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Quality Assurance in China: The Changing Context

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In the last 30 years, virtually every aspect of higher education in China has been altered. Rather than an educational system run from Beijing, China has moved toward a more market-oriented system, in which the government focuses on quality—through a combination of American accreditation processes and European “steering at a distance.”

THE CONTEXT

The system developed within the context of five major factors, and the key is massification. But since increases in funding have not kept pace with enrollment growth, the support per student declined—along with reduced quality. Undergraduate teaching was neglected; a new faculty assessment process focuses on research productivity, encouraging professors to devote more of their energies to publications. The regulatory burden was placed on colleges and universities by early evaluation schemes. The changing relationship between

government and higher education institutions has signified greater autonomy for colleges and universities.

Finally, in the context of internationalization, China chose to align its quality-assurance system with comparable programs in Europe and the United States, although the stakes are higher (in terms of funding levels and enrollment quotas, for example) than is the case in many Western countries.

POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Starting in 2003, the Chinese Ministry of Education announced a series of indicators to be used in assessment of undergraduate education—including mission, academic resources, instructional development, and learning outcomes. Almost 600 universities were evaluated by the ministry on a five-year cycle of undergraduate instructional assessment.

The process is a combination of European and American systems of assessment and evaluation. Institutions begin with a self-study—comparing their instructional conditions, administrative practices, strengths, and weaknesses with the indicators published by the ministry. Course evaluations, filled out by undergraduates every semester, are now required components of institutional self-assessment. However, the information is not always used for continuous improvement purposes, as much as satisfying the evaluation requirements.

Next is a site visit by a visiting team of experts, followed by a team report to the relevant ministry office. Unlike the American system, the self-study, team reports, and final report are not necessarily confidential; the ministry plans to post such documents on its Web site in the future.

The development of a quality-assurance system has been a positive example of communication between the Ministry of Education and institutions, with changes in policy and procedures, based on the experience of the first five-year cycle. For example, all institutions of higher education were initially evaluated on the same criteria, but it became clear that large research universities and small technical colleges should not be held to the same standards. As a result, the ministry created a differentiated system, in which mission and unique factors were taken into account.

Similarly, critics focused on inappropriate or vague indicators. In response to these concerns, the ministry sharpened its definitions, provided greater detail, and shifted toward qualitative reporting rather than the initial highly quantitative approach. In addition, the ministry now offers examples of good plans for educational improvement, faculty development, campus construction, and so on, to provide guidance to institutions undergoing evaluation.

A significant problem with the system has been fraud and corruption. Because of the high stakes involved in the quality-assurance process, institutions falsified data to avoid reduced funding and lower enrollment quotas. The Ministry of Education has instructed its examiners to be alert to suspicious statistics; in addition it plans to collect its own set of basic statistics to mitigate the reliance on institutional data. Also, some universities provided lavish gifts, stipends, and accommodations to the visiting team; the ministry has issued strict regulations against luxuries and bribes.

People also question the surprisingly high proportion of institutions receiving “excellent” ratings, exceeding 80 percent, in 2007. Critics also worry that institutions have not woven quality assurance into the fabric of the

institution but rather devote all their energies to the site-visit process, once every five years.

Overall, the quality-assurance process has had positive effects on Chinese higher education. Colleges and universities are paying more attention to undergraduate education; in fact, full professors are now expected to teach undergraduates regularly. Institutions are also investing more of their own resources in libraries, laboratories, classrooms, faculty development, and other educational enhancements. In addition, universities have also engaged more seriously in strategic planning around the undergraduate programs; the most successful institutions were granted greater autonomy, as a result. Many of the current issues in Chinese higher education—innovative pedagogy, developing creativity in students, more interdisciplinary work—have come about in part because of greater attention to the quality of the undergraduate programs. Based on current successes, the quality-assurance process is being extended to the graduate level as well.

In November 2010, the Ministry of Education announced the creation of the National Higher Education Quality Assurance and Evaluation Institutions Coordination Association. Including more than 200-member institutions, the association is an organization comparable to the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation in the United States.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

China has been clearly moving from the state as education provider to the state as regulator, facilitator, and coordinator. Critics of the system believe, however,

that the ministry's control is still too strong. The quality-assurance system requires that institutions themselves implement reforms, yet their autonomy is still limited. Scholars such as Ka-ho Mok describe it as "centralized decentralization," in which operational decentralization is combined with recentralization of strategic command; Mok believes that the government's role has been strengthened rather than diminished by current policy changes.

Some interesting counterexamples do exist. In 2010, three separate groups of universities announced unilaterally that they would administer their own entrance examinations, alongside the national higher education entrance (*GaoKao*) test. The universities will consider both scores in deciding which applicants to admit. Although it appears to be a competition among universities for students, it is also considered as the universities' direct action for autonomy in quality assurance—without waiting for the Ministry of Education's directives.

The system will continue to evolve in China. Recent policy pronouncements, such as the National Mid-long Term Plan for Education Reform and Development (2010–2020), highlight the importance of quality assurance, if China hopes to achieve its goals of economic and social development. Marketlike structures will continue to encourage nonstate investment in higher education—by families, students, and private enterprises, alike—to meet a seemingly insatiable demand for higher education.