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Abstract

Universities in China and Taiwan have undergone drastic changes in the last two decades, including a series of new quality assurance efforts. The changes in China first started in an era of the Open Door policy in the early 1990s, which resulted in an unprecedented economic growth and social development. Meanwhile, Taiwan's higher education has undergone a rapid political democratization and economic transformation, largely due to the processes of deregulation and de-centralization as a result of lifting martial law in 1987. In response to the pressure for global university ranking, many public universities in both Chinese societies have competed for bulk governmental funding to strive to become world-class institutions despite an increasing discrepancy in resources and development among universities. It is argued that both China and Taiwan's quality assurance models have encountered similar challenges, and yet their origins and outcomes remain quite distinct. Though quality assurance has served as one of the driving forces for improving educational institutions, the whole evaluation process has reinforced the monopoly and hegemony of government over universities in both societies. The social costs are high and the benefits are subject to debate.

Key Words: World-class University Ranking, University Expansion, Quality Assurance, Performance Evaluation, Academic Standards

Introduction

The introduction of university quality assurance is an inevitable part of the worldwide university expansion in the last four decades. The university student population increased from 36.2 million in 1970, to 182.2 million in 2011, of which 46% came from East and South Asian regions (UIS 2013). The undergraduate student number even increased 10 times in China (UIS 2014), while six times in Taiwan (MOE, 2015) over that period of time. The university admission rate has decreased from the elite

type (15 percent) to the mass type (between 15 percent and 50 percent), and reached the stage of the universal type (more than 50 percent) (Trow 2005). As greater numbers of students gain access to universities, the question of how to exert control over quality in higher education becomes a great concern, and international agencies such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the World Trade Organization (WTO) have initiated programs to foster quality enhancement. Governments also face the demanding need to reallocate limited educational finances, which have experienced constraint due to the expansion of higher education (Chou and Ching 2012). Thus, university ranking based on prestige and research performance has come to serve as one of the major criteria for government funding (Chang 2012; Fiske 2004).

Higher education on a global basis is also facing another important issue. Universities and colleges have to be responsible for quality assurance of education in response to a call for global standard setting. In other words, the concept of assessment of university accountability and performance, including faculty research, teaching and student learning/development has been emphasized (Alexander 2000). Consequently, teaching and learning issues have been widely discussed in higher education institutions (HEIs) over the last decade.

In addition, higher education has become interconnected with trends of globalization and internationalization, development of information communication technology, and a set of political and economic transformation. These changes together produce multifaceted influences on higher education in China and Taiwan. In particular, the ideology of globalization has been acting as one of the driving policy agenda in China and Taiwan (Mok and Lee 2000). For example, a sudden influx of international students and faculty members was clearly observed in both societies. This new emerging phenomenon represents university internationalization policies which have served as a national priority in higher education in response to globalization, especially in asserting higher education quality.

On the other hand, China and Taiwan also have concurrently experienced the expansion of higher education enrollment which resulted in the decline of public funding allocation since 1990s. This trend has created a tremendous pressure of how to maintain higher education quality. In China and Taiwan, government policy toward higher education quality assurance has shifted dramatically. In addition to research publication, universities now credit more on teaching and learning than a decade ago. In particular, quality assurance for teaching and learning has attracted more and more attention than before. This phenomenon is also an awakening response to globalization worldwide which requires universities to enhance undergraduate

teaching and learning quality in a knowledge-based society.

China's Recent Higher Education Development and Reform

Higher education in China has been provided by the central and provincial governments respectively and operated directly under their administration for the last five decades. The disadvantages of this system were that the state undertook too many responsibilities/authorities over HEIs at the expense of institutional flexibility and academic autonomy. With central governance over HEIs, Chinese higher education has been long criticized as inefficient, segmented, and robust in responding to social needs and the global trend for accountability (Fan 2006; Min 2004; Chou 1999). Therefore, the Chinese government launched a series of policy and structural reforms to improve the quality of HEIs. Specifically, reforms in 1990s took place in this regard including the reconstruction of over-centralized governance, improvement of management, effectiveness of resource allocation, expansion of student recruitment, advancement of faculty qualification, and change of job-placements after graduation (Min 2004). The overall objectives of higher education reform over the last two decades are to introduce shared governance and responsibilities among different levels of governments, society and HEIs. In so doing, it is expected that the central state will be responsible for the overall planning and macro management, while the local governments take the lead, and HEIs follow the laws and have more autonomy in their daily operations and quality advancement.

In addition, student enrollment growth over the past decade has also changed the scenario of Chinese higher education to a great extent. For example, the regular annual undergraduate student enrollment in China was around 1.08 million in 1998, 4.47 million in 2004 (Wan 2006). However, in the year of 2012, new student enrollment in HEIs climbed to more than 6.8 million, with the admission rate over 75 percent as a result of the great enrollment expansion since 1998 (MOE PRC 2010; <http://edu.qq.com/a/20120606/000041.htm>). As a result of the “massification of HEIs” over the past decade, an era of free higher education in China has come to an end (Huang 2003).

With respect to reform policies, since the mid-1990s, China has committed to the establishment of world class universities, key disciplines and high-qualified talents. The overall objectives of these education reforms have targeted on qualitative and quantitative improvement, such as innovation of science and technology, and improvement of research in humanities and social sciences (Huang, 2005). Among these efforts, the Ministry of Education (MOE) first introduced Project 211 in 1995, with an attempt to establish 100 key universities in China for the 21st Century. By

2002, China's central government invested 18 billion RMB in 99 institutions as part of Project 211. In 1998, Project 985 (because of being announced in May 1998) was launched with additional bulk funding to establish world-class universities and key disciplines and research centers. Once again, Peking and Tsinghua University coupled with another 38 universities received these extra funding from Chinese government as well as local authorities (Wang 2010a; http://www.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/s3336/201001/xxgk_82267.html).

Chinese Higher Education Quality Assurance

'Quality Assurance' (QA) is a highly contested term with multiple definitions used in different areas of higher education (Barnett 1992). It also involves different measurement of higher education performance based on selection of criteria, approaches and methods for assuring university quality (Tam 2001). Above all, one QA indicator regarding students' educational processes concerns the development of individual students' autonomy, intellectual integrity and the capacity to act as a citizen in a democratic society (Bickmore 2012). As a result, the role of students in quality assurance has attracted increasing attention around the world. Student feedback on the courses they took and surveys of their degree of satisfaction with their educational experiences have become one of the major criteria for university quality assurance in the eyes of public funding agencies and stakeholders (Li and Zhu 2012; Alaniska et al. 2006).

According to Rowley (2003), there are four main reasons for gathering student feedback:

1. To offer students the opportunity to comment on their courses and instruction and provide suggestions for improvement;
2. To encourage students to self-reflect on learning processes and outcomes;
3. To provide students with the opportunity to express their satisfaction level about their learning experiences;
4. To enable HEIs to come up with their own standards/indicators based on student survey results for benchmarking purposes in the marketplace.

As the student body gears toward more diverse in the process of massification of higher education, university quality assurance becomes a concern and issue across the country. As a result, the Chinese MOE came up with a top-down and compulsory quality evaluation policy in 2002 and launched a 5-year-cycle assessment plan among

HEIs to evaluate Bachelor degree programs and non-degree degree programs throughout China. The Chinese QA policy includes both an external and an internal system. The external assessment has three dimensions (Li 2010):

1. public supervision with central policy guidelines, such as compliance with PRC Higher Education Law, and the Action Plan of the Invigoration of Education 2003-2007;
2. monitoring processes through various governmental evaluation agencies (such as national teaching quality evaluation, provincial/local assessment, university teaching-based evaluation, and other discipline-based reviews);
3. various non-governmental institutions and agencies producing university rankings and evaluation benchmarking, such as such as Shanghai Jjiao Tong University's Academic Ranking of World Universities, Research Center for Chinese Science Evaluation of Wuhan university, The Chinese Universities Alumni Association Ranking, and the NETBIG, The University Ranking Lists for Wu, and so forth .

Since 2002, external evaluation agencies at both national and university/local levels have been set up to evaluate HEIs in China (Ding 2008). At the national level, Ministry of Evaluation established the Evaluation Office of the Higher Education Department (EOHED) to take charge of education quality evaluation. Another MOE-affiliated Higher Education Evaluation Center (HEEC) and the China Academic Degrees & Graduate Education Development Center (CADGEDC) are responsible for execution of the nationwide evaluation of Chinese HEIs in a five-year cycle. These centers and agencies also conduct research on assessment policies, regulations, and theories, along with the establishment of evaluation databases to enhance higher education policy making in China (Huang 2005)..

At the university level, some HEIs established their own teaching quality assurance offices/centers monitoring internal evaluation of degree granting and undergraduate teaching. At local levels, most provincial governments also have their own local higher education evaluation agencies engaging in local HEIs quality evaluation (Huang 2005; Li and Zhu 2012).

Currently, higher education quality assurance in China is mandatory and operated by evaluation panels appointed by HEEC. Like many others in the world, the QA process in China includes the flowing procedures that all HEIs are required to comply with:

1. Meeting standards and guidelines issued by QA agencies and a government-appointed Evaluation Panel;
2. Preparing an institutional self-review report;
3. Hosting the Evaluation Panel's on-site visits;

4. Forwarding Evaluation Panel reports to university and MOE;
5. Submitting institutional self-improvement reports.

In addition to the external quality assurance system, another internal system is emerging within Chinese universities. Soon after the first five-year cycle of national Teaching Quality Evaluations for undergraduate (2002-2007, later extended to 2008 in which 589 universities evaluated), Chinese MOE required HEIs to develop their own institutional internal quality assurance schemes. These are characterized as follows (Ding 2008; Li, et al. 2008):

1. Establishment of semi-independent or institution-affiliated teaching evaluation centers responsible for the development and operation of internal quality assurance;
2. Recruitment of experienced and retired teaching supervision/steering groups for classroom observation and quality improvement;
3. Engagement of on-site peer review for classroom observation and teaching feedback;
4. Administration of student survey through questionnaires, individual/group interview, and student representative reports;
5. Preparation for annual QA institutional self-review report;
6. Construction of teacher training opportunities including pre-and-in service training programs, especially for all new faculty members.

The second round of evaluation focused more on individual institutional characteristics using information technology. It is also expected to comply with the goals of the Chinese National Reform and Development Educational Plan Outline for Medium and Long Term (2010–2020). In other words, the institutional internal QA system has been the major change that differentiates the second round from the first round of national evaluation in effect before 2008 (Ji 2010).

In addition, the various non-governmental institutions and agencies, such as Shanghai Jjiao Tong University's Academic Ranking of World Universities, and Research Center for Chinese Science Evaluation of Wuhan University, also play as intermediators between government and HEIs by producing regular university rankings and benchmarking. Their annual university ranking reports sometimes attract even more domestic and international attention.

Chinese QA Challenges

Given the political authority and party supervision over Chinese HEIs, the QA systems are not only conducted in a top-down approach but also with mandatory centralized criteria and standards regardless of institutional and regional differences. As a result, the discrepancy between institution and regions has increased over the last few years thanks to the current approach (Li and Zhu 2012). In addition, the external QA focuses on quantifiable data and outcome collection, such as teacher qualifications, educational resources, instructional management, and graduate employment rates as major performance indicators. Such information may oversimplify the complexity of university instruction and learning processes and ignore insider viewpoints, including those of academics, students and staff (Ulrich 2001).

After the first round nationwide external evaluations from 2002–2008, the Chinese MOE initiated another internal quality assurance system to remedy all the pitfalls related to institutional differences and regional needs. Student learning experiences are also included such as intellectual development, campus engagement, and course satisfaction. The current internal quality assurance systems also rely heavily on university teaching administrators for data collection rather than teaching staff and students themselves. The reason is that most Chinese HEIs are still governed under the central administration, which tends to pressure all related parties to strive to increase institutional reputation and resources instead of self-improvement.

In addition, most quality assurance policies and guidelines are initiated by the central administration and monitored by governmental agencies, which has created tremendous pressure for institutional compliance with a standardized formula and the dominant authority at the expense of individual needs and features of HEIs (Li 2010). It also has very little impact on the actual process of student learning and individual growth.

In order to meet the needs of diverse student backgrounds while maintaining educational quality, HEIs also need to take the initiative in participating in the QA process through goal setting and indicator verification. As a result, a paradigm shift and reconstruction of the teaching and learning process in HEIs may occur, followed by a genuine learning-focused QA that will enhance student learning performance and thus improve higher education quality in China. Above all, two-way communication and dialectical dialogue can serve as a foundation for learning-focused QA, which will engage teachers, students, and administrative staff in working as a team to improve the QA process through the advancement of a shared university vision and common goals.

Taiwan's Recent Higher Education Development and Reform

In Taiwan, higher education was closely linked to economic development and subject to government control before the 1980s. The government implemented rather strict control measures over both public and private institutions. Higher education remained a means to cultivate elites using a rigorous college entrance exam system to select talent (Chou 2012).

It was not until the lifting of martial law in 1987 and onwards that the number of HEIs began to rise, resulting in an unprecedented expansion in the number of students. Consequently, the government's public spending on higher education became relatively constrained. In order to alleviate the financial burden of the higher education expansion, the government adopted neo-liberal principles and market mechanisms by granting HEIs greater freedom and rights in university governance and operational budgeting.

Meanwhile, as Taiwan's government responded to public demands for "more high schools and universities" and to alleviate the pressure for advancement, along with a demand to establish universities in local elections, by 2008 (with per capita income of US\$17,000 at the time), the number of university students had increased to 1.12 million, a 6.5-fold jump since 1984. By year 2011-2012, the number of HEIs had increased to 163. The total number of university students had reached nearly 1.35 million, or nearly 6% of Taiwan's entire population of 23.3 million people (Ministry of Education 2012).

The rapid expansion of the higher education system also had some side effects including an overly-rapid upgrade of some vocational/technical colleges into four-year university system causing a decline in the quality of education. Although the government relaxed its controls over universities, this introduced market competition mechanisms which resulted in the uneven distribution of resources among public and private institutions, causing after-effects such as quality decline issue.

Taiwan's Higher Education Quality Assurance

As a result of the influence of neoliberal ideology and the expansion of higher education, Taiwan's HEIs are now competing for resources, funding, and students. In order to meet the challenge of global competitiveness and enhance university effectiveness, universities have been required to carry out regular external and self-evaluation in all aspects of teaching, research, and service. Meritocracy, accountability, and networking among faculty and staff now count for considerably

more than in the past (Chou 2008).

Accordingly, Taiwan's University Law, revised in 2003, reiterated the amendment of university evaluation to serve as one of the major mechanisms for funding to eventually assure the quality of higher education. QA policies have been introduced and reinforced since 2005 based on the law. Historically, Taiwan's university evaluation can be traced back to 1975. However, from 2004 to 2005, a professional evaluation association was commissioned for university evaluation. General university affairs were targeted based on six components: teaching resources, extension services, student affairs, general education, administrative support, and degree of internationalization. The new indicator of internationalization stressed the importance of integrating universities into the global context. Later, the Taiwan Assessment and Evaluation Association (TWAEA) took charge of the first round of university evaluation and quality assurance from 2006–2010. The second round (2011–2016) of university quality assurance focuses more on student-based learning outcomes.

In addition, it also requires more improvement in institutional self-positioning, university governance/management, teaching/learning resources, accountability, social responsibility, and sustainable self-improvement/quality assurance (Wang 2010a). The University Law entitles the MOE to allocate public funding to universities based on the above-mentioned evaluation result as references.

Taiwan's QA Challenges

In pursuit of quality assurance for universities that is comparable to the global standard, Taiwan has established a mechanism of QA to reach out to its international standard through more specific criteria for institutional improvement. For example, one private university was accredited in 2010 by the American Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE). (MSCHE, 2015) It was the first institution in Taiwan and Asia to be accredited, and this took place after a long period of self-assessment, candidate status, and self-study procedures.

Another sign of progress is that the assessment of student learning has now become an important indicator for quality assurance in higher education since around 2005 with the implementation of university evaluation, the Five Year, Five Billion Plan, the Teaching for Excellence Plan, and department/graduate evaluation.

With respect to individual faculty members, the establishment of another internal and external QA system is intended to monitor faculty publication records in various international and domestic databases, such as the Science Citation Index (SCI) and Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) by Thomson Reuters and the Taiwan Social

Science Citation Index (TSSCI). All of these new indicators serve as an effort to be in accordance with international standards that will lead to awards, achievements, and contributions to scholarship.

Similar to China, university QA in Taiwan is a top-down policy administered by the MOE by law, which requires regular institutional evaluation by the above-mentioned professional associations and departmental assessment of individual faculty members. Moreover, the evaluation results influence institutional public funding and resources as well as faculty qualifications for promotion, salary, sabbatical leave, and extra duties related to teaching and promotion to administration.

In other words, all of these policies are an attempt to enhance university quality. It is also expected that the process of QA will help institutions to come up with a more concise and detailed plan to improve their core competence, course design, and educational goals. Undergraduate student ability and learning achievement should now be at the core of the institutional evaluation (Chang 2011). Frameworks such as the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis and the PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) cycle are widely applied, partly due to the need for compliance with the semi-governmental evaluation agencies whose QA principles and criteria are demanding and authoritarian (Yen 2011).

Overall, the evaluation process has been very time-consuming, and the movement of human resources and money that is required is overwhelming, according to university and staff involved (Peng 2010). Questions also arise regarding the qualifications of the reviewers and the duration of on-site visits. Disagreement between university and evaluation commissioners over QA results has been a major concern for stakeholders. In addition, more and more faculty members are falling victim to such evaluation criteria, which emphasize research more than teaching and other performance in social capacities. In fact, faculty members across Taiwan have lost their jobs due to their failure to satisfy requirements for research performance or refusal to submit to an evaluation (Wang 2010b).

Furthermore, owing to the lack of specific criteria and quantifiable data available to justify effectiveness of learning and teaching, the number and impact of local and international journal publications has become the major evaluation criteria for faculty research performance and HEI competition for government funding and resources in Taiwan.

Pros and Cons of the Chinese and Taiwanese Models of University Quality Assurance

As the above discussion indicates, higher education in China and Taiwan has

followed a similar pattern along with the global expansion of neoliberal ideology. Universities and colleges in both Chinese societies were regulated by the central government for many decades until economic restructuring in China in the early 1990s and the political opening-up in Taiwan during the late 1980s. Higher education reforms in both societies generally followed government policies and directions. Chinese higher education reform is more geared towards a semi-authoritarian approach, in an attempt at readjusting the relationships between government, society, and HEIs. An emerging shared-responsibility policy between the central and local authorities came into practice in recent years for the sake of promoting burden-sharing and social responsiveness. Market forces have had impacts all across university campuses where curriculum, staffing, tuition plans, and many other aspects of universities are expected to undergo dramatic transformations to empower HEIs to meet market needs.

In Taiwan, the general public in Taiwan anticipates a power withdrawal from the government to allow universities to achieve greater autonomy, efficiency and flexibility in decision-making and daily operation. However, as a result of higher education expansion and budget cuts, universities are now facing new challenges, such as increasing governmental demands for accountability and quality assurance.

Consequently, both the Chinese and Taiwanese governments have launched similar projects in an attempt to enhance international competitiveness among universities. To achieve the goal of establishing 100 leading universities, research centers, and disciplines across China in the 21st century, China started its “211 Project” in 1995 and “985 Project” in 1998. These projects aimed to develop a group of HEIs that would compete to enter the ranks of the top world-class universities (Li 2010). Whereas in Taiwan, a series of reform policies such as university evaluation, the Five Year, Five Billion Plan, the Teaching for Excellence Plan, and department/graduate evaluation have taken place, all of them focused in large part on QA. These initiatives were catalyzed by the declining quality of university education due to university expansion, the market economy and global competitiveness.

With respect to university QA, both China and Taiwan launched evaluation policies by the establishment of higher education evaluation agencies to conduct nationwide quality assurance practices. They were all top-down, macro-level, and coupled with centrally mandated procedures, which worked to reallocate public funding and create changes in institutional ranking in both societies. After the first cycle of evaluation, a more micro-level approach was introduced in China and Taiwan, which concurrently emphasized on teaching and learning with the hope to include factors such as institutional and regional differences. The focus of assuring student learning development and outcomes has also become one of the emerging priorities in

both societies.

Both China and Taiwan are in a similar transitional situation in creating their own models of university quality assurance while responding to global market forces and international competition. The issue of how QA policies have affected HEIs in both societies remains controversial, especially given all of the investment of time and resources mobilized nationwide both within and outside of universities. The challenge of globalization for higher education in the making of global citizens requires a paradigm shift from “passive modes of knowledge transmission” to “active modes of knowledge engagement”, which will enhance the quality of university instruction and learning and eventually benefit more students in the global era (Neubauer 2007). Whether the Chinese and Taiwanese university quality assurance models have reinforced the monopoly and hegemony of government over universities in the market-driven world or served as a facilitating force for quality improvement that invites all stakeholders, including students, to participate in the process is subject to debate and deserves further investigation.

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