

From Elitism to Massification: The Evolution of Quality Control in British Higher Education and its Implications for China

Xiwen Huang¹, Jie Yang², Lingjian Yang³

¹Macau University of Science and Technology, Macau, China;

²University Malaya;

³Nanchong Film Industry Vocational Academy

ABSTRACT

This essay explores how higher education quality control system in the UK has changed and what China may learn from it. It tracks the evolution of the British system from an internal self-regulation model to a synergistic one that integrates third-party quality control with institutional autonomy. The study, grounded in historical institutionalism, examines the British experience to identify the rationale and causes behind institutional changes in quality control. It underscores the significance of this evolution for China, which navigates the massification of the higher education system in this country. The paper discusses the implications of this evolution for China's higher education quality control framework, advocating for a more measurement-driven, student-centric approach to quality control that aligns with the needs of a knowledge-based economy. It also highlights the importance of government guidance, third-party intermediaries' participation for professional supervision, and cooperative synergy among diverse stakeholders in achieving successful quality governance in higher education.

KEYWORDS

Higher Education Quality Control; Historical Institutionalism; British Higher Education System; Massification of Higher Education; China's Higher Education System

1 Introduction

1.1 The Shift to Mass Higher Education and Comparative Quality Imperatives

The efficacy of higher education indicates national educational competitiveness in the twenty-first-century knowledge economy. Between 1949 and 2020, China's higher education gross enrollment rate increased from 0.26% to 54.4%, and higher education in this country is currently in the process of moving from an elite to a mass and popularized stage. As a result, the public seeks more diverse and high-quality tertiary education, which puts the new system to the test in terms of differentiating between quality and dynamic innovation. While the local Chinese higher education remains one without any archetype, the developed nations' higher education, like the one found in Britain, is one of the best in the world. In 2020, there are over 2.53 million university students in the UK, and the proportion of 30-34-year-olds with higher education is the highest in Europe. Oxford ranked first in the 2022 Times Higher Education World University Rankings, which reflects the influence of UK tertiary education on the world stage. British higher education quality control system began as an internal self-regulation system, later evolved into a more robust external oversight system, and finally became a synergistic model that combined third-party quality control with institutional autonomy.

1.2 Significance of the Study

There is a notable disparity that emphasizes China's need to take inspiration from Britain's experiences in introducing progressive reforms in higher education. The study, grounded in historical institutionalism, examines the evolution of the British higher education quality control system throughout time to determine the rationale and causes behind its institutional transformation. These insights are essential for designing and improving China's higher education quality control framework. The study also aims to promote innovation in the inherited system and guide education reform in China, which seeks to improve the quality and international competitiveness of China's higher education.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Global Context

Concerns about quality and competitiveness are driving change in global higher education. The effectiveness of higher education is viewed as a crucial metric for assessing the performance of national educational systems considering the growth of knowledge economies (Britton, 1994). The UK, a nation with an extended record of academic success, has been a pioneer in developing external quality control procedures (Brown, 2004). It starts with a self-regulation mechanism

by institutions taking this as a challenge (Harvey & Williams, 2010).

2.2 The Quality Control Framework in British Higher Education

The British higher education system has been the subject of significant academic study. Brown (2004) chronicles the British experience of quality control from 1992, which saw QAA released in the wild, an example of attention to standards. The British model of quality control, which combines institutional freedom with outside pressure, was developed mainly because of the QAA and other quality control procedures like the REF and the TEF (Neave & van Vught 1991).

2.3 Expansion of China's Higher Education and its Quality Control

China's higher education system has experienced fast-paced development, with the gross enrollment rate dramatically increasing from 0.26% to 54.4% between 1949 and 2020 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021). Concerns have been raised over the effectiveness of the education provided and the capability of the system to maintain education quality due to the internal expansion of the educational system (Liu & Zhang, 2016). To address such challenges, Chinese scholars have started to formalize the implications of international experiences, especially in the UK, concerning how to develop a quality control system that supports the pace of educational growth and maintains quality (Chen, 2014).

2.4 Comparative Institutional Change Perspectives

Comparative studies have served an important purpose in clarifying the differences between higher education systems and how they control education quality. International studies of higher education governance systems reveal a mixed economy, according to Neave and van Vught (1991). However, there are external policies on competition and governance (greater rigor against the backdrop of more autonomy). Hazelkorn (2015) discusses the conflict in higher education between independence and external accountability, which speaks to China's desire to maintain quality while growing.

2.5 The Function of External Quality Control Mechanisms

Recent literature has focused on external quality control mechanisms to preserve educational standards. The QAA, REF, and TEF in the UK have formed the crux of this in terms of providing a framework for institutional accountability and flexibility (Hazelkorn, 2015). Such framework ensures that universities satisfy what students and the wider society need while allowing academics the freedom to pursue their work.

2.6 A Critique of the Literature Review

Quality and competitiveness in higher education have become the language of global higher education with attempts to establish external quality control (notably, the QAA, REF, and TEF) originating in the UK (Brown, 2004; Harvey & Williams, 2010). Although these frameworks have been pivotal in accountability and performance measurement, they have also received criticism for potentially acting as anti-academic and restricting innovation (Hazelkorn, 2015). The necessity to take into account the increasing diversity of China's higher education institutions should be factored into any concern of if and how the UK model of quality control can work within the country, especially considering the growing disparities between the East and the West of that country (Liu & Zhang, 2016; Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021).

Comparative research such as Neave and van Vught's (1991) complexities of observing, watching, and overt institution autonomy highlight the unique mix of external evaluation and institutional autonomy in various higher education systems. Also, it highlights that though overt observations through the external assessment are necessary, the balances between them becomes a complex phenomenon, and thus, given different higher education institutional context, the effectiveness between them varies depending on contextual factors. Another area highlighted by the literature relates to external quality control in the context of maintaining standards. Although it is crucial, there is a concern that we may overemphasize the need for external validation over the need for internal development and self-regulation within academia.

Using the development of the British higher education quality control system over the previous forty years as a clue, the study focuses on the establishment of the system as well as many topics between the evolution of role transformation and the two-dimensional analytical process. It also looks at the implications of the trends and characteristics for the development of China's higher education quality control system.

3 Research Question

- 1) How has the evolution of the British education quality control system since the 1980s influenced the development of its higher education?
- 2) What insights can be drawn from this experience for the refinement of China's higher education quality control system?

4 The Evolutionary History of the British Higher Education Quality Control System

The ethos of "freedom and autonomy" has long been the driving force behind the higher education system. Its precursor was the UK assessment of higher education, in which institutions self-evaluated. The universities themselves were custodians of higher education standards. During the 1980s, as the massive process of the British higher education system continued, the expansion in student size and that of institutions compromised the stability and development of educational quality and triggered concerns about the quality of higher education. In the 1990s, faced with external pressure to demonstrate the quality of higher education, British institutions initially adopted the approach of a financial audit, but this did not produce the results it should have brought about. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was then founded and, in 2001, introduced the Academic Quality Framework. This framework ensures further detailing of the quality control system by incorporating quality objectives and assessment activities within a unified system.

The QAA has gradually moved away from directly assessing quality since the early twenty-first century, increasingly passing the responsibility of judging quality in the context of the circumstances of institutions onto institutions themselves and, later, monitoring the efficacy of internal quality control systems and their operations. With this change, a framework where institutions are granted autonomy in quality evaluations under oversight has been formed, and a coupling mechanism of internal quality control with external monitoring is fostered. This method has not merely stimulated institutions to focus more on their development but has also improved the efficiency of internal quality control to a degree.

In the past few years, the QAA has consistently refined quality standards and provided greater clarity on the role of the government, higher education institutions, and agencies, thus building up a functioning operational mechanism for the higher education quality control system. Generally, the quality control system of higher education in the UK creates a new development hot land for higher education. It has integrated complex higher education information in a single system by responding to and perpetuating the culture and tradition of institutional autonomy in the UK, ensuring homogeneity and uniformity of shape and method of academic activity. As a result, it enables the higher education institutions to maintain external monitorization while establishing the information and resources exchange with the outside world, effectively enhancing the acceptance of the public and satisfaction of the higher education institutions and higher education quality.

5 Characteristics and Trends of British Higher Education Quality Control System

5.1 Quality Control Focused on Competition

In 2016, the report "Success in the Knowledge Economy Era: Excellent Teaching, Social Mobility, and Student Choice" flagged many challenges in the UK higher education system: low course flexibility, low student satisfaction levels, insufficient student motivation to innovate, and low knowledge acquisition among learners. These problems are said to be caused by a loss of competition in higher education quality control and a lack of student right to know. While the university scales have extended and the marketization of higher education has enhanced, the British government created the "Office for Students", which works on two dimensions: operating the higher education institution access system and serving the government of Britain with the related knowledge and analysis references. In the face of the education scale expansion and rising public expectations, competition-oriented higher education quality control is the inevitable choice. It pulls universities from the inevitability of free and independent development into the context of competition, continuing to move forward in the torrents of market and consumer responsibility, full of vitality. This not only makes strong promises on making economic use of financial resources to improve academic standards and educational quality, watching all students greater but also provides an effective guarantee for students to develop in the interests of society. This factor indicates a development in the evolution of the system itself and a change in the interactive relations between universities and external actors.

5.2 Student-centeredness Rends

While the British higher education quality control system was initiated based on tertiary education quality reports,

since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the British government has repeatedly explained that the UK higher education quality control system should provide a better reference for student choices. The humanization of “students” represents the concern of “people”, so quality control is not just a mechanized evaluation of the academic achievement and education quality information of a university but more on the assessment of the actual teaching effect and feelings of the students. This shift has also further driven the marketization of UK higher education and promoted the upgrade of the higher education quality control system from a unitary goal to a dual goal, expanding the dimensions and breadth of the evaluation and monitoring, allowing the educational quality supervision to obtain more diverse information data for analysis, and further achieving the goal of ensuring and improving the quality of tertiary education.

5.3 Rationalization and Liberalization of Assessment and Management

With the empowerment of quality control assessment management bodies and stepwise refinement and rationalization of their mechanisms, the degree of openness of objectives, processes, and outcomes that quality control shall be exposed to the public has gradually increased.

The evolution of the British higher education quality control system cannot be limited to the gradual improvement of operational mechanisms but also to the strengthening of the system logic and operability, the construction of a “dialogue mechanism between different quality elements” from institutional audits to institutional assessments, and from the performance of the duties of the Higher Education Funding Council to the replacement and refinement of assessment and monitoring procedures of the “Office for Students” and the “Office for Research and Innovation”.

In addition, a communication link between higher education and the general public has also been built by the higher education quality control system, which makes higher education a more effective external table and significantly increases its benefits to society.

6 Enlightenment from British Higher Education Quality Control System for China

6.1 The “Government Guidance” Reform

The transformation of the role and function of the government in higher education has gradually become a hot topic in public administration. The evolution of the British higher education quality control system inspires our government to broaden the “macro-guidance methods” and change the “government-led” to “government-guided” to fully mobilize the initiative and autonomy of universities themselves. In this regard, it is necessary to enhance communication and cooperation with universities and society.

6.2 Involving Independent Intermediaries for Expert Oversight and Evaluation

At present, the establishment of a system for evaluating the quality of higher education, like one that already exists in the UK, has not been implemented in China. The lack of normalization of the services offered by institutions of higher education is correlated with the absence of an efficient third-party quality control element. A two-pronged approach is suggested to be adopted considering the unique conditions in China.

First, a gradual setup of a permanent body providing specialized support for the quality control of higher education is needed.

Second, organic linkages should be developed among existing organizations and institutions so that effective cooperation will be feasible.

Moreover, they may consider establishing periodic consultative forums with experts involving the higher education sector in strategic consultation for the quality control system development.

6.3 A Synergy of Cooperation to Get Quality Governance from Diverse Stakeholders

The interaction between the government, higher education institutions, and third-party agencies, which were involved in the British higher education quality control system, provides lessons for how different players can work together in our system. Now, there is an urgent need for the government and third-party organizations to operate more meaningfully with market and higher education to help ability affirmation and improvement in higher education. As a specific form of educational quality control, we need higher education institutions to continually improve their quality and development capabilities according to our national conditions. Within themselves, they need to improve their ability to conduct self-assessments. Externally, they need to work with the government, market, and third-party agencies. It is necessary to build a macro-regulation characteristic in teachers, and the final goal is to establish a quality control system for higher education with Chinese characteristics.

7 Conclusion

In examining British higher education quality control from the perspective of historical institutionalism, the study has provided an exhaustive account of how the system and its scope changed and evolved over the decades. A balanced approach to quality control that safeguards educational standards and stakeholder interests can be found in the British system, which includes the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), the Office for Students (OfS), the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), and the National Student Survey (NSS). The comparison highlights how the lessons learned from the British experience could inform China's expanding higher education system, which is facing challenges around an agenda of massification and new demands for quality education. This study highlights the need for a more measurement-driven, student-centric quality control process that is necessary for raising standards of education while ensuring the needs of a knowledge-based economy are being met. The focus of the British model on the rationale and liberalization of evaluation and management will serve as a reference for China in its exploration of modernization of the quality control system in higher education. Moreover, the study has emphasized the significance of the state in guiding the quality control process and recommends a shift from a government-led to a government-oriented approach. All this transformation is essential for propelling a responsive and futuristic higher education sector that aligns with the shifting needs of the students and the world of education. A significant means to successful quality governance in higher education is the inclusion of third-party intermediaries for further professional supervision and assessment and the cooperative synergy between heterogeneous stakeholders.

Overall, this study is expected to make some contributions to the theoretical construction of the quality control system in Chinese higher education as well as to provide reference to the actual construction of the system and policy making. It provides a powerful and adaptable path for the construction and improvement of a quality control system for establishing a modern higher education system in China, which is in line with the transformation and development of the socialist market economy system.

References

- [1] Britton A. (1994). *Macroeconomic Policy in Britain 1974-1987*. National Institute of Economic and Social Research.
- [2] Brown R. (2004). *Quality Assurance in Higher Education - The UK experience since 1992*. Routledge Falmer Press.
- [3] Chen J., & Zhao J. (2014). An evaluation of the UK higher education teaching quality information disclosure system. *Foreign Education Research*, 41(2), 96- 102.
- [4] Harvey L., & Williams J. (2010). Fifteen Years of Quality in Higher Education. *Quality in Higher Education*, 16(1), 3-36.
- [5] Hazelkorn E. (2015). *Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education: The Battle for World-Class Excellence*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [6] Liu X., & Zhang Y. (2016). An Analysis of China's Higher Education Quality Assurance System. *Educational Research Journal*, 15(3), 234-250.
- [7] Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2021). *Education Statistics*.
- [8] Neave G., & van Vught F. (1991). Comparative Analysis of the Policy and Structure of Higher Education. In Burton R. Clark (Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Higher Education* (2, 741-750). Pergamon Press.