

The problem and future of the higher education quality assessment system in China-Reflection on the Double World-Class Initiative

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Abstract: Faced with increasingly competitive landscape of the knowledge society, governments worldwide are growingly placing a high value on the quality guarantee of higher education. How to assess and promote the quality of higher education has been a major concern for institutions and governments. The formulation and implementation of the Double World-Class Initiative (DWCI) in China is the process of accreditation where a batch of universities and disciplines are granted with the priority to develop into world-class ones and enjoy privileged subsidize. Despite certain breakthroughs, this evaluation also exhibits problems deep-rooted in the Chinese high education quality assessment system including the governmental monopoly control through the progress, the lack of social and students' participation, and non-transparent public information. After conducting an analysis on the text of the DWCI, enlighten by the principal-agent theory, the article put forwards the administrative entrustment model and student-oriented evaluation model for future higher education assessment systems in China.

Keywords: Double World-Class Initiative, higher education quality assessment system

1. Introduction

In the global context of massification and internationalization of higher education, how to build a rational and efficient quality assessment system to assure the quality of higher education has been a worldwide concern. Quality assessment in higher education has also been high on the policy agenda of the Chinese government since China has the largest higher education system across the world, with 30.31 million students getting enrolled in higher education within 2019 according to the National Bureau of Statistics of China¹. Under such gigantic pressure of higher education expansion and more importantly, driven by the eagerness to improve the overall quality of higher education and eventually gain the advantage among the global higher education providers, the Chinese government has launched a variety of higher education evaluation programs since the 1980s. The Double World-Class Initiative (IWCI) is the latest higher education quality assurance policy initiated by the government to evaluate, select, and promote a batch of high-quality universities and disciplines, which are able to reach and compete for the world-class universities and disciplines across the world (MOA,2015). Despite the ambitious resolution of reforming the existent higher education quality assurance system by introducing the third-party evaluation criteria and stressing out the building of 456 disciplines, the newborn policy is still a top-down evaluation process led by the government lacking the participation of society and transparency open to the public. Based on the theory of the principal-agent approach, this article points out that the future of the higher education quality assurance system in China lies in the continuous efforts to empower the intermediary evaluation organizations and strengthen the autonomy of universities. Moreover, students' voices and should be heard in the evaluation process.

2. Text analysis and reflection on the DWCI

To boost China's soft power and gain a cultural, economic edge among developed countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and other emerging economies such as India, Russia, the Chinese government issued the Double World-Class Initiative (IWCI) in 2015. According to the published Double World-Class list, there are 42 potential world-class universities and 456 potential world-class disciplines which are given the priority to develop and reach the world-class ones by mid-century (MOA, 2017).

¹ Resource from <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2020/indexch.htm>

Those selected universities and disciplines are entitled to more favorable policies and the lenient supporting fund from the central government and local government. By doing the text analysis of the Plan, the article finds out the breakthroughs and embedded problems.

2.1 Text analysis of DWCI

The section will analyze the policy texts of DWCI regarding its general aims, evaluation process and criteria, supporting system, and organization and implementation.

Firstly, the general aims of DWCI. By 2030 more universities and disciplines will be labeled world-class and several of them will be at the top of world-class university rankings and several disciplines will be at the top end of those considered world-class. The overall quality of national higher education will be remarkably improved. By 2050, the number of Chinese world-class universities and disciplines will be massively increased, those world-class universities and disciplines will be ranked at the top of world-class rankings and China will have a strong higher education system. Before the mid of the century, the quantity and quality of the world-class universities and disciplines would enter the top rankings among global providers and China will obtain advanced educational power.

Secondly, the evaluation process and criteria of DWCI. At first, a world-class universities and disciplines evaluation committee is built, which consists of the experts from governments departments concerned, higher institutions, research institutions, and other industry organizations. Then, the committee determines the evaluation criteria which are based on the standard of Chinese characteristics and refers to international related evaluation factors. Under the criteria, the committee selects and publishes the qualified universities and disciplines. Suggestions and recommendations will be given to the qualified ones. And dynamic performance monitoring is implemented every 5 years. As for the evaluation criteria of DWCI, according to the policy, higher education development should be closely connected with the actual objective and future direction of China's development, and the universities should serve the public, reform and opening up as well as socialist modernization construction, and help consolidate and develop the socialist system with Chinese characteristics. The evaluation criteria consists of five aspects: talent training; researching ability; social contribution; culture inheritance and innovation; teaching staff construction; international communication and cooperation.

Thirdly, the supporting system, organization, and implementation of DWCI. The local government must support the world-class universities and disciplines in terms of funds, policies, and resources. Higher education institutions are supposed to earn social investment and resources to build a diversified financing mechanism. Higher education institutions are also entitled the autonomy with regards to enrollment, personnel system, degree awarding, funding management, and research evaluation. As to Organization and implementation, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, the Development and Reform Committee is responsible for formulating, implementing, and supervising. Various industries and enterprises are encouraged to cooperate with universities. An information disclosure network platform would be established to publish the constructing plans and performance outcomes.

2.2 Reflection on the DWCI

Based on the governmental policies and existing literature, this section brings forward the features as well as the problems of DWIC.

Comparing with the 985 project and 211 project, which are also accreditation projects aimed to raise the high education quality and increase their national influence (Sheng, 2016), DWCI has the following features and breakthroughs. Firstly, it breaks the identity solidification of higher institutions and encourages competition. In the past, those qualified universities wouldn't be removed from the accreditation list of "985" or "211" once they had passed through the strict evaluation. However, for universities already evaluated as the potential world-class ones, pressure and accountability are never relieved because of the dynamic and rigorous monitoring evaluation mechanism, which is operated based on self-evaluation reports by the approved universities and periodical inspections including mid-term inspection and long-term inspection every 5 years (MOA, 2015). If the university is diagnosed with low performance, low efficiency, or deviation from the goals, they might undertake the risk of being excluded from the accreditation honor list or obtaining less funding investment from the government in contrast to the high achievers, who can receive more funding support (MOA, 2015). This policy helps to build a dynamic supervising, managing mechanism and a rigorous budgetary system, where the universities have more impetus to keep constructing and improving themselves.

Secondly, it is the first time that the systematic evaluation of disciplines has been introduced in China (Guangli,2016). There are four stages of evaluation in higher education systems in China. The first research stage started in 1985 when the idea of education assessment was first proposed in the history of China in the Decision of the Central Committee Party of China on the Reform of the Education System. The second stage of trial and exploring was implemented in 3 methods from 1994 to 2002: The Acceptable Evaluation which was applied for universities founded after 1978; the Excellent Evaluation which was applied voluntarily for key universities with a long history and good reputation and achievement; the Random Evaluation which was applied for the institutions selected randomly by the Ministry of Education. During the third stage from 2003-2008, a five-year-round evaluation system was set up for all undergraduate institutions under the guidance of the Action Plan for Rejuvenating Education 2003-2007. The formulation of the Outline of National Medium to long-term Educational Reform and Development Plan signified the start of the fourth stage, which implemented the classification evaluation to foster distinctive development of universities and set up the database concerning basic information of education to monitor the educational quality all time (Shuiyun,2016). All the previous plans evaluated the university as a whole. As Pan (2007) pointed out, this kind of overall evaluation has led to assimilation among higher institutions in China, which all follow the same development pattern and path under the guidance of the overall assessment criteria. Nevertheless, great attention has been attached to the construction of disciplines in the Double World-Class Plan, which can not only optimize the disciplinary structure, encourage the diversified development of universities, but also helps to reallocate the government funding into higher education from excessively concentrating on certain institutions to disperse allocations (Mohrman, Wang& Li,2011). This means more universities are included in the funding system and the problem of the high centralization of governmental resources has been relieved to some extent.

Thirdly, Chinese characters and the Chinese national context has been emphasized strongly in the document. For instance, the guiding ideology of the Double World-Class Plan is to implement the educational policy of the Communist Party, insist on the socialist educational direction, and cultivate the potential successor and constructor of the socialist cause. The evaluation criteria related to the world-class disciplines include whether they can solve the current and urgent Chinese problems and nourishing devoted students loyal to the Communist Party (MOA,2015). The selection of subjects with socialist features such as Marxism, Maoism, Chinese culture is also distinct. This action puts higher education in a historical, political, and economic Chinese context, which guarantees the correct direction of higher education institutions and bridges the construction of higher education as a robust component and overall progress of the nation.

However, it is quite problematic when higher education is seared with such a strong political and administrative color since higher education is supposed to serve and be responsible for the benefits of students (Wang, 2010). This attachment will eventually result in the affiliation and submission of universities to the political body. Moreover, other problems are self-evident according to the policy text. The issue of direct and strong government control stands out as the text demonstrates that it is the government that issues the evaluation program, builds the evaluation committee, guides, and supervises the evaluation process, determines the approved universities and disciplines. It is a joint action of the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, the Committee on Development and Reform performed in a top-down method, namely universities don't participate in the evaluation of their own will and the public are informed of little information but the results. The personnel list of the evaluation committee, the specific process, and procedure of the evaluation, the founding standard, the clear specification of the criteria is never open to the public. The government is the initiator, at the same time, the policy performer and supervisor. There is no doubt that this kind of monopoly will lead to the lack of fairness and objectivity of the quality assurance of higher education (Liu&Springer,2016).

In conclusion, the main problems of the DWCI lie in 3 aspects: the governmental monopoly control through the whole progress, the lack of social and students' participation, and non-transparent public information.

3. The major problem of higher education quality assurance system in China

Except for the implementation of DWIC, there are various higher education quality assurance programs in China, such as the Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education. DWIC is a typical miniature of higher education quality assurance in China. Admittedly, those evaluations have improved the awareness of universities on the quality, encouraged the normalization of educational management of universities, and gradually established the quality assessment system for distinctive university

education in China. But the higher education quality assessment system is still faced with certain problems and challenges.

First, the monopolistic status of the government has permeated into the higher education quality assessment system. Currently, there are 3 components of the external higher education evaluation system in China. The system is dominated by the central government which established the Higher Education Evaluation Center (HEEC) in 2004 to assess the quality of undergraduate students and China Academic Degrees and Graduate Education Development Center (CADGEDC) in 2002 to do the degree-granting accreditation, subject evaluation, and dissertation evaluation. The local governments build provincial accreditation committees to evaluate the quality of vocational or private higher education. Although there are intermediary organizations in China such as the Shanghai Agency for Education Evaluation and Jiangsu Agency for Education Evaluation which is both entitled to the right to launch the higher education quality evaluation from the governments (Yang, 2008), they have played little role in practice. University rankings, according to Kehm (2014), as one kind of social evaluation, have also push universities to improve their quality. Apparently, the higher education evaluation is overwhelmingly dominated by the government. Yang (2008) demonstrated that there are 3 characteristics of the government-led evaluation: The first feature is power centrality. The government builds the evaluation institution and organizes, manages, leads every step of the evaluation. The second one is managerial immediacy which means that the government directly intervenes and controls the specific activities including the construction of the index system, auditing of the assessment scheme, formulation of the assessment procedure, arrangement of the audit experts, and approval of the evaluation outcomes. Administrative enforcement is also exhibited since higher institutions have no choice but to accept the evaluation launched by the government. There is no denying that in certain historical contexts, this kind of model is in favor of promoting the rapid initiation of higher education evaluation and quick establishment of the evaluation mechanism (Fan, Ma & Wang, 2015). But it has apparent disadvantages: As Wang (2015) exhibited, firstly, the monopoly of government has restricted the enthusiasm of other actors to participate in the evaluation and constraint the development of intermediary organizations. What is more, the compulsory nature of the evaluation puts the universities in a passive situation, whose enthusiasm and creativity could be hard to motivate. Finally, the behavior of rent-seeking and corruption easily appear because of the lack of other supervision forces. This prejudice the professionalization of the evaluation, as well as the fairness and objectivity.

Secondly, the development of the intermediary evaluation organizations has been caught in the plight. Strong administrative nature and weak independence is the gravest problem faced by them (Hammond, 2016). There are more than 40 intermediary evaluation organizations in China, which are all established by the government and thus totally affiliated or "half affiliated" with the government. They cannot make decisions on when, how, and who to evaluate, what is the evaluation procedure and criteria given to the fact that the personnel appointment and financial appropriation are strictly controlled by the Ministry of Education. In addition, although the words "social groups" and "social evaluation" have appeared in the Decision of the Communist Party on the Reform of the Education System and Temporary Regulations on the Higher Education Evaluations and other documents several times, there is no clear definition of the intermediary evaluation organizations (Li, 2010). More essentially, there is no law to regulate the status, rights, and obligation of them in higher education evaluation, which will absolutely lead to public skepticism to their validity and credibility. And the quality of the intermediary evaluation organizations themselves remains to be improved as well. Many of the evaluators do not possess the qualified aptitude and experience. And it is not uncommon that the intermediary evaluation organization always lacks individuality and creativity in the design of the evaluation system. Consequently, their evaluation cannot be recognized and approved by the public.

Thirdly, university autonomy and freedom still need more attention. According to Vaira (2008), the realization of university autonomy is the important basis of the healthy development of the high education quality assessment system. However, true autonomy has not been achieved among universities. The Soviet educational model was introduced when New China was established. But the effect has extended to the modern higher education system, within which the government exerts unified planning and management to universities and universities are just conformists and followers of the government. The most robust control of the government is financial control and governmental funding is the main source of higher institutions in China. The evaluations are issued in a top-down way all the time, which gives universities no choices but to engage. After all, the outcome of the evaluation is closely related to the funding distribution. Because of the strict budgetary system aimed at making the universities develop as the government plans, there is little space for universities to construct and develop of their wills. In addition, teachers in universities are under great research pressure and occupied with the task of publishing papers rather than focusing on teaching due to the evaluation criteria: research ability (Nair,

Li & Cai,2015). This has led to the deviation of higher education's main mission: teaching rather than coping with the external evaluation for political reasons.

4. The future of higher education quality assurance system

4.1 The theory foundation

The theory of neoliberalism is based on the economic policies, which promotes liberalization, privatization, and competitive mechanism to transform the traditional government role (Foster,2017). The most important proposition of this theory is the emphasizing the macro direction guidance of the governmental function instead of the intervention and management in the society. This market-based idea has also been illuminating on the issue of higher education quality assurance since universities and society are inclined to reject direct intervention from the government.

The originality of principal-agent theory is in essence to solve the problem of information asymmetry (Lambert, Leuz & Verrecchia, 2012).The politicians come up with various policies without enough time or expertise to gain the information and put policies into practice, which is why they-as principals rely on agents to deliver public services. When the theory is applied in the field of higher education quality assessment and related to the theory of social contract, it is demonstrated in the way that the public entrusts government to evaluate the quality of higher educations; Being stuck at daily routine, the government then entrust the intermediary organizations to perform the assessment.

4.2 From administrative authorization to administrative entrustment: the changing relationship between the state and social organizations.

Generally speaking, there are 3 models for governments to run the power: the government itself steers the power; the government delegates the power to other institutions. Those empowered ones are entitled to the qualification of administrative body and must undertake the according to administrative responsibility; the government entrusts the power to other institutions. Wang (2013) showed that in this model, the government delivers administrative affairs to social organizations by signing in contracts and negotiating with them. By contrast with administrative authorization, administrative entrustment is more advantageous: in the model of administrative entrustment, the evaluation institutions are not affiliated or attached with the government. They are independent social evaluation organizations that are entitled to equal status to the government. Moreover, the evaluation is operated upon a marketing mechanism and relationship where the entrusted institutions perform the entrustment obligation and launch the evaluation while the government carries out the right of inspection on the institutions (Li,2015). Given the edge of administrative entrustment, the transformation from administrative authorization to administrative entrustment should be encouraged. Specifically, on the one hand, the transformation of the governmental function should be promoted. Instead of stepping into every process of high education evaluation, the government should undertake 3 main functions in terms of formulating scientific-educational regulations and laws, monitoring social organizations by establishing the certification system of higher education evaluation institutions and experts, providing information support such as information consulting service and culture propaganda. On the other hand, elevating the quality of those evaluators and achieving the standardized operation of the social organizations is not only necessary but also urgent. Guangli (2016) pointed out that establishing a strict certification system of higher education evaluation institutions and experts is still the key.

4.3 Be responsible for the students: the ultimate goal of the government, universities, and evaluation organizations.

The experience of students has been valued highly among universities and organizations in western countries. According to Douglas Bennett (2001), the essence of higher education evaluation is to assess whether the ability and knowledge of students have been enhanced. Scotland introduced the Quality Enhancement Framework in 2003 which also pointed out that to promote the students' experiences and eventually, benefit their learning should be the top aim in higher education. Great attention is also attached to the policy practice. For instance, in 2006, the OECD initiated 'Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes' to evaluate the generic skills and discipline-based skills on a global scale (OECD, 2000a). The European Standards and Guidelines also raised that the evaluation procedures should be able to measure the implicit and explicit accomplishment of students (ENQA, 2005). The establishment and development European Students Union demonstrate that students voice is more heard

through the process of high education evaluation. However, in China, the role of students tends to be diluted in practice. Therefore, it is important to build a student-oriented higher education quality assurance system.

In the context of market mechanism, as consumers, students are considered as immature because on the one hand, they lack access to comprehensive and sufficient information to make decisions, on the other hand, many students could not take good advantage of it even if they get the information (Carless, 2006). To address the problem of immature consumers, the government is entrusted the right to assess higher education which further transfers the right to social organizations. But the transfer of rights doesn't mean the decrease of governmental responsibility to students. On the contrary, the government is free from the complicated evaluation to procure and has more energy and time to concentrate on formulating relevant regulations and laws which could safeguard the genuine benefits of students. This again brings requirements of the streamlined administration and delegation of power for the Chinese government. For the social organizations, although as agents, they must undertake the inspection from the government, students are the eventual target they are support sed serve. Scientific assessment system and rational assessment criteria which can reflect the learning outcomes of students and be employed to measure the student experience is the direction where the evaluation organizations in China should head for (Fan, Ma, & Wang, 2015).

The affiliation relationship between universities and the government should also be changed in the student-oriented model. Universities are entitling the right to run a school. It should be their own decisions on teacher-student ratio, the number of enrolments and the distribution of funds rather than the government's will (Sheng,2016). The purpose of the higher education evaluation should be designed to check whether teachers, infrastructures, environment benefit the student rather than serve the political agenda. Only by truly achieving autonomy can the universities focus on improving the teaching quality and making efforts to elevate the students' experience instead of reacting passively and reluctantly to the frequent and tedious governmental evaluation.

The better evaluation method could be operated in a down-to-top way which is based on the principle of volunteer application for the evaluation (Pan, 2007). After all, universities need to gain social recognition and earn a high reputation.

The engagement of students can also be accomplished in terms of internal or external student surveys and complaint mechanisms (Carless, 2006). Moreover, Shuiyun (2016) demonstrated that establishing a special database concerned with the high education quality assurance and timely release of evaluation information containing method, criteria, procedure, and outcomes to the public including students is very necessary.

5. Conclusion

The higher education quality assurance system in China has been developed and completed over the past decades. The Double-World Class Plan is undoubtedly another significant evaluation project which would exert a profound impact on the landscape of Chinese higher education. Nevertheless, it demonstrates a similar government-led problem to the previous ones. As a result, to further entrust the evaluation power to society, return the autonomy right to universities and enable students to engage more in the evaluation might be the future path of higher education quality assessment system in China.

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