

# Higher Education Quality Assurance System in New Zealand and Its Implications for China

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## **Abstract**

With the popularization of higher education, its quality assurance and enhancement have gained top priority in the work of governments and higher education institutions across the world. In order to meet the needs of society for the booming economy and globalization, The New Zealand government has taken effective measures to develop and improve its higher education quality assurance system to maintain its international reputation. This paper first introduces the background of New Zealand higher education quality assurance system, and then examines the structure, function and operation of its internal and external quality assurance systems. Based on a comparative analysis of the quality assurance systems in New Zealand and China, useful recommendations such as diversified standards and multi-engagement, etc., are given, which aims to contribute to the progress of the quality assurance system of Chinese higher education.

**Key words:** New Zealand; Higher education; Quality assurance, Implications

## **1. Introduction**

The New Zealand government has always focused on improving the higher education system in a more flexible and strategic way in terms of outputs, efficiency and student achievement. Nonetheless, as is known to all, it is the guaranteed quality that can fundamentally ensure satisfying outcomes of the higher education system. Consequently, the government highly expects that over the coming decades, the higher education system will continue to improve the quality and relevance between higher education and research in the face of growing international competition for talents (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2014), which means that its quality assurance system is important and worth valuing.

The quality assurance system in China, however, is not as advanced as that in New Zealand. Over the last sixty years, China has undergone dramatic social, political and economic challenges in developing the educational system. The reform and opening-up policy since 1978 and the entry into WTO have not completely improved the operation and practice of the higher education in China to an international level. With the expansion of students enrolled in higher education institutions, concerns remain about the conflict between limited educational resources and the quality of education they receive. The Chinese government has realized the problem and admitted the importance of higher education to both individuals and the further development of the society, economy and culture. Relevant measures have been taken to maintain and improve the internationalization of its higher education, such as the two pivotal government programs- Project 985 for developing world-class universities and Project 211 for developing 100 first-class universities. It should be noted, however, that such measures do not fundamentally maintain

and increase the quality of higher institutions. The improvement of the current quality assurance system in China should be listed on the government's agenda.

This paper focuses on the development of higher education in New Zealand and in particular, the development and implementation of the quality assurance system. It elaborates on how the New Zealand authorities develop and improve the quality assurance system effectively and efficiently to help higher institutions meet their missions and goals, and in the long term, to foster the individuals' careers and make contributions to the community and society. A comparative analysis of the strengths of the New Zealand model and the weaknesses of the Chinese system will be conducted to provide some implications for Chinese higher education.

## **2. An Overview of New Zealand Higher Education Quality Assurance System**

The issue of higher education quality is not new in New Zealand. With the expansion of higher education worldwide, to meet the demands of the knowledge-based economy, governments across the world have focused on the quality of their education provision and knowledge production in order to ensure rewards of their investments in education. Furthermore, influenced by the theory of Neoliberalism during the 1980s, the political, economic and social reform highlighted the need for significant changes to the education sector in order to raise comparability in educational programs and the skill and education levels to compete effectively in an international marketplace. Consequently, the education reform was undertaken by the government and the Education Act 1989 was enacted to adapt to such demands.

According to the Act, New Zealand's TEIs (tertiary education institutions) operated with substantial institutional autonomy. It passed the decision-making power from the central government to TEIs, letting them control their own resources and future plan. Higher education providers were required to manage their education quality themselves in accordance with the requirements of the 1989 Education Act. At the same time, the independence and self-assessment of higher education providers were emphasized by the reform policy.

As a result, though the government remained the main funder of the higher education in New Zealand, the Ministry of Education was decentralized to a government department responsible for developing the policy framework for tertiary education and advising Ministers on the tertiary education strategy (TES). The major external quality assurance agency, the New Zealand Qualification Authority (NZQA) was established to ensure the quality of higher education. Since then, the current quality assurance system of higher education in New Zealand has taken shape.

With the expansion of the autonomy of higher education providers and the implementation of market-oriented reform policies, NZQA, which was originally designed to assess the quality of all the universities, polytechnics and private tertiary education institutions, played a role in non-university providers. According to the Education Act, it was the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee (NZVCC), now operating as Universities New Zealand (Universities NZ) that took total responsibility for the quality of universities. In 1993, the NZVCC delegated its quality assurance of universities to one of its standing committees, the Committee on University Academic Programs (CUAP) for the assignment of program approval. CUAP is in charge of setting up and applying qualification and regulation approval, accreditation and program moderation procedures across universities. Another NZVCC delegation was the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit (NZUAAU), an independent body providing periodic monitoring of each university's quality assurance system with a quality audit approach. NZUAAU has been known as the Academic Quality Agency for New Zealand Universities (AQA) since 2013.

The education reform, however, began to reveal its faults in the late 1990s. As was pointed out in a report

given by the Association of University Staff (AUS) to the Tertiary Education Committee (TEC), the tertiary education policy and the operating system at that time led to the blind expansion of tertiary education. Such an expansion was a serious waste to a country with a small population and limited resources. At the same time, the quality experienced a downward trend, which would do harm to the reputation of the tertiary education in New Zealand both domestically and globally and hinder the development of the public tertiary education. The increase of the number of students also contributed to the lack of educational resources, which further had a bad influence on the scientific research of tertiary education providers and the global fame of the tertiary education in New Zealand. What's worse, the country suffered from brain drain as an increasing number of students studied abroad and high-level talents chose to settle down overseas. Consequently, policy makers began to take new measures to meet challenges the tertiary education faced.

In 1998, the government published a white paper *Tertiary Education in New Zealand: Policy Directions for the 21st Century*. It emphasized the enhancement of the quality assurance of tertiary education and the macro-management of the government over the public tertiary education by effectively combining the internal supervision mechanism with the external quality assurance mechanism. The white paper also noticed the establishment of the Quality Assurance Authority of New Zealand (QAANZ), which would be responsible for the accreditation and the monitoring of external quality assurance agencies (Australian Universities Quality Agency 2006).

The conception and the proposal regarding the establishment of QAANZ, however, deadlocked over the election in 1999 and as a result, ignored by the new government. Then in 2002, the New Zealand Education and Science Committee, now called the Ministry of Education (MoE), enacted the *Tertiary Education (Reform) Bill* in order to improve the quality assurance system of tertiary education in New Zealand. A new crown entity, the Tertiary Education Committee (TEC) was established to operate the government's funding mechanisms and give effect to government strategy. The Bill also stipulated that NZQA was the major agency in terms of the external quality assurance system of tertiary education. It became an authority to ensure that tertiary institutions should comply with policies and criteria in relation to registration, accreditation, course approval and other quality-related requirements. It could also monitor and audit providers against quality standards. Besides, it clearly pointed out that NZVCC was responsible for the quality of universities.

It is worth mentioning that in 1992, NZQA developed one of the first qualifications frameworks in the world-the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), now called the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF) under section 253 of the Education Act 1989. The current NZQF, replacing NQF in 2010, identifies ten levels for the registration of the unit standards-based system of national qualifications, which are categorized by fields of study and levels of student achievement. It covers from senior secondary education (level 1) to doctoral study at a university (level 10) (New Zealand Ministry of Education 2006). NZQF provides a standardized parameter for the recognition of qualifications. It eliminates the discrepancies and inconsistencies between separate education and training systems, linking the prior learning with the skills necessary for a particular career. The higher education institutions, including universities and ITPs are linked to NZQF.

Currently, the quality assurance system of higher education in New Zealand consists of two parts: internal and external assurance systems. Both higher education institutions and agencies are involved in the quality assessment and improvement issue, each of which performs its own functions to ensure a high-level quality (Utuka 2012: 18).

### **3. Internal Quality Assurance System of Higher Education in New Zealand**

The internal quality managements of universities and polytechnics are different in that their engagements differ partly from each other. Regardless of this difference, they are well-organized and fruitful.

#### **3.1 Internal Quality Management of Universities**

Though higher education institutions are still centralized in New Zealand, they share a high degree of autonomy. Under Section 160 of the Education Act 1989, institutions are given much independence and freedom to make academic, operational and management decisions to efficiently use national resources. Under section 161 of the Act, the Parliament has the power to enact laws to preserve and enhance the academic freedom and autonomy of institutions. That includes the freedom of the enrollment of new students, regulating the subject matter of courses taught at the institution, appointing its own staff through its chief executive, etc. The Act also stipulates that higher education institutions are independent legal entities and have the power to change their own structures of management after consulting with the Minister of Education. The board, representing the interest of its staff, students and community, is responsible for the overall management of school transactions. The focus of the work of the board is to formulate school rules, set the school mission and long-term projection under the approval of the Minister. It should also submit the school operation report annually to the Minister and accept the audit and review of panels delegated by the Minister. According to Section 94, the board shall comprise no more than 7 and more than 3 parent representatives. It also includes student representatives and staff representatives.

#### **3.2 Internal Quality Management of Polytechnics**

Polytechnics, or institutes of technology (ITPs) are also New Zealand government-owned higher education providers. They deliver technical, vocational and professional education and promote research, particularly applied and technological research that aids development. Many ITPs offer degrees and are involved in research activities. Now there are 18 ITPs spreading across the country.

Similar to universities, the council of a polytechnic is responsible for the internal quality management. It is responsible for the macro-management of the whole college. Members of a council compromise senior experts from every industry, commissioners delegated by the Minister, full-time teacher representatives, excellent student representatives, etc. According to the Education Act 1989, it is the principal, rather than the council that directly takes responsibility of the teaching and staff management. A faculty is under the responsibility of the dean, and every faculty has its own council to deal with issues about teaching evaluation. Correspondingly, a department is under the responsibility of the head of the department, responsible for teaching, staff and financial issues. It is the three-level system-institute, faculty and department-that works to guarantee the education quality of a polytechnic.

#### **3.3 Components of the Internal Quality System**

The internal quality assurance work is undertaken by higher institutions themselves. In spite of the multiplicity of higher institutions in New Zealand, self-assessment is arguably the most powerful means for a higher institution to understand and improve its educational performance. It directs towards coherent goals about decision-making and operational practices.

No matter how higher institutions conduct their self-assessment, the process should be comprehensive, authentic, transparent, robust, and focused on: 1) needs assessment-the extent to which higher institutions systematically determine and address the needs of learners, employers and the wider community; 2) processes and practices-the processes and practices that help to achieve outcomes, e.g., the primary

importance of good teaching or the role of effective learner support services; 3) learner achievement-the impact of educational provision on learner progress and achievement; 4) outcomes-what is being achieved and the value of that for learners, employers and the wider community; 5) using what is learned-self-assessment should result in evidence-based conclusions and decision-making that will feed into strategic and business planning, leading to positive change; and 6) actual improvement-the extent to which improvements are relevant and worthwhile.

Though the concrete approaches and procedures to self-assessment can vary and be tailored to suit individual institutions, the focuses of self-assessment are still the quality and value of educational outcomes and the typical stages of a self-assessment include (New Zealand Qualifications Authority 2009):

Step 1: planning-the higher institution should select an appropriate focus that systematically covers all aspects of the institution. The area(s) of focus should be of sufficient relevance or importance to learner outcomes to warrant the effort involved. It is also required that institutions take a strategic view to make explicit the educational outcomes they are trying to achieve.

Step 2: gathering data-There are many different approaches to evaluation, but quantitative and qualitative data is mostly used to better understand the performance of an institution. As a result, the data for self-assessment can take many forms including enrolments, learner completion and achievement. Higher institutions also use enquiries, ranging from a good conversation in the staff room to meeting with local employers, to gather evidence relevant to the outcomes of the institution. In order to draw reasonable conclusions, data gathered should be valid, reliable, complete, sufficient and up-to-date.

Step 3: analyzing and interpreting the information-This step is essential to establish the level of achievement of educational outcomes. By asking questions like what are the probable reasons for this result and what evidence is there to support them, a picture will be created about what is happening and why. It will then enable decisions to be made about whether more information might be needed, whether it is possible to find that, and what needs to be done to make improvements.

Step 4: making decisions-By this stage, higher institutions can consider what actions they might want to improve performance. The decisions should be justifiable and evidence-based.

Step 5: reporting and action-The self-assessment process, its findings and the actions taken as a result should be documented and reported to senior managers, councils, boards or owners. The documentation is an important part of the internal management and acts as evidence for any subsequent external evaluation and review, as it proves that the higher institution is using self-assessment successfully in its internal quality assurance to make improvements.

Step 6: monitoring improvements-A plan is needed to implement the improving actions. In order to make sure that the decisions are practical and effective, monitoring is necessary to see whether the actions lead to improved educational outcomes.

#### **4. External Quality Assurance System of Higher Education in New Zealand**

The two legislative quality assurance authorities are NZVCC and NZQA. Two bodies of NZVCC oversee the quality assurance of universities-CUAP and NZUAAU (AQA). NZQA is responsible for quality assurance for non-university TEOs. With respect to higher education, NZQA's own AAA is responsible for the quality assurance of wānanga. Two delegations, ITPQ and CEAC are responsible for the quality assurance of ITPs and CoEs respectively.

#### **4.1 External Quality Assurance System of Universities**

The external quality assurance system of universities is led by NZVCC with its delegations CUAP and NZUAAU. NZVCC represents the interests of the eight public universities in New Zealand. According to the Education Act 1989, NZVCC is the statutory body with primary responsibility for quality assurance matters in the university sector. The government also built in the Education Amendment Act 1990, a requirement for NZQA to consult with NZVCC before establishing policies with regard to universities. NZVCC has two main delegations: CUAP (Committee on University Academic Programs) and NZUAAU (New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit ).

With the demand for competitiveness and employability in people's careers, the quality of courses offered in universities is of great importance, as a result of which, academic performance should also be of high quality. NZVCC noted this trend and has delegated its quality assurance powers to one of its standing committees-CUAP. CUAP considers academic matters within the university sector regarding program approval, accreditation and moderation procedures, which ensures that the quality of program development is consonant with high academic standards and mindful of the country's interests. CUAP is comprised of a representative from each university, a Chair and Deputy Chair appointed by NZVCC, and a student representative.

The Education Act 1989 authorizes NZVCC, through CUAP, to determine approval and accreditation for new qualifications and to withdraw approval where there are reasonable grounds. At first, universities should submit proposals to the committee about the introduction of a new academic qualification or a new subject or a new conjoint program. The proposal can also cover changes in the qualification, course or program. All proposals are to be submitted electronically via the CUAP online system. Then CUAP will assess and scrutinize these proposals to make decisions: unconditional approval, deferred decision, conditional approval or declining the proposal. All successful proposals should be assessed by Graduating Year Review (GYR) to ensure that the proposals can be carried out finally (Universities New Zealand 2015).

NZUAAU, now known as AQA, was established in 1993 by NZVCC to carry out audits of the processes in universities which underpin academic quality. The governing board of NZUAAU is appointed by NZVCC, but it is operationally independent of NZVCC. The mission of NZUAAU is to contribute to high quality New Zealand university education by engaging as a leader and advocating in the development of universities based on high quality internationally acceptable, academic practices; and providing quality assurance and quality enhancement services which assist universities in facilitating excellent student experience and learning outcomes.

One of the responsibilities of the unit is to consider and review the universities' mechanisms for monitoring and enhancing the ongoing academic quality of academic programs which are necessary for achieving their original goals, and to comment on the extent to which procedures in place can reflect good practice in maintaining quality.

NZUAAU has operated four academic audit cycles since 1995 and now Cycle 5 has commenced in the second half of 2013. Each cycle has a theme and previous cycles have focused on whole-of-institution (Cycle 1: 1995-1998); research, the teaching-research link and postgraduate support (Cycle 2: 2000-2001); teaching and learning (Cycle 3: 2002-2007) and whole-of-institution (Cycle 4: 2008-2012). Cycle 5 audits focus on teaching and learning and student support, including postgraduate study. Audits are always managed around a framework which invited the institution to reflect on its strengths, challenges, areas for enhancement and areas of good practice. The academic audit procedure can be outlined as follows:

A self-review by the university. This reflects that universities are autonomous institutions and that academic audit is intended to respect universities' own, individual objectives. The self-review provides the audit panel with the essential information about their quality, and also leads to improvements in academic processes irrespective of NZUAAU's audit.

Preparation and submission to NZUAAU a Self-review Portfolio. The Portfolio includes the self-review report. Meanwhile, students of the university are invited to submit to NZUAAU an independent student report on the audit topics.

Consideration of the Portfolio by an independent external audit panel, appointed by NZUAAU. Auditors will think about what further information is needed and assessed in the site visit.

The Panel undertakes a site visit with forms of interviews with staff, students and stakeholders. The purpose is to further testing the claims in the self-review report.

An audit report is completed, quality-checked by the NZUAAU Board, checked for accuracy by the university and, after approval by the NZUAAU Board, is made public.

#### **4.2 External Quality Assurance System of Polytechnics**

The external quality assurance system of polytechnics is led by NZQA with the help of NZQF. NZQA is a crown entity as defined by the Crown Entities Act 2004, and is empowered by Section 256A of the Education Act 1989. It is responsible for the quality assurance of non-university tertiary training providers, and develop, register and support NZQF. NZQA is headed by a Board, which is appointed by the Minister of Education. It is an unprofitable agency but will charge fees equal to the cost of quality assurance. NZQA requires registration, approval and accreditation to ensure that polytechnics in New Zealand provide quality education for students to meet the national and international standards.

Registration-it is a requirement for any tertiary education provider wishing to receive government funding, offer approved courses, or offer qualifications available for student loans and allowances. It means that the education institution is able to provide high quality education and training in a stable and safe studying environment. However, higher education institutions do not need to be registered because they are established under the Education Act 1989.

Approval-it is mainly for courses. The course approval of NZQA means that the course complies with the quality standards. The approval process mainly focuses on whether the structure, objective, content, evaluation of the course are scientific, effective and efficient enough.

Accreditation-the accreditation of the institution means that it can provide approved, high-quality courses, or can deliver credits according to levels on NZQF.

In addition, NZQA conducts periodic external evaluations and reviews, providing an independent judgment of the educational performance and capability in the self-assessment of polytechnics. Both self-assessment and external evaluation are requirements of program approval and accreditation for all non-university institutions.

#### **5. Comparing the Quality Assurance Systems in New Zealand and China**

It has been widely recognized that the quality assurance system of higher education in New Zealand is one of the most advanced among developed countries. Though closely linked to the national conditions, it is still worth valuing and useful experience can be drawn on to enhance the quality assurance system of higher education in China.

## **5.1 Strengths of the New Zealand System**

With the development of international political, economic and cultural exchanges, there has been an urgent need for versatile, qualified, and talented people across the world. In order to offer high quality education and training for both domestic and international learners, and to maintain the global reputation of its higher education, the New Zealand government has taken relative measures to develop the quality assurance system of higher education. The combination of internal and external quality assurance is not only a reflection of the respect for the autonomy of higher institutions, but also a guarantee that the institutions themselves can pay much attention to self-assessment and ensure the effectiveness and advancement of their internal quality assurance under the review of external quality assurance agencies (Cha 2006: 28).

### **5.1.1 Combination of Internal and External Quality Assurance**

It is required that both the higher institutions themselves and the external agencies should ensure the quality of higher education. Such a system seems complex and high-cost but will surely spur institutions to maintain and enhance their education quality under national laws, policies, and standards.

One of the most important characteristics of higher education institutions in New Zealand is that they are highly independent and autonomous. The external quality assurance system is based on the internal self-assessment to ensure that the external review is fair, justified and open enough. Meanwhile, the self-assessment involves a considerable staff as well as students, so there is a high awareness of quality assurance within the institutions. As a result, the staff will devote themselves to the continuous improvement of their teaching or serving performance. There is no doubt that the internal self-assessment is always regarded as the most valuable part of the whole quality assurance system (Liu 2009: 125).

### **5.1.2 Multi-engagement in the Quality Assurance Process**

As the higher education system is complicated, the interests of individuals, the government and the society are all related to the outcomes of the higher education sector. As a result, in the quality assurance system of higher education in New Zealand, not only the institutions themselves, but also the government and the society are involved in the assessment and review of quality assurance. For universities, NZVCC, as well as its two delegations CUAP and NZUAAU, is responsible for their quality; for non-university higher education institutions, NZQA is responsible for their quality. Though the boards of NZVCC and NZQA are appointed by the Minister of Education, they are independent agencies and are recognized by the government to be authoritative. Thus, under the leadership of the Minister of Education, NZVCC and NZQA act as 'intermediaries' in quality assurance. Besides, members of audit panels including experts and academics from various industries are involved to ensure that the education and training offered can meet the demands of market.

### **5.1.3 Relevant Legislation on Quality Assurance**

Governments around the world have paid much attention to the quality assurance for the recent expansion of higher education. Nevertheless, the direct involvement of the government in quality assurance will damage the independence and autonomy of higher institutions, and may make the process bureaucratic. Consequently, the government of New Zealand plays an indirect role in the quality assurance system, and enacts laws and regulations to manage the whole system.

The Education Act 1989 and its successive amendment acts stipulate the objective, structure, agencies and procedure etc., of the quality assurance system, and the statutory roles of NZVCC and NZQA in the



process of quality assurance. Relevant documentation includes Tertiary Education Strategy 2014-2019 and Tertiary Education in New Zealand: Policy Directions for the 21st Century. Authorities like NZVCC and NZQA have also published documents or handbooks to define explicitly the framework of academic audits, the process of external evaluation and review, and the suggested self-assessment procedures etc.

#### **5.1.4 Highly International Standards of Quality Assurance**

The trend of education export and exchange requires that the education and qualifications offered by New Zealand institutions be recognized by other governments, and that the quality assurance agency conduct international cooperation to improve its own education quality. The guidelines of the quality assurance in New Zealand are related to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area and based on the UNESCO-OECD Guidelines. In 2007, New Zealand was involved in Lisbon Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education, one of the best qualification evaluation systems in the world. This means that the higher education in New Zealand is of high quality, and that the qualifications of New Zealand's higher institutions can be recognized worldwide.

Nowadays, education has been an industry in New Zealand and NZQA has also functioned to ensure the quality of export education. NZQA ensures that the providers achieve equivalence between their domestic and off-shore operations in relation to outcomes, student experience and standards of delivery. The students' expectations must be met regardless of delivery mode or whether or not the delivery is off-shore.

#### **5.2 Weaknesses of the Chinese System**

The higher education system in China has undergone reform since the 1990s. It ensures the basic quality of higher education, though China still suffers from problems like limited education resources, imperfect legal system and little awareness of quality assurance. In 1985, Higher Engineering Education Evaluation started up as a trial. In 1990, "Draft Regulation of Higher Education Institution Evaluation" was issued by the then State Ministry Commission, which was the first regulation on higher education evaluation. Since then, China has done better in assuring the quality of higher education. It is worth mentioning that the establishments of China Academic Degrees and Graduate Education Development Center (CDGDC) in 2003 and the Higher Education Evaluation Center (HEEC) of the Ministry of Education mark a new stage for the development of a systematic and professional quality assurance system of higher education in China. However, with the popularization of higher education and the development of the market economy, problems still exist in the current system (Guo & Tian 2011: 25).

##### **5.2.1 Single Quality Assurance Engagement**

The regulatory and management responsibilities are shouldered by one central organization, i.e., the Ministry of Education (MoE), which is also allowed to monitor and audit the quality of higher education institutions. Though a non-governmental organization, the National Evaluation Institute for Degree Granting Education (NEIDGE) was founded in 1994 to pioneer in the procedure of external assessment, reservations were expressed by higher education institutions and the public concerning the viability of the third-party institution. However, with the development of market economy, non-governmental colleges and universities have been set up to provide a diverse range of higher education professional trainings. International education providers, including sino-foreign cooperative schools have also sprung up in China, especially in the developed coastal regions. As a result, the single role of MoE in assuring quality

cannot meet the new demands from various stakeholders. Instead, it will further reduce the fairness, objectivity and openness of quality evaluation.

Meanwhile, acting as the single agency conducting the work of quality assurance of more than 2000 institutions in China, MoE lacks time and adequate facilities to function effectively and efficiently. It is hard to guarantee that the conclusions are scientific enough.

### **5.2.2 Ineffective Internal Quality Assurance**

The internal self-evaluation is widely recognized as the most effective component of quality assurance because it is only the awareness and improvement of institutions themselves that will enhance the quality ultimately. In China, however, though self-assessment is formally included in the quality assurance process, internal evaluation is subject to external evaluation because many powers are centralized to MoE, such as choosing the theme of evaluation, and designing and preparing for the evaluation activities. As a result, the self-assessment of higher institutions is mainly under the orders from higher authorities. Thus, the individualism and unique characteristics of various higher institutions will be neglected and good practices like innovation in management system will not be valued and encouraged by the public (Qian 2011: 60).

Too much emphasis on the external quality assurance makes higher institutions lack the internal motivation to assess themselves and fundamentally improve the quality of courses or service they offer. In the long term, there will be little advancement in higher education quality.

### **5.2.3 Limited Quality Assurance Standards**

With regard to the contents of quality assurance in China, key concerns are still related to the quality of teaching, major infrastructure facilities like instructional equipment, libraries and laboratories, and the qualification of teachers. However, such ‘software’ as intellectual capital, innovation capital and motivation is rarely valued by current higher education institutions and the government. Besides, little has been considered about students’ critical thinking and problem-solving abilities, which are basic goals of higher education in the West.

Actually, nowadays an increasing number of people in China have had access to higher education and there has been a great demand for better quality. Universities act as a provider of qualified and talented people to meet the demand of the highly competitive labor market. As a result, such ‘soft power’ as communication skills and creativity will have an indirect but profound impact on the contributions one person can make to his/her employer or the community, which means that academic performance is not the only standard to evaluate an institution’s education quality. Good academic performance is certainly important and will certainly increase the employment rate of graduates, but people who have nothing impressive but high grades will be isolated by the society in the long run.

### **5.2.4 Inappropriate Financial Investment**

Similar to New Zealand, the Chinese government remains the greatest fund provider for higher education institutions. However, in order to ensure that each student has access to education resources, the amount of funds is related to the enrollment number of students. This will offer people with more opportunities to receive higher education as all the institutions are trying to admit more students for more educational funds. The disproportional increase of students enrolled, and educational resources which are still in short supply to institutions in those less- or under-developed inland provinces and regions, will hurt the quality of these higher education institutions as some of them lack the capacity, both in terms of educational

facilities and teaching staff, to ensure that every student can get high quality education facilitating their future careers or at least deserving the tuition fees.

## **6. Implications for Chinese Higher Education Quality Assurance System**

The quality assurance system of higher education in China nowadays has developed for a demand to satisfy the competitiveness from the labor market and an increasing awareness to maintain the internationalization of Chinese higher education. However, as indicated above, Chinese quality assurance system still suffers from problems and challenges that directly or indirectly hurt the quality of higher education offered. Actually, it is high time to think about what quality of higher education means, how it can be assessed and evaluated and who should be involved in the whole process. It does not mean that China should duplicate the New Zealand model without any adaptation. Rather, China ought to draw lessons from the good practices of New Zealand, and make relevant changes according to the current Chinese conditions.

### **6.1 Diversifying the Standards and Guidelines of Quality Assurance**

Higher education achievement does not stand alone. It will further assist the community people as well as individuals to fulfill their potentials. The government of New Zealand has always focused on the education outcomes economically and socially. It is expected that higher education will contribute to growth through labor productivity, effective public services, and provides opportunities for all. As for social outcomes, it is hoped that the knowledge and skills acquired by higher education will promote social cohesion and democratic values and support all New Zealanders from all backgrounds to live in a prosperous, safe, and equal society (Ministry of Education 2014).

As a result, the quality of higher education cannot be restricted to teaching or academic performance, which is quite common in China now. It is recognized that one of the goals of education in China is to cultivate well-rounded qualified talents in terms of moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetics and labor development. It further means that the quality evaluation standards should be diverse enough to expand to those 'soft power' such as innovation skills, critical-thinking skills and problem-solving skills. Policy makers should realize that the roles of higher education institutions are not limited to fostering how many people with high degrees, but are also to enable graduates with corresponding qualifications to make contributions to the community, to cooperate and collaborate with teams, and to live a better-off, healthier and happier life. Therefore, to higher education institutions, especially institutes of technology and polytechnics, standards regarding quality assurance should not only consider academic and research performance, but also put emphasis on students' application skills and emotional intellectuality.

### **6.2 Authorizing Third-party Engagement in the External Quality Assurance**

In New Zealand, it is the independent agencies that are responsible for the external quality of higher education institutions. Though they are still funded by the government, the Education Act has stipulated their independence clearly, which means that the government cannot have direct influence on the planning, implementation, analysis and reporting of quality assurance. While in China, though relevant agencies, CDGDC and HEEC, have been established to undertake the task of evaluating and appraising the academic degrees and graduate education, and evaluating the teaching quality of higher education institutions, they are directly governed by MoE. Consequently, in order to ensure that the conclusions of quality assurance are fair, justified and open to the public, it is high time to establish and authorize a nationally-independent and autonomous agency under relevant laws and regulations (Wu, Chen & Wang

2014: 26).

Meanwhile, social unit or organizations should be encouraged to monitor and audit the higher education authority. For instance, in the UK, The World University Rankings are powered by the news agency Thomson Reuters to judge world class universities across all of their core missions-teaching, research, knowledge transfer and international outlook. Its data and indicators help governments around the world to analyze the relationship between the excellent performance of higher institutions and policies in a critical way.

It is not recommended that Chinese news agencies must undertake such comprehensive research and there is still doubt about the credibility of such evaluations, but it has been clear that the social involvement, which is conducted by professional academics and indicators, can also provide further, detailed information for both the government to adapt its policies, and higher institutions to improve their quality. Besides, it can also increase public awareness and spur higher institutions to ensure their education quality of their own free will.

### **6.3 Undertaking Effective Internal Quality Assurance**

The quality assurance system should be as much institution-driven as agency-driven, which means that internal quality assurance procedures are an important element of quality assurance. Actually, internal quality assurance can not only provide the external agencies with information about the institutions, but also stimulate higher institutions to check whether their teaching outcomes are consistent with their education missions and goals, together with the demand of the labor market. What the government should do is to make sure that institutions should initiate the quality assurance process and that each institution should develop its documented quality management system about the goals, approaches, procedures, etc., of quality assurance. Meanwhile, self-assessment should be given top priority and be conducted without any pressure from the external environment. It should not just serve as a source of information for the external panels, but should act more as a spur to institutions to take responsibility for their quality improvement.

### **6.4 Encouraging More Student Evaluation**

It is noteworthy that the Self-review Portfolio is submitted to NZUAAU together with independent student report on the audit topics. The board of a university or the council of a polytechnic also includes student representatives. Besides, the external audit panels will interview students during site reviews. Such measures in New Zealand show full respect to education receivers, who are payers and will be influenced by the quality of education lifelong. In other words, quality assurance is not solely to serve the needs of the university administration but also about satisfying the needs of the students and communities. Though academics and experts can give rather scientific conclusions that the quality assessment and review, students' opinions and suggestions should be taken into consideration as they are part of 'stakeholders'. Some institutions' student evaluation is limited to rating professors' performance at the end of the semester (OECD 2003). This is clearly not sufficient and higher education institutions should emphasize on the roles of students in managing its quality. Changes can take place like involving student representatives in the self-review unit and inviting more students to anonymously evaluate his/her own education experience during the process of self-assessment.

### **6.5 Developing Higher Education Management Information System**

The making of policy and reform is based on an effective and efficient management information system,

and the higher education quality assurance is no exception. The data and feedback, such as enrollment quotas, employment rate and alumni feedback, can serve as a reference for policy-makers and decision-makers to review the existing rules and make any changes if necessary. There is an urgent need for MoE to improve and develop the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS). It can set standards for institutions to logging data and maintain the characteristics of different kinds of intuitions by adapting the standards in particular aspects (Wu, Chen & Wang 2014: 31). Meanwhile, such features of the data collected as relevant, timely, accurate, understandable and cost-effective should be considered to make sure that HEMIS can not only work highly effectively and efficiently, but also reduce financial burden on the government to collect data. All the statistics and analysis should be open to the public and shared by higher education institutions to help the external monitoring as well as the internal quality management.

### **6.6 Linking the Allocation of Appropriation with the Quality**

As indicated above, the allocation of financial support from the government is currently related to the enrollment number of students, which draws the institutions' attention of quality assurance to the expansion of student admittance. There is no doubt that investment according to the enrollment number will ensure that students can have access to more education resources, but there is less evidence that higher education institutions will use most of the financial support to maintain and increase its education quality. As a result, a link between the allocation of appropriation and the quality of institutions can stimulate institutions to put emphasis on the improvement of their education quality. Funds should favor institutions with higher education quality and significant, community-contributing projects and programs to stimulate healthy competitiveness among higher education institutions. This will also encourage institutions to assess and monitor the education quality purposefully, effectively and initiatively, and raise the awareness of institutions to be responsible for tax payers.

### **Conclusions**

This paper examines the quality assurance system of higher education in New Zealand. It outlines the background, and elaborates on the current implementation of the system both internally and externally. Based on a comparison of the quality assurance systems in New Zealand and China, the paper provides the following suggestions for China to improve its higher education quality assurance system: diversify the standards and guidelines of quality assurance; authorize third-party engagement in the external quality assurance; undertake effective internal quality assurance; encourage more student evaluation; develop the higher education management information system; and link the allocation of appropriation with quality.

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