study programs and degrees throughout Russia.

In 1990s, quality improvement and quality control were not a top concern for the authorities, and application for accreditation was non-mandatory. There were fewer bureaucratic processes and less paperwork, and the faculty enjoyed greater academic freedom. Yet it was also the time of a rapid expansion of private education providers and the notorious 'diploma mills'. Given the long-standing tradition of state regulation, centralised accreditation was perceived as a means to protect the interests of the employers who might otherwise hire unqualified graduates, and to secure the monopoly of publicly funded universities on credibility and prestige (Tomusk, 2000). Eventually, in 2005, during a series of neoliberal reforms, accreditation of both the institution and its programs was made compulsory for universities issuing state-recognised diplomas. The certificate had to be reviewed every five years, making them more accountable and giving the state a powerful means of control at the same time. Higher education institutions (HEIs) without state accreditation are not prohibited from functioning, but their degrees are less competitive in the labour market. Only accredited universities may give male

students who are subject to compulsory military service a deferment from the draft for the term of their studies. Moreover, accredited degrees are required by state and state-funded organisations and postgraduate programs.

Prior to 2004, accreditation services had been delivered directly by the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation. In 2004, the function was assumed by the newly established Federal Service for Supervision in the Sphere of Science and Education (Rosobrnadzor). It is responsible for the Unified State Exam, the attestation of teachers and graduates, the Federal Register of national educational documents, the recognition of foreign educational documents, and for licensing and accreditation. Rosobrnadzor is a governmental agency that is subordinate to the Ministry of Education and Science, therefore, it cannot be considered an independent QA body.

Quality assurance has also been promoted in Russia as part of the country's Europeanization and modernisation policies. In 2003, Russia joined the Bologna Process, which the government used as a tool for initiating and facilitating various reforms. To enhance the transparency, compatibility, and international competitiveness of Russian study programs and qualifications, attempts have been made at harmonising national QA practices with Western standards. Accordingly, Russia's National Accreditation Agency (subordinate to Rosobrnadzor) became a member of international networks and associations for quality assurance, such as the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN), and others (National Accreditation Agency, 2014). Although some aspects of accreditation methodology were aligned with the European standards and guidelines, the influence of the Bologna Process on QA was limited by Russia's distinct cultural and institutional traditions. As a result, there emerged a tension between the market logic and considerations of quality improvement that necessitated deregulation of accreditation, on the one hand, and state control that impeded this development, on the other (Motova & Pykkö, 2012).

### ***Recent Reforms***

The latest major policy shift that took place in 2012, with the enactment of the Federal Law on Education in the Russian Federation, partially released the above-mentioned

tension. This law raised the status of public-professional and international accreditation vis-à-vis state-managed QA (Government of the Russian Federation, 2012, a. 89.2). A year later, in 2013, it was followed by a special Regulation on State Accreditation and Regulation on Professional Standards (Government of the Russian Federation, 2013a & 2013b). Public accreditation denotes accreditation performed by public organisations in accordance with their own criteria, while professional accreditation is the one performed by associations of employers in accordance with professional standards and demands of the labour market.

Public-professional and international accreditation was mentioned in the earlier laws on education, but it was virtually non-existent, and professional associations did not have much influence on educational quality because non-governmental assessments were not taken into account by state commissions. Presently, although non-governmental accreditation does not entail any legal consequences for the university, state experts are obligated to consider the evaluations by independent agencies or expert associations when they are submitted for their review (Government of the Russian Federation, 2012, a. 96.8). Thus, the government encourages further internationalisation of QA practices and diversification of QA providers that are associated with fair competition and independent appraisal.

State QA has undergone some changes, too. It is now comprised of legal registration, licensing, and accreditation. Since 2011, licenses certify the conformity of HEIs' facilities and faculty qualifications to federal standards and are given for an unlimited period. Furthermore, the distinction between the accreditation of institutions and accreditation of study programs was dropped, and state accreditation is now only performed for principal educational programs. It begins with self-evaluation and ends with an external evaluation by a commission of experts appointed by the state. The commission examines the authenticity of self-evaluation and the compatibility of student training with the federal educational standards. The certificate of state accreditation can be issued for up to six years.

These measures for quality improvement have been countered with new instruments of governmental control. Firstly, the Ministry has the right to conduct an unscheduled inspection at any time and call off the license. Secondly, in 2012, Russian policymakers

introduced a compulsory yearly procedure known as “the monitoring for effectiveness” that has replaced institutional accreditation. The indicators used for the monitoring in 2015 included average scores of the Unified State Exam and additional entrance exams, university income per faculty member, RDI spending per faculty member, the percentage of faculty pay as compared to the average regional pay, the number of faculty members with postgraduate degrees (candidates, doctors) per 100 students, the percentage of international students, the percentage of graduates who got employment within one year upon graduation, criteria corresponding to the profiles of individual institutions, and so on (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, 2015). The monitoring has become a tool for eliminating (closing, merging) low-quality HEIs. Between September 2013 and February 2015, 600 of 2500 licenses, earlier given to HEIs and their branches, were taken off the register by Rosobrnadzor (Rosobrnadzor, 2015).

Both state accreditation and the monitoring for effectiveness have been heavily criticised as overly bureaucratic, open to power abuse and corruption, and failing to promote academic excellence (Aleksandrov, Vereshchak, & Ivanova, 2015; Forrat, 2012). Firstly, when self-evaluation is driven by external forces and criteria, it aims at formal compliance with the imposed standards rather than at genuine improvement (Van Kemenade & Hardjono, 2010). Secondly, accreditation sets minimal thresholds, and once it is granted, HEIs are not motivated to raise quality standards (Scheele, 2004). Thirdly, in the assessments for effective performance, managerial and market concerns have greater importance than teaching and research (Ilinskiy, 2013). Fourthly and finally, the indicators used in the monitoring are often inadequate (Vinokurov, 2013). For example, students with higher grades traditionally go to capital universities, therefore, the criteria for average exam scores cannot be the same for the capitals and the regions. Moreover, the same parameters cannot apply to public and private universities, since they operate under different market conditions (Ilinskiy, 2013). Conversely, non-governmental QA sets higher standards, establishes a close link between the academia and the labour market, and utilises international standards and guidelines.

### ***The Dynamics of Russian External Quality Assurance***

The Law on Education (2012) made provisions for the development of a hybrid QA system, where compulsory state accreditation and monitoring are supplemented with

voluntary accreditation by Russian, foreign, and international QA bodies – that is, quality control is supplemented with quality improvement, at least in theory. Since 2012, the number of QA agencies and professional associations has grown, just as the number of applications for their services has, despite the fact that public-professional accreditation creates additional institutional and financial pressures on the universities. The government actively promotes this type of accreditation, calls for the creation of professional standards, and cooperates with these organisations; hence an apparent increase in their visibility.

For example, in 2013, AKKORK, a Russian Agency of Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Career Development, had more than 60 per cent of the market share in public-professional accreditation, which comprised about 10 per cent of all HEIs and was predicted to reach 25 per cent within a few years (Agency of Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Career Development, 2014). It took part in the expert commission for the Law on Education (2012) and arranged the meeting between the Head of Rosobrnadzor and the President of ENQA (2010). It is integrated into the European and international QA networks, works with multiple standards and carries out multiple QA activities (international e-learning accreditation, assessment of administrative and teaching staff, internal quality assurance system audit and certification). Additionally, AKKORK enters into partnerships with professional associations like the Association for Engineering Education of Russia, the Russian Managers Association, or the NGO of Russian Entrepreneurs “Opora Rossii” (“The Supporter of Russia”). The latter has its own professional accreditation agency, Profakkredagentstvo, which specialises in the evaluation of programs in Small and Medium Enterprise. So far, it has accredited 72 programs at the tertiary level for various terms, from one or two years (conditional accreditation) to up to four (full accreditation) or six years (high standards accreditation), which shows the scrutiny and flexibility of its approach (Opora Rossii, 2015). Profakkredagentstvo has developed its own methodology and indicators and is working on professional standards. Importantly, many professional associations produce independent rankings of the best educational programs in their respective areas (Kalyazin, 2014), which helps university applicants to navigate the educational market.

The Russian way of merging governmental and public-professional elements in external quality assurance allows the state to retain control over the higher education sector while

promoting international standards and facilitating a direct participation of employers in educational programs. Perhaps, in the future, both types of accreditation will merge into a single procedure, where public-professional accreditation will replace the state accreditation, and independent agencies will act as intermediary bodies between the state and the universities, with their evaluation of educational programs becoming mandatory for issuing the government certificate of accreditation. Given that in China, the government is likewise reluctant to withdraw from quality control in higher education, while grappling with the issues of its improvement and international competitiveness, Russia's experience should present an interesting case for the Chinese policy makers.

### **China: The State of External Quality Assurance**

As the advent of globalisation in higher education has profoundly transformed the higher education sector worldwide, producing qualified university graduates and investing in the production of the high-level manpower has become one of the priorities of any government wanting to compete in the global arena (ENQA, 2009). Therefore, the development of a quality assurance framework which comprises of the participation of the government, institutions and the external bodies is called for in this land, to ensure the proper functioning of all types of providers. This section's main focus is on the external quality assurance in China's contemporary higher education.

#### ***Overview***

Quality assurance started quite late in China compared to most of the western countries, and its development can be traced back by the promulgation of the national policies. The Decision of the Reform of Education System of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued in 1985 was the first ever educational law which laid the basic foundation of the modern Chinese education. It marked the beginning of the exploration of the quality assurance framework for higher education (Li, 2013). Five years later, China's quality assurance of higher education officially launched with the birth of the Interim Provisions on The Educational Assessment of the General Higher Education Institutions (MOE, 1990). The first step towards quality assurance in higher education, according to Chinese scholars (Zhou, 2009), was the university ranking of the top 4 Chinese higher education institutions, which was performed by the government in 1992, with subsequent publication of the result in the overseas edition of China Daily. It was also the first time that the Chinese government formally ranked the local universities. In

1994, the Ministry of Education initiated an Undergraduate Education Review to evaluate the qualification and eligibility of all the undergraduate institutions established after 1976. Not long after, the ministry also conducted the excellence evaluation within the country on the top 100 key universities which hold a long history, and the unannounced checking on the rest of institutions. Hereafter, the ministry set the custom of periodic review which means a team of professionals carry out the review on all the universities every five years, and all the reports are visible to the public. This is the prevailing national evaluation mechanism of the Chinese higher education.

The Chinese quality assurance framework of higher education consists of four major elements: the operating mechanisms, the performing bodies, the evaluating process and the assessed objects (Li, 2013). First, the operating mechanisms of the higher education quality assurance refer to the corresponding educational laws and policies formulated by the government. Dozens of regulatory documents have been enacted to supplement the 1990's Interim Provisions, aiming to legitimate, regulate and direct the quality assurance work in higher education (Qi, 2011). In terms of the performing bodies, the quality assurance is primarily performed by the Chinese government despite the emergence of the external evaluation bodies. The governmental subordinated offices, such as the higher education division, the development and planning division, and the provincial educational bureaus share the specific work of quality assurance under the instruction from the Ministry of Education. The assessment focus is not always the whole university, but can also be certain disciplines or departments, which is the widely accepted notion of the dimension of the higher education quality assurance in China. Lastly, the core process of the external quality assurance in China is the review and examination of institutional behaviours within the university/discipline/department, such as teaching, scientific research, social service, and degree awarding (Li, 2013).

Decades ago, Chinese higher education entered an era of transformation from elite education to mass education and embraced the global discourse on internationalisation and privatisation of higher education. Hence the competence of the government-controlled Chinese quality assurance framework was challenged, and was therefore pushed to welcome the participation of external evaluation bodies in quality assurance.

***External Quality Assurance Bodies***

In the process of higher education globalisation, marketisation and diversification, the shortcomings of the centralised quality assurance model are becoming apparent. On one hand, the transnational institutions and programs prevail in both developing and developed countries, in forms of virtual learning, branches, or joint cooperation, adding to the traditional educational offerings of local higher education institutions. An increasing number of students and faculties move across borders for different educational experiences. On the other hand, taking account of the government's determination on reforming the quality assurance system, governing mechanisms, along with the social demand on the quality to combat the academic fraud that accompanies the various provision of the higher education system, a convergence of mechanisms started in China. New methods of quality assurance such as accreditation system are implemented, third-party (external) quality assurance bodies are introduced to function as professional buffer organisations between public authorities and higher education institutions, leaving the government playing the steering role as well as the basic function of policies making.

The external quality assurance bodies in China mostly appeared and developed during the time when the higher education sector started the decentralization discourse. Two documents, the Outline of China's Educational Reform and Development and the Suggestions on Implementing the Outline of China's Educational Reform and Development enforced respectively in 1993 and 1994 proposed the establishment of external quality assurance organisations. Then in 2002, the Law of the People's Republic of China on Promotion of Private-run Schools (meaning all the educational entities which offer courses, including preschool education, vocational education, and degree education, MOE, 2002) explicitly prescribed that,

Administrative departments for education and the relevant departments shall, in accordance with law, exercise supervision over and provide guidance to privately-run schools, in order to promote the enhancement of the quality of such schools; and they shall make arrangements or entrust public intermediary bodies with the arrangements for assessing the level and the quality of education of such schools, and make the results of the assessment known to the general public (MOE, 2002).

Besides, the accreditation of the tertiary education majors has been partly handed over to the professional boards of the specific industry or jointly cooperated with the social guilds (Qi, 2011). Compared with the independent private evaluation agencies, accreditation and evaluation organisations which are affiliated to the government or the higher education institutions appeared earlier and are much bigger in numbers. Such organisations shoulder lots of the quality assurance workload due to their proximity with the government.

Based on the instruction of the Outline of China's Educational Reform and Development and the Suggestions on Implementing the Outline of China's Educational Reform and Development, researchers found out that the external quality assurance bodies in China own features that distinguish them from other decentralised western systems and, therefore, classified them into four categories according to their organisational nature upon establishment and fundraising channels (Li, 2013; Qi, 2011) The first group is the subordinate government divisions. These divisions mostly receive government funds, and are usually given mandate by the government to apply evaluation to the higher education institutions or offer accreditation services to degrees, new programs, etc. (Li, 2013). They are established under different levels of the government, typical examples include China Academic Degrees & Graduate Education Development Centre by the central government, Shanghai Education Evaluation Institute by Shanghai government, Jiangsu Agency for Educational Evaluation by Jiangsu Province, all serving to evaluate higher education at the defined level.

The second group is the quality assurance organisations affiliated to specific government unit. They are separated from the Ministry of Education but receive considerable support from the government unit regarding the work discourse (Qi, 2011). The well-known examples are National Evaluation Committee of Architectural Education in Institutions of Higher education which is under Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of the P.R.C. and the Working Committee of Ministry of Education for the Accreditation of Medical Education. The staff working for these organisations are professionals from the field, the associations, and educational accreditation organizations, as well as representatives from the government (Li, 2013).

The third group are the quality assurance organisations affiliated to the research institutes and universities. They are financially independent but different from the for-profit

companies. They usually own a professional team of academics specialised in educational evaluation, such as the Higher Education Evaluation Office of Yunnan Province founded in Yunnan University.

The last group includes independent research organisations in quality assurance which is well represented by the famous Shanghai Jiaotong University Ranking, and private agencies. These research organisations and private agencies offer evaluation services to the huge education market and periodically provide the public with first-hand university ranking results or comments on selective colleges.

### ***Limitations of Quality Assurance Bodies***

Looking back on the quality assurance bodies currently active in China's higher education, it is easy to find out that they all have shortcomings that prevent them from offering sufficient service to tackle the quality issues in Chinese higher education.

The central government is still the decisive player in quality assurance, but the common problem with national authorities' judgment of the quality of higher education institutions is that it tends to focus on the national needs, thus unconsciously sacrifices the interest of other stakeholders. In addition, the bureaucratic government structure often results in overlapping tasks between the units which wastes extra resources. Another serious consequence of the national quality assurance is that it decreases university autonomy which is opposed to what China is trying to reform in the institutions. Regarding the second player, the subordinate government divisions are too intimate with the government, though it is categorised as the external quality assurance body. In reality, most of their performance represents the needs of the government. The rest two groups, the institution-affiliated quality assurance organisations and the private agencies, have not gained enough public recognition to make themselves eligible to share the workload of the quality assurance as expected. Additionally, the private quality agencies hold a limited market share in China's overall quality assurance service, so most of them are stuck in the stage of struggling for customers in order to generate sufficient profit to survive.

All in all, the negative facet of China's current quality assurance bodies is more or less clear. The government is still the major player in quality assurance of the higher

education, and the external quality players are mostly functioning under the umbrella of the government, that is, working for the government authority. The solution proposed to improve this situation is a reform of the current scenario.

### ***The Future of the Quality Assurance Reform***

Whenever the topic of reforming the quality assurance system is raised, there are always voices against it. Therefore, evidence is collected, experience is analysed, as well, the applicable theories will be explained, in order to offer a rational response to the opposing views. All these efforts aim to conquer the reforming obstacles derived either from the oriental culture or political systems, hence to ensure the smooth operation of the reform.

First, empirical studies on educational reforms of the eastern European countries justify that the successful quality assurance mechanisms of some countries can be applied to different systems - it is the common shortcut that most developing systems follow. Some countries, such as Russia, even set up certain organisations to study and research the quality assurance practices of other western European countries, so as to improve their own system.

According to Chen (2004), the quality assurance model of higher education should be a combination of theory and practice, guided by certain methodology on the one hand, and adopting specific management approaches and strategies on the other hand, so as to assure the higher education quality. Based on a review of the literature, theories are there to advance the outcome of quality assurance. For instance, new public management (NPM) is suggested to be employed in the process of re-constructing the internal structure of the QA related government units. Apart from it, total quality management (TQM) can also be adopted, as this approach advocates the participation of all the stakeholders in the process, along with the quality centred concept meaning that quality is determined by each movement during the procedure.

The central government, at the same time, showed its strong attitude and determination to change the long-lasting role of being the decider of both the higher education and its quality. The Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development for 2010 - 2020 reiterates to continue developing the QA system, and also explicitly suggests separating the government from the controlling role

of quality assurance in education (MOE, 2010). Therefore, the general guideline of reforming China's QA in higher education is certain, but the detailed rules and regulations are to be discussed and decided.

### **Discussion and Suggestion**

In the previous sections, we have presented the external quality assurance processes of three nations' higher education systems, including their assets and shortfalls. As the global landscape of higher education continues to evolve at an impeccable rate, so must quality assurance systems adapt to ensure that standards of education provision are not compromised (Billing, 2004).

What is evident from the existing literature on Chinese Higher Education and the government's recent education policy goals is that China wishes to be a global leader in the higher education sector both within China and in its education exports (Altbach & Knight, 2007). However, in order to achieve this, a discernible change needs to take place in the current external quality assurance model.

One of the greatest perceived obstacles in this transformation, is the government's unwillingness to withdraw its involvement in quality assurance processes (Mok, 2003), rendering the possibility of an independent regulatory body, such as the U.K.'s QAA, completely out of the question. Furthermore, as previously discussed, the temptation to apply a total transfer model from another country is also not worth considering under the current circumstances, due to China's unique sociocultural nature. The outcome of this would be, at best, an ineffective quality assurance system whilst worst case scenario is not worth imagining at present.

Though there are many points of convergence in quality assurance processes across the globe, a "one size fits all" model is neither practicable nor is it an effective solution to the reforms taking place. Considering the large size and the complex nature of China's higher education, together with the fact that the Chinese private higher education (including international programs, branch campuses, etc.) has been given less attention than the public one in all aspects and hence enjoyed more autonomy, we would like to suggest a QA mechanism separating China's private higher education from the public institutions.

The QA reform should start from the private higher education, and a new QA model will be placed on it, whilst leaving the public institutions as it is now.

The lessons and practices to be learnt from the U.K. are the effective use of an intermediary body in place, liaising with both higher education providers and the government. This would allow some independence from the government and the opportunity to provide some objectivity to procedures, without government having to surrender control completely. Whilst the public tender for a new quality monitoring system has not yet taken place and has been met with some scepticism about its necessity, introducing such an instrument in the Chinese higher education sector could create competition and therefore enhance the standards of quality assurance monitors, as well as bring diversity to a currently government controlled and saturated system.

Now turning to Russia, the assets here are of a different nature. Firstly, the higher education sector benefits from a hybrid model which relies on both governmental and public-professional input to quality assurance standards. As previously mentioned with the intermediary body, this allows the state to retain some control over the processes whilst driving up international standards through the use of multiple regulators. Secondly, Russia's newly implemented laws on professional accreditation, which endorses the use of accreditation performed by associations of employers, benchmarked against industry standards, presents multi-faceted benefits. Not only does it provide more relevant links between qualifications and labour market demands but also helps to enhance the international reputation of degrees, in line with China's goals to become a global education leader.

To sum up, the new model is a hybrid that draws upon the virtues of the individual quality monitoring systems of Russia and the U.K., which would provide an attainable and feasible solution in the socio-political context of the People's Republic of China. The public sector of China's higher education retains status quo, and the quality of the private sector shall be monitored by an intermediary (non-governmental) private agency which is associated with the government by a contract. The contract is earned by public tender. One noted criteria the participating agencies need to fulfil is being capable of organising a group of professionals with heterogeneous background, including fields of law, economics, finance, public policy, higher education, etc. Certainly, difficulties and obstacles are bound to appear during the whole process of implementation, especially at

the initial stage, in spite that, the private sector is much more agile than the public sector. One such difficulty that could be foreseen is how to increase the social status and power of the intermediary private agency, as well as how to allure the recognised professionals from different fields to the team. Regarding this matter, developing certain sorts of incentive mechanisms might be helpful. Meanwhile, new regulations from both the government and the agency might be required considering it is a novel challenge to engage different professionals into accreditation.

### **Conclusion**

In the course of this study, it appears that the most important elements for reforming Chinese quality assurance would be the introduction of other QA bodies with particular characteristics into the process in order to reduce some of the state control on procedures, and also the introduction of a competitive mechanism, such as professional accreditation or a public tender, which helps to increase the quality standards and, subsequently, the international recognition of Chinese higher education.

Of course, designing a new QA framework for such a giant and complicated higher education system as China requires much more considerations and discussion. The proposal of a separating QA mechanism for China's higher education is expected to offer an innovative way of tackling existing issues while taking full account of the potential hindrances. Future research of similar themes should focus not only on digging into the possible applicable practices, but also on offering practical insights of how each of the QA players can be balanced so as to act independently and collaboratively.

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