A STUDY OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN CHINESE HIGHER EDUCATION: REFLECTING STUDENT LEARNING?

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A STUDY OF
QUALITY ASSURANCE IN CHINESE HIGHER EDUCATION:
REFLECTING STUDENT LEARNING?

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The University of Manchester
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2011

ABSTRACT
Chinese higher education (HE) has been through a process of profound restructuring, decentralisation, introduction of market incentives, university mergers, internationalisation, and enlarging student enrolment in the past two decades. Along with the expansion of Chinese HE, the issue of quality has become a concern and has attracted a lot of attention in the Chinese HE sector. Developing quality assurance (QA) systems has been given priority in the agenda of most Chinese higher education institutions (HEIs). The nationwide implementation of quality evaluation since 2002 is the main means used by the Chinese government to address the potential quality decline and to realise a macro level control of quality over Chinese HEIs. This study is conducted against the background of the prevailing quality culture, and focuses on student learning rather than the widely adopted top-down scrutiny of teaching as the main component of QA schemes. The purpose of this study is to explore how student learning experiences can be integrated into the QA systems in Chinese HEIs for continuous quality improvement. A qualitative case study approach is adopted in this study. Document analysis, focus groups, and in-depth interviews are used to achieve a comprehensive qualitative inquiry into student learning experiences, HEIs’ QA practice, and the integration of student learning experiences into QA system. Through this study, we find that Chinese universities generally use regulations, teaching inspection/evaluation, and student feedback as the main approaches to manage their QA practice. There is great emphasis on the institutional management and teaching management, but little attention given to what students are actually doing. The analysis of the key issues in student learning experiences, the concept of quality learning, and the analysis of the objectives, control, areas, procedures and uses in the current Chinese QA systems suggest a discrepancy between student quality learning and what the current Chinese QA assures. The findings of this study imply that the current top-down QA has great limitations in addressing key issues in student learning and accordingly plays a limited role in generating educational quality. As the conclusion of this study, a learning-focused QA is proposed to offer insights into integrating student learning generically into the QA process for the purpose of the continuous improvement of HE quality.
DECLARATION

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support for an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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Introduction

Research Overview

Over the last two decades the landscape of Chinese HE has changed greatly through a process of profound restructuring, decentralisation, introduction of market incentives, university mergers, internationalisation, and enlarging student enrolment. The HE sector in China has expanded and become more differentiated, especially vertically through reputational differences, and also funding differentiation. Most universities have expanded their campus or moved to a new campus and have shifted to a more market-led culture. The student body has become more diverse with the greatly and rapidly increased numbers, which means students enter HE with different entry levels and for a greater variety of purposes. Universities compete strongly for their teaching and research funding, and are expected to be more accountable for the funds they receive and tuition fees they charge, and to be more relevant to the economic and social needs of the nation. Along with the expansion of Chinese HE, the issue of quality has become a concern and has attracted a lot of attention in the Chinese HE sector. Developing QA schemes has been given priority in the agenda of most Chinese HEIs. The nationwide implementation of HE quality evaluation since 2002 is the main means used by the Chinese government to address the potential quality decline and to realise a macro level control over Chinese HEIs.

The exploration of ‘quality’ in HE has been dominated by compliance with external agencies’ definition of ‘quality’ as – assurance, accountability, audit and assessment (Houston, 2008). Compliance with any definition imposed from outside the university largely ignores the views of academics, students and others inside who are positioned as the affected but not involved (Ulrich, 2001). At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, after almost one decade of exploration of promoting Chinese HE quality in a top-down pattern with national quality evaluation as the main leverage, there is little evidence to say the quality
of Chinese HE has been improved. Therefore, it is necessary to make an in-depth investigation into fundamental issues in Chinese HE quality from a new angle with student learning and development as the core.

This study is conducted against the background of the prevailing quality culture with top-down scrutiny of teaching as the main component of QA systems. The purpose of this study is to explore how student learning experiences can be integrated into the QA system at Chinese HEIs in order to achieve continuous quality improvement. The main research questions of this study are:

1) What are the Chinese universities’ approaches to QA? How are student learning experiences used in the current quality assurance system?
2) How do students and staff perceive HE quality, the current QA system and student learning experiences?
3) How to integrate student learning experiences into the QA system for continuous quality improvement at Chinese HEIs?

A qualitative case study approach is adopted in this study. Document analysis, focus groups, and in-depth interviews have been used to achieve a comprehensive qualitative inquiry into student learning experiences, Chinese HEIs’ QA practice, and an exploration of how to integrate student learning experiences into the QA system.

This study began by looking at quality assurance and the earliest literature review was related to the substantive issues in quality assurance systems. Interestingly and unexpectedly, the whole research journey has led me to the question of the whole understanding of quality in Chinese HE and what this means for the future university system. After a thorough analysis of student learning, quality in the view of key stakeholders, and the current QA systems in Chinese HE, it appears that QA does not ensure HE quality and that what really matters for Chinese HEIs is to provide students with a balanced education. The QA documents in this study present an overview of the current Chinese QA structure, which is composed of systematic measurements of what can be measured. In contrast with the number-led QA system, the data collected from students and staff give a richer picture of student learning, which also exposes the problems and challenges in the current QA system. Aligning them together, there is a discrepancy between the QA systems and students’ actual learning. This may serve as an explanation of why there is little sign of any improvement in student learning, despite all the effort and investment in installing and developing QA systems in Chinese HE. At the end of the research, it seems QA
systems become less important than reforming the current teaching-centred Chinese HE system. The purpose of HEIs is not different from what students want to get from HE. All are seeking a balanced education. A meaningful QA system should serve this end more constructively and ensure a balanced education experience is provided to students. As the conclusion of this study, a learning-focused QA is proposed to offer insights into generically integrating student learning into the QA process for the purpose of a continuous improvement in Chinese HE quality.

The careful reader will notice that there is a shift in emphasis between the literature review and the way the data is reported and discussed. This reflects the shift in my own understanding and interest over the period of my PhD research. I set out by looking into QA from the view of the administrator that good quality assurance was about better system and better implementation. Sadly my review of the available literature did not support this view. Indeed when I began to collect the data, I found that the real problems may not be in the implementation of the system but in the assumptions which drive the system. Nevertheless, below I will give the overview of chapters.

**Chapter Overview**

In Chapter 1, the literature on quality and QA is reviewed. The literature review is organised in two parts, the Western theories on quality and QA, and a systematic review of the 491 published papers on Chinese QA in the seven selected Chinese academic journals. The review of the Western literature on HE quality and QA provides a theoretical basis for this study. The review of the Chinese literature helps to identify the gaps in the QA theories and practice in the Chinese HE context, which is what this study tries to explore and fill.

Chapter 2 reports the research methodology of this study in detail, by delimiting the research focus and research questions, research design, data collection and analysis process, and ethical issues related, and how the quality of this qualitative study has been assured.

Chapter 3 is a very lengthy description of the data used in this study. The data is presented in two parts: part 1 describes the data collected from students with the themes that emerged as the thread; part 2 is the staff data describing their perspectives on quality, QA, quality improvement, students, and teaching. The data presented in this chapter give a rich picture of student learning and help to
structure the analysis and discussion. Looking into the data in detail, it is clear that the quality of learning experience available needs to be analysed and discussed before coming to the discussion of quality and QA, the focus of this study.

Chapter 4 analyses the key issues identified in student learning experiences, including student characteristics perceived by their teachers, student expectations of HE, their learning motivation, activities, approaches and engagement. In the analysis of student quality learning, I also identified the key factors influencing student learning quality, including curriculum, teaching, assessment methods, interaction between teachers and students, students’ ownership of their learning, and student learning approaches.

Chapter 5 looks at how quality and QA have been perceived by teachers and students, and examines the structure of the current Chinese QA and its objectives, control, areas, procedures, and uses. In this chapter, we see more clearly the discrepancy between student learning and what the current QA assures. The in-depth analysis in this chapter set up a good foundation for the discussion of how to incorporate student learning into QA and how to make sure the direct factors influencing student learning quality are managed in a meaningful way so that continuous quality improvement becomes realisable.

In the concluding Chapter 6, a learning-focused QA is proposed, to address the problems and discrepancies observed in QA and student learning. In this chapter, I also draw out some implications for Chinese HEIs, teachers, QA policy makers and administrators on the understanding that reforming the current teaching-centred Chinese HE system is as important as using the right QA systems. At the same time, the limitations of this study and some recommended further research are also put forward.
Chapter 1: Literature Review

1.1 Quality theories

The concept of ‘quality’ has been contemplated throughout history and continues to be a topic of intense interest today (Reeve & Bednar, 1994). As is well known, the term quality and QA was put forward by Joseph Juran and William Edwards Deming. Both Juran and Deming contributed to the efficient reconstruction of the Japanese industrial and commercial sectors after the Second World War. Deming is credited with training hundreds of key professionals for controlling quality in manufacturing processes. At the same time Juran was very active in delivering courses on aspects of quality management. Their ideas were taken up in the US and other countries in the second half of the last century. In industry throughout the twentieth century, the concern for quality and the development of quality management arose from within. Individual companies and people within quality management identified the need to do right things right as a working definition of quality (Jacques, 1999). In the industrial/business environment there is substantial agreement on core aspects of the definition of quality. User-based definitions of quality have gained pre-eminence: customers define quality in relation to their expectations and value in a market transaction.

A concern about quality and standards is not new in HE. Since the mid-1980s, the concept of quality has increasingly influenced discussion around the globe about the role and future of HEIs and the academics that constitute those institutions (Watty, 2003). Quality has become a universalizing metanarrative (Morley, 2003). Quality and QA issues in HE have risen to prominence both nationally and internationally (Dunkerley & Wong, 2001, p 3). Quality parades as a universal truth and continually extends its domain (Morley, 2003). The concern for quality is articulated by university managers themselves, by external agencies deliberately established to assess and reward quality and, increasingly, by the ‘clients’ of HE – the students, the employers and, importantly, the state (Dunkerley & Wong, 2001). Despite the prevailing use of the concepts and
models of ‘quality’, many researchers believe that the language and tools of industry-born quality models are an imperfect fit to HE (Houston, 2008) and the concept of customer-defined quality is problematic (Eagle & Brennan, 2007; Houston 2007; Meirovich & Romar, 2006).

Quality had by tradition been seen as an implicit and natural element of university-level learning and research and an integrated part of academics’ professional responsibilities. This changed in the 1990s, with a requirement that HEIs should demonstrate, through their institutional leaders and expressed in comparable measures, the quality of their activities (Harvey & Askling, 2003). There is substantial agreement that the quality imperative in HE was based on pressure from the market and from governments to adapt to an external political agenda (Dill, 2000; Harvey, 1998; Salter & Tapper, 2000). Brooks and Becket (2007) point out that the introduction of the quality imperative in HE is mainly an externally driven process related to increased demand for accountability and efficiency in the sector.

1.1.1 The idea of HE and quality

The concept of quality is not always made explicitly, though it is used so often by so many people inside and outside HE. ‘Quality’ is a highly contested concept, which has multiple meanings for people from different tracks of HE. Barnett (1992) argues that there is a logical connection between concepts of HE and different approaches to quality. In his opinion, what we mean by, and intend by, ‘quality’ in the context of HE is bound up with our values and fundamental aims in HE. We cannot adopt a definite approach toward quality in this sphere of human interaction without taking up a normative position, connected with what we take HE ultimately to be. In turn, what we take HE to be will have implications for how we conceive of quality, how we attain it, how we evaluate our success in achieving it, and how we improve it. So if we want to offer a particular view on quality we should be prepared to declare where we stand on the key purpose of HE (Barnett, 1992). He categorises concepts of HE into two groups:

**Group 1:**

Four dominant concepts of HE underlie contemporary approaches to, and definitions of, quality: 1) HE as the production of qualified manpower; 2) HE as training for a research career; 3) HE as the efficient management of teaching provision; 4) HE as a matter of extending life chances. This group of concepts
reflects the thinking about HE of the national policy makers, funders and institutional managers, and other national interest groups. These concepts are external to the process of HE, but are driving national debate and development work in quality assessment and are informed by a systematic approach to education (Barnett, 1992).

If HE is perceived as a process of filling particular slots in the labour market with individuals who are going to be ‘productive’, then one way of assessing quality might be to examine the destinations of the students. The question is not just whether they are employed, but whether they are employed in the kinds of position envisaged by the course designers. Under this conception, students take on value as, and are described in the vocabulary of, ‘products’ of the system (Barnett, 1992).

**Group 2:**

This group of concepts is concerned with the students’ development, or the educational process to which students are exposed. Such concepts include HE seen as: 1) the development of the individual student’s autonomy, with students acquiring intellectual integrity and the capacity to be their own person; 2) HE as the formation of general intellectual abilities and perspectives; 3) the enhancement of the individual student’s personal character; 4) the developing of competence to participate in a critical commentary on the host society. The concern of this group of concepts is with the educational process that students undergo, not with inputs and outputs and their relationship. This group is not obviously reflected in contemporary debate over QA in HE. It contains ideas about HE that do not lend themselves to institutional practice easily captured by system-wide and systematic evaluation procedures such as numerical performance indicators. But their not fitting the standard model of performance assessment does not affect the validity of such conceptions of HE (Barnett, 1992).

As Barnett (1992) points out, if we believe that the quality of HE is more demonstrated in the nature of the intellectual development that takes place in students’ minds, in the depth and breadth of understanding that students achieve, in their ability to be self-critical, and in their capacity to apply that understanding and self-critical capacity to all they experience and do, then ‘quality’ of HE takes on a quite different character. Under this conception of HE, the appraisal of quality will not rest content with economic indicators of output, but will turn to exploring the educational process within our institutions. Since
there is a logical connection between the development of a worthwhile state of mind and the experiences and educational processes to which students are exposed in their course, a conception of HE of this kind will prompt an examination of the types of intellectual challenge presented to students: and that in turn will begin to produce an illumination of the internal life of our institutions.

1.1.2 Defining quality

Many authors have been engaged in defining of quality. Garvin (1984) discerned five approaches: the transcendental approach; the product-oriented approach; the customer oriented approach; the manufacturing-oriented approach; and the value-for-money approach. In the transcendental approach quality is absolute and can be objectively judged. But what is quality of education? There is probably no ready answer to that question. One of the most cited articles on quality in HE was written by Harvey and Green (1993) under the title 'Defining quality'. The structure for defining quality they developed has been widely adopted in analyses of the concept of quality. Their structure focused on the impact of different conceptions of quality from various stakeholder groups as influencing standards and assessments of quality, and the importance of understanding these different conceptions to assist in understanding their preferences in relation to quality issues. Harvey and Green contend that 'this is not a different perspective on the same things but different perspectives on different things with the same label' (Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 10). In their deconstruction of the concept of quality, they identify five forms of quality: exceptional, perfection, fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation.

Quality as exceptional

This is the traditional notion of quality that equates it to excellence (Harvey & Knight, 1996). Quality is equal to special. Just as a Rolls Royce is considered to be a 'quality car' because of its high standard of parts and construction, HEIs can also be viewed in this way. There are three variations of quality as exceptional: first, the traditional notion of quality as distinctive; second, a view of quality as embodied in excellence; and third, a weaker notion of exceptional quality, as passing a set of required standards (Harvey & Green, 1993). This definition sets a goal for universities and academic communities to be always the best; to belong to the elite and achieve better outcomes than the others. This
definition is very often keenly observed and stressed by educationalists and politicians when the quality of education is under discussion. This particular definition does not set standards for quality measurement, nor does it define exactly what is meant by quality. Quality is inevitable and irrefutable; a person recognizes quality instinctively (Harvey, Green, 1993).

**Quality as perfection**

This approach to quality sees quality in terms of consistency. It focuses on process and sets specifications that it aims to meet perfectly (Harvey & Green, 1993). It emphasises quality as a consistently flawless outcome or perfection. In some ways this definition ‘democratizes’ the concept of quality, and if consistency is achievable then anyone can achieve quality (Parri, 2006). This definition is easily applicable in industry, because there are detailed standards set for the product or outcome. However, when it comes to university graduates, it would be impossible to define what a flawless graduate should be. Furthermore, the aim of HE is not to produce identical graduates. Although this particular approach is too idealistic for HE, it still fosters the development of the learning environment to enhance quality (Parri, 2006).

**Quality as fitness for purpose**

Quality is judged in terms of the extent to which the product or service fits its purpose. Fitness for purpose requires that the product or service fulfils a customer’s needs, requirements or desires. This notion is quite remote from the idea of quality as something special, distinctive, elitist, conferring status or difficult to attain. It is a functional definition of quality rather than an exceptional one (Harvey & Green, 1993). This is the definition used most frequently regarding HE. HE goals are articulated at a more precise academic level through a particular programme’s aims and learning outcomes (Lomas, 2002). This definition enables the institutions to define goals in the mission statements: the quality is presented and assessed through mission statement and goal achievement. This definition takes into consideration the differences of institutions instead of making them artificially resemble each other. Fitness for purpose offers two alternative priorities for specifying the purpose. The first puts the onus on the customer; the second locates it on the provider (Harvey & Green, 1993).

Both definitions assume the concept and goals of HE are firstly to be defined. The problem with any fitness for purpose definition of quality in HE is that it is
difficult to be clear what the purposes of HE should be. Different stakeholders in HE may have different views about the purpose of HE. Fitness for the customer's purpose identifies quality in terms of the extent to which a product or service meets the specifications of the customer. However, defining quality in HE as meeting customers' needs does not necessarily imply that the customer is always best placed to determine what quality is or whether it is present. Students are not always able to specify what is required (Elton, 1992).

As pointed out by Westerheijden (1997), the pitfall of this definition of quality is that it is a goal compliance approach. It seems that in HE everything goes as long as the proper goal is reached. A risk of using this definition is that focusing on measuring goal compliance may be misleading and make us ignore whether the goal is relevant and proper in the first place. The goals of a HE institution can be presented on a general level in the mission statement or a more concrete academic level in the programme objectives and expected learning outcomes. Very often, the quality of teaching is linked to the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching: effectiveness is connected with the objectives of the course, whereas efficiency is connected with the resources used in order to meet the objectives. When the moral and intellectual development of students and expansion of self-realisation opportunities are considered to be of the utmost importance in HE, then the focus in quality measurement will be through analysis of the study process. Although straightforward in conception, ‘fitness for purpose’ is deceptive as it raises the issue of whose purpose and how fitness is assessed. This definition leaves open the question of who should define quality in HE and how it should be assessed.

**Quality as value for money**

A populist notion of quality equates it with value, especially value for money (Harvey & Green, 1993). At the heart of the value-for-money approach is the notion of accountability. Public services are expected to be accountable to the funders and to the ‘customers’. Universities are expected to be responsible to funders and students. Accountability in terms of assuring value for money is generally to the government. For the parts where there is self-funding, accountability is directly to the students.

Quality can be assessed in terms of return on investment or expenditure. Randall (2001) believes that the parents of current and prospective HE students will expect value for money to be demonstrated clearly. Thorne and Cuthbert (1996) consider that the notion of value for money in the HE sector is far more
complex because HE requires the customers to supply a high level of motivation and commitment, in addition to money, in order to achieve a particular award and personal and intellectual growth.

The essence of this approach lies in the responsibility aspect of QA. Effectiveness is seen in terms of control mechanisms (quality audit), quantifiable outcomes (performance indicators), observational ratings of teaching and research assessment exercises. There is an implicit assumption that the market will take care of quality in the long run and that institutions can be left to ensure the quality of what they provide (Harvey & Green, 1993).

**Quality as transformation**

Harvey and Green’s (1993) transformative view of quality is rooted in the notion of ‘qualitative change’, a fundamental change of form. In educational terms, transformation refers to the enhancement and empowerment of students or the development of new knowledge (Harvey & Knight, 1996). This notion of quality as transformative raises issues about the relevance of a product-centred notion of quality. Unlike many other services where the provider is doing something for the consumer, in the education of students the provider is doing something to the consumer. Education is not a service for a customer but an ongoing process of transformation of the participant. Quality as transformation does not lend itself to the atomisation of clearly stated purpose because the achievement of knowledge and the satisfaction of the mind are holistic (Harvey & Knight, 1996).

Harvey & Green (1993) describe how transformation in HE could be compared with how water transforms into ice. This approach stresses that a university should bring about positive changes in students, both in the cognitive and non-cognitive dimension. The most outstanding institutions are those that have the biggest impact on the knowledge and personal development of students (Tam, 2001). The students are the focus of attention – the better the university, the better it can meet the goals that include equipping the students with special skills, knowledge and attitudes that enable them to work and live in the society of knowledge (Westerheijden, Kristoffersen & Sursoc, 1998; cited in Parri, 2006).

Among Harvey and Green’s (1993) five forms of quality, Watty (2003) suggests that the dimension of quality as perfection can be removed, since HE does not aim to produce defect-free graduates. Lomas (2002) used four of Harvey and Green’s (1993) five definitions of quality as an analytical framework to examine
whether the expansion of HE is bringing about the end of quality. He suggests that fitness for purpose and transformation seem to be the two most appropriate definitions of quality.

**Quality as standards**

Quality is sometimes defined as standards along the lines that standards refer to levels of achievement against which performance can be assessed. Such a definition implies that standards are measurable. Standards help to rationalise the definition of quality, and make it more objective (Parri, 2006). The American Society for Quality defines standards as: ‘The metric, specification, gauge, statement, category, segment, grouping, behaviour, event or physical product sample against which the outputs of a process are compared and declared acceptable or unacceptable’. Standards are specified and usually measurable outcome indicators. When specific standards and norms are defined, a threshold is set for institutions to cross in order to certify that the instruction meets the quality standards.

On the face of it, the concept of standards is more straightforward than that of quality. The weakness of this approach is that standards are difficult to apply under rapidly changing circumstances. When the reality changes more quickly than the standards, standards outdate and become an obstacle to sustaining quality. Many countries apply minimum standards that ensure a level of quality below which no institution offering HE should go. Minimum standards are often briefly defined: only a general definition of the expected knowledge, skills and attitudes of graduates is provided. These ensure the particular minimum quality of HE and curricula comparability. At the same time it is assumed that all university units or curricula exceed minimum standards, adding goals and increasing quality through meeting these goals (Westerheijden et al., 1998; cited in Parri, 2006).

Van Kemenade, Pupius and Hardjono (2008) discern that a new definition of quality is needed to explain recent quality issues in HE. They describe a quality concept with four constituents: object, standard, subject and values. They also suggest four new value systems on quality and quality management: process control, continuous improvement, commitment and breakthrough. They claim that these value systems make it possible to explain some recent developments in quality management in HE, for example, the lack of acceptance of external evaluation systems in HE by academia might be connected with too much control and too little improvement, let alone commitment. In their view, the
breakthrough. As Hardjono (1995) suggests, the strategic choice of an organisation should be on the balance between outside and inside orientation on the one hand and between an orientation based on control and change on the other.

Tam (2001) suggests that ‘quality’ is a highly contested concept and has multiple meanings linked to how HE is perceived. She identifies the relevance of conceptions of HE and quality to the measurement of performance of universities and colleges. She points out three models of measuring quality: the simple ‘production model’ which depicts a direct relationship between inputs and outputs; the ‘value-added approach’ which measures the gain by students before and after they receive HE; and the ‘total quality experience approach’ which aims to capture the entire learning experience undergone by students during their years in universities.

From a political point of view, Harvey and Askling (2003) points out that quality has been used as a vehicle for delivering policy requirements within available resources. On the one hand, it operates as a mechanism to encourage change, but it also operates to legitimise policy-driven change, which includes making HE more relevant to social and economic needs, widening access, expanding numbers and usually doing it with a decreasing unit cost.

1. 2 QA theories

1.2.1 Defining QA

There are many definitions of ‘quality assurance’ in the literature (e.g. Ball, 1985; Birnbanum, 1994; Frazer, 1992; van Vugh and Westerheijden, 1993; Woodhouse, 1999). The term ‘quality assurance’ refers to “systematic, structured and continuous attention to quality in terms of quality maintenance and improvement” (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). Girdwood (1997) defines the term ‘quality assurance’ as the policies, systems, and processes designed to ensure the maintenance and enhancement of quality within a programme or institution. QA is about ensuring accountability, which gives assurance that it is good quality. For Lewis, Ikeda, and Dundar (2001), accountability is defined as demonstrating the worth and use of public resources. Campbell and Rozsnyai
(2002) define accountability as the assurance of a unit to its stakeholders that it provides education of good quality.

Harman (1998) suggests that in essence, QA refers to the systematic management and assessment procedures adopted to ensure achievement of specified quality or of improved quality, and to enable key stakeholders to have confidence in the management of quality and the outcomes achieved. QA may in other words be seen in the context of the regulation of HE.

QA is not new. It was originally an integral part of craftsmanship and professionalism (Morley, 2003). Before the quality imperative prevailed globally, the concern for quality and development of quality management arose within HEIs. Teachers and administrators within universities and colleges identified what was right for them to teach and made sure it was taught in the accepted way. In the past two decades, the quality imperative in HE has come from the market and from government (Houston, 2008). More recently, it has been disaggregated from the professions, and formalised and transformed into an object of inquiry (Hart, 1997).

The changes, as analysed by Harvey and Askling (2003), occurred for both pragmatic and ideological reasons. In his view, quality had by tradition been seen as an implicit and natural element of university-level learning and research and an integrated part of academics’ professional responsibilities. In the 1990s, universities were required to demonstrate the quality of their activities. Universities were used to seeing excellence or transformation as the self-evident key indicator of HE quality, but now a self-evident property of HE became transformed into a mechanism of control.

Systematic procedures for QA and improvement through formal evaluation have been in place in Western Europe since the mid 1980s (Bornmann, Mittag & Daniel, 2006). QA is slowly but steadily becoming an integrated part of HE (Stensaker, 2008). QA is by no means a new idea in HE. For many years, most major HE systems have had in place various mechanisms of review and assessment. What is new, however, apart from the language, is a more systematic and far-reaching approach to ensuring that institutions and systems have in place mechanisms for review and assessment, and for renewal and improvement (Harman, 1998). Compared to past approaches, the new mechanisms also put much more emphasis on external scrutiny, seeking the views of employers and graduates and, in various ways, making the results of
assessments more widely available (Harman, 1998). Stensaker (2008) summarises this process as:

- in the beginning emphasis was given to design issues and the relationship between QA systems and the governance of HE (Neave, 1988);
- there was a period with greater interest given to methodological issues;
- much attention was drawn to the human factors (Vroeijenstijn, 1995; Neave, 1996)
- interest in quality stimulated by leadership and the ways to stimulate staff and student involvement and ownership (Brennan & Shah, 2000)
- more and more governments and QA agencies, and HEIs, are held accountable for the impact and outcomes of all this (Stensaker, 2003, 2008; Westerheijden, Hulpiau & Waeytens, 2006)
- currently, HE is entering an era in which a more nuanced understanding of what QA and quality processes can or cannot do prevails (Stensaker, 2008).

1.2.2 The rationale of QA

Harvey and Askling (2003) argue that from the start quality has been used as a vehicle for delivering policy requirements within available resources. QA operates as a mechanism to encourage policy driven change. It makes HE more relevant to social and economic needs, widening access, expanding numbers and doing it with a decreasing unit cost. The rationale for QA is often opaque (Harvey & Newton, 2007). QA has two underlying broad rationales: accountability and improvement. The perpetual debate about accountability and improvement is as old as QA in HE (Harvey & Newton, 2007).

Accountability

The term ‘accountability’ has been widely used in HE ever since the 1990s. Accountability relates to processes which assess whether minimum standards are in place in a HE institution or programme. Harvey & Newton (2007) identify accountability as a dominant rationale, but they argue that what exactly accountability is, or requires of the sector, and how that is related to the quality of HE is less clear. In their view, the often stated reason for the rise of accountability include the cost and potential problems of expansion, the concomitant need to account for increasing amounts of public money, the need
to ensure value for both private and public monies, lack of clear lines of accountability within HE systems, globalisation and the need to keep control of an increasingly unrestricted market (Harvey, 2002). Accountability is seen as a major purpose of external quality processes. Harvey (2002) suggests that accountability has five main functions:

1. To ensure that the institution or programme is accountable for the money it receives;
2. To ensure that the core principles and practices of HE are not being eroded;
3. To ensure that the programme is organised and run properly and that an appropriate educational experience is both promised and delivered;
4. To provide proper public information for funders to aid funding allocation decisions, and for prospective students and graduate recruiters to inform choice.
5. To ensure compliance with policy.

**Improvement**

Quality improvement focuses on developmental processes. Improvement potentially depends on the development of definitions and interventions that reflect the interests and concerns of those in the sector (Houston, 2008). Continuous improvement aims at continual increase of performance by emphasising learning and adaptation as keys to success of an organisation, which is also one of the core values of quality management (Deming, 1994; Evans and Lindsay, 2001). Harvey and Askling (2003) point out that improvement has been a secondary feature of most QA systems despite the claims of most external reviews to encourage improvement.

Temponi (2005) suggests the adoption of a continuous improvement approach requires not only upper administration commitment, but also uncovering the current underlying culture and examining the appropriateness of objectives to adopt continuous improvement. Creating a quality culture and long-term commitment to continuous improvement within an academic institution means engaging the administrative and academic systems, and engaging all stakeholders of the institution of HE.
Chapter 1  Literature Review

The tension between accountability and improvement

Harvey (2002) points out there has been increasing uniformity of practice for quality monitoring in HE. This is a pragmatic response to government requirements to demonstrate value for money and fitness for purpose. Nevertheless, what purpose and what constitutes fitness is unclear. The links between accountability mechanisms and quality improvement are rarely clear. Vroeijenstijn and Acherman (1990) point out the tension between accountability and continuous quality improvement. Arguably, accountability is about value for money and fitness for purpose, while continuous improvement in teaching and learning is about enhancement of the student experience, and empowering students as life-long learners. Vroeijenstijn & Acherman (1990) argue that the improvement essence of quality is sidelined in the assurance process by a focus on demonstrating compliance. Thune (1996) argues that accountability and improvement are based on different methods based on the ownership of the evaluation system. He identifies that the process has a different form and is independent of control. He argues from his Danish case that accountability and improvement may be combined in a balanced strategy. Middlehurst and Woodhouse (1995) explore whether it is feasible to combine the function of accountability and quality improvement in national arrangements for QA in HE. They identify that accountability and improvement must be conceptually and practically distinct with separate resourcing. The failure to address different purposes will damage the quality and the integrity of HE by imbalances of power.

The accountability-led view sees improvement as a secondary function of the monitoring process. Following this approach, external monitoring of quality will lead to improvement as a side effect (Harvey and Newton, 2007). In other words, requiring accountability will lead to a review of practices, which in turn will result in improvement. Harvey (1994) questions this accountability-led view. First, facing a monitoring system demanding accountability, academics will tend to comply with requirements and to minimise its interruption in their existing practice. Second, improvement comes from a changed culture and local ownership, which is in conflict with the principle of compliance in accountability. Third, the extra burden of responding to external scrutiny leads to the feeling of lacking trust, which will demotivate staff who are already involved in innovation and quality initiatives. Harvey and Newton (2007) suggest a view counter to the accountability-led one, which will result in quality improvement: improvement is its own accountability. In other words, if an organisation continually improves it
is accountable. This returns the ownership of the QA system to academics. In their view improvement is not something regulated but something attained through critical engagement.

Harvey and Askling (2003) point out the most effective improvement occurs when external processes mesh with internal improvement activities. It is more difficult for external QA to encourage the learning-teaching interface. They argue that the improvement function of QA procedures is to encourage institutions to reflect upon their practices and to develop what they do. Therefore, QA needs to be designed to encourage a process of continuous improvement of the learning process and the range of outcomes.

1.2.3 The focus of QA

Webb (1994) summarises four broad areas of QA, central to the maintenance and enhancement of standards and where there is a presumption that institutions would have procedures and mechanisms in place:

1. QA in the provision and design of programmes and courses;
2. QA in teaching, learning and communication (between staff and students and throughout the institution);
3. QA in relation to academic staff;
4. QA in relation to feedback from external examiners, students and external bodies (including employers).

Brennan and Shah (2000) provide a framework summarising the focus of QA models (Table 1). In their framework, quality values and conceptions about what constitutes high quality in HE decide the approaches to quality management and assessment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type 1</th>
<th>Subject focus – knowledge and curricula</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'Academic'</td>
<td>Professional authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quality values vary across institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type 2</td>
<td>Institutional focus – policies and procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Managerial'</td>
<td>Managerial authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quality values invariant across institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type 3</td>
<td>People focus – skills and competencies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Pedagogic'</td>
<td>Staff developers / educationalists influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quality values invariant across institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type 4</td>
<td>Output focus – graduate standards / learning outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Employment focus'</td>
<td>Employment / professional authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quality values both variant and invariant across institution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: The focus of quality assurance models
(Source: Brennan & Shah, 2000, p.14)
According to their analysis, approaches to quality and the focus of QA depend on quality values and the conception of what constitutes high quality in HE. As shown in the above table, the four foci of QA are academic, managerial, pedagogic and employment. In the first type ‘academic’, the focus is on the subject field, associated with professorial authority and academics’ conception of value. However, conceptions based on subject affiliation vary across the institution, which makes it difficult to assess quality. In the ‘managerial’ type, the main focus is on institutional policies and procedures, which means that good management is a key factor in QA. Therefore, there is little variation across the institution and centralisation is an essential characteristic. In the ‘pedagogic’ type, the focus is on people and pedagogical aspects of the process, such as teaching skills and methods, and staff development. Quality values are invariant across the institution, with a lot of attention given to achieving a more standardised teaching process rather than the content of education. In the ‘employment’ type, the focus is on learning outcomes, standards, and attributes of graduates. This approach addresses employers’ requirements and attempts to take into account both subject specific and students’ generic skills identified in national qualification frameworks (Brennan & Shah, 2000).

1.2.4 The approaches to QA

In one of the earliest classifications of the different approaches to QA, Dill (1992) distinguishes between three forms: the reputational approach, the student outcome approach, and the total quality (management) approach. The reputational approach uses peer review to assess the quality of HEIs or programmes. The student outcome approach measures student achievements both when attending HE and after graduation. The total quality management approach is based on participation, customer orientation, organisational learning and coordination. Over time, approaches to QA are widely discussed and analysed at theoretical level and vary widely among countries. The literature on approaches to QA is reviewed here with two threads: external QA and internal QA.
External quality assurance (EQA)

EQA has been one of the hottest topics in HE in the last 20 years leading to the build-up of national external systems for evaluating teaching and learning (Stensaker, Brandt & Solum, 2008). EQA refers to the actions of an external body, possibly a QA agency, which assesses the operation of the institution or its programmes, to determine whether it is meeting the agreed standards. EQA systems include accreditation, assessment and audit. EQA is an all-encompassing term that covers a variety of quality-related evaluations undertaken by bodies or individuals external to HEIs. There are also important differences among these systems, especially in the ownership of the system and in the consequences of quality evaluation, with or without direct consequences to funding (Neave, 2004).

Billing (2004) explores international comparisons of the purpose of EQA in HE and the extent to which the main national QA frameworks meet this. He concludes with a general model, which summarises the purposes of EQA into:

- improvement of quality
- publicly available information on quality and standards
- accreditation (i.e. legitimisation of certification of students)
- public accountability: for standards achieved, and for use of money
- to contribute to the HE sector planning process

Van Vught and Westerheijden (1993) summarise the common elements of quality frameworks in European countries:

- a national agency to co-ordinate and support QA within institutions, which is independent of government;
- self-evaluation as the vital focus of the external QA process;
- external peer review to explore the self-evaluation with the HEI (normally by a site visit);
- public reports of these evaluation activities;
- no direct relationship of the results of external QA to the funding of HEIs.

Thune (2002) summarises the important procedural elements shared among European QA systems: internal self-evaluation; visits by external expert review panel; external evaluation; and public reporting.

Harvey (1999) summarises the approaches of EQA into: accreditation and evaluation of institutions, audit of procedures within an institutions, accreditation of programmes of study, assessment of teaching quality in subject areas or of...
programmes, research assessment, and standards monitoring. Harvey and Askling (2003) point out that external quality monitoring takes many forms, ranging from accreditation and institutional audit, through subject assessment and standards monitoring to customer surveys. They have varied objects, foci and purposes and relate to different notions of quality and standards. Harvey and Askling (2003) summarise the object, focus, rationale, approach and mechanisms for external quality evaluation under four headings: accountability, control, compliance and improvement.

Table 2: Object, focus, rationale, approach and mechanisms for external evaluation (Source: Harvey & Askling, 2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Focus</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Mechanism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provider</td>
<td>Governance &amp; regulation</td>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Accreditation</td>
<td>Self-assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium of delivery</td>
<td>Curriculum design, administration</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Audit</td>
<td>Performance indicators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Output</td>
<td>Learning experience</td>
<td>Compliance</td>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>Visit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner</td>
<td>Qualification</td>
<td>Improvement</td>
<td>Standards monitoring</td>
<td>Customer surveys</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Harvey and Askling’s (2003) model, the main objective of the quality monitoring process may be the provider in institutional review, medium of delivery, output in programme review, or learners in some cases. The focus may be governance and regulation, curriculum design and administration, learning experience or qualification. The specific purposes of quality monitoring fall under four broad headings: accountability, control, compliance and improvement. External quality monitoring takes several forms, ranging from accreditation and institutional audit, subject review and standards monitoring to customer survey.

Accreditation

Accreditation is a public statement that a certain threshold of quality is passed (Campbell et al. 2000). The formal public recognition embodied in accreditation is seen as being based on agreed, pre-defined standards or criteria (El-Khawas, 1998). Accreditation has two nuances: first, the abstract notion of a formal authorising power, enacted via official decisions about recognition and; second, the quality label that institutions or programmes may acquire through certain accreditation procedures (Haakstad, 2001, cited in Harvey & Askling, 2003). Accreditation may be of an institution or a programme of study. Accreditation tends to focus on inputs, for example, resources, curriculum and staffing. It may
address the teaching process but not focus on outcomes of education, for instance, graduate attributes and employability (Harvey & Mason, 1995). In principle accreditation is based on recognition that the institution has in place appropriate control and monitoring processes to ensure satisfactory quality and standards. Accreditation is usually based on an evaluation of whether the institution meets specified minimum (input) standards such as staff qualifications, research activities, student intake, and learning resources (Harvey & Askling, 2003).

Audit

Quality audit is the process of checking to ensure externally or internally specified practices and procedures are in place (Harvey & Askling, 2003). Audits ensure that the institution has clearly defined internal quality monitoring procedures linked to effective action. An audit is often considered as having the potential of meeting many of the expectations of external control at the same time as it might support improvement (Dill, 2000).

Assessment

Quality assessment sets out to measure the level of quality of inputs, processes and outputs (Harvey & Askling, 2003). Quality assessment may be a judgement of the overall quality of an institution or programme, or of specified component elements. Many assessments are supposedly of fitness for purpose. Institutions or programmes are assessed against mission based criteria. Assessment might include a complex grading system or might be based on a simple satisfactory/non-satisfactory dichotomy (Harvey & Askling, 2003). Assessments may benchmark against other institutions, national norms, or against oneself over time. Assessment may also focus on inputs (for example, teaching staff, learning resources), or process (for example, teaching, learning, support services), or outcomes (for instance, students’ academic standards of achievement or professional competence, employment rates, students’ perception of their learning). Assessment evidence includes statistical indicators, observation, direct evaluation of research outputs, student and graduate views, employer views, student performance, self-assessment and other documentation, discussion and interviews with teachers, students and managers, and perceptions of other agencies, such as professional bodies (Harvey & Askling, 2003).
Standards monitoring

Standards monitoring makes use of external examiners and has a longer history than external quality evaluation. Harvey and Askling (2003) summarise two main foci of standards monitoring: first, academic standards of a programme of study, identified by the academic work produced by students; second, standards of professional competence, identified through the ability or potential to undertake professional practice. They also argue that standards monitoring may specify standards that are appropriate, or it may endeavour to ensure that standards are at appropriate levels, possibly by checking or grading student work or performance. The purpose of standards monitoring may also be ensuring comparability of standards across the sector or across specific subjects within subject disciplines. Sometimes external examiners grade directly but usually standards are inferred by scrutiny of a sample of work or by monitoring award statistics.

Customer surveys

Quality evaluation often includes participant or client satisfaction with service provision which is at institutional, programme or module level in the HE context. The feedback from students, graduates or employers is collected to enhance the normal process of self-assessment, statistical indicators and peer review (Harvey & Askling, 2003).

Different EQA procedures affect universities in many ways. These procedures exert both direct and indirect impact on universities. In the process of implanting EQA, new management and self-regulation, as alternatives to the former models of quality management will be institutionalised. Westerheijden (2001) argues that external quality monitoring leads to uniformity rather than diversity. External quality monitoring actually inhibits innovation because of the application of conservative or rigid evaluation criteria.

Dano and Stensaker (2007) argue that the role and function of EQA is of great importance for the development of an internal quality culture in HE. Harvey and Askling (2003, p. 81) argue that:

*Individual teachers within fields of teaching and learning and didactics have inspired each other and also challenged university teachers to make powerful contributions to improve university teaching. These researchers and teachers contribute in turning the quality issue, which was originally imposed by governments, into something empowering teachers and students.*
**Internal quality assurance (IQA)**

In addition to externally initiated systems, more and more countries are also requesting HEIs to develop internal systems for QA, including demands that such systems should secure the core process in HE – teaching and learning (Stensaker et al., 2008). IQA refers to each institution’s or programme’s policies and mechanisms for ensuring that it is fulfilling its own purposes, as well as the standards that apply to HE in general, or to the profession or discipline in particular.

The literature on IQA focuses either (in the form of theoretical discussion) on quality enhancement inside HEIs, or on case studies of certain universities. Compared with the discussion on EQA, there are relatively few papers on IQA. This demonstrates how the quality debate has been dominated by the discussion of EQA and by the activities of external agencies. Among the limited number of papers on IQA, Weusthof (1995) points out that a QA system should not focus predominantly on external demand, but should be focused on improving the self-evaluation procedure. Horsburgh (1998) concludes that emphasis needs to be given to self-regulation and innovation, in particular through delegating responsibility for quality to teaching teams and fostering the improvement process. Weusthof (1995) explores the nature of self-evaluation, the way results are utilised at faculty level, and factors influencing IQA at faculty level, through examining IQA in a Dutch university. He argues that the focus in implementing a QA system should be on improving the self-evaluation procedures, rather than on external demands. In his view, this would increase faculty autonomy and aid improvement of educational quality. Horsburgh (1998) examines how the internal quality monitoring processes may be contributing to transformation in two institutions. She points out the importance of self-regulation and innovation and emphasises the need to delegate responsibility for quality to teaching teams and foster improvement processes. Coyle (2003) examines the evolution of a quality-management system at a university, formerly a polytechnic, in the United Kingdom. He focuses on the role of self-evaluation in periodic reviews of departments, the use of customer-centred approaches, the use of knowledge-management techniques and the anticipation of risks. He considers that the potential rewards of a self-evaluative approach are from the consequent academic debate. He also observes the tension between the use of honest and open self-criticism for the purpose of continuous improvement, and the use of
those self-assessments in a potentially critical public report prepared by an external agency. He concludes from this study that the successful use of self-evaluation, customer-centred approaches, knowledge and risk management demands the highest level skills of leadership and management by senior managers. These papers indicate the importance of IQA and that it is what goes on routinely in institutions that impacts on quality.

At a theoretical level, there have been a number of attempts at the exploration of models in educational QA in HE. There are several well articulated models in the literature of QA. Each model has its own perspective on QA in HE. Here I choose the total quality management model, transformative model, engagement model, university of learning model, responsive university model, quality development model, and holistic model for quality to examine how quality is interpreted and QA is theorized.

**Total Quality Management (TQM)**

Attempts to introduce industrial quality concepts like total quality management (TQM) into HE began in the later 1980s (Sallis, 1993). ‘Delighting the customer’ is the core message of the total quality approach. In the beginning of the 1990s the idea of applying TQM, the popular industrial quality model, to HE was quite wide-spread. The TQM model applies the management concepts of control, quality, process, and customer to the regime of HE. TQM is the first quality management model in HE, and it has caused a great deal of discussion. There have been some studies showing certain positive changes brought by TQM, such as improved enrolment, retention and international institutional environment (Freed & Klugman, 1997). However, some other authors argue that TQM is not appropriate for HE (e.g., Brinbaum, 2000).

**Transformative Model**

Transformation is the process of changing from one qualitative state to another. Harvey and Knight (1996) argue that ‘transformation’ is the most appropriate learning-oriented approach to quality. The emphasis is on ‘enhancing participants’, ‘adding value’ to their capability and ultimately ‘empowering’ them. The focus here is on student experiences. In their theory, transformative learning requires a transparent process, which is integrated, contributing to a rich and relevant ‘total student experience’. Harvey and Knight claim that the transformative approach is really about a responsive process of transparency, integration and dialogue. Transparency means being open in terms of the aims,
processes and method of attainment of student learning. Integration means the cohesiveness of learning experiences. Dialogue involves the communication between students and teachers about the nature, scope and style of their learning; and the dynamic exchange among the teachers about the teaching and learning process. For Harvey and Knight (1996), transformation involves transforming institutions to enable learner transformation. Harvey and Knight argue that HE must itself be transformed if it is to be successful as a transformative process. To realise such transformation, it is necessary to shift from teaching to learning, to develop explicit skills, attitudes and abilities as well as knowledge, to develop appropriate assessment procedures, to reward transformative teaching, to encourage discussion of pedagogy, to provide transformative learning, to foster new collegiality, to link quality improvement to learning, and to audit improvement.

Engagement model

Engagement has emerged as a cornerstone of the HE lexicon over the last decade. Cross (1999) points out that what we know about student learning is that students who are actively engaged in learning for deeper understanding are likely to learn more than students not so engaged. Student engagement is generally considered to be among the better predictors of learning and personal development. Carini, Kuh, and Klein (2006) also point out that the more students study or practice a subject, the more they tend to learn about it. In general, engagement in educational oriented activities positively contributes to a range of outcomes including persistence, satisfaction, achievement and academic success (Astin, 1985, 1993; Goodsel, Maher & Tinto, 1992; Kuh, Pace & Vesper, 1997; Pascarella & Terenezini, 2005). Haworth and Conrad (1997) explore the factors that consistently foster excellence and result in positive learning experiences for students. They define high quality programs as those which contribute to the learning experiences for students that have positive effects on their growth and development. Their ‘Engagement Theory’ is based around one central idea: that student learning is the focal point of a high quality undergraduate or graduate programme, and that programme quality is a result of student, faculty, and administrative engagement in teaching and learning. They identify five clusters of programme attributes contributing to enriching the learning experience for students: diverse and engaged participants, participatory cultures, interactive teaching and learning, connected program requirements, and adequate resources.
University of learning model

The university of learning model emphasises that the quality of a university is in the quality of learning, which has a lot to do with qualities of different ways of seeing (Bowden & Marton, 1998). In this model, Bowden and Marton (1998) argue that quality in university context relates strongly to quality of learning. They explore the organisational aspect of HE from a pedagogical perspective. They stress that among the three main functions of a university: teaching, research and community service, learning is the critical feature of the university. Therefore, they argue that quality in a university context has a lot to do with the quality of learning, and the quality of learning has a lot to with qualities of different ways of seeing. In this model, the learning experience is considered as gaining ability to discern the relevant aspects of variation. In their view, to discern an aspect is to differentiate among the various aspects and focus on the one most relevant to the situation. According to their theory, when students widen the range of possibilities of seeing the same thing, their world grows richer and they will have more options for actions. They emphasise that without variation there is no discernment. The ‘University of Learning’ model highlights synergistic involvement of academics in a course or research team, developing a holistic view of student competencies, and a collective consciousness of commonalities and complementarities. University life centres on membership of intersecting networks, including an active collaboration among academics in program teams. They argue that large interdependent groups of academics and management staff working in harmony are the basis of a university of learning. In this model, academics are expected to commit themselves to a deep exploration of the subject matter from learners’ perspectives, to develop alternative patterns of understanding.

Responsive university model

Tierney (1998) brought together a number of leading scholars and teachers and asked them to describe how universities might respond effectively to changing social, demographic and political forces. He collected their views and formed a model for a responsive university. Tierney sees the responsiveness of a university to be coming from meeting the learning needs of students. This model is based on the conception that the public will judge the university in terms of the quality of its relationships and the quality of the outcomes. Following this model, a successful university must be responsive and be service oriented. This model emphasises developing new internal relationships through communication
and partnerships, as well as new external relationships through social partnerships with communities. Following this model, the academic staff need to review and address student demand, resource allocation, departmental goals and the evolving mission of the institution. In this model, it is important for staff to develop a commitment to annual performance contracts, because it can determine the extent to which and the ways in which the institution will be a responsive one. External relationships are also important for a responsive university because this will enhance education quality through joint ventures across academic units and between institutions. In addition, partnership with government is also crucial in aligning institutional performance with public purposes. Tierney emphasises relationships and outcomes, through which the university will become a network.

**Quality Development Model**

The Quality Development Model was proposed by Gosling and D’Andrea (2001). They observe the gap between the regulatory function and developmental function of QA, and the tension in HEIs between offices responsible for QA and educational development. They suggest a quality system that not only performs a regulatory function but also improves the quality of the educational experience. They argue that the holistic educational development model should combine the enhancement of learning and teaching with the quality and standards monitoring processes in a HE institution. In their quality development model, educational development includes the initiation and management of three major areas: academic development, learning development and quality development. In this model, the activities of the educational development office would create a quality loop of development, implementation and evaluation of the educational provision, by informing the process of curriculum development and validation with knowledge of current pedagogical theory and practice. They claim that this model will provide the necessary professional development for teaching staff on teaching /learning strategies to meet the educational aims and objectives of the curriculum developed. Gosling and D’Andrea (2001) claim that it creates the linkage between QA and educational development; it provides wide-ranging support for teaching departments to enhance the educational experience of students by addressing the tensions between QA and educational development. They also claim that this model satisfies the need for public accountability at the same time that it addresses quality enhancement. An important point of this model is that it focuses on practice and enhances a more
holistic understanding of the relationship between QA and learning enhancement.

Holistic Model for Quality

Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2002) try to integrate existing research on QA and propose their Holistic Model for Quality. This model attempts to combine existing concepts of transformation, engagement, learning and responsiveness into one model which addresses student learning and active collaboration at the educational delivery level. They support the concept that quality of HE is in the quality of student learning and the focus of quality should be on enriching the student learning experience. They argue that critical dialogue between student and teachers about the nature and style of their learning, communication among teachers about teaching and learning, and communication with the external partners are crucial in improving the student learning experience. This model emphasises learning and organisational culture in quality management with the advocacy for system ideas and systematic action in HE. Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2005) argue that implementing this model requires a shared vision within the community, based on an agreement on how the quality at all levels would be monitored, integrated and improved. Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2005) suggest that leaders committed to implementing the holistic model must focus on all three of the architectural elements: guiding ideas, theory, methods and tools, and innovations. They claim that this model generates synergies, keeps the institution’s focus on learners and their learning, and that the power of the model arises when all the elements are practised simultaneously. The advantage of this model is that:

It allows identification of the nature of the elements in the domain of action to set in motion a learning cycle to progress towards the desired organisational setting (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2005, p.80).

It is not hard to find that that these models have two common foci, the student learning experience and collaboration at learning interface, though there are different approaches to quality in different models. These models are valuable in theorising QA approaches and in providing implications for HEIs to work out their own QA strategies.
1.2.5 The role of students in QA

In recent years, the role of students in the QA of HE has been recognised across the world. Across the world, students increasingly play their role in the QA process through providing feedback on the courses they have taken and on the general satisfaction with their educational experiences. Reviewing the literature relating to this topic, we may find that students are more and more involved in measuring quality and in improving their own learning experiences. Students’ voice are increasingly heard through providing feedback, contributing to the development of learning and teaching, participating in the university decision making process, and presenting student views in a number of ways (Alaniska, et al., 2006).

Giving feedback is the most common way through which students participate in QA. The increasingly competitive environment in higher education leads universities to monitor levels of their student satisfaction (King et al., 1999). There is a wide diversity in how, when and what kind of feedback students give. It is typical that feedback is given after each course or at least once in a term. It is believed that student feedback can be used as an effective tool for quality improvement. Harvey (1995) suggests that student satisfaction goes hand in hand with the development of a culture of continuous quality improvement. Rowley (2003) identifies four main reasons for collecting student feedback:

- To provide students opportunities to pass comments on their courses and to collect information for improvement;
- To encourage student reflection on their learning;
- To allow institutions to benchmark and to provide indicators that will contribute to the reputation of the university in the marketplace; and
- To provide students with an opportunity to express their level of satisfaction with their academic experiences.

The National Student Survey (NSS) in the UK

In the UK, students’ opinions about various aspects of academic life are collected by HEIs principally in the form of satisfaction feedback surveys. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has introduced the NSS to gather student feedback on the quality of their courses. The NSS started in 2005 and aims at final year students and seeks their views on a number of aspects of teaching assessment and support provided by their universities and courses. The
survey has 21 statements relating to teaching, assessment and feedback, academic support, organisation and management, learning resources and personal development. The results are used by government and funding bodies to produce league tables of university performance, which are published on the Higher Education and Research Opportunities portal (HEFCE, 2003; cited in Davies, 2008).

The introduction of the NSS by the HEFCE reflects the growing importance placed on student satisfaction. Asthana and Biggs (2007) argue that the NSS is becoming increasingly influential in the decision making of students when selecting universities. The positions of universities in the league table will influence their brand image and recruitment of students (James, Baldwin & McInnis, 1999; Palacio, Meneses & PerezPerez, 2002; cited in Davies, 2008). Therefore, student satisfaction has become more and more important for universities and the NSS has attracted more and more attention from universities.

The National Student Survey of Engagement (NSSE) in the US

The NSSE is a U.S. survey of first and fourth-year students based on student engagement theories and best practices in teaching and learning. The development of this survey is based on the research finding that student engagement is an important factor in student learning and success (Astin, 1977, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). The NSSE was designed to assess the extent to which students are engaged in educationally purposeful activities that contribute to their learning and success during college (Kuh, 2001). The survey is operated by an independent entity based at Indiana University and is supported by user fees paid by individual participating institutions.

It is reported on the website of the NSSE that up to 2009, 1,493 U.S. and Canadian institutions have participated in this national survey since 2000. According to Kuh (2009) the NSSE was founded on three core purposes: institutional improvement, documenting good practice and public advocacy. The NSSE questionnaire collects information in five categories (Kuh, 2009):

1. students’ participation in dozens of educationally purposeful activities, for example, interacting with teachers and peers, the amount of time they spend studying or participating in co-curricular or other activities;
2. institutional action and requirements, such as the amount of reading and writing students did during the current school year and the nature of their examinations and coursework;
3. students’ perception of features of the college environment associated with achievement, satisfaction, and persistence;
4. students’ background information, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, living situation, educational status, and major field;
5. students’ estimation of their educational and personal growth since starting college in the areas of general knowledge; intellectual skills; written and oral communication skills; personal, social, and ethical development; and vocational preparation.

Kuh (2009) argues that HEIs cannot change who students are when they enter college. However, with the right assessment tools, HEIs can identify areas where improvement in teaching and learning will increase the chances that their students achieve their educational and personal goals. Kuh also argues that the NSSE provides behaviourally oriented data about aspects of student behaviour related to student success.

**Student Course Experience Questionnaire (SCEQ) in Australia**

A parallel practice of national student survey is conducted in Australia. The Australian SCEQ was firstly administered as a census to all enrolled undergraduate students in 1999. It has subsequently been administered annually to stratified random samples of undergraduate students. Questions in this survey cover various aspects of the student experience. The survey is administrated centrally by the Teaching Evaluation Enhancement Service and results are disseminated publicly as part of an institutional quality indicators system. The SCEQ was preceded by the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), which asks similar questions of university graduates and has been administered since 1993. Both surveys are administrated by a public agency. The participation is mandatory, and results are presented publicly (Ewell, 2004; Harris & James, 2006).
The NSSE-China

The NSSE developed by Indiana University was introduced to China by Tsinghua University in 2007, known as the ‘NSSE-China’. The NSSE instrument was translated into the Chinese language and adapted to the Chinese context. The instrument was piloted in six institutions in Beijing in 2007. Cognitive interviews were conducted in five institutions of various types and in different regions in China in 2008. The NSSE-China national survey was conducted in 2009 among 27 voluntarily participating Chinese HEIs. The NSSE-China instrument asks students about their perceptions of the institutional environment, their participation in programmes and activities provided by the HEIs, interactions with faculty and peer students, time-on-tasks, and background characteristics and learning outcomes. The NSSE-China is expected to become a tool to help measure Chinese students’ learning experiences of students and help Chinese HEIs benchmark their practice and take their responsibilities in creating more effective learning environments for their students (Ross, Luo & Cen, 2008; Luo, Shi & Tu, 2009; Luo, Ross & Cen, 2009).

Both student feedback on courses and these national student surveys are increasingly used by HEIs across the world as an important component of QA processes. Students are playing a more and more important role in QA through these surveys. Though student learning experiences are internal issues inside HEIs, the publication of survey results and league tables produced accordingly make the internal things external. These surveys provide a means for students, their parents, employers and other stakeholders to assess the quality of HEIs. Therefore, student surveys have become a very useful tool for HEIs to benchmark themselves in the HE market and to monitor the quality of HE provision.

Obviously, students have increasingly become an important force in measuring HE quality through these surveys. However, we need to realise that there are a lot of problems with these standardised surveys. Reflecting the way they are used in the current HE context, they are very limited. Firstly, though using self-completion questionnaires enables student satisfaction data to be collected from a large sample size and to make comparison across HEIs, such surveys are methodologically flawed. In general, these surveys are given to students towards the end of their courses, when they may not remember their good/bad experiences. Secondly, though these surveys introduce student views, the carefully-thought-out questions in these surveys might be responded to by
students in an unthinking way. The analysis of such data and the further publication of results might be misleading and contribute little to quality measurement and improvement. Therefore, if students are really important in Chinese HE, it might be better for us to find out what really matters in student learning, and what really constitutes quality from Chinese students’ viewpoints, instead of having this kind of surveys. Accordingly, this study has adopted the case study approach to explore how students understand quality, what learning experiences are available for them, and how to achieve continuous quality improvement by integrating student learning experiences into the QA systems in the context of Chinese HE.
1.3 Reviewing Chinese literature on quality and QA

HE quality and QA are currently high on the policy agenda in the Chinese HE sector. Current interest in quality and QA has a varied provenance related to the changing scenario of Chinese HE. The review of Chinese literature aimed to reach a general overview of research by Chinese researchers on QA in Chinese HE. The primary focus of the literature search was on journal papers published since 2000. Due to the availability of Chinese journals, seven main journals on Chinese HE and quality were selected: Tsinghua Journal of Education, China Higher Education Research, China Higher Education, China higher Education and Evaluation, Journal of Higher Education, University Education Science, and Higher Education Exploration.

The aims of reviewing Chinese literature on QA are:

1. To identify the main themes in QA research in the Chinese literature;
2. To reach an overview of methodological approaches in the literature;
3. To identify the gaps which this research needs to examine.

The criteria for selecting literature include:

- about Chinese HE
- related to quality issues
- about undergraduate education

Following these criteria, the literature search resulted in 491 journal articles in total. These articles are categorised firstly according to the time of publication to find out the trend, though it is hard to describe explicitly the trend in a particular year. If generalising along the chronological line, the topics in the literature cover from understanding the meaning of quality, the significance of the concept of quality and QA in HE, introducing overseas experiences and international trends, interpreting the standards used in quality evaluation, discussion on methods of evaluation, and establishing IQA in the early part of 2000s, to critiques on quality evaluation, suggestions for the coming new round of QA, and quality improvement in the recent literature.

The themes in the literature selected are mainly categorised into conceptualising quality and QA, introducing QA overseas, quality evaluation as the main EQA, IQA, quality improvement, and student employability, six themes for reporting. The great majority of the journal articles are conceptual or theoretical discussions, and only a small number report on empirical studies. Among the
429 conceptual/theoretical discussion articles, 8 articles are historical reviews, 226 are of viewpoint type, 29 discuss technical issues, and 196 are of descriptive type. Among the 32 empirical research papers, 2 are based on the analysis of secondary data, 13 report survey results, and 17 are case studies.

Table 3: Overview of the Chinese literature on QA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Conceptual / theoretical</th>
<th>Empirical</th>
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<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>Historical</td>
<td>viewpoint</td>
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<td>Conceptualising quality and QA</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>QA in other countries</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quality evaluation</td>
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<td>Internal quality assurance</td>
<td></td>
<td>103</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employability</td>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>226</td>
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**Theme 1: Theorizing quality in Chinese HE**

Discussion of the meaning of quality in Chinese HE is a major theme in the literature of QA. Of 98 journal articles reviewed, 87 articles are conceptual/theoretical discussions, of which the great majority are in the categories of expressing viewpoints or describing concepts.

Of all attempts to conceptualise Chinese HE quality, the concept of diversified quality is most widely accepted among Chinese academics. Qi (2002) argues that the quality of HE cannot be evaluated with a universal standard and there should be a diversified view of quality considering the classifications, levels and positions of individual education systems.

Pan (2000) points out that HE expansion leads to the diversification of HE where there are diversified educational aims and standards. In his view, quality and standards are closely linked. At the micro level quality standards has two meanings: general standards means HE should produce qualified graduates with all-round development in morality, intelligence and physical fitness; specific
standards refers to the diversity at the horizontal level, i.e. theoretical oriented, application oriented, vocational oriented, and at the vertical level, i.e. undergraduate, master, PhD levels.

Jiang (2002) summarises five widely used perspectives on quality: (1) Diversified quality. The concept of quality should be diversified since HE is diversified in the process of expansion. (2) Adapted quality. The quality of HE should be viewed in terms of its adaptation to the state, social and market needs. (3) Developmental quality. The standards of quality are developmental and aligned with the development of HE. (4) Integrative quality. Quality of HE integrates all aspects of HE. (5) Characterised quality. In line with diversity of extended HE, quality of HE is closely linked to the characteristics of a particular type of education or HE institution.

HE quality is also understood from the viewpoint of student development. Guan (2008) maintains that the conventional conception of integrated development of students’ morality, intelligence, and physical fitness is the best interpretation of education quality. He suggests that the quality standards of modern universities should include subject standards and humanism standards. Subject standards require students to grasp their subject knowledge integratively, and humanistic standards define education quality in terms of student morality and social values. In his view, to improve the quality of Chinese HE, efforts should be made in satisfying both subject and humanistic standards.

Liu (2002) analyses quality from a functional viewpoint: the production of HE is the organic combination of the product and service, and the service of HE accounts for the core status. He argues that compared with the product quality view and the service quality view, the view of the combination of the production quality and service quality will be more helpful in improving the quality of HE.

The understanding of quality is often linked to the self-positioning of HEIs. Liu and Yang (2003) discusses the importance of HEIs’ identification of their positioning in educational provision. In their view, the self-positioning of HEIs is an integrated and developmental conception. Only when the essence of university is clarified, can HEIs come to the stage of laying down aims, making plans, positioning educational levels, functions and services.

The concept of quality is also understood from an economic point of view. Hou (2006) applies the theory of Baumol, Panzar and Willig to analyse the quality of Chinese HEIs. Based on the analysis of Chinese HEIs Financial Data Base he
concludes that the complete joint-production is the best model in generating quality.

Huang and Mao (2009) analyse HE quality from a knowledge perspective. They conclude that the expanding definition of knowledge, the changing character of knowledge, the varying modes of knowledge production, the reforming communication and distribution of knowledge affect HE quality. They suggest an understanding of the quality of HE should include this knowledge perspective.

Application research in the area of conceptualising quality and QA is mainly related to applying the identified quality and QA concept, or quality policies in practice. Research of this type is mainly in the form of using the published quality standards in constructing QA schemes in regional HEIs (e.g., Qin, Luo & Liang, 2003).

Hou, Li and Zheng (2008) analyse the impact of student family background on their access to HE and conception of education quality. They conclude that parents’ education background has a significant impact on their children’s education levels and quality. They also find that educational discrepancy caused by social stratification still exists in the student selection in Chinese HE.

**Theme 2: Introducing QA in overseas countries**

There are 87 articles in our selection of literature covering the QA in other countries, among which 18 articles introduce the QA practice in the U.S., 24 articles synthesise the practice in Western countries; 8 articles on QA in the UK, 20 articles on QA in other European countries, 5 articles on QA in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao, 4 articles on QA in Japan, 2 articles on QA in Australia, 2 articles on QA in Canada, 1 article each on QA in Russia, New Zealand, India and South Africa respectively. These articles cover a wide range of topics in QA overseas, including:

- The general development of QA in Western countries (e.g., Lei, 2003; Li, W., 2003);
- The general trends of HE evaluation (Shen & Li, 2002), the new direction of quality evaluation policies in specific countries, for example in the US (Wen, 2008);
- QA practice in general (Bi, 2004a, 2006; Zhang, X., 2009), and in individual countries, e.g. in the UK (Zhang, X., 2006; Zeng, 2008; Shi &
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Wu, 2009), in the U.S. (Yuan, 2006; Shi & Ning, 2006), in Europe (Li, 2001; Zhu & Pan, 2003), in Australia (Li, B., 2003), in the Netherlands (Tian, 2005), in Russia (Bai & Deng, 2005), and in Japan (Guo & Wang, 2006; Zhang, Q., 2008; 2009; You, Yao, Jiang, & Hu, 2009);

- The practice of international organisations, for example, introducing OECD’s *Education at A Glance: OECD Indicators* (Chu, 2002), and UNESCO’s practice and its implication for Chinese HE (Wang, 2002); and international cooperation in improving education quality (Jiang, 2007);

- Quality evaluation practices (Yan, 2004; Fang, 2005; Jin, 2005, 2006; Huang, 2006);

- EQA schemes (Zha, 2005; Yan, 2006; Zhang & Zhang, 2006);

- Introduction to the structure, function and development of quality evaluation agencies (Fu, 2008; Meng, 2008);

- Accreditation practice (Fang, 2004; Guo, 2005; Yang, H., 2006; Xia, 2006; Wei & He, 2009);

- Degree standards and QA standards (Bi, 2005);

- IQA practices (Lu, 2005; Bi, 2004b);

- Students’ role in QA (Li, 2002; Zhang, J., 2007; Ye & Yang, 2009);

- Quality improvement (Wang & Fortune, 2007);

- The publication of HEIs’ quality information (Zhang, J., 2008);

- Quality performance and funding in USA (Zheng, 2006);

- HE expansion and research universities’ concern for quality and QA practice (Zhou, 2007);

- QA of private HE overseas (Shi & Liu, 2005).

In general, much of the research above has been descriptive in nature. Among these articles, the great majority (78.2%) are descriptive, introducing the various aspects of QA practice in overseas countries, and 17.2% providing their viewpoints or their perceived implications for QA in Chinese HE. These publications are very helpful for Chinese researchers, teachers and policy makers to understand the QA practice, development and trends in overseas countries. However, most of the articles are introducing or discussing QA from the management perspective in terms of control, management, evaluation, and assessment. In contrast, too few of them introduce or discuss quality enhancement. Most importantly, the research exploring overseas QA fails to focus on student learning, which should be the core of HE and QA.
**Theme 3: On quality evaluation**

Quality evaluation has been widely accepted and conceived as necessary in addressing the concern for quality in the era of HE expansion in China. Quality evaluation is considered as a movement in which Chinese HEIs compete to achieve their best performance. In the great majority of the literature reviewed, quality evaluation is considered as an important medium to assure and improve quality. The topics of the literature cover a wide range from the history of evaluation in HE, the problems observed in the first-round teaching quality evaluation, discussion on how to improve evaluation practice in the new round evaluation, to the technical issues in quality evaluation.

Zhao (2008) reviews the evaluation history in Chinese HE and identified three periods: the early development and interruption from 1949 to 1978; the formal development and exploration from 1978 to 1991; the prosperous development and institutionalisation of education evaluation from 1990 till now. Li (2006) reviews the history of quality evaluation since the 1950s from the viewpoints of evaluation content, methods, theoretical development, and discussed its implications for quality evaluation in Chinese HE. Zhang, Y. (2006) reviews the development of education evaluation and its underlined epistemology and methodology, from positivism, social constructivism to postmodernism.

Most literature in our selection recognises the necessity of quality evaluation, but at the same time, a number of problems in quality evaluation practice have been recognised. Liu (2005) identifies eight problems in Chinese HE evaluation: (1) HEIs misunderstand the purpose of quality evaluation and over-emphasise their performance in evaluation; (2) HEIs are passive receivers of quality evaluation; (3) The evaluation conclusions sometimes have subjective bias; (4) Using the government agency as the only evaluation body turns evaluation into a tool of compliance; (5) The evaluation index has not included variables that are hard to measure with numbers; (6) The evaluation is lacking a standardised process; (7) The practice of evaluation has not played its role in improving HE quality; (8) there is some misbehaviour in the process of quality evaluation. Zhang, X. (2008) examines current quality evaluation and points out that the following problems should be addressed to improve evaluation and education quality: the top-down procedures damages the autonomy of HEIs and traps HEIs into an evaluation vicious circle; the unified index system does not distinguish institutional characteristics; the area covered by evaluation is too complicated and 28 items of the 44 observation items cannot be quantified; the judgement
of some evaluators and some evaluation results are not convincing; too much focus has been put on infrastructure construction, which is a waste of the already insufficient funding; some institutions show dishonest behaviour in preparing for the evaluation. Sun (2009) summarises the problems observed in the first round of QA: (1) The evaluation is dominated by the government and universities are put at the passive receiving end of quality evaluation. (2) Using a unified evaluation index system in quality evaluation cannot differentiate universities’ performance. (3) The evaluation result is not convincing since a large number of HEIs obtained the result of ‘excellent’ (48% HEIs evaluated in 2003 obtained the result of ‘excellent’, 56% in 2004, 57% in 2005, 75% in 2006, and 80% in 2007). Du (2009) highlights the need to recognise stakeholders and their various expectations in conceptualising the meaning of education quality. The role of government in quality evaluation is also questioned. In Du’s view, the current quality evaluation is ‘the government evaluate the government itself’ in the sense that the government controls HE and evaluates HE itself. Du calls for the participation of a wider range of stakeholders in quality evaluation.

Many articles focus their discussion on the new round of quality evaluation. Qiu (2009) suggests using multiple evaluation methods which combine unified evaluation standards and modularised ones based on the types of Chinese HEIs, such as research universities, research-teaching universities, and teaching universities. Xu and Li (2003) reflect on their own experiences as evaluators in evaluation panels and suggest several issues for evaluation panels to consider in conducting evaluation: a proper composition of evaluation panels, efficiency in institutional visits, handling properly the relationship between evaluation panels and reviewed institutions, making proper judgements in the evaluation process, providing convincing comments and recommendations to reviewed institutions, and several other issues in evaluation practice. Wang and Zhang (2009) propose that there should be some meta-evaluation for the evaluation practice, which should focus on the completion of intended objectives, the feasibility of standards, and the reliability of evaluators. They suggest that there should be more qualitative discussion on legality and legitimate reasoning of the utility, feasibility, propriety and accuracy of the standards in use.

Li, Zhong, Wei, and Wei (2009) discuss the standards of the coming new round of QA in Chinese HE, including the main elements, objectives and principles, the evaluation process, the new index system, and evidence to be provided by HEIs. In their opinion, the new round of evaluation should address the problems in the
previous round, but it is still challenging for Chinese HE because of a lack of experience, systematic data collection, and support for the data operation system. They further suggest some solutions to the problems in education evaluation, including developing universities into learning organisations, building a management system for QA knowledge, and creating conditions for organisational innovation. Zhang, J. (2009) identifies that the underlying rationale in the first round teaching quality evaluation is good teaching conditions and normative process control will ensure quality. In his view, the practice of quality evaluation shows the government’s control of education. He points out that the political function of evaluation should not be over-emphasised, and that the focus of evaluation should be put on teaching. He suggests that the focus of the new round of evaluation should be on quality itself, including teaching process quality and student learning quality, and should employ different standards and evaluation procedures for different types of HEIs. Liu (2009) proposes three principles for the new round of quality evaluation: promoting the construction of QA system, increasing the autonomy of HEIs, and reforming and innovating teaching.

Sun (2009) discusses his conception of the next round of quality evaluation: (1) the general aim of the second round of evaluation should focus on establishing a HE evaluation system with Chinese characteristics; (2) quality evaluation should be regular; (3) the object of the new round of evaluation should be teaching. He emphasises the importance of IQA and suggests giving more attention to student learning output and satisfaction. Bi (2009) argues that the new round of quality evaluation should take the form of an institutional audit, based on the experience of USA, UK, Australia, Japan, Germany, France, and other European countries. Luo (2009) suggests including new elements in QA: (1) improving HEIs’ self-review process as the good foundation of quality evaluation; (2) involving more regional quality evaluation bodies and non-government quality evaluation agencies in teaching quality evaluation; (3) refining the current evaluation standards and evaluating HEIs according to their categories and levels.

There are several articles discussing the technical issues in quality evaluation, for example, weighting in teaching evaluation index (Chen & Hou, 2002), applying linear programming in teaching evaluation (Zhang, 2002), applying chaos theory in teaching quality evaluation (Ye, 2003), qualitative analysis on the errors in generating teaching quality (Li & Zhang, 2003), applying fuzzy set and cluster analysis in evaluating HEIs’ general capacity (Jiao & Han, 2004),
applying gray statistics in quality evaluation (Ouyang, Kan & Liu, 2005; Yang, T., 2006; Hua, 2007), the application of technique for order preference by similarity to an ideal solution in a subjective evaluation (Chen & Hou, 2005), modelling balanced evaluation with DEA in institutional operation (Chen, 2006); and setting up an institutional reputation evaluation index (Cai & Cai, 2006). Chen, Liu and Zhong (2009) report the results of their commissioned research project on National Database of Chinese HEIs. They propose a new data system to collect and analyse teaching quality. Liu (2008a) emphasises the importance of meta-evaluation for QA. He suggests that developing QA should be based on the systematic review of the current quality evaluation, the analysis of the existing problems, the involvement of both teacher and students, and the adoption of public feedback. He recommends using the American National Survey of Student Engagement as the reference in designing new quality evaluation in Chinese HE.

Theme 4: On IQA

Establishing and developing IQA in Chinese HEIs is the mission of the quality movement and policies in Chinese HE in the new millennium. There are a huge number of studies on this topic, discussing the issues from exploring suitable IQA models, controls, tools, and improvement.

In the literature, quality control is considered an effective medium for assuring quality, and TQM is accepted as an advanced method of quality management in HE. How to apply this method in HEIs’ quality management is discussed in many papers (e.g., Liu, J., 2001; Lin, 2001; Li, L., 2001; Chang, 2002; Li and Sang, 2003). ISO9000 is also considered by some Chinese researchers as another advanced method for managing education quality (e.g., Zhao, 2002; Duan and Zeng, 2002; Zhang and Zhao, 2003; Xie and Tan, 2005; Ran and Wei, 2004; Yang, Dong & Zhao, 2006; Chu, Dai & Song, 2006)

Quality control is often discussed in the context of expanded HE (Li, 2000; Zhang & Sang, 2002). Quite a number of articles describe the understanding and practice of establishing IQA. Cao (2002) discusses the establishment of a QA system from its concept, functions, structure, significance, flow, principles, development and trend, and developing quality culture. Some measures are considered effective in realising quality control. Yu and Yang (2003) suggest that a student survey is a good tool to improve teaching quality control. They suggest establishing a unified and efficient information system of quality control, unified and scientific standards of quality information control, and institutional quality information control. There are several papers reporting cases of
establishing quality control in HEIs, for example, Harbin Institute of Technology (Liu & Dong, 2000). These cases are not case studies in the research sense, but descriptions of their own institutional implementation of quality control policy.

Hu (2002) identifies that student entry level and adaptation to university study is the first crucial stage to assure HE quality. He reinforces the importance of strict entrance exams and selection, and suggests several issues for HEIs to consider when guiding students’ adaptation to university study, which include getting students familiar with campus environment and facilities, guiding students to improve their learning methods, adjusting psychologically, and building student communities. Liu, Lv and Li (2007) did a survey to explore the dimensions of student quality with the technique of hierarchical factor analysis. They identify two-order hierarchical factors in measuring student source quality. The first-order factors are student general comprehension and student academic performance, and the second-order factors are student thinking ability, creativity, social ability, leadership, and academic performance.

There are some authors who recognise the importance of student evaluation of teaching in quality control. Bi (2007) stresses that student evaluation of teaching is crucial in assuring education quality. Bie and Meng (2007) suggest that HEIs should establish proper student evaluation of teaching, construct a scientific system of student evaluation of teaching, and draw upon the overseas experience to improve the system of student evaluation of teaching. There are some views opposite to total acceptance of student evaluation of teaching. Chen (2009) criticises the problems existing in evaluating teachers’ teaching: overusing students’ online evaluation of their teachers’ teaching and the imbalance among the members of teaching supervision groups. He maintains that teaching evaluation turns out to be teachers’ competition for popularity among students, which may lead to teachers’ misbehaviour to please their students. He also criticises the bias in selecting members of teaching supervision groups.

Quality control is also discussed from the viewpoint of knowledge selection and delivery. Xu (2008) emphasises that the quality of education is in the quality of knowledge delivery, which includes the quality of knowledge selection and the quality of delivery. After analysing knowledge delivery in the fields of science, social science and humanities, he concludes that controlling the quality of knowledge selection and the quality of transmission will ensure the quality of education.
Among the very little empirical research, Hu (2006) explored the measurement of the service quality in HE with a survey method. He used the technique of exploratory factor analysis and identifies nine factors in students’ conception of HE service quality, namely brand image, employment service, curriculum content, staff affection for students, teaching process, the accountability of university service, educational result, teaching conditions, and student living service quality.

**Theme 5: On quality improvement**

The topic of quality improvement appears with the highest frequency in the literature of IQA. Among the articles reviewed, the following problems in teaching have been identified: (1) teaching has not been given enough attention; (2) the investment in teaching is not enough; (3) teaching management is outdated; (3) the structure of the teaching team is weak; (4) lack of teaching quality management and proper evaluation methods; (5) students are not motivated in their learning.

How to improve quality has been discussed in a large number of articles. Wei, Liu and Zhang (2002) stress reforming education models and giving more flexibility to students’ selection of their courses. Li, Sun and Sheng (2004) emphasise the importance of practice based teaching in improving teaching quality. Zhao and Xu (2004) discuss quality improvement from the viewpoint of reforming assessment methods and suggested more use of open-ended examinations, standardising grading process, and using assessment to improve student learning. Le and Wu (2005) believe that classroom teaching is the key to education quality. They suggest motivating teachers to improve their teaching in order to realise quality improvement. Wang and Li (2006) suggest that quality improvement needs the joint efforts of the government, HEIs and the society.

Developing excellent courses is considered as an effective medium for quality improvement. Excellent courses often involve excellence in curriculum, teachers, teaching, textbooks and other course related support. Zhang and Lu (2003) introduced the experience in their university, which focused especially on establishing standards for excellent courses, using known professors to lead the teaching team, innovative teaching content and methods, and evaluating these courses to ensure quality. Ye, Shen and Gao (2005) emphasise the importance of excellent courses in improving teaching quality in that they can lead to the development of other courses. Improving QA systems has been identified by many researchers for quality improvement. Tang, Song, Feng, and Liu (2001)
introduce the experience of how Tsinghua University improved its teaching quality by improving their teaching QA systems from the aspects of curriculum development, teacher development, teacher appraisal, teaching management.

Student learning is also addressed when exploring how to improve education quality, though the number of articles in this category is too limited. Liu (2003) suggests that (1) learning is self-learning in its nature; (2) learning methods are more important than what has been learned; (3) learning quality is rooted in practice; (4) student participation in teaching, management, research, exchange and practice is the main medium to improve quality; (5) Developing creativity is an important task for university students; (6) the key to education is student engagement in self-education. Student feedback on teaching is considered as an important element of teacher appraisal and teaching evaluation (Liu, 2008b). Li and Chen (2006) suggest a new index system to reward teaching excellence.

Zhan (2009) discusses the principles of assessments and emphasises that assessments should serve student development and there should be more respect for and understanding of students’ individual needs and differences. Certain principles in assessment design are also summarised: (1) clarifying assessment objectives and structures; (2) choosing proper measures in assessments; (3) using multiple question types; (4) standardising the process of assessment design; (5) considering differentiation, validity and reliability in assessment design. Tian and Ma (2009) summarise the common problems of student learning assessments in Chinese HE: (1) There is too much examination on the subject knowledge in textbooks and little on student’s comprehension and creativity. (2) There is too much use of closed written exams. (3) There is no feedback to students after exams. (4) Exams cannot differentiate students because teachers usually give students the key issues to be tested before their exams. They give their suggestions to improve the quality of assessments: (1) before teaching the course, there should be a teaching task analysis which will help decide what assessment methods, standards and content to use; (2) In the period of composing assessments, teachers should verify the alignment between teaching task and assessment content, methods and grading criteria; (3) teachers should make assessment analysis and reflect their teaching after assessing student learning.

Yang (2009) conducted a survey on student feedback on the quality of graduation dissertations and satisfaction with their dissertation teaching and supervision. He identified seven dimensions to measure students’ feedback on
dissertation quality: teaching administrative department’s management of student dissertations; teaching administrative department’s supervision of academic departments, dissertation supervisors, and students; department directors’ supervision of student dissertation teaching and guidance; department directors’ supervision of the programmes, teachers and students in their departments; teaching of dissertation writing; supervisors’ supervision and guidance of student dissertations; students’ dissertation writing.

Zhang and Yue (2009) report their findings in the student development survey among 54 HEIs in Beijing in 2008. They find that there is significant difference among students’ evaluation of education quality of their institutions. In general, students from ‘985’ institutions have more positive feedback on the education quality of their institutions than other institutions, and students from ‘211’ institutions are more positive than students from ordinary institutions. They identify six factors (teaching content, student involvement, teaching methods, extra-curricular activities, campus service, and infrastructure) influencing students’ satisfaction with the HE quality they experienced. Among the six factors, teaching content and extra-curricular activities are the most significant.

Teacher development has the priority in education quality improvement. Li, Li, and Gao (2006) used a survey to investigate how teachers and students perceive the quality of teachers. Employing the statistical technique of exploratory factor analysis, they identify four factors in judging teacher quality, namely teachers’ discipline competence, quality as a teacher, personality and knowledge. They further suggest that HEIs should consider teacher development from the viewpoint of improving teachers’ knowledge, responsibility, teaching techniques, affinity and interaction with students. Bie (2009) argues that the key problem in education quality is the teachers’ pedagogical competence. In his view, most teachers start to teach after getting their PhD or master degrees without proper teacher training. Those teachers have to explore by themselves how to prepare teaching, how to organise teaching activities, how to give tutorials to students, and how to activate student learning. He maintains that pedagogy decides education quality and that there will be no quality improvement without an improvement in teaching methods. He suggest teachers innovate their teaching methods by shifting from teaching content based teaching to guiding students to a wider range of subject knowledge; by providing guidance to students to develop their subject knowledge and independent learning; and by adopting cooperative learning.
Teachers’ participation in quality improvement was discussed by Sun (2005) from five aspects: teachers as participants in QA, in assessing student learning, in analysing and evaluating teaching outcomes, in structuring evaluation standards, and in analysing and using quality evaluation results. In his view, teachers’ participation in evaluation is based on the following rationales: (1) teachers are the actors of teaching; (2) teachers’ participation is the basis of evaluation reliability; (3) evaluation is evaluating teachers’ teaching. Therefore, teacher development should be included in HEIs’ IQA and they should be involved in quality evaluation.

**Theme 6: Graduate employability and quality**

Employment rate is an important factor in evaluating HE quality. There are several articles discussing this topic from the viewpoint of the relationship between education quality and graduate employment, the factors influencing student employment, using self-assessment to improve student employability, and new methods to calculate student employment rate.

Wen (2003) examined the relationship between HE quality and graduate employment. He identifies three factors influencing graduate employment, supply, demand and labour market. (1) The graduate students’ number, quality, structure, their job searching activities and expectations are the main factors influencing graduate supply. (2) Social and economic development size, speed, and structure are influencing the demand for graduates. (3) Labour markets’ regulative factors, management and service also have important impact on the behaviour of both graduates and employers. He concludes that though quality is not the only factor deciding graduate employment, it is a decisive one if other factors are controlled.

Li, Liu and Weng (2005) conducted a survey among students who have confirmed their employment before their graduation in 14 Southern universities to investigate the impact of graduates’ employability on employment quality. They identify three latent factors constructing student employability, among which students’ personal characteristics, including honesty, diligence, commitment, responsibility, activeness and self-motivation, explain 23.135% of the variance; students’ work related competence, i.e. judgement, thinking ability, problem solving ability, independent working, adaptability, resourcefulness, learning ability, and team work awareness, explain 21.743% of the variance; and social and leadership competence, including communicative ability, leadership, social ability, coordinating ability, interpersonal ability and
entrepreneurship, explain 21.197% of the variance. They also find that student employability is significantly related to the quality of their employment quality, though there is no direct evidence to the causality. They recommend that the earlier students get to understand the employment environment, the better they are able to prepare themselves. Therefore, they suggest that universities should provide more employment guidance to students on campus through all possible forms, including developing students’ work-related skills, providing proper career development guidance, and creating more opportunities of social practice for students.

Liu (2006) observes that at the time of graduation students’ general ability is mainly assessed by teachers and departments where they study. He proposes including student self-assessment in the general ability assessment, to improve their self-recommendation ability in career development. He believes that students’ self-assessment will enable students to know their strong and weak points, to improve their employment related abilities, such as self-observation, self-analysis, judgement, self-management, self-recommendation and communication, subject knowledge application, time management, and awareness of credibility, responsibility, and team working. He recommends universities to provide students the opportunities to carry out self-assessment, to identify their own learning needs, and to develop their employability.

Sun and Chen (2008) criticise the current graduate employment rate calculation method of employment rate = (graduates with confirmed employment / total graduates number) * 100%, and propose a more complicated calculation method. They propose to include graduate employment rate (the rate of student employment confirmed before graduation, employment rate six months after graduation), salary level, employment structure (employment location, job levels, the reputation of employers, self-employment rate, postgraduate and overseas study rate), employment demand of the region, discipline, and industry, and student employment satisfaction into the calculation in order to make the employment rate statistical figure more informative for universities to improve their education quality.

**Summary**

The literature on quality and QA in Chinese HE is compartmentalised, and most journal articles are in the category of conceptual or theoretical discussion. Few
studies are empirical and fewer studies connect quality and QA with student learning. Despite the large number of articles addressing the conceptual or theoretical discussion, very few of them are grounded in proper theoretical literature, and they lack depth. Many articles introduce Western theories in quality and QA, but lack constructive criticism and nuanced analysis for their application in Chinese context. While introducing Western theories on quality and QA, there is some misinterpretation, which might be misleading. For example, in Liu, F.’s (2003) work, Green’s (1993) definition of quality is referenced but the interpretation is not concise, which is further referenced by Zhang, Jin and Shi (2009) in their article discussing certain concepts in HE quality. In addition, QA in HE is not a context free concept, but should be located in a particular country, or area of education and institutions. This implies the need to develop theories of quality and QA in the Chinese context.

The large number of publications on conceptual and theoretical discussion of quality and QA does not mean a sound theoretical ground has been established in Chinese HE. By and large, as shown in the literature reviewed, in Chinese HE QA, the role of control and evaluation dominates over the process of student learning. What QA can or cannot do in developing Chinese HE has not been investigated with enough quality empirical studies.

The quality of research in the field of QA in Chinese HE needs to be improved. Firstly, in the process of introducing theories developed by overseas scholars, it is necessary to make sure that theorises are properly interpreted and represented. Secondly, empirical research needs to be developed in Chinese HE. Most of the empirical research in the literature reviewed employs the survey method, especially in investigating student evaluation of teaching and their satisfaction. However, there is little in-depth qualitative research conducted to explore QA and enhancement. There are a number of articles describing cases of QA in some Chinese universities, but these are not case studies in a research sense. They are rather describing and reporting the experience of establishing and developing QA in those universities. Thirdly, QA and what it can or cannot do needs to be explored in a more nuanced sense. The efforts in developing HE will never stop and should not be limited by the current discourse of QA in Chinese HE.

As it is clear from the literature reviewed, there are differences between QA in the west and in China, which to some extent reflect the different cultural traditions in which universities operate. In fact, as part of this study, I did
conduct a quite detailed analysis of the QA processes in Chinese universities and the assumptions underpinning the QA in China. However, as I hinted in my introduction, when I began to collect data, my notion of what was important changed somewhat. Nevertheless, I did write up the findings from this part of my research in a paper which is available in Appendix 9 for the interest reader.
Chapter 2: Research Methodology

2.1 Delimiting the research focus and questions

The exploration of ‘quality’ in HE has been dominated by compliance with external agencies’ definition of ‘quality As’ – assurance, accountability, audit and assessment (Houston, 2008). Compliance with a definition imposed from outside the university largely ignores the views of academics, students and others inside who are affected but not involved (Ulrich, 2001). The prevailing imposed quality evaluation in Chinese HE has led to gaps between macro-level quality evaluation, meso-level QA approaches, and the improvement of teaching and learning at micro-level. Compliance is leading in the process of QA establishment and development in Chinese HE. Chinese universities are investing considerable resources to comply with external requirements but with minimal and poorly-targeted or documented pay-offs. The literature of QA in China emphasises evaluation, standards, and improvement of quality as defined in the quality evaluation procedures. There is little convincing evidence to show that investment in QA has contributed to an improvement in student learning.

What are the levers that stimulate improvements in teaching and learning? This study attempts to understand how to fill the gap between the existing QA and student learning by exploring Chinese students’ learning experiences and how these can be integrated into Chinese QA schemes for continuous quality improvement. The purpose of this study is also to stimulate new ways of conceptualising student experiences and QA approaches in Chinese universities and to provide implications for Chinese HEIs to improve their education quality. The main research questions are:

1. What are the Chinese universities’ approaches to QA? How are student learning experiences used in the current quality assurance system?
2. How do students and staff perceive HE quality, the current QA system and student learning experiences?
3. How to integrate student learning experiences into the QA system for continuous quality improvement at Chinese HEIs?

Research questions narrow the research purpose to specific questions that researchers seek to answer (Creswell, 2005). Formulating research questions helped me identifying the phenomenon to be studied and mapping out my research strategy.

2.2 Research design

Research design can be categorised into three levels: at the most general level it means all the issues involved in planning and executing a research project, from identifying the problem to reporting and publishing the results; at the most specific level it means a researcher guards against and tries to rule out alternative interpretations of results; and between these two levels research design situates research in the empirical world and connects research questions to data (Punch, 2009). The design of this study considered the following issues: what strategy to follow? what conceptual frame work to use? from whom to collect data? and how to collect data?

Research strategy is important because it drives the design. Behind the design lies a logical rationale for answering the research questions. Miles and Huberman (1994, pp. 6-7) summarise the recurrent features in qualitative research, providing a good background for qualitative research design:

- Qualitative research is conducted through intense and/or prolonged contact with a ‘field’ or life situation.
- The researcher’s role is to gain a ‘holistic’ overview of the context under study: its logic, its arrangements, and its explicit and implicit rules.
- The researcher attempts to capture data on the perceptions of local actors ‘from the inside’, through a process of deep attentiveness, of empathetic understanding, and of suspending or ‘bracketing’ preconceptions about the topic under discussion.
- Reading through these materials, the researcher may isolate certain themes and expressions that can be reviewed with informants, but that should be maintained in their original forms throughout the study.
- A main task is to explicate the ways people in particular settings come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their days-to-day situations.
• Many interpretations of this material are possible, but some are more compelling for theoretical reasons or on grounds of internal consistency.
• Relatively little standardised instrumentation is used at the outset. The researcher is essentially the main ‘instrument’ in the study.
• Most analysis is done with words. The words can be assembled, subclustered, broken into semiotic segments. They can be organised to permit the researcher to contrast, compare, analyse and bestow patterns upon them.

This study adopted a qualitative strategy to analyse the QA in Chinese universities and to explore how student learning experiences can be integrated into QA to achieve continuous quality improvement. The selection of the qualitative approach is based on the strong points of qualitative research, the nature of the research questions and the advantages qualitative methods may provide for this study. These include:

• qualitative research is about meaning
• qualitative research focuses on emergent themes
• qualitative research has flexibility
• qualitative research is reflexive through the role of the researcher
• qualitative research is sensitive to process
• qualitative research provides a holistic view
• participants in qualitative research are not subjects, but active participants

At the centre of this is the set of ideas by which the study intends to proceed in order to answer the core research question, how to integrate the student learning experience into QA processes. From the literature review of QA in Chinese journals, we see there has been little discussion about QA from the aspect of student learning. Despite the large number of publications on quality evaluation and assurance, the issue of student learning has been touched on in only a small number of areas (i.e. student satisfaction, student evaluation of teaching) and relies heavily on survey methods. The survey as a main quantitative method is very efficient in generating a general picture of student satisfaction and their evaluation of teaching, but it is not so effective in answering why costly QA procedures cannot improve student learning, or how best to integrate the student learning experience into QA mechanisms. The focus of the study lends itself to qualitative analysis, in terms of students, teachers and administrators’ understandings of quality, QA and student learning, and
their sense-making processes. Therefore, qualitative research methods are appropriate to the research questions and have been chosen as the research tools for this study.

The conceptual framework here is framed by the three key concepts, quality, QA and student learning, and their relationships to each other. Embedded within the main research questions, this study is interested in how education quality is perceived by key stakeholders, how QA is carried out in universities, and how students learn. These questions need to be answered by students, teachers, and administrators. Therefore, they were identified as the sample group to collect data from. The data collection activities planned at the stage of research design were data from interviews with students, teachers, and administrators, documents related to QA and student learning, and other qualitative data reflecting student learning and education quality.

2.2.1 Why use the case study approach?

Qualitative research is a complex, changing and contested field with multiple methodologies and research practices (Punch, 2009). There are a number of choices of approaches for researchers to undertake qualitative studies, from narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography, to case study (Creswell, 2007). Every approach has its own advantages and disadvantages. The purpose of this study is not to produce a standardised set of results or to generate a theory, but to produce a coherent and illuminating discussion of and perspective on QA and student learning experiences that are based on and consistent with detailed study of live situations. The key dimensions of the research questions are:

- What is the status quo of QA and student learning in Chinese universities?
- Why does QA have little impact on student learning improvement?
- How can student learning experiences be integrated into QA to achieve continuous educational quality improvement?

The inquiry into QA systems, student learning experiences and quality improvement requires the researcher to attend to the subtlety and complexity of conflicts in QA and student learning. Accordingly, multiple methods are needed to collect the data of the current QA systems in Chinese HE, key stakeholders’ understanding of quality, students’ learning experiences, and the workable
breakthrough to integrate student learning into QA systems for the purpose of continuous quality improvement. In addition, the nature of this study requires the researcher to use a research strategy with which the researcher can make in-depth investigations and find underlying principles by collecting data with multiple methods, analysing data in an open and rigorous way and by gaining a sharpened understanding of issues that the researcher intended to explore in this study.

The case study is a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 1994). The emphasis on context or setting is an important aspect of a case study. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that in some circumstances the term ‘site’ is more preferable, because it stresses that a case occurs in a specified social and physical setting, which is in contrast with most quantitative methods. The case study approach is powerful for the studies aiming to understand cases in depth in its natural setting, recognising its complexity and its context. It focuses on a phenomenon in context and uses multiple methods of evidence or data collection. Therefore, the case study approach was selected as the best choice to address the research questions in this study, to examine students’ experiences and HEIs’ QA approaches in the natural context, to find out why QA schemes have not improved student learning, and to explore how the student learning experience can be incorporated into QA systems to achieve continuous quality improvement in Chinese universities.

Two foreign languages universities were selected in this case study. What this intends to find out through the inquiry in the two universities are: 1) what are the QA systems in Chinese HE like? 2) how do the key stakeholders understand HE quality and student learning experiences? 3) why does the current QA have little impact on student learning improvement? 4) how to integrate student learning experiences into QA for continuous quality improvement? The above key research areas in this study were explored with multiple research methods, multiple-source data, and systematic data analysis.

- Document analysis is crucial in reaching an overview of the current QA systems in Chinese HE. Two sources of documents have been collected, national policy documents and the university produced policy and guidelines. Besides these key documents, documents from other sources, for example, student learning diary, were also collected.
• The accounts from students, teachers and administrators are equally important for the researcher to explore how educational quality and student learning are perceived by these key stakeholders inside HEIs. Interviews are employed to collect students’ and teachers’ viewpoints on what really constitutes quality and how they perceive student learning experiences.

• The questions of why the current QA has little impact on student learning improvement and how to integrate student learning experiences into QA for continuous quality improvement is explored based on the analysis of documentary and interview data.

The introduction to the two case universities is presented in the section 2.2.2. The details of the data collection and analysis process, the documents included in this study, the interview methods used and data generated are introduced in the section 2.3 and 2.4.

2.2.2 The two case universities

Two foreign language universities have been chosen to be the two main cases in this study. This selection is based on the following reasons:

1) Foreign language universities in China have experienced two major national level external quality evaluations since 2002: the National Teaching Quality Evaluation, and the National Foreign Languages Course Review. Exposed to different external quality reviews, the perspectives of the students, teachers and quality managers on the quality in these universities might be more deep and representative.

2) Foreign language universities in China are mostly of similar size, offering similar courses, which may make the cross-case comparison and analysis more workable.

3) University A is one of the two best foreign language universities in China, well-known for its contributions to the development of the nation’s foreign language education, curricula, teacher training, foreign language research, and the development of quality evaluation of foreign language courses. University B is quite typical among the regional universities, which have experienced the process of recent Chinese HE reforms. It is now striving to distinguish itself through its performance in external quality evaluation.
4) The selected HEIs focus on teaching areas related to the researcher’s own background. The researcher of this study has the background of teaching English at a Chinese university. Choosing HEIs of foreign languages will avoid the potential problems or misunderstanding caused by lacking subject knowledge.

**University A**

University A, founded in December 1949, is a national level key university in China and one of the ‘Project 211’ universities. University A is jointly funded and administered by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Municipality of Shanghai. The mission of University A is to cultivate graduates with multidisciplinary knowledge, generic skills and international orientation. University A is one of the two leading foreign languages universities in China. University A has two campuses, one in the city centre for senior postgraduates, overseas students, and students in other training programmes. The new campus in the suburb, is for undergraduates and some junior postgraduate students. University A has 20 schools and departments, covering five disciplines, literature, education, economics, management and law, and providing education at various levels from vocational, undergraduate, to postgraduate levels. University A also provides adult education and international education. There are 35 undergraduate programmes, 23 masters’ level programmes and 9 PhD level programmes. University A has a full-time enrolment of 1533 postgraduate students, 7070 undergraduate students, and 1350 international students. There are more than 644 teaching staff. University A undertook its national teaching quality evaluation in May 2004 and achieved the result of ‘Excellent’. The College of English Language and Literature undertook its subject review in May 2007 and achieved the result of ‘Excellent’ too.

**University B**

University B is located in Dalian, Liaoning Province, China. It was founded in 1964 and aimed to train foreign affairs officials, Japanese language translators and interpreters. Through 40 years of development, University B has become a multi-disciplinary foreign language university, which offers 25 undergraduate programmes and 14 postgraduate programmes. The undergraduate programmes
cover the field of the language of Japanese, English, Russian, French, Korean, German, Spanish, Arabic, Italian, Chinese Literature, Teaching Chinese as a Second Language, Art Design, Tourism Management, International Economics & Trade, Computer Science & Technology, Information Management and Information Systems, Computer Software Engineering, Journalism and Music Studies. There are over 20,000 students on campus, including more than 800 postgraduates, 12,000 undergraduates, 900 international students, and nearly 9,000 students for adult education. The university has 900 staff with 300 professors and associate professors. The mission defined by DLUFL herself is cultivating talents with multidisciplinary knowledge, multiple skills and an international orientation. The university gained ‘Excellence’ in the national undergraduate education quality evaluation in 2007.

The intention of choosing two universities as the cases in this study is not for the sake of a comparative study. Instead, choosing a national level university and a regional one is to avoid the conclusion of the study being limited by the level of the university. However, if the two universities turn out to be different in their QA measures or have significant approaches to managing student learning and QA, the comparison between the two universities would be considered as a key issue in this study.

2.3 Data collection

Case study designs constitute a major strategy for social research and offer an extensive variety of designs. Case study approaches have used a wide variety of data collection methods and they are particularly suited to research including a diverse range of units of analysis (de Vaus, 2001)

Following Yin's (2003) suggestion about the significance of using a case study protocol, a protocol for this study was produced to keep the data collection targeted on the topic of the case study, to avoid possible problems in the process of data collection, to keep the data collection on track, and to increase the reliability of this study. The protocol of this case study is composed of an overview of the background information, the issues to be investigated, and the relevant literature reviews and readings, alongside the detailed field procedures to be used. Case studies are studies of events within their real-life context and data will be collected from student, teachers, administrators and institutions in
their everyday situations. Therefore, it is necessary to have field procedures that integrate real-world events within the needs of the data collection plan. The explicit and well-planned field procedures worked as a frame, emphasising the major tasks in the process of data collection.

2.3.1 Access

Gaining access to the HEIs and interviewees is the starting point of data collection. Doing research in Chinese universities usually requires a formal agreement. Negotiating access to the two HEIs in this study was through two different processes. The access to the national university was through a key contact there who recognised the value of this study. This key contact introduced me to the Director of the Teaching Administration Department and the Director of the College of English Language and Literature. The access to the regional university was through the Educational Department of the provincial government. In the process of negotiating access, an overview of the study and the detailed data collection procedures were prepared and submitted to the HEIs for their consideration and amendment. The national university agreed the access, but did not offer any further support. The regional university was very cooperative and provided all requested support and documents. Negotiating access required the researcher to be very flexible in adjusting her schedule and to be sensitive to all possible data collection opportunities. Gaining the access to the regional university was a once for all permission, which means that after gaining the access to the university, the access to students, teachers and administrators has been supported by the university. In contrast, the access to every interviewee at the national university needed a process of negotiation. During the fieldwork at the national university, the researcher had to adjust her schedule and interviewees constantly for various reasons from the side of the interviewees, for example, the availability, the transportation between the two campuses, interviewees’ sudden change of plan, and so on.

2.3.2 Data to be collected

Having a clear concept of what data is to be collected and good management of the data collected is crucial to the data collection process. At the heart of what data to collect is a set of substantive questions reflecting the actual line of inquiry. The three research areas decide the orientation, but they need to be transferred into questions for data collection, accompanied by a list of likely
sources of evidence and how to collect these data. Among the three main research areas, (1) what are the Chinese universities’ approaches to QA? How are student learning experiences used in the current quality assurance system? (2) how do students and staff perceive HE quality, the current QA system and student learning experiences? (3) how to integrate the student learning experience into the QA system for continuous quality improvement at Chinese HEIs?, the first two research areas decide the process of data collection, while the last one is more analytic and can only be explored after finding out the answers to the first two research questions. Therefore, the first two research areas formed the starting point for operational questions in the process of data collection.

Table 4: Overview of the data collection in this study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Collection Questions</th>
<th>Sources of evidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1/ What is the external quality assurance like?</td>
<td>Director of Institutional teaching administration departments and directors of academic departments and schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/ What is the structure of the internal quality assurance?</td>
<td>Documents from NCCE, MoE, and the HEIs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/ What is the function of student learning experience in the quality assurance systems?</td>
<td>Students, Teachers, Administrators, Teaching administration documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/ How do students think of the quality of their higher education?</td>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/ How do students perceive their learning experience in the university?</td>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/ How do teachers understand the quality of higher education?</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/ How do teachers think of student learning and their teaching?</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/ How do teaching administrators perceive the quality of higher education?</td>
<td>Teaching administrators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/ How do teaching administrators think of student learning?</td>
<td>Teaching administrators</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Translating research questions into data collection questions accompanied by a list of likely sources of evidence made the data collection process clearly
targeted and well controlled. Of the six main data sources pointed out by Yin (2003) (documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant-observation, and physical artefacts), interviews, documentation, and observation were chosen as the main sources for the data collection of this study, to achieve a comprehensive overview of the students’ experiences, QA and quality improvement processes in these universities. No matter what data sources were chosen, in the process of collecting data, I found the necessity of keeping a continuous interaction between the theoretical insights gained in reviewing the literature and the data being collected, and between the data collected in different forms.

**Interviews**

One of the most important sources of case study information is the interview (Yin, 2003). In this study, students, teachers, and quality managers in the selected universities will be interviewed. As suggested by Yin (2003), interviews are essential sources of case study information, which are guided conversations rather than structured queries. In the interview process, the researcher needs to follow her own line of inquiry as reflected in the protocol developed before the data collection process, and at the same time to ask the conversational questions in an unbiased manner to serve the needs of the inquiry. Collecting data through interviews requires researchers to be able to ask good questions and interpret the answers, to be good listeners and not trapped by their own preconceptions, to be adaptive and flexible and to see new situations as opportunities, to have a firm grasp of the issues being studied, and to be unbiased by preconceived notions (Yin, 2003).

Much has been written on the topic of different types of interviews. For example, Yin (2003) distinguishes the in-depth interview, the focused interview, and the use of more structured questions. Patton (2002) distinguishes three main types of interviews, the informal conversational interview, the general 'interview guide’ approach and the standardised open-ended interview. Robson (2002) distinguishes three types of interviews, fully structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews. Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, and Alexander (1990) summarise a continuum of interviewing methods based on the degree of structure imposed.
There are many different types of interview, and we should select the interview type most appropriate to research purposes and questions. The purpose of this study is to examine QA in Chinese HE and student learning experiences, and to explore how to incorporate student learning experiences in a QA system for continuous quality improvement. Describing and interpreting the current QA systems and student learning experiences, and exploring how to incorporate student learning experiences into QA are the main focus points of this study. The interpretative and exploratory nature of this study indicates semi-structure in-depth interviews and focus groups as appropriate for this study. Basically, before the process of data collection, focus groups were chosen to collect data from students, and in-depth interviews were chosen for staff. However, there were some changes necessary in the fieldwork process when unstructured interviews and the combination of semi-structured and unstructured interviews were also employed. The interview questions has been translated and listed in Appendix 2. The overview of the interviews is shown in Table 5.
### Table 5: The interview summary

Throughout the interview process, the researcher not only followed the designed line of inquiry but also asked actual (conversational) questions in an unbiased manner to serve the need of the inquiry. In this case study, the interviews varied from open-ended ones asking interviewees about their perspectives of student experiences, the QA system in their universities, and their opinions about it, to more structured interviews, especially when the response categories were developed. Interviews in this study were all conducted in Chinese. The length of the interviews varied from thirty minutes to five hours, depending on the availability of interviewees and how comfortable they were to spend time with me and explain their views in detail.

The semi-structured interviews with the teachers focused on their perceptions of quality and QA and their understandings of student learning. Teachers were
recruited through introductions from their colleagues, through contacts at the universities, and through the recommendation of the teachers interviewed. The directors of teaching management and the directors of the two colleges at the two universities were accessed through the introduction of the contacts there. The negotiation of access for staff interviewees took some time, but most interviews proved to be successful. Once accepting the interview, most interviewees were very willing to share their perceptions, experiences and opinions. Most of them consented to the interview being recorded, but a few of them only allowed the researcher to take notes. All interviews were arranged on campus. Before and after the interview was also the good time to observe the work of the interviewees. Most of the teachers chose the time after class to take my interview. The two universities are both located in a suburb of the city, the time waiting for the university evening bus after class proved to be a good time for interviews, when the teachers were more available and relaxed.

Focus groups were chosen as the method to collect student perceptions of their learning experiences and their perceptions of education quality. Focus groups are considered to be the most appropriate method for this type of research, as many students are likely to feel more comfortable voicing their opinions in the company of friends and colleagues. These groups provide a forum for students to reflect on and react to the opinions of others. Students attending the focus group were recruited through multiple methods, including posting advertisements, recruiting on campus by accessing students randomly, and recruiting through the student union. Students recruited were divided into four groups for each university, according to these students’ availability of time. Each group was composed of six to ten students. Students were invited to take part in a small group discussion, with the incentive of a free soft drink in acknowledgement of their time commitment. Eight focus groups were carried out to get detailed student experiences. Most of these focus groups lasted 2-3 hours. Seven focus groups were recorded with a digital recorder after achieving the consent of all participants, but one focus group was not recorded due to a technical problem with the digital recorder.

All focus group recordings were listened to and reviewed immediately afterwards and detailed field notes were taken. Several students contacted me again after the focus groups to share their learning experiences individually. An individual interview was conducted for these students. These second rounds of interviews were mainly a combination of unstructured and semi-structured interviews. The unstructured part was to give the students the opportunity to talk about what
they wanted to share with the researcher, while the semi-structured part was to verify the questions raised after reviewing the focus group record. Students were very active in contributing their perceptions and experiences. Many of them expressed how they welcomed more opportunities to share their learning experiences with their peers and the researcher. All these interviews provide rich data to understand the learning experience of these students and show the need for Chinese HEIs to explore appropriate ways to ensure the quality of student learning experiences.

In the process of data collection, most interviews were carried out in the planned format, but there were several exceptions. While doing fieldwork at University A, one teacher respondent stated that he would prefer an informal exchange. The unstructured interview was applied in that case. Immediately after completing the fieldwork there, I encountered the Deputy Director of the Teaching Management Department of the university at a national conference on QA organised by NEEC. We had an unstructured interview over the lunch time. There was a Year 1 student I encountered on campus that helped me post advertisements to recruit focus group participants. I held an unstructured interview with her when we met on campus to get to know about her recent introduction to university life, and we did a semi-structured interview afterwards. There were also three students who contacted me after doing the focus group. Some of them indicated that they had their own opinions which they wanted to share with me individually, and one of them wanted some advice from me about learning abroad. The second round of interviews with them was a combination of both structured and unstructured. The structured part was used to verify the points I noted from their focus groups, while the unstructured part was used to better understand the stories of these students without imposing any a priori categorisation.

While doing fieldwork at University B, the interview with the Director of English College was planned to be a one-hour semi-structured interview, but it became a five-hour interview with the planned semi-structured interview followed by an unstructured discussion where she shared her experiences of managing the college and initiatives encouraging teachers to do teaching research and to improve their teaching skills. This encounter was very instructive. On the one hand, the combination of the planned semi-structured interview and the following open ended and unstructured interview enabled an in-depth exploration of issues of educational quality, QA practice, understanding of student learning, and the perception and efforts in improving teaching quality.
**Documentation**

Documentary information is an important part of the data of this study. Based on the research questions of this study, the documents identified as related to QA practice of national agencies and HEIs, and to student learning experiences include: national policies and regulations related to the issue of the quality of HE; national statistics on HE; Chinese HEIs’ internal and EQA policies and documents; HEIs’ self-review report; the Index System of Undergraduate Teaching Quality Evaluation (2002 and 2004 versions); student feedback surveys and reports; curriculum documents; course introductions; other documents related to student experiences and the QA of the universities. These documents were not accepted as a literal record of events but used critically. Collecting these was to understand QA approaches in Chinese universities, to corroborate information from other sources, and to set up a picture of how the student learning experience is positioned in the current Chinese HE system. At the same time, to avoid over-reliance on documents, when assessing the quality of documents this study followed the four criteria suggested by Scott (1990):

1. Authenticity: Is the evidence genuine and of unquestionable origin?
2. Credibility: Is the evidence free from error and distortion?
3. Representativeness: Is the evidence typical of its kind, and, if not, is the extent of its untypicality known?
4. Meaning: Is the evidence clear and comprehensible?

Following these principles and the data collection protocol developed on the basis of research questions, the following documents were collected:

- Regulations and requirements on QA from the MoE
  - Undergraduate Teaching Quality Evaluation Index
  - Discipline-based Undergraduate Teaching Evaluation: the Discipline of Foreign Languages
  - Regulation of Student Management at Chinese HEIs (2005)
  - Code of Practice for Students at HEIs
  - Regulation of Tutor Development at HEIs (2006)
  - Code of Practice for Evaluators in Undergraduate Teaching Evaluation
The self-review reports of the two universities
University A’s Self-Review Report for Undergraduate Teaching Evaluation (see Appendix 5)
University B’s Self-Review Report for Undergraduate Teaching Evaluation (see Appendix 6)

Official documents on QA from the universities in this study
University A
- University A’s Fifteenth-Five-Year Education Development and Reform Plan
- Classroom Teaching Quality Evaluation Procedures
- Quality Requirements for Student Informants
- Regulation of Student’s Evaluation of Teaching
- Questionnaires for Evaluating Teaching

University B
- On Further Enhancing and Improving Teaching QA System (policy)
- Code of Practice for University B Teaching Supervision and Quality Evaluation Committee
- University B’s Follow-up Improvement Plan after Undergraduate Teaching Evaluation
- Questionnaires for Evaluating Teaching

These documents were collected from multiple sources, including the teaching management departments of the universities, the colleges and their directors, teachers and students, the websites of the universities, Higher Education Evaluation Centre (HEEC) and MoE. These documents were collected in conjunction with interviews and observation. Some quality management documents were collected from the directors of departments and colleges after interviewing them. There were some surprises in the document data collection, for example, contrary to my expectation, two students shared their learning diaries with me, and a few students kept contact with me by emails, which were subsequently drawn on as a part of the data to understand the student learning experience. These documents provided the background of this study composed a key part of data analysed, played an important role in triangulation, and provided a rich resource for analysing the QA in Chinese HEIs.
2.4 Data analysis

There is a variety of techniques of data analysis, because there are different questions to be addressed and different versions of social reality that can be elaborated (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). All qualitative research is characterized by an emphasis on inductive rather than deductive information processing (Hatch, 2002). Inductive analysis starts from examining the particulars within data, moves to looking for patterns across individual observations, then arguing for those patterns as having the status of general explanatory statements (Potter, 1996).

Yin (1994, 1999) suggests three principles in analysing data to produce high quality data analysis: (1) attending to all the evidence; (2) displaying and presenting the evidence separate from any interpretation; (3) showing adequate concern for exploring alternative interpretations.

2.4.1 Analysis of the interview data

The data collected from the fieldwork include interviews and focus group records, documents, field notes, and some student diaries. All interview and focus group data were transcribed. Most of the recording was clear enough, except for the recording of one focus group. This incident did not influence the transcription because a detailed field note had been made during the focus group. This served as a reminder that all recording should be transcribed as soon as possible after the interview or focus group. Each interview was saved in a separate file. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the names of people involved in the data collected are protected with a code to make them unidentifiable.

Data analysis started as soon as the data was collected. All data collected was indexed with tabs and put into the case study database. Even though there are debates on whether it is necessary to transcribe an interview in order to conduct data analysis, all interviews of this study were transcribed. Of course, interview transcription is very time consuming. It took me four weeks to transcribe all interviews. One advantage of putting interviews onto pages is that it sets up a good foundation for systematic data analysis and allows the researcher to be more aware of emerging themes which have not been asked about in a more direct way in interviews.
When all data collected from the fieldwork and the interview transcription were displayed in front of me for coding, I found that there was much for me to compile and analyse. Following Miles and Huberman’s (1994) advice, research questions were used to start the coding process. The related research questions were transformed into coding questions:

- How do students, teachers and administrators think of education quality?
- How do they understand QA?
- What are the main themes perceived as important in student learning experiences?

These coding questions worked as the objectives directing the coding process. An initial open coding was conducted immediately after transcribing the interviews. At this stage, the coding became more descriptive, but it was very helpful in giving me a feel of the data. The coding process started from the data collected from University A. Codes were attached to `chunks` with different sizes from sentences to a paragraph. Sometimes, more than one code was given to the same chunk of information. At the descriptive coding stage, the codes carried little inference, apart from a class of phenomena. The open coding resulted in a long list of codes and categories, which was quite challenging to manage by hand. The software NVIVO was then used and enabled me to do the coding in a systematic and efficient way. Coding at this state was provisional, and codes were developed by constant comparison of codes and rereading of field notes. Memos were written when coding because it helped develop the conceptual categories and themes. Coding was not a sequential process, but often revised in the process of comparing and abstracting.

As the researcher became more knowledgeable about the dynamics in the data, and through the procedures of adding codes, extending codes, configuring categories, and identifying new categories, the coding process naturally went into the stage of focusing on pattern codes with a higher level of abstraction, together with the emerging categories and themes. At this stage the conceptual and structural order was the focus, and the codes pulled a lot of material together into more meaningful units of analysis. In other words, a large amount of data was reduced into a smaller number of analytic units. Codes were related to one another and higher level categories and themes were developed. Analytic memos were used in the whole process of coding, for the convenience of recording ideas and developing the conceptual structure to elaborate an evolving and more integrated schema for understanding the phenomena and interactions.
revealed in the data. To avoid stalling at the analytic stage, which is quite common in research starting with no notion about how the evidence is to be analysed, this study developed its analytic tools, which were centred on its three coding questions, along with the researcher’s rigorous reflection, the sufficient presentation of evidence and careful consideration of alternative interpretations. In the process of data analysis, constant comparative method was used and proved to be very helpful.

The coding process was repeated three times. I used NVIVO software to assist the interview data analysis, but due to technical reasons the software collapsed after the first round of the complete coding of the whole data. The lesson I learned from this was to keep a manual coding book or to work out a safe way to back up the analysis in case of software failure. After recoding the data, the codes, categories, and themes were discussed with the supervisor, with some participants who had stayed in touch, and other PhD students. With their advice, the data was coded again, but this time coding was very purposeful for verifying the propositions and preparing case reporting.

2.4.2 Document analysis

As listed in the previous section, the document data collected in this study was mainly for the purpose of interpreting and conceptualising the QA schemes in Chinese HE. Document analysis in this study was conducted with clear objectives based on the research questions. The purpose of document analysis was to understand the structure of QA at Chinese universities in practice and to provide the foundation for analysing the limitations of the current QA and exploring how to incorporate student learning experiences into the QA systems to realise continuous quality improvement. The questions guiding the document analysis were:

- What are the structures of QA in Chinese universities?
- What policies guide the development of QA in Chinese universities?
- What are the key components of QA schemes?
- Who are the actors in QA schemes?

These questions implied the objectives of document analysis, and defined the scope of analysis and the use of information.
The documents relating to the standards of teaching quality evaluation, the standards of subject review, and other national quality policies were collected before the fieldwork on campus. These documents provided the context within which Chinese universities developed their QA systems. The collection of other documents was conducted in the fieldwork and expanded to the self-review report, QA regulations, and other institutional official documents. While collecting interview data, the documents extended to students’ learning diaries, and other personal documents. All documents collected were analysed with the method of qualitative content analysis. With the assistance of NVIVO software, the documents were coded and categories were generated. The document coding questions proved to be very helpful in anchoring direction in the process of document analysis. Within the domain of these questions, the key recurring themes and themes of interests were identified. The relationship between categories and themes were linked, compared and reflected on.

The document analysis ended when the objectives for this stage were reached; the answer to the four document analysis questions were found, and the structure and key dynamics of QA were identified. In fact, the results of document analysis yielded more than expected. Through document analysis, the structure of QA in Chinese HE could be summarised, and at the same time, the imbalance between external and internal QA revealed the pitfalls of the current QA structure. This provided explanation for certain issues the researcher identified in analysing interview data. For example, both teachers and students at the two universities linked QA to quality evaluation and limited their understanding of QA to various kinds of evaluation. Furthermore, the documentary analysis helped identify the areas to explore to establish a more student-learning focused QA system. The completion of the initial process of document analysis does not mean these documents do not need to be analysed again. Instead, these documents were referred to and reanalysed again and again for various purposes, including verifying the preliminary conclusions of the document analysis, triangulating the analyses of interview data, developing the discussion, and structuring a new learning focused QA.

2.5 Case reporting

How best to report the cases were in the researcher’s consideration even before the process of data collection. When designing the study, what types of and how many universities to select, what rationale to use in this case study, and the
focus of case reporting were elaborated. The rationale of choosing the two universities has been reported in the previous part of this chapter. The most important reason of choosing one national level university and one regional level university was to examine whether the institutional QA was influenced by the difference of the university: levels of the university, funding sources, location, and sources of students.

The focus of this study is not comparing the two universities, but to investigate the structure and dynamics of the QA systems, to examine why the quality movement has not improved the quality of student learning, and to explore how student learning experiences might be incorporated into a more generic QA system. Although the nature of this study is not comparative, the constant comparison method was used in the whole process of the research. The data collection and analysis were conducted case by case, and data in one group was compared and contrasted with that in the other groups, in order to form a bigger and more concise picture. The findings from the case of University A were tested and verified in the case of University B. The researcher found that there was little difference between the two cases in terms of the QA systems: the external drives in developing QA, the process of developing institutional QA, the structure of both internal and EQA systems at both universities, the operation of institutional QA, and even the results they obtained in the national teaching quality evaluation. Despite the differences in student entry level, the students in both universities did not differ greatly in how they understand educational quality, in their expectations of university learning, and in how they perceive their university learning experiences. Following the same national curriculum, which has regulated the educational objectives, course structure, course hours, course requirements, teaching principles and methods, assessments, and textbooks and references, the curriculum of similar programmes proved to be similar in both universities. It is also found that teachers are employing similar teaching methods with lecturing as the main approach, even though there are more known scholars and a higher research profile in the national university. In other words, the levels of the university, funding sources, location, and sources of students have not influenced the QA in either university.

In summary, the purpose of this study was not to compare the quality of the two universities, but to investigate how to improve HE quality by attending more to and incorporating student learning experiences into a more generic QA. Furthermore, the two universities were not significantly different in terms of QA systems and student learning experiences. Therefore, the reporting of this case
The study will not highlight cross-case comparison, but will be structured by integrating the two cases and highlighting the three key issues of the study, quality, QA and student learning, to explore how to develop a QA system more sensitive to student learning needs in Chinese universities.

2.6 Ethical issues

The study adhered strictly to the Ethical Practice Policy and Guidance composed by the School of Education, the University of Manchester and the Guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2004). The research is not anticipated to cause risk or harm to any of the participants. All research participants were informed of the purposes of the research and their right to withdraw from the research at any time. Written consent was obtained from all interview participants. The researcher made every effort to ensure the confidential and anonymous treatment of participants’ data. All data was stored in accordance with the requirement in the Ethical Practice Policy and Guidance composed by School of Education and BERA guidelines. The consent letter used is included in Appendix 1.

‘Sound ethics and sound methodology go hand in hand’ (Sieber 1992, p.4), though sometimes ‘ethical considerations usually throw up ethical dilemmas’ (Gomm, 2004, p.303). To avoid possible bias and misleading conclusions of this research, ethical considerations were observed at every stage of the research process: research design, gaining access, data collection, data analysis, and making conclusions. The ethical issues raised by this research are discussed in the light of the Ethical Practice Policy and Guidance composed by the School of Education, the University of Manchester, with special consideration given to the responsibility of the researcher to the participants and the community of the educational researchers.

As Gomm (2004) pointed out, researchers are all subject to a moral requirement to conduct research truthfully. Though there might be different interpretations of being truthful, researchers require each other to take ‘all reasonable precautions’ to prevent the production of misleading results (Gomm, 2004). Thus in the research design, the researcher should consider making the research available for scrutiny by others and give special attention to the relation between what is claimed and the account given to support the claim (Gomm, 2004). The researcher followed the Ethical Practice Policy and Guidance composed by the
School of Education, the University of Manchester and informed the two Chinese universities about the research design, procedures, the participants in the research, and the research activities. The researcher also honestly provided details about the research purpose and the researcher’s research competence in conducting this research.

The researcher’s responsibility to participants has been carefully considered. This study strictly followed the seven principles set out in the School of Education Ethical Protocol: (1) respect for human dignity; (2) ensure integrity and quality; (3) respect for free and informed consent; (4) respect for vulnerable persons; (5) respect for privacy and confidentiality; (6) participation should be voluntary; and (7) procedures should avoid harm. It is very clear that voluntary and fully informed consent is compulsory in any research. The researcher informed participants in the research about the research intention, procedures, the possible cost to the participant (in this research, mainly time), privacy protection, how and to whom the research result is to be reported, and the right to withdraw. A written form of consent was given to the research participants, together with a clear face-to-face explanation about the purpose of the interview, the procedures of the observation and interview, the length of time, and the possible loss of time for the participants. The researcher is quite clear about the right of any participants to withdraw from the research for any or no reason, and at any time. The researcher also clearly informed the participants before the interviews about their right to withdraw.

The confidential and anonymous treatment of participants’ data is considered as the norm for the conduct of this. The researcher informed the participants of their entitlement to privacy, and tried to secure their rights of confidentiality and anonymity. The interview record is to be deleted at the date shown in the consent letter. The participants’ personal data will not be shown in the research report. If it is necessary to report the features of the participant, or if there are any third parties intending to access personal information, the researcher will ask for the permission of the participant. The research outcomes and its publication can be provided to the participant upon request, but their rights to this were disclosed to them beforehand.
2.7 Quality of qualitative research

Undertaking qualitative research is not an easy process, and demands theoretical sophistication and methodological rigor. The three concepts of reliability, validity and generalisability compose the traditional framework for conducting and evaluating research. Qualitative studies are often criticised for the following deficiencies:

- the failure to provide detailed descriptions of the research process;
- the use of selected ‘telling examples’;
- searching for and selecting those cases that support the argument;
- failure to report how representative the selection(s) are of the whole dataset.

The debates concerning validity and reliability criteria in qualitative research have centred on whether qualitative research should follow the criteria in quantitative research or develop its own criteria. Some researchers have sought to assimilate the concepts of reliability and validity in quantitative research to qualitative research (e.g. LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Kirk & Miller 1986). Some other qualitative researchers argue the impropriety of using positivist standards to judge the quality of qualitative research and argue that the positivist position sees no difference between the nature and social worlds. They suggest that qualitative studies should be judged or evaluated according to quite different criteria (Bryman, 2004). Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that it is necessary to specify the terms and criteria when assessing the quality of qualitative research. They propose trustworthiness, which is made up of four criteria which are equivalent to internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity in conventional quantitative inquiry (see table 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventional inquiry</th>
<th>Naturalistic inquiry</th>
<th>Methods to ensure quality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internal validity</td>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td>Member checks; prolonged engagement in the field; data triangulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External validity</td>
<td>Transferability</td>
<td>Thick description of setting and/or participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Dependability</td>
<td>Audit – researcher's documentation of data, methods and decisions; researcher triangulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectivity</td>
<td>Confirmability</td>
<td>Audit and reflexivity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Lincoln and Guba’s comparison of criteria for judging research quality (Adapted from Lincon and Guba, 1985)
Credibility

Credibility parallels internal validity in quantitative research, by which researchers seek to establish confidence in the ‘truth’ of their findings. In qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba focus on the degree to which findings make sense. They recommend the techniques of respondent/member validation, prolonged engagement in the field and triangulation. Bryman (2004) recommends using respondent validation as a means of establishing the validity of qualitative research findings: reporting back findings to those observed, to confirm or revise findings in the light of their comments.

In this study, the internal validity is assured through collecting multiple sources of data for triangulation, prolonged engagement in the field, and respondent validation. The data in this study can be categorised into two themes, QA and student learning. The QA data were collected from the two universities, and the data base of NEEC, in the form of both documentation and the interviews. Student learning experiences data were collected from students, teachers, administrators. All data from different sources were compared and triangulated constantly in the process of data collection and analysis. Prolonged engagement in the field is also taken into consideration during this study to assure its credibility. The researcher of this study has been working in the same field though a different HEI for some years, and close contact has been kept with the two universities and people involved in this study. This helps to establish confidence in the ‘truth’ of the findings and increases the degree to which these findings make sense. Respondent validation was also employed in this study to achieve credibility. The transcripts of all interviews were sent back to interviewees for their agreement and validation of accuracy. In several focus groups, following some students’ advice, a further open ended interview was used for the purpose of listening to some volunteer interviewees’ comments on the researcher’s interpretation of data, and collecting more data to further understand the issues that emerged in the focus group data. The respondent validation was a useful tool to avoid the researcher’s bias and to overcome the temptation of jumping to easy conclusions which are only framed by the researcher's understanding.
**Transferability**

Transferability parallels external validity in quantitative research. Instead of aiming for random sampling and probabilistic reasoning, qualitative findings tend to be oriented to the contextual uniqueness and significance of the aspects of the social world being studied. Yin (2003) suggests that external validity in case studies is concerned with whether a study’s findings are generalisable beyond the immediate case study. Providing enough rich and thick description may provide others with a database for making judgements about the possible transferability of findings to other milieu. In this study, thick description of data and data analysis is adopted, to provide readers the opportunities to scrutinise the validity of the study and to consider applying the findings to other contexts. In the process of data collection, the data collected has been evaluated, analysed initially, and kept in a highly organised format with the help of NVIVO software. The data analysis process was done in several rounds for different purposes, from achieving thorough understanding of the data, comparing the themes identified, constructing theoretical frameworks, to re-examining the findings. The thick description of data in this study is presented to the readers in the themes established for analysis. This allows the reader to scrutinise the decisions made by the researcher during the research process.

The two chosen universities in this study have experienced all the key developments and movements in Chinese HE over recent years, from massification, campus extension, internationalisation, to quality evaluation, which most Chinese universities have experienced in the past two decades. In addition, they both obtained the result of ‘excellent’ in the teaching quality evaluation process. The external and internal QA schemes of the two case universities and how they manage student learning experiences are common among all Chinese HEIs. In Chapter 6, the common QA schemes are introduced with rich and thick description, to provide opportunities for readers to scrutinise the quality of the study. The representativeness of these two case universities in their QA schemes and management of student learning experiences among Chinese HEIs increases the transferability of the findings in a wider context.

**Dependability**

Dependability parallels reliability in quantitative research. The objective of checking dependability is to make sure the same findings and conclusion should
be arrived at, if a later investigator followed the same procedures as described by an earlier investigator and conducted the same case study all over again. To achieve dependability, researchers need to adopt an auditing approach in order to ensure all phases of the research process (problem formulation, selection of research participants, fieldwork notes, interview transcripts, data analysis decisions) in an accessible manner for external scrutiny.

Dependability in this study is secured by making steps as operational as possible and by constantly checking every step in the data collection and analysis. In the process of collecting data, a case study database was developed. With the help of NVIVO software, the data of multiple sources was kept in separate files, but they are saved in the way convenient for triangulation and comparison. The trajectory of data coding, analysis and re-examination has been kept together with analysis memos and notes. Establishing such a database makes it possible for other researchers to review the evidence directly and increases the reliability of the study.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability parallels objectivity in quantitative research. While recognising that complete objectivity is impossible in social research, researchers are advised to show that they have not ‘overtly allowed personal values or theoretical inclinations manifestly to sway the conduct of the research and findings deriving from it’ (Bryman, 2008). Researchers’ reflexive analysis of the methodology used in the research and the technique of triangulation are considered as useful tools to achieve confirmability.

In this study, the confirmability is achieved through three strategies which enable the researcher to critically appraise the research. Firstly, a detailed field diary was kept, to record and review how the data had been collected and how decisions had been made in the process of data collection. With the field diary the researcher continuously reflected on what evidence was being sought and the quality of the data collected. Secondly, a self-critical research diary was used to document a critical and constant review of the research process and how the research arrived at the end result. Thirdly, reflexivity is assured by checking alternatives at every step of the research, from research design, data collection methods, interpretation in every stage of data analysis, and conclusions
reached. The critical appraisal of the researcher’s role and assumptions about the research increases the quality of this study.
Chapter 3: Data Description

There is a great number of studies and publications on the issue of QA in HE, but most of the studies have difficulties in providing substantial evidence that the core processes of HE – teaching and learning – are improved as a consequence (Stensaker, 2008). The intuitive answer is that most studies have not reached the needed level of sophistication, but as Stensaker (2008) points out, this is not necessarily a problem solely related to methodology, but to the underlying assumptions of QA and the standard top-down implementation approach. This study adopted a bottom-up approach in addressing the issue of quality and QA in the context of Chinese HE. The focus of this chapter is on presenting the data collected from students, academic staff, and administrators, and describing their understanding of quality, QA, learning and teaching. The data are organised into two main sections, student data and staff data. In the section of student data, student views on quality, their expectations of university study, and their learning experiences are presented. In the section of staff data, staff views on quality, QA, quality improvement, their understanding of students and teaching are reported.

As I have hinted previously, engagement in the field let me to reconsider what are the most important factors in constructing the most effective and useful QA system. As I immersed myself in the data analysis, it was clear that the key themes that emerged were too important to overlook, thought this did not overlap with my initial research questions. Actually, my objective was to produce the best account I could of the available data, rather than simply working mechanically through a list of questions. Therefore, in reporting the data I will make use of the key categories that have emerged from my thematic analysis.
3.1 Student Data

3.1.1 Student views on quality

The research and debate on quality in HE is extensive, but there is little empirical research into student perceptions of quality in HE, especially in the Chinese HE sector. In this study, the question ‘what does quality education mean to you?’ was given to students in focus groups and individual interviews. Students were very active in expressing their perception of quality. Students’ views on the quality of HE tend to fall into five main categories, the quality of teachers, the quality of courses, university culture, student development, and university resources.

The quality of teachers

Most students refer to the quality of teachers when commenting on HE quality. In general, students perceive three factors as important in judging the quality of teachers: teachers’ qualifications, teaching skills, and relationship with students.

Teachers’ qualifications. Students appreciate teachers who have high academic qualifications (e.g. PhD degrees), good educational background (e.g. graduated from known universities); rich academic experiences (e.g. overseas academic experiences), and high research profile (e.g. publications). Here are some comments from the students:

The quality of staff is related to their qualifications and educational background. Teachers with high qualifications and good educational background have better understanding of the subject and wider horizons. These are important for students. (SIDA615)

We are learning foreign languages. It is very necessary for our teachers to have some overseas experiences. Their experiences in the culture of the target language will make their teaching vivid and interesting. (SIDA408)

We like teachers with a high research reputation and we are very keen on knowing about their research. The more such teachers a university has, the better quality the university has. (SIDA1029)

... The optional course in our department is difficult to operate because of a lack of teachers. In the programme of news media, there is only one teacher teaching the core courses. He teaches from Year 1 to Year 4. There are other teachers, but not specialized in news media. (SWXSFG1TG007)
**Teachers’ teaching skills.** Students appreciate the teachers who have good subject knowledge and skilful teaching.

*Teaching quality means that our teachers have a very good knowledge of the subject, which is also updated with the latest developments in the field.* (SISUDA611)

*Good teachers should prepare their teaching well.* (DASI1125)

*The quality of teachers is reflected in their teaching: how they organise their teaching content and how they link what we have known to what we need to learn.* (DASI1115)

*Quality of a university means that the teachers there can make their teaching stimulating and interesting.* (DASI426)

*Quality, for me, means how active and interesting the class is. If the teachers are good, students would like to follow their instruction.* (SISU064)

*High education quality often links with the width and depth of teaching content, the active participation of students in and outside of the class, and disciplined and organised classroom teaching activities.* (DW082)

There are some new teachers recruited, but their quality is not good enough. There is an extreme case that a teacher joined our university at the position of the director of a department. His teaching is so dull like a lullaby that we are quite bored by his teaching. We heard that he has many publications and he is known in his field. However, we have not reached the level to understand all his theories. At the end of the term we were assessed by writing an essay with high requirements. We like him, but his lecturing style is too dull. (SWXSFGJYX003)

*There is too much lecturing now. I believe more discussion will be helpful for us to know other students’ ideas and opinions.* (SWXSFGAJY005)

*I do hope our teachers may set up some regular links with entrepreneurs. In this way, our teachers will know more about the latest developments in related fields, and make their teaching more closely connected with the real practice.* (SWXSFGAJY005)

**Teacher-student relationship.** Students appreciate teachers who are interested in their students, willing to know their progress, and ready to communicate with them.

*I think it is essential in quality education that we can have regular communication with our teachers.* (SISU046)
Teachers should have not only high qualifications, but also communication skills with students. In this way, they can make their teaching interesting and can encourage us to work hard in learning. (SISU131)

We need to know where we are in our learning. I think quality teaching means that teachers will let their students know how well or poorly they are learning, and give them the direction to make progress and improvement. (SISU083)

Students appreciate teachers who are approachable and supportive to their learning. They especially appreciated the teachers who can find their potential and inspire them.

Quality means how much teachers know their students and their potential, especially how to encourage students to aspire and develop their potential. (SISU057)

Good teachers are student capacity builders. Quality of a university is reflected in how many such teachers a university has. (SIDW613)

Quality teachers are flexible in adapting their teaching to the differences of individual students. Very disappointingly, some of our teachers even don’t know our names. How is it possible for them to give us individualised teaching. (SISU108)

We hardly have the chance to talk with our teachers in class, not to mention getting advice after class. Quality means that teachers are approachable. (SISU111)

We expect our teachers to be encouraging and inspiring in their teaching or their after-class communication with us. I still keep the feedback one teacher gave me when I was in my first year. Her encouragement helped me make the decision to be a journalist in the future. (SISU121)

The quality of courses

The quality of courses is a theme which came out clearly when analysing students’ views on quality. The students value a programme and course with good design, a curriculum with clear objectives, textbooks with updated content, and course content with both width and depth, and they value especially a link between the course provision and the practice in the real world.

Good design of the course and curriculum. In the student data, course design is concerned in most students’ comments on quality of education. They often use the term ‘reasonable/proper course design’, by which they want to express:
It is not likely for us to learn everything in our undergraduate education, but we need to know enough about our subject or discipline. Course design is an important aspect of the course quality. (SISU024)

Our course structure is not very different from other programmes, for example English language and culture. We only have a few core courses related to our major. (SISU033)

The number of our core courses is too limited. It is not enough for us to have a proper understanding of our discipline. (SISU039)

Course design is crucial for quality. It means how many courses, and what courses should be provided to students at which study year. How these courses are organised will decide the quality of a programme. (DW037)

A good quality programme must have courses designed reasonably considering both width and depth of knowledge students will learn. In the meantime, it should link with the practice in the real world. (DW049)

Good course design cannot be separated from effective course management. Students complain about the options they have in selecting the course in their programmes.

Our university is too specialized, not comprehensive and active enough. There are so many things we want to learn but no opportunities available. (SWXSFGAP004)

The curriculum should be more flexible in terms of its timetable and course content. In our university, there is no complete course credit system. We cannot choose the course freely. All optional courses are just in the form since there are so many requirements, which make it almost impossible. (SWXSFGAXM001)

**Clear course objectives.** Students appreciate courses and curricula with clear objectives. In their view, clear course objectives not only provide a clear picture of what students are to learn, but also help them to work out their own learning objectives.

How the course objectives are defined is an important indicator of course quality. There are some statements about them in the introduction to our programme, but they are too general. I cannot link it with our learning. I think we need more concrete course objectives. (SISU045)

I hope the objectives of our courses can be more practical in helping us develop our learning and analytical skills. (SWXSFGB004)

I don’t know others, but for me, I do want to see a clear picture of the course objectives so that I may evaluate my learning besides taking exams. (SISU083)
We often heard the phrase of ‘reaching the course objectives and requirements’, but I want to ask what the objectives are? All are in abstract words. (SISU112)

**Textbooks updated and linked with the real world.** In the Chinese HE system, a textbook is an essential component of any course. Students are used to having one textbook in their hand. They appreciate textbooks with updated content and good links with the real world.

Some of our textbooks are too old. I want textbooks to include the latest trends and developments. (DW045)

I hope our textbook may update in time. Some of our textbooks are out of date. In the video class, the videos are about Japan in its 1980s. Language learning should be connected closely to the present time. (DWSXFGCF002)

... In this way, our teachers will know more about the latest developments in related fields, and make their teaching more closely connected with the real practice. (SWXSFGAJY005)

**University culture**

University culture is a term which has very high frequency in students’ comments on university quality. In students’ views, university culture is often related to an integrative culture that pervades their university.

The culture of a high quality university should be rich in its diversity and strong in its learning culture. There should be rich resources for teachers and students to develop their thinking. (DW086)

In their view, university culture is composed of a network of different sub-cultures, including leadership, collective values and beliefs.

I think the leadership of a university decides its culture and quality. The leadership of our university is very keen on making our students’ voice heard, so we have the chance to organise our own student society and report our criticisms and demands to the teaching management office. If the university leadership does not value students’ voices, there is nothing we can do with it. (SWXSFGAT006)

When talking about university culture, I remember that our teachers often mention humanity, which means respecting people, their rights and freedom. I think what a university values shows its culture and will decide its quality in the long run. (SW111)
An excellent staff team is the base of a university’s quality and culture. The management style of the leadership decides the culture of a university. (DW042)

University culture can be reflected in the learning ethos which students can feel and be influenced by. The students in the study recognise the value of a learning ethos.

University culture is the best indicator of education quality. If a university has a good learning ethos, students will have a better environment to develop their thinking and minds. (SW006)

I don’t know the exact word to express what university culture is like, but I can feel it. Students in our university are very utilitarian in some ways, limited by short-term goals. It is quite related to the university culture. I think it can be changed, though not easily. (SW010)

A deep and rich university culture reflects the quality of a university and creates a learning ethos for students to reach their best. (DW104)

University culture is associated with the students recruited, in the view of some students.

Quality of a university is directly reflected in their university culture, in other words, the level of the students recruited, the history of the university, and the excellent graduates the university produced. (DW008)

I think the quality of a university is directly linked to the students recruited. Those top universities attract the best students of the country, and in turn, they will strengthen the fame and culture of their university. (SW079)

In students’ view, university culture goes beyond the walls of universities. They believe that a university’s reputation and academic exchange with other institutions reflects its university culture and quality.

The reputation and social impact of a university is its quality. Teachers’ publications, social influence and their value will influence their students. Good universities have bigger and better social impact and attract better staff and students. (SW058)

The academic exchange of a university with other institutions, especially with overseas educational institutions shows its openness and develops its culture. (DW085)
Student development

Students believe quality education should enable students to have good development in the university. Four themes came out when categorising students’ comments on quality in terms of their development:

- discipline knowledge learning and skills acquisition;
- generic abilities and skills: both cognitive and affective;
- employability;
- moral and ethical quality.

Discipline related knowledge and skills acquisition. Students highly value the development of their discipline related knowledge and skills. This includes the width and depth of subject knowledge, the ability to apply the subject knowledge in practice, the skills of using subject knowledge, and skills to find jobs after graduation, etc.

Students’ commented on quality in terms of student subject knowledge and skills development as follows:

- Quality is what the university has developed its students. (DW075)
- Quality means cultivating students to acquire proper discipline related skills. (SISU037)
- Quality means the width and depth of subject knowledge that students learned. (SISU053)
- Students’ grasp of subject knowledge. (SISU073)
- Quality means students’ academic capacity. (SISU074)
- Quality is reflected in our subject knowledge learning and development. (SISU096)
- University quality means the improvement of student subject knowledge and skills (DW010)
- The mastery and application of subject knowledge. (DW013)
- Quality means that we can use the knowledge learned in the university to cope with the challenges after graduation (DW043)
- Students’ good mastery of subject knowledge and skills is the reflection of good university quality. (DW068)
- A high quality university shall facilitate students’ individual development in their majors. (DW096)
- Student academic performance shows the quality. (DW100)

Generic skills. Students highly value the development of their generic ability and skills. What they put under the umbrella of generic ability and skills includes
learning ability and skills, analytic skills, ability to think independently and creatively; interpersonal skills; and perseverance, etc.

Students commented on quality in terms of their generic ability and skills development as follows:

- Development of students’ creativity. (DW005)
- Communication skills, interpersonal skills, independence, creativity, and the analytical skills. (DW068)
- Quality means developing students’ potential, encouraging the development of their creativity and thinking ability. (DW105)
- Cultivating students’ ability in analysing and solving problems. (DW151)
- Learning ability and skills is what students must develop. (DW151)
- Quality firstly means the development of our subject knowledge and skills. Secondly, it means developing our mental health and psychological well being. (DW121)
- Good learning habits will benefit us in our future learning and life. (SISU047)
- The development of self-learning ability. (DW054)
- Developing students’ independence in learning. (DW103)
- Learning awareness and the ability to take action. (DW131)
- Quality is about what we shall learn, how to learn, what we will have learned. (SISU115)
- The skills we should develop are communication skills, organising skills, and adapting to changes. (SISU004)
- Planning ability, to distinguish long term and short term planning. (SISU006)
- How to think and analyse problems. (SISU034)
- Team work skills, how to negotiate and coordinate in team work. (SISU084)
- Social skills, how to communicate with people, and how to sustain the contact with people, etc. (DW001)
- Quality means giving us the opportunity to develop our ability, for example, how to communicate with people, how to work and get along with others. (DW053)
- Cultivating students with knowledge and skills to enable us to transit into the society smoothly after graduation. (SISU061)

**Employability.** Students give great importance to their employability when expressing their views on quality. Here are some typical comments:

- Quality means employment rate and employment satisfaction. (DW002)
- The jobs graduates have after they complete their university study. (DW075)
- The employment rate, and the types and level of the employment. (DW147)
- Quality is in student employment rate and employment quality. (SISU130)
- Quality of education means what we learned in the university facilitates our employment after graduation. (SISU080)

Students show their great concern about employment and their employability in the discussion. They cherish the university learning and think it is the last chance of their taking formal education before entering society. At the same time, they are quite concerned about how they may develop their own employability, which they hope may help them to obtain proper jobs after graduation.

I think university time is our last opportunity to learn without burden and interference. The employment rate of graduates majored in foreign languages is very low. I heard that the graduate employment rate is only 30%. Employers may like to employ the graduates who have both a good English level and specialities related to their companies. Most graduates majored in foreign languages have switched to some other specialities in their work, e.g. marketing, management, etc. Foreign languages are only the side support in their work. This is what I heard from other students. (DWXSFGCG001)

Some students are not satisfied with the alignment between their subject learning and employability development. Many students take various kinds of exams for various certificates.

I think quality of a university means its graduates may find jobs smoothly after graduation. Our university is specialised in foreign languages. I don’t know whether we will be lucky in finding jobs. I take exams for certificates which other students are also preparing for. It is not closely related to the course we are learning. I take these certificate oriented exams to be more competent in the future when searching jobs. (DWXSFGBS004)

I hope I may be ready for entering the society through the university study. I think this readiness shows the quality of university education (DWXSFGBJ001)

I expect to learn some skills which will help us get a job smoothly after graduation. (DWXSGFBS007)

There are different kinds of tests for certificates which we wish to be helpful for our future job searching and career development, for instance, Business English Certificate, Professional Interpreter Certificate, computer skills certificate, IELTS, TOFEL, etc. It is quite energy and time consuming to prepare for these certificate tests, but we think it might be useful for us since most foreign companies would like to consider graduates with such certificates. (SWXSFGB001)
**Moral and ethical quality.** Students believe that moral and ethical quality is as important as their subject knowledge and skills. Here are some students’ comments on moral and ethical quality as part of HE quality.

- Quality education enables students to have their own aims in life and to know what the best is for them. (DW174)
- Besides subject knowledge and skills, there should be a place for morality. (DW046)
- ... the development of student ethical quality is essential for university quality. (DW048)
- ... ethical quality, personal values and accomplishment, sense of responsibility, patriotic spirit, and the enhancement of moral quality. (SW069)
- Ethical education is part of quality HE. It is cultivating students with a good attitude to life and good moral quality. (DW083)
- Humanity education is to develop students into people with heart and mind. (DW093)
- Ethical quality is based on students’ understanding of society and their values. (DW102)
- The guidance of how to develop our personal quality should be included into university education. (DW117)
- Quality of HE means developing students’ ethics and psychological health. (SW164)
- ... the sense of respecting other people, doing good for the country and society (DW150)
- How students understand the society, how to develop their social values, how to set up the proper life aims and planning, how to cope with interpersonal and family relationship should be considered in university education. (SW011)

**University resources**

Students put university facilities in the category of ‘hardware’. Most universities in China have extended their campus, built many new buildings and facilities. The two universities in this study are both located in the suburb of the city with large campus, newly built modern buildings, and nice classrooms and facilities. In students’ view, they believe the hardware of universities is important, especially, libraries and learning related resources. Here are students’ comments:

- Quality of a university is related to its hardware, campus, teaching facilities, libraries, accommodation and sports facilities. (SISU002)
- Library is crucial. (SISU005)
- ... the book collection of a library, and other teaching facilities. (SISU015)
- Accommodation conditions and catering facilities and service. (SISU048)
- University infrastructure, teaching facilities, and sports facilities. (SISU070)
- Quality is in whether these hardware facilities are student friendly. (SISU095)
- ... teaching and learning environment, such as, library, multi-media classrooms, and simultaneous translation training facilities. ... and also living environment including accommodation building and facilities, catering services. (DW055)
- ... the availability of reference books. (DW092)
- Educational resources are part of university quality. The opportunities of internship or other practices during the university study are also important resources.
- Language labs, the internet availability and speed, and other resources. (DW153)
3.1.2 Student expectations

A number of challenges in the context of changing teaching and learning have been posed with the recent rapid expansion in Chinese HE, with the increase of undergraduate student numbers from 3,410,000 in 1998 to 20,210,000 in 2008. The rapid increase in the number of students changes the structure of the student body, and challenges the existing learning resources and teaching methods. In contrast with the quickly increased student numbers and diversity, the study on Chinese students at Chinese universities is inadequate compared with studies in western countries which have experienced similar change and challenges of student bodies. It is very important for universities, teachers, and researcher to know what expectations students have for their university learning.

Students enter university with various expectations. Students expect university life to offer them opportunities for personal, social, and intellectual growth. Some students are quite clear about what they want to achieve, as expressed by one student:

*I am quite clear with what I want to achieve. I want to study hard and continue to postgraduate study after graduation.* (DWXSFGAS004)

The expectations of some students at the time of entering their university are more general, as expressed in the following statement:

*When I had just got into the university, I wanted to learn as much and broadly as possible.* (SWXSFGBJY005)

Students’ expectations of university study can be categorised into their personal development and preparation for their future career.

- **Personal development**

  *When I had just got into the university, I wanted to learn as much and broadly as possible. Now I want to know how to be an independent person with proper judgement and abilities. I also want to find out what I really want before finishing the study here.* (SWXSFGAP004)

  *I expect to be competitive in my study and to develop myself as a whole person.* (DWXSFGCL005)

  *I expect myself to make a good use of time. Enriching my experience is my expectation for the university study. I wish to study abroad later, in Japan*
or America, or the countries with leading information technologies. (DWXSFGBM008)

I expect to develop personal principles which I will follow in the rest of our lives. I guess we will be changed by various factors after entering the society, so we should take the opportunity of our university time to build up some principles for ourselves. (SWXSFGAT006)

I expect to develop the ability of making judgement, deciding the priority after complete consideration. (SWXSFGB003)

The students summarised the skills they should have at the time of graduation, which include communication skills, interpersonal skills, adaptive ability, teamwork skills, ability of applying knowledge into practice, time management, self-discipline, and personal qualities. The students also gave their definition of 'personal qualities'.

It refers to morality, psychological health, tolerance to others, kindness (The kindness I mean here is more than sympathy), honesty, considerateness, and uprightness. The personal quality can also be reflected in personal manners, for example, picking the rubbish on the ground, placing the chair back to the proper place after dinner, and other small things in life. (SWXSFG02)

- Preparation for the future career

Most of the students interviewed reported that they wanted to learn how to make a good preparation for their future career.

I think the university time connects student life and career development in society. We need to make preparations for our future career. (SWXSFGAHX002)

I think university education is a kind of investment. I expect to equip myself with proper knowledge and skills to earn the investment back. (DWXSFGC006)

I hope to find a proper job after graduation with what I learn in the university. (DWXSFGCL005)

I expect the university study to make me well prepared for my future career. (DWXSFGCG001)

I hope to find a good job with the foreign language skills learned in the university. I have little idea about what kind of job I can find. I hope I will be ready for entering society through university study. (DWXSFGBJ001)

I expect to learn some skills helpful for me to get a job smoothly after work. A good job is what I want. (DWXSGFBS007)
The university gives us some training sessions, including how to write a CV and how to prepare for job interviews. However, the trainers are not familiar with students, and the training tends to be too general and not very useful. I wish to make a good use of all possible resources to make myself ready for the future career. (SWXSFGBJY005)

3.1.3 Student learning experiences

Student learning experiences are a main focus in this study. The purpose of this study is to examine Chinese students’ learning experiences and to explore how to integrate it into QA systems for continuous quality improvement. The students’ description of their learning experiences in the university will be presented here through reporting their learning trajectory, what they have learned, and barriers to their learning.

3.1.3.1 Our trajectory

Our experiences in the first year: ‘I have wasted my time’

Students often say that they have wasted their time in the first year, even though they know adjusting to university study needs a process.

I feel I have wasted my time in the first year. I have not seen much progress in my study, except 4-5,000 new words I have memorised. I still can’t understand the talk of our foreign teachers. I still can’t communicate in English freely. (DWXSFGBJ001)

I was a bit lost in the first year. Reviewing the time of my first year in the university, I feel I have wasted my time and haven’t enjoyed myself in my study or life. (SWXSFGBM008)

The first year was the extension of high school life. We were required to study in the classrooms in the evening. It was so boring. (DWXSFGLC005)

In the first year we were lost because we knew little about how to use time effectively. (DWXSFGCW002)

When we were in the first year, we knew what we needed to do is to study hard. (DWSXFGCG003)

In the first year, I was still in the high school learning habits and psychological state. We were required to go to the classroom for morning and evening reading every day. (DWXSGAB001)
Our experiences in the second year: ‘It is our turning point.’

The second year is viewed by students as the turning point in their study after they become more familiar with university study and establish their own learning methods.

Stepping into the second year, I became more familiar with the university life. I enjoyed spending time in the library reading interesting books in literature, psychology, translation theories and novels. (SWXSFGB002)

In my second year, I attended many social activities. I did a part time job distributing questionnaires. It was a good experience for me. (SWXSFGB001)

The second year is the turning point. We know what we need to do. Everyone is working hard for their objectives. (DWXSFGL005)

In the second year, students have formed their way of coping with course learning and assessments.

In general, no one would like to spend much time on the things which won’t be assessed. (SW111)

In the second year, we get to know more about the university and the course. We choose the books and reading according to our own interests and needs. (SWXSFGBJ005)

Basically, in our second year, we are able to judge what is more important in our study, but it varies from course to course. Usually, the requirements given by the teachers frame our reading, especially after knowing what will be tested in the final exams. The teachers will tell us what they are going to test at the beginning of the course. Our final exam results will take 80% of the final scoring. The other 20% is decided by the teacher; usually it is based on course attendance. (SWXSFGB002)

In the second year, I was pushed forward by the pressure of the Band Four exam. Some of us chose to study in the classroom, some chose to stay in the dormitory, and some chose to spend the time outside the campus in the evening. (DWXSFGB001)

In the first year, we lived a life pinned by three points: dormitory, classrooms, and the dining hall. From the second year on, we changed our study mode and started the real university study. (DWXSFGB004)

When being asked about what ‘the real university life’ is like, she describes it as:

We are less limited by the routine of classroom-canteen-dormitory. We have more time to ourselves. Some of us choose to skip classes. (DWXSFGB004)
Our experiences in the third year: ‘Chasing various certificates’

Generally, students start to consider what they will do after graduation when they step into the third year. Some students start to consider this even earlier. Students report that those who plan to take postgraduate study put their efforts into preparing for postgraduate entrance exams; those who plan to look for jobs after graduation are busy chasing various certificates; those who plan to go abroad after graduation spend most of their time learning English language and other courses as a preparation. Students feel drawn in chasing various certificates and do not know whether those certificates will help them.

_In the third year, we had many core courses. Everyone was quite busy. We started to think about our future, to go abroad, to study further, or started to look for jobs._ (DWXSFGAB001)

_Some of my classmates are busy with their preparation for tourist guide certificate test. I don’t know whether I should take that exam since it is not that related to my major. I am wondering whether it will be helpful for my job application in the future._ (DWXSFGBM008)

_In the third year, we accumulate some knowledge, but we are more lost in the uncertainty of our future._ (DWXSFGCW002)

_There is so much to learn for various certificates which might be helpful for my future career. I got a certificate of computer skills. I am preparing for other exams at the moment._ (SWXSFGB001)

_We were quite busy preparing various kinds of examinations, required by the university or planned by ourselves._ (SWXSFGB002)

_There are different kinds of tests for certificates which we think might be helpful for our future job searching and career development, for instance, Business English Certificate, Professional Interpreter Certificate, Computer Skills Certificate, IELTS, TOFEL, etc. It is quite energy and time consuming to prepare for these certificate tests, but we think it might be useful for us because most foreign companies would like to consider graduates with such certificates._ (SWXSFGB001)

_In the third year, we realise that there is not much time left in our university study. We start to make up for what we have missed in the past two years. I give all my attention to the core courses._ (DWXSFGCL005)

Our experiences in the fourth year: Looking forward to our future

Students report that what they are going to do after graduation is the leading theme in their fourth year in the university. There are fewer students in the
class. Most of them are busy looking for jobs, taking postgraduate jobs, and contacting overseas universities to study abroad.

_In the fourth year with the day of graduation approaching, we are busy looking for jobs._ (DWXSFGCL005)

Now we are in my fourth year. We find our classmates have disappeared suddenly. Some of my classmates are busy with preparing for the postgraduate entrance exam, some are searching for job opportunities. There are many job fairs. We try our luck there. It seems that study is no longer the main theme in our university life. Some of the courses in the fourth year are necessary for those students preparing for the postgraduate entrance exam. Most of the teachers understand us if we give them the reasons why we are not able to attend their lectures. We have more freedom and independence. But I often feel lost. (DWXSFGAB001)

The topic of uncertainty was brought up in a focus group when the discussion came to the issue of their future. One girl mentioned:

_I am quite scared of the uncertainty in my future. No clear picture of what my future job will be like, especially in such a difficult time with less job opportunities and more graduates._ (DWXSFGCG001)

Her opinion was agreed by another girl in the group immediately.

_I have the same feeling. But I also tell myself that such a feeling won’t help me find a job. I need to work on it._ (DWXSFGCG007)

A boy in this focus group showed his different opinion immediately after hearing the agreement of the second girl.

_I don’t think there is much you need to feel scared about. I think it is quite helpful if you try several different jobs. The experience of those jobs will enable you to know what your real interests are. It is also my plan. So far I am not sure what my real interest is and I am trying to find it out by trying._ (DWXSFGCL005)

Another girl in the group disagreed immediately that:

_The competition now is very severe. There won’t be many chances or positions left for you to try and find your own interests._ (DWXSFGC006)

One student from a different group summarised the changes in the four years university study as follows:

_In the first year we accept whatever the university gives us without knowing what we want. In the second year, though there is no action taken, we start to think what we want. The third year is the integration of satisfying the university’s requirements and exploring what we think useful. In the fourth year, we are more independent since we are going to_
graduate soon. Course lectures are not that important for us anymore. (DWXSFGAL006)

3.1.3.2 Our learning

Student learning is something that happens quite naturally in their university study and goes by quite unnoticed. Whatever experiences students have in their universities are all part of their learning. It is very interesting to see how students reflect on their own learning.

I think the university should empower us with the ability of independent learning, especially we should learn how to learn. Our university is more like a high school which frames our learning by telling us what to learn and where to learn (classrooms). There are not many choices. We feel a lack of freedom. In my opinion, we should study in the library, instead of in the classroom. I know there is little we can do to change it, but I really don’t like being pushed to study. (DWXSFGBJ001)

In every focus group and every interview with students, the question of ‘what have you learned in your university study?’ was given. Students have different answers to this question.

Some students told me that they learned to be independent in making decisions of what to learn.

I think we become more independent through the learning in the university. Teachers in the university don’t supervise our study as closely as the higher school teachers. We judge by ourselves what is important and what to learn. In contrast, we followed our teachers more when we were in the high school. Now, we decide for ourselves when and what to learn. We also learn to make plans in our learning, when to learn the course content and when to learn things not listed in the course reading. (SWXSFGB003)

Some students told me that they learned to listen to other people’s opinions. A girl summarised the changes she has noticed about herself:

I learned to listen to other’s opinions. When in the high school, I was quite sticking to my own opinion. There are more chances of communication here in the university. I started to think and to take others’ advice. (SWXSFGB002)

Some students told me that they learned to learn more actively.
We studied in a more passive way when we were in the first year. In contrast, we are more active in learning and follow more of our interests now. Often, we choose and read what we feel interesting. (SWXSGAT006)

One girl told me that she learned to be professional in work by doing part time jobs.

Recalling what I have learned, I think I learned a lot from the volunteer work I have done in my summer holiday. From that experience, I realise the difference between what we have learned from the university and what is the reality in society. We did the work with payment, so we needed to consider the employer’s expectations and to satisfy their requirements. I also worked as the receptionist at the Telecom Centre at the time. From that experience, I started to know we should be professional and responsible in our work. (SWXSGBJY005)

Some students find that learning how to work in a team is exciting and helpful.

Working in a team is very exciting. We often have to do presentations in groups. By working together with others, I find we are different from each other. It is not easy to work something out in a group, but it is a very helpful experience. (SWXSGB003)

What is the best way to learn was brought up by some students. Some students emphasise learning by linking theory to practice; some students preferred more presentation in class; some students think developing a general picture of their field is more helpful.

Theory presentation is the main form of teaching. I think practice is more important. There should be a link between them. The main course delivery is in the form of lecturing. We don’t like it, but there are no other choices. (SWXSGAP004)

I think presentation is a very good way for us to learn. Firstly, it can arouse our interest. Secondly, it enables us to look at things from different perspectives. Thirdly, it gives us more chance to talk in front of others. (SWXSGAHX002)

The earlier we develop our knowledge and awareness about our speciality, the better we may use our study time and resources to develop ourselves. In the first year, without speciality awareness, it is hard for us to have any resonance with the course content. When we get to know more about our speciality, we start to judge what is important or useful for ourselves. When the teachers come to those interesting points, we will write them down and raise questions. (SWXSGAT006)

The regional university in our study requires the students to study in their classrooms at the fixed time. Some students at this university expressed their
resistance to the fixed learning hours regulated by their university. One student told me:

When we entered the university, we were told to study in the fixed classroom at 6-8 p.m. every evening. I feel this is quite ridiculous because different people may have different learning habits. I like to study in the dorm at 9-10 p.m. I think imposing the fixed study time and place is very unreasonable. I believe more respect should be given to students. (DWXSFGCG001)

Another girl in the same group had some disagreement:

I used to be quite against the imposed evening learning arrangement. But after talking with some senior students, I find it is a good way to establish my own learning habits. University study is different from high school study, and we don’t have clear learning objectives. We have more freedom in universities. Without a good learning habit, the precious university time will be wasted. I think the imposed evening learning did help me in my study. (DWXSFGCG003)

There are also other students supporting the university’s evening learning requirement.

I think the requirement of evening learning hours is a very effective way to promote our learning. Keeping a good habit of doing certain things at certain times will help sustain our learning. If I don’t want to study today and idle time away by putting things off till tomorrow, it is very likely tomorrow will be spent in the same way. Learning a foreign language requires a lot of time in reading and using the language. More reading and listening will definitely help improve language skills. I think the required evening learning in the classroom is very helpful. (DWXSFGCL005)

Students are influenced by the course assessment. A student described how she and her classmates adapted their learning method to the course assessments, which are usually in the form of summative final exams at the end of the term.

At the beginning of the university, we studied hard and reviewed what teachers taught after class. We extended our reading to current affairs and other readings. However, after the first term, we changed our learning methods because we saw that learning hard every day hadn’t distinguished us in the final exams. We started to put more effort into the two weeks before the final exams. Basically, this method helps us survive all exams because when approaching the end of the term the teachers will inform us what need to review for the final exams. (SWXSFGAP004)

Many of us start to prepare for the final exams two weeks in advance. It is very tiring. There is an interesting metaphor invented by the students from the Department of Law, 'We are in the rest home without the pressure
during the term time, but moved to the mad house before the final exams”. (SWXSFGAXM001)

One student gave me an interesting summary of how his learning has been developed.

I think what shapes up our learning methods are teachers at the beginning of our study, ourselves in the mid of the process by trying out our own learning, and exams in the end fixing our learning pattern. (DWXSFGCG003)

One boy told me that he was tired of exams and he would learn more without those exams.

I think if there are no exams, I will love to learn. When I go deep into our subject, I find learning very interesting. However, whenever thinking of exams, the negative feeling comes out immediately. (DWXSFGCG003)

How students learn is influenced by the features of their programmes. The student from the Department of Law commented that:

The learning for the students majored in law is quite detailed. The civil law and criminal law are related to all detailed things in life. The knowledge points in the teachers’ teaching are usually very general and broad. So we collect cases in real life to make sense of the theory taught by the teachers. Things in the real world are too broad and complex, so the reviews given by the teacher before the final exam are very helpful for us. Usually, before the end the term, we will spend some time to work out the framework of the course content. And then we will fill the frame with branches to link the main points covered in the course. In fact, the review before the final exam is the time we learn the most. (SWXSFGAJYX003)

A student majored in journalism described her learning method:

I am majored in journalism. I learn with two main methods: one for learning English language; the other is for major related courses. The method I use to learn English is to prepare for the class by finding out the meaning of the new words and reading briefly the text before class. If we have some questions, we may put them forward in class. We started to learn English in our primary schools, so we have formed our own learning methods. As for the major related courses, we seldom preview, and put more of our energy in the practice after class. Usually, it is the teacher who gives us the assignments, for example, interviewing someone. We will hand in our assignment before the deadline. (SWXSFGC003)
3.1.3.3 Barriers to our learning

What are the barriers identified by students is very useful for investigating how to improve student learning. Students commented on this from four aspects: teaching methods, limited course provision, narrow curriculum, and inadequate resources.

Teaching methods

There should be more discussion and group work in class, but the main teaching method here is lecturing. (SWXSFGAP004)

I think there should be more discussion in the class. There is too much lecturing now. I believe more discussion will be helpful for us to know other students’ ideas and opinions. (SWXSFGAJY005)

I feel our aspirations have not been activated and developed. University life is definitely not sitting in the classroom and answering teachers’ questions. (DWXSFGBS004)

We wish our teachers not just to explain the text and the language points in the texts. We hope they will guide us in exploring its implications, which might be more useful for us. (SWXSFGJYX002)

We hope teachers will go beyond the explanation of the textbooks, and extend it to something which may be helpful for us to develop our understanding in the long run. (SWXSFGBJY005)

Limitation in course provision

Students reported that the narrow curriculum and the limitation in course provision were the barriers for their learning.

The course organisation should be more flexible in terms of its timetable and course content. In our university, we can’t choose the course freely. All optional courses are just in the form since there are so many requirements. (SWXSFGAXM001)

The optional courses offered in our university are in two categories: public optional courses and major related optional courses. When we entered the university, a brochure with the list of all optional courses was given to us. In fact, what courses we are to take have been decided by the university in advance. There is a Student Right Centre at the Student Union. As the representatives of all students in this university, we reported our dissatisfaction to the president and other leaders of the university face to face. We proposed that we should have a real course credit system with more options in courses to take. Our proposal was accepted. Though there is no chance for us to benefit from the flexibility we have gained through
our efforts, we are still very happy to see that students of the next cohort will have more choices. (SWXSFGAJYX003)

The courses listed in the optional category are in conflict with the number of teachers available to teach. In the programme of news media, there is only one teacher teaching the core courses. He teaches from Year 1 to Year 4. There are other teachers, but not specialized in news media. (SWXSFG1TG007)

I am preparing for the postgraduate entrance exam. I find most postgraduate programmes require advanced mathematics, but it is not available in the course provision of our university. (DWXSFGCW002)

The professional features of our speciality are not strong enough, so we should also extend our speciality to other fields to be more competitive. However, we don't have such courses available. (DWXSFGCS004)

Narrow curriculum

I hope our university may offer some more interesting courses. We are majored in language and culture. The learning of culture should involve a wide range of knowledge, but I don’t think we have such courses. A curriculum covering a wider cultural knowledge is what we need to broaden our horizon and knowledge. (DWXSFGCG003)

We find our curriculum is too narrow. We have learned many courses, but we don’t feel we have learned enough to be professional. (DWXSFGAB001)

I feel what we are learning is isolated from the reality. We need our course content to be updated and connected to the reality. (DWXSFGC006)

The courses we want to learn are not organised in an interesting way. Many courses are too general without clear objectives. To some extent it is a waste of our time. (DWXSFGBX003)

I hope the course can be more practical, or having more relation to the real world. Especially, I hope we may be trained to know how to make analysis. (SWXSFGJYX002)

Inadequate resources

In fact, our learning is quite constrained by the resources. What you can see in the university decides to some extent whether you will develop towards this direction. What we can see in our university is still quite limited. (SWXSFGAXM001)

We feel we are limited by the resources of the university, especially library and online resources. (SWXSFGJYX003)
The opening time of our library is too short. The books storage of the library is too limited. We also need more audio and video resources. I often go to those senior students to know what courses will be available for us in the third and fourth year. Sometimes, I am quite disappointed. (DWXSFGCG001)

I still don’t understand why the textbooks have been used for twenty years. What we watched in the video class is so much different from the current status of the target language country. (DWXSFGCW002)

There is not sufficient resources and support for our personal development. (DWXSFGC006)

I hope the university will offer us more opportunities to communicate with the culture celebrities through inviting them to give us public talks or lectures. (DWXSFGBZ003)

Most of us have the same feeling. Our university is more like a high school except it is much bigger than high schools in size. There should be more opportunities to listen to the talks given by famous people in different fields. (DWXSFGBZ003)

What support do we expect from our teachers and tutors

Seeking support from teachers and tutors when having difficulty in learning seems to be quite natural in student learning. In this study, we find that, according to students’ descriptions, the interactions between teachers and students have not been sufficiently used to support student learning.

When we have problems, we will go to our tutor. There is a tutor for each class. Usually, they are our teachers teaching the course of Basic English or Advanced English. The tutors may also talk to those students skipping class often to find out the reasons. (DWXSFGAW002)

When I was in my first year, I went to the teachers and asked how to improve my speaking skills and how to give a good presentation. The answers from them were quite similar to what I got from books. I don’t think it is very useful. (DWXSFGAW002)

In my first year, I was not confident about my English skills, so I attempted to explore myself in other fields. I was in great need for the teacher’s advice on what field I might turn to. The teacher gave me some good ideas and I took her advice. (DWSFGAS004)

I don’t think there are many students who seek help from their teachers. Seeking advice from teachers happens usually in the first and second year. Some of us message our teachers. Our department requires us to write a weekly journal which enables us to get feedback from our teachers. Sometimes, we find teachers’ comments are helpful. (DWXSFGAL005)

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What support do students expect from their teachers and tutors? Students gave various ideas. Here are the reports from the students interviewed.

I think the first year is the time to set up a proper basis for university learning and future development. Thus, we expect our teachers to help us set up a good personal development plan. (DWSXFGAB001)

When we were in the first year, we did want to know what the university life is like and what is the best way to organize it. We are in real need of this kind of guidance. We didn’t have teachers who can give us this kind of guidance. To some extent, I feel the communication between students will help. When we were in the first year, we did not have much contact with senior students. However, I noticed students from other universities had learned quite something from the senior students in their universities. (DWSXFGAS004)

In our study, the courses require a much wider grasp of knowledge. New learning needs new learning methods. Most of us are using the learning methods employed in the high school to cope with the study in the university. We need some guidance, but so far we have not got it. (DSXSFGCS004)

Who influence us most are our teachers, but we feel that teachers are quite far away from us. Usually teachers disappear after finishing their lectures. (DWSXFGCG001)

Tutors are supposed to be responsible for managing our daily study and life, but they often care about only a small number of students who have good contact with them. When we go to them with questions, often we can’t get very clear answers. (DWXSFGC006)

When we complain, our tutors will explain from the standpoint of the university. I don’t think they will pass our complaints to their directors or further up to higher leaders. What they do is only to dismiss our complaints and questions. (DWXSFGCG003)

There is not much communication between us and the university. Usually, we talk to our teachers when in need. Teachers sometimes ask for our opinion of the courses and their teaching. (DWXSFGBZ003)

The effectiveness of the communication between teachers and students depends on how close they feel to each other. We seldom have such communication with most teachers. (DWSXFGAB001)

I feel we should find out the suitable learning methods by ourselves. It is not what teachers can tell us, but there should be a good communication between teachers and students. We need their psychological support and guidance. (DWSXFGAL005)

We expect our teachers to help us find out what we are good at, or what our potential is. We are not skilled in finding it. (DWSXFGAJ003)
It would be great if teachers could help us find out what area we are weak and strong in. (DWXSFGAL005)
3.2 Staff Data

3.2.1 Staff views on quality

What is quality? During the last decade, the word ‘quality’ has been used widely by individuals, institutions, and government agencies with multiplicity of purposes to indicate the positive state of HE. Most of the staff think the concept of HE quality is hard to define, but they have the concern of quality especially after the expansion of HE.

The concept of quality is quite hard to define. Before the expansion of HE in 1999, Chinese HE was in its elite period. After the expansion of HE, the concept of qualities attracted more and more attention. (DWJWCJ001)

When talking about quality, we need to relate this concept to another one, HE expansion. Here is a contrast. In the elite education period, a teacher taught only a small number of students, but now there are a big number of students a teacher needs to teach. Students have fewer opportunities to meet up and discuss with their teachers. Where is the ground for quality? In China, the issue of quality comes to the centre stage of HE because it has become a problem. When we speed up to catch up with the global trend of HE expansion, we did not consider sufficiently whether our economy and financial capacity can sustain that. (LYSFTW005)

Quality as staff quality

What does quality of education mean? The teaching administrator of the national university responded to this question by linking quality to the quality of teachers, their teaching conduct, and research achievements. He believes the most important factor in HE quality is the teachers’ quality.

In fact, all efforts for quality are based on the quality of the faculty. Research and teaching are both undertaken by teachers. The capacity of teaching staff is the most important. ... All in all, the foothold of a university’s quality is in its teaching staff. Without a strong and competent teaching staff, a good teaching ethos, there is no ground for quality. (SWJWCL021)

Most teachers interviewed in this study think teacher quality is the key to education quality.

Good teachers, especially eminent teachers (ming shi) are how good universities distinguish themselves from other universities. The eminent teachers are not judged via their educational background, but by the achievement in their fields. They are distinguished in both teaching and research. A good university should have at least several such academics. A
university with such distinguished academics is more likely to attract other distinguished academics and professionals. (SWTZY006)

Staff quality is an important indicator, including their qualifications, achievements, the structure of the teaching team, and the opportunities of staff training and development. (SWTCXF007)

I think the most important in education quality is teachers’ qualifications and curriculum. (DWTZ009)

**Quality as student entry level and student development**

Some teachers believe the quality of a university is decided by the quality of its students and their entry level.

The entry level of students makes the difference of university quality. A more prestigious university will attract students with higher entry level. The quality of its graduates is better naturally. (DWTH007)

Quality is a complicated phenomenon. I think the quality of students is the most important. In China, students’ performance in the National College Entrance Exams (NCEEs) is the main indicator. Students with higher scores in the entrance exam, their learning motivation is stronger. In general, ’211 Project‘ universities have more possibilities to recruit better students. (SWTCXF007)

Student growth is considered by some teachers as fundamental in the concept of HE quality.

Student development is the most important in university quality. It is one of the main objectives of HE. (SDJS002)

Quality of HE should be reflected in the competence of students, including proper attitudes to life, learning capacity (not just academic scores), the ability to accept new things, creativity, and innovation ability. (SDJS003)

The quality of graduates is also considered as a key indicator of education quality.

I think successful HE should produce excellent graduates. (SWTZY006)

I feel a university with proper educational quality should provide more job opportunities for its graduates. I think this is a very important indicator. (DWTH007)

A teacher considered that graduates’ strength in their specialty and a proper self-positioning are the two good indicators for the quality of a university.
If the quality of a university is good, the graduates will be strong in their speciality. As you know, only a very small number of people can become the leading talents. So, a proper positioning is crucial for students’ job searching. I think universities need to develop their students in their ability of self-positioning. A university with quality should be strong in both of the two issues. (DWTHT010)

Graduate employment is the concern of all students, their parents and universities. When talking about the understanding of HE quality, graduate employment rate is related.

An important aspect of university quality is in its graduates, mainly the employment rate, and the categories and levels of their employment. This indicator differentiates the quality of various HEIs. It can be observed directly, and is more objective. (SWJWCL021)

A senior management staff member expressed his concern of over-emphasising graduate employment rate.

The quality evaluation is often conducted in a direct and simple way, for example, based on employment rate. It is believed that the higher the employment rate, the higher quality of education a university has. I am quite against this view. It is misleading. Graduate employment rate is important, but it should not be overvalued. Our HE can’t be degraded to the level of vocational education. I think it is dreadful if our HE only teaches students some means to make a living like a job training centre. (DWJWCJ001)

Critics of quality policies

Globally, quality becomes a key word in HE dictionary. Opportunities for policy borrowing have been greatly enhanced by the various information flows of globalisation (Morley, 2003). Policy borrowing is very common in this globalised world, especially in management culture. One teacher gave his view of borrowing the policy of quality into Chinese HE.

I have never done any research on quality, but I don’t think at the current time there is a proper QA system in Chinese HE. Chinese universities are busy with campus and facility construction. Student experiences have not become the focus of their work. I do believe the quality system in Chinese should not be the same as in western countries for we have a different cultural and historical background. In China, we use education to install rationale and social rules into students. In contrast, western education inspires students to develop independent thinking. Our education system provides students with unified courses and knowledge without considering their individual differences. The western education expects students to see
the difference, while the eastern education leads students to see the homology/unification. (SWTC004)

Policy borrowing, in his view, needs to consider the local tradition and culture. The teacher continued to explain his disagreement with borrowing quality policies to China.

I don’t think it is a wise idea to implant the concept of quality from the western education into Chinese HE. The definition of quality must be based on people. The western standard is rooted in their history, tradition and values. Our definition of quality should also be based on the people in China and their values. I don’t think it is wise to follow other countries. As the result of this quality culture globalization, we will lose our local characteristics. I don’t think a real QA system in Chinese HE has been established. (SWTC004)

The practice of nationwide teaching quality evaluation is used as the tool to evaluate the education quality of Chinese HEIs. This practice was criticised by some teachers.

Our education evaluation system is not rational and scientific. It brings a big burden to us. We spent a lot of time preparing documents for evaluation. (SDJS001)

What is used in quality evaluation is mainly numbers, but how can one know whether these numbers are valid or not. Many valuable things cannot be quantified, and thus are overlooked. Scientific management is quite a prevailing vocabulary in quality related language. Under this concept, it is believed that following a series of programmed procedures will produce quality. What if the procedure is wrongly programmed? I doubt the opinion of achieving quality via controlling the process. (SWTC004)

A senior management staff member was quite critical of the current quality policies. In his view, the practice of the quality projects ‘211’ and ‘985’ are misleading in improving undergraduate education quality:

In fact, the quality of Chinese HE is indeed problematic, including those ‘211’ and ‘985’ universities. Undergraduate education is the sector encountering the greatest pressure. One of the reasons, I think, is that the evaluation, especially the evaluation of ‘211’ and ‘985’ universities, uses discipline based achievement (research performance) as the key indicators. Accordingly, research is over emphasised and teaching is overlooked. This kind of evaluation concepts misleads many universities. (DWJWCJ001)
Quality policies, especially the projects of ‘211’ and ‘985’ have been welcomed by the leading Chinese universities with the extra financial support from the government. A teacher from the regional university gave his different opinion.

There is only one Tsinghua university in China. The level of graduate at a regional university should not be expected to be the same as the graduates from Tsinghua. It is not wise for the government to sacrifice the support to the majority of regional universities just for the purpose of developing a few world top research universities in China. It is a big mistake not to give sufficient attention and support to the HEIs with undergraduate education as the main body, because they are the majority of Chinese HEIs. (LYSFXTW005)

Quality related movements reshape Chinese HE through the means of setting up new standards, carrying out evaluations, and redistributing funding and resources. Like many other educational reforms in China, HEIs involved themselves with hesitation and bewilderment at the beginning, and then invested greatly into this quality movement. A senior management staff member warned HEIs to watch their steps when following this trend. In our 65 minute interview, he tried to explain to me his theory of ‘moderate quality’.

There is some misunderstanding in the current enthusiasm for quality in Chinese HE. Pursuing HE quality needs to be based on the reality of the institution itself. The concept of moderate quality is what Chinese universities need to consider. In China, HE development varies greatly from the coastal regions in the east to the underdeveloped regions in the west. Institutions with different backgrounds need to consider what quality means for themselves, besides their efforts to reach the requirements given by the Ministry of Education. (LYSFXTW005)

To help me understand what he means by moderate quality he related his explanation to a metaphor:

Let us understand it in this way. What we have in hand is the food supply for four people. Suddenly, twenty people come, but we do not have the budget for the extra comers. The sudden expansion of HE is similar to this situation. However, it may not be obvious to outsiders, including the new students, since they don’t have information about it. What is leading the discussion of quality and QA now is about how to best use the food supply (educational resources) available. Rice is made into soup by adding more water to fill the stomachs of more people. In this sense, quality is different from the traditional sense of excellence. What I will advocate here is the concept of moderate quality. If you invite people to your home, you should have made proper preparations. When universities expand, there should be
a control of its speed and size on a realistic basis. The most important thing is to secure proper resources to sustain this expansion. In addition, universities should position themselves properly. (LYSFXTW005)

3.2.2 Staff views on QA

Old wine in new bottles?

QA is a new term in Chinese HE. A teaching administrator told me his understanding of the prevailing movement of QA. He considered introducing the current QA policy as the old wine in the new bottle.

Before the concept of QA system came into our management vocabulary, we had already used class observation, student feedback collection, interviews, and other methods to supervise teaching. Class observation is multi-levelled, including teaching observation by teaching administrators, leaders, and teachers. All these are QA strategies. Now, these are raised to a theoretical level, and have become a more formal and ritual thing. The teaching observation loses its original purpose of improving teaching, but is just for the sake of QA. (DWJW CW002)

When establishing QA system, universities often learn from each other, as commented by the teaching administrator.

Most universities use the experience of other universities as a reference point. In fact, the QA practices of most universities are quite similar to each other. (DWJW CW002)

Evaluation as the EQA

The nationwide quality evaluation started the quality movement in Chinese HE. Some teachers recognise the positive side of this practice. One teacher commented,

Our university undertook the national teaching evaluation last year, which standardises our teaching management. We did not have a detailed regulation on examination papers, e.g. marking code, etc. The teaching evaluation pushed us to work out and to implement new detailed regulations. Everything becomes more and more standardised. (DWTZ009)

An evaluator who is also a professor and senior teaching administrator told me his perspective, experiences, and understanding of quality evaluation practice.
Our evaluation is completely top-down. Inspectors are sent to HEIs as the representatives of the Ministry of Education. There is an imposition in such an evaluation, but it also has some advantages for management. The guiding principle of the current teaching quality evaluation is 'evaluation for quality construction, evaluation for quality improvement, integrating evaluation and construction, emphasising quality construction’... The main purpose of this round of teaching quality evaluation is to promote changes and quality regulation construction.

The implementation of the current quality evaluation policy has received a lot of criticism from HEIs and their staff. A teacher criticised the results of the evaluation.

*In the national teaching evaluation, nearly 72% of institutions got the result of ‘excellence’. Someone from the government explains that this result shows the undergraduate education in China has reached a very high level. This interpretation is too optimistic and simple. (DWJWCJ001)*

Some teachers criticised the top-down model and suggested that establishing a QA system should be HE institution based.

*Building up a QA system needs to be based on the features of our own university and our students. We often find the dilemma between meeting the strict requirements of the MoE and to develop fully the features of the university, students, and teachers. It is hard to balance. Universities should have more autonomy. (SWJWCL021)*

Staff at colleges and universities don’t like the imposed concept of QA.

*I think the best management should be developed naturally, instead of imposed from outside with the umbrella of some new management terminologies. (DWJW CW002)*

The unified standard in the quality evaluation despite the difference of colleges and universities was also criticised.

*Almost every procedure needs to be improved. The Chinese universities need more autonomy. A unified standard has been used to evaluate all HEIs. This practice itself has both positive and negative sides. The practice that all institutions use the unified standard to control their teaching will constrain the development with their own features. In fact, every university should have its own characteristics. Now, universities in China are converging with little space for divergence with their own features. Most universities are quite similar. (SWJWCL021)*

A teaching administrator believes that QA should be based on the classroom teaching, not treating teachers as the subjects of criticism.
QA needs systematic and complete regulations. Quality and QA has been located in classroom teaching. Teachers become the main targets of scrutiny and have faced a great pressure. I agree that improving teachers’ teaching is an important means to promote quality. However, if teachers are treated as clay pigeons, the purpose of quality improvement won’t be achieved. I think encouragement instead of punishment is more helpful for teachers to improve their teaching performance. (DWJWCJ001)

**IQA**

QA system has been developed into a complex system as commented by a teacher.

> QA is a complex system with many procedures, including faculty capacity building, teaching monitoring, students’ evaluation on teaching, teachers peer review, management staff self-review, department head self-review, etc. (SWJWCL021)

The responsible unit for QA inside university is the teaching administration office.

> The Teaching Administration Office is responsible for teaching management of the whole university. The academic departments are responsible for their own academic activities independently and under the supervision of the Teaching Administration Office. (SWJWCL021)

> In our university, the Teaching Administration Office is in charge of QA. There are quite detailed regulations on teaching management. The directors in charge of teaching at academic departments are experienced in teaching management. (DWECZ003)

Student evaluation of teaching is considered an important means in QA. It is a very common practice in all Chinese universities.

> Every student must give their feedback on line before selecting the courses for the next term. The main indicators in the feedback form are teachers’ teaching, class preparation, teachers’ compliance with the teaching regulations, and student satisfaction with assignment marking and feedback, etc. (SWJWCL021)

Teaching evaluation is the main function of student survey. Besides this, collecting student feedback is also for spotting students’ opinions and needs.

> Besides evaluating teaching, there are also questions about student evaluation of courses in the student survey. (SWJWCL021)
Students may take the chance of those surveys to express their needs. Maybe there should be a channel for teachers to express our needs and experiences too. (DWTZ009)

The information collected through student survey will be given to the relevant teachers individually, but no feedback will be given to students.

Information collected won’t be shown to students. Teachers are informed of their students’ evaluation of teaching. The college directors will be given an overview of all teachers’ results, which will be used as a reference point for their teaching management and teacher appraisal. (SWJWCL021)

Some teachers doubt the quality of student surveys. Some of them told me that students might not be very serious with such surveys.

There are some students who are not serious with the teaching survey online. They either choose A to all questions, or choose D to all questions. To avoid this kind of interference, we have to design some questions to triangulate the reliability of their answers. (SWJWCL021)

As most staff and students agreed, the quality of faculty is the core of QA. Various measures have been taken to assure teacher quality.

We use both incentive and punishment schemes to ensure the quality of teachers’ teaching. We also recruit excellent teachers outside our university. The teacher management is satisfying in general. Punishment won’t help in quality improvement, but it may stimulate teachers to improve their teaching. (SWJWCL021)

For teachers, there seems to be more and more severe scrutiny on them and their teaching.

I didn’t see a clear quality management system, but there is an evaluation system. The requirements for teachers are rising. New teachers are supposed to have PhD qualifications. There are requirements in research achievement records and publications. There is a student survey system to collect students’ evaluation of teaching. There are also meetings with students to collect their comments on teaching and course experiences. Teachers become more careful with their students to avoid negative comments. Some students are quite mean when reporting their teachers’ teaching. (SWTYID009)

Teachers have their own views of what is a good teacher. They don’t think professor title and PhD qualifications are the synonyms of quality teaching. One teacher gave her interpretation.
It is quite hard to evaluate a teacher, especially a professor’s teaching. Professors known for their research and publications may not be good at teaching. Students may like some teachers without PhD better than some newly recruited teachers with PhD qualification. This is the dilemma most universities often face. Some teachers may be strong in doing research, but weak in teaching. Usually good teachers prepare their teaching carefully and sufficiently. Their teaching content is rich, coherent, and well-organised. When I studied here as an undergraduate, there were some very impressive teachers. They have become my role model, when it was time for me to start my teaching. (SWTYID009)

3.2.3 Staff views on quality improvement

Quality improvement is concerned in almost every interview. A teaching administrator analysed the difficulty of quality improvement from the point of ‘three deficiencies’ in Chinese HEIs.

We often hear ‘three deficiencies’ in regional HEIs: leader’s deficient attention to undergraduate education, teachers’ deficient effort in undergraduate teaching, and the deficient financial resources. University presidents in China are officials appointed by the government. They may aim at achieving good performance within their tenure, in terms of the number of key disciplines, key laboratories, the research performance, and the number of doctorate programmes and supervisors. Teachers are busy with their own research and publications. Undergraduate teaching is often ignored. For this reason, the Ministry of Education promulgated a series of policies to strengthen the undergraduate education, especially for ‘211’ and ‘985’ universities, including requiring professors to give lectures to undergraduates. You may hear that undergraduate teaching has the priority in a university’s agenda, but usually you will find it is not the case if you look into the resource distribution inside the university. (DWJWCJ001)

Teachers perceive quality improvement from different perspectives.

I think the quality of a university is in its capacity in making continuous improvement. But, in general, it is what absent in our practice. (DWTW008)

Many universities reinforce their management these days. I think it will contribute to the improvement of quality. There is more and more regulation and standardisation in our work. Management is quite prevailing and powerful in our university. (DWTH007)

Quality improvement is generated from the inside of universities instead of under the external pressure. Whenever students and teachers are really
given enough attention, quality improvement will be possible. (DWJWCJ001)

I think quality is the quality of the people related to universities, leadership, academic staff, administrative staff, students, etc. If a university intends to improve its quality, it should start from stimulate the thinking of people there. (DWTL012)

Where shall we work to improve quality? In the opinion of a teaching administrator, curriculum as the core of QA, is the point where quality improvement may start from,

The curriculum in Chinese HE consists of three parts: national regulated courses (moral education, Marxism philosophy, computer, etc.), the compulsory courses regulated by Discipline Guidance Committee, and university featured courses. In general, university featured courses only take 20% of the whole curriculum. It is this lack of space of university featured courses in the curriculum that leads to the convergent tendency of the curriculum in most Chinese universities. I strongly call for reducing the regulation of Discipline Guidance Committee. Their regulated courses may not fit into the actual condition of different universities. In addition, most universities need more space for their featured courses.

In fact, what is directly linked to teaching quality is discipline structure and level with curriculum at the core. The curriculum structure decides the students’ knowledge structure. Just a glimpse at student development planning and curriculum at Chinese universities, we may find the gap between the education objectives with emphasis on practice and creativity and the supporting curriculum. In most Chinese universities, even those ‘211 Project’ ones, the development of students’ ability of practice and creativity is mainly on the support of practicum teaching. However, the practicum in the curriculum is very limited and far from enough. Except in Zhejiang University and a few other universities, the curriculum in most universities is still following their discipline structure. Accordingly, courses arranged in a different study year are fixed without much space for optional courses available for students to select. (DWJWCJ001)

This opinion of improving quality from curriculum is shared by another teacher.

Many students often feel lost when considering which should be their priority, English language or their subject courses. They also have questions about what are the advantages of their cross-subject programme. However, most of these programmes are based on the existing programmes in the university and the name of ‘international’ is used to attract students. Quality improvement should start from curriculum construction and refinement. (SWTYID009)

Teachers’ teaching is the permanent focus of quality improvement. The director of a college noted that quality improvement needs teachers’ attention to student
development and needs in teaching. However, as the college director said, it is not easy to change teachers’ established teaching routine:

The teaching pattern common among teachers is presentation-exercise-reproduction. Teacher presentation of new knowledge takes most of the class time. The focus is on teaching itself, with little consideration of how much students may accept. We realised the problem in our teaching, and put some efforts in changing towards learner centred teaching. As you can imagine, teachers have formed their teaching style. It is really not easy to change their concepts.

From the administrative perspective, we observe teachers classes and give questions to them about how they observe students accept and process what has been presented by teachers. There are some changes step by step, though the improvement is very slow.

Our university initiated teaching reform projects aim to encourage teachers to improve their teaching by doing teaching research. In our college, we find that in the process of doing teaching research, many good ideas came out, which can be used to improve teaching. We have more than ten teaching research projects every year. Doing the research on their own teaching, teachers themselves become learners, which helps them understand more of their students. I think it is a very good strategy of teacher development and teaching improvement.

We organise several collective course preparation sessions every term. Teachers teaching the same course meet up every month to discuss their teaching plan, class activities, progress, problems encountered. In this way, teachers know what their peer teachers are doing, and accordingly improve their own teaching.

We encourage teachers to give concrete feedback to their students’ assignments, instead of just scoring them. Concrete and detailed feedback is a good communication tool between teachers and students. It makes students know they have got the attention of their teachers. They can be informed of how their work is and where to improve. The key point is to take students as learners as all of us are. (DWECZ003)

Encouraging teachers to do teaching research is a good practice and welcomed by teachers.

It is a good practice in our university to encourage teachers to do teaching research. As a young teacher, I feel it is a good chance to learn how to teach and how to do research. (DWTZ009)

There is a big number of publications and research on quality, QA and improvement. However, as one interviewee pointed out, the quality of these
publications and research is not satisfying. Higher quality research is needed to in the field of QA and improvement.

*Most of the quality related research is not empirical. Many academics doing research on quality have almost no experience of teaching management. They borrow the experience of other countries directly. Such implantation won’t help the quality improvement of Chinese education quality. Higher quality research is needed to improve quality. (DWJWCJ001)*

The student learning experience is not a new concept but has not been given enough attention in China. A teaching administrator described his observation:

*I feel the total education in China of all levels is cultivating students into one type despite their individual differences. (DWJWCJ001)*

It is not difficult to collect information of student experiences from students, but as a teacher pointed out, the problem is how to use the information for improvement.

*Getting information from students is not difficult. Questionnaires and interviews with some student representatives can be used to get student feedback. Most students would like to share their opinions. What is absent here is a mechanism to take actions for improvement. Students vary individually. It is hard to take care of the needs of every single student. However, it is workable to research on what student’s need, what they encounter in their study, what is helpful for their learning development. The cooperation among teachers and tutors may complete the task. (DWTW008)*

Improving quality through enriching student learning experiences can be started by providing a supportive learning environment and resources.

*There are two things we need to work on. The first thing is to try our best to give students a good supportive learning environment. The university leaders, teachers and management staff all should take students as their own kids. The second thing is provide our students good learning resources and courses. Students are like the kids in our family, who always like candies without knowing what are healthy food. Sometimes, students don’t like the milk and eggs prepared by the teachers; instead they only like ice cream. However, no matter how much they like ice cream, they still have to eat enough eggs and milk for their health. This is what we should do in education. (LYSFXTW005)*
One teacher believes that giving students some pressure and encouraging them to read more may help sustain student learning motivation and improve their learning quality.

*The common problem of most Chinese students is learning motivation. This problem is not an individual phenomenon, but a common one. Their learning motivation in high school is to go to universities, but after entering universities they often feel relieved. Their learning motivation decreased. In Chinese universities, the graduation rate is over 95% in general. Students don’t worry about their graduation with such a high graduate rate. Not enough pressure, students have little motivation for learning. They often feel lost. The learning state of students is quite worrying. We require our students to read more for accumulating their knowledge or developing their own language skills.* (SWJWCL021)

Cultivating students with all-round development is identified as a key point to improve HE quality. The teaching administrator noted that:

*Even since the last century, ‘education for student all-round development’ has become a theme of quality improvement in Chinese HE. It has been promoted as a project. However, education is a long term thing, while all projects are short-termed. The project of all-round development education has not reached its objectives. At the time, more than 30 bases of all-round development education were set up, mostly in those ‘985’ universities. The most successful cases are Zhejiang University and Fudan University. The boundary of disciplines is broken. The first two years are a basic education phase where students can choose courses in science, humanity, arts, etc. Then students come to their more specialised discipline learning from the third year.* (DWJWCJ001)

What really are the constraints of quality improvement in China? Here is the view of a teaching administrator.

*The constraint may be the system of HE in China. University presidents are officials appointed by the government. As the spokesman of the government, they will tend to protect the benefit of the government when there is a conflict between universities and the government. To compete for educational resources, many universities advocate themselves despite their poor education quality. The fiscal appropriation from the government is not sufficient for maintaining university operation in the context of HE expansion. The common practice among most Chinese universities is constructing a new campus or extending the campus with a loan from the bank. This adds to their financial pressure. Here are the questions. How can they pay off the loan? Do they have enough money to invest in quality improvement? (DWJWCJ001)*

Another constraint for quality improvement for Chinese universities is the hierarchical structure of Chinese HE. For instance, '211 Project’ is the policy that structures Chinese HEIs. It also reflects the inequality of educational
resources distribution. Top universities with better financial support are given extra funding, part of which may have been wasted on reception costs as exposed in the news media. In contrast, those regional universities with a great need for funding find it very difficult to get sufficient financial support. (DWJWCJ001)

*I think the current teaching evaluation does not make much contribution to the quality improvement. It might be more useful if it was linked to the HE resources distribution.* (DWJWCJ001)

‘Quality improvement’ often conveys very positive meaning. However, we need to realise that all improvement will be null if it only stays between lips and documents.

*Quality improvement is quite problematic since not much action has been taken. Both university leaders and teachers have not given enough attention to it. The priorities for many colleges are upgrading to the university status, qualification of master programme provision, and application for doctorate programme provision, which are all very time and energy consuming. I don’t think they are doing the right and realistic thing. In fact, for most teaching oriented regional colleges, the focus should be on undergraduate teaching.* (DWJWCJ001)

### 3.2.4 Our students

#### 3.2.4.1 The characteristics of our students

The question of how teachers think of their students was given to all the teachers interviewed. A great majority of teachers interviewed used the comparison between the previous student generation and the current one to describe their understanding of student features. Teachers commented on the characteristics of their students in the following aspects.

**Their entry level**

*In the informal exchange among teachers, we often say that students are worse in their learning attitudes and lower in their entry level year by year.* (SWTCXF007)

*They are not as good as my previous students in their entry levels.* (DWTH007)
More utilitarian and very keen on shortcuts

Students, like most people in the society, are more and more utilitarian and performance oriented. More attention is given to speaking; less is given to the more fundamental things. (SWTCXF007)

Students nowadays often want some shortcut in their learning, and are not willing to put any effort into the process. (DWTH007)

Better financial support from their family

Students nowadays are very different from the students of previous generations. Their family background and financial state are much better. They have better family financial support as the only child of the family. (DWTJ011)

Less diligent and perseverant

Students now are quicker in catching new information and trends, but they are weaker in their perseverance and practical working ability (dong shou neng li), tenacity, hard working, self-adjustment when facing difficulties and frustration. My current students are weaker in their will and mentality, comparing with the previous generations. (DWTJ011)

Students now are less diligent than my previous students. (SWTZY006)

Postgraduate education

It seems that they don’t rely much on their undergraduate learning for their future. They will study somewhere for a master degree. For our generation, the undergraduate period has been crucial in our career preparation. It seems that their acquisition of professional knowledge and skills happens when they study abroad or in their postgraduate study period. (SWTZY006)

Many of them choose to study abroad after graduation. In our department, of the 250 graduates I tutored that year, 27 studied abroad after graduation. (SWTZY006)

Less obedient and more demanding.

The students of previous generations were more obedient, while in contrast, students now are more self-centred. (DWTZ009)

When we were students, we respected our teachers greatly and followed what they told us. The students nowadays are very demanding. (SWTYID009)

In my university time, only excellent students could have chance to go to universities. We studied hard to learn all valuable things from our teachers. We did not have much demand on teachers’ teaching activities. Now I have
to consider class activities and how to attract and keep students’ attention. Students these days are different from us. (DWTL012)

**They are active and open to express themselves**

The college students of this generation are very active. When you give them a topic for discussion, they will be very excited and quick to bring out their ideas. It seems they are very resourceful and quick with ideas. They like to participate and communicate their ideas with others. (DWTZ009)

They are very active in out-of-class activities. They have got more musical or artistic training before entering the university. In the class I tutored, three to four of the thirty students play piano. The rest have also received some other musical or artistic training. (SWTZY006)

The satisfying side of my students is that they are willing to speak and to express themselves. This is much better than the previous students, shy and silent in class. (DWTHT010)

They are very different from the previous generations. They were born around 1990s or late 1980s, more outgoing and ready to show them. (SWTZY006)

**Awareness about their career planning**

Sometimes you feel students are more mature. They start their career planning quite early, even in their 1st and 2nd year study. In contrast, we started to have some vague pictures about it only in our 3rd or 4th year. Students nowadays plan earlier, either to study abroad, to continue for postgraduate study, or to start their career. They are better in planning their career. (SWTZY006)

**Keen on information and trends**

The students nowadays are very open. They are keen on information, and very skilled in using information technology. They can find the needed information with amazing speed. (DWTH007)

Students now are quicker in catching new information and trends. (DWTJ011)

It is an era of information and quick changes. Students have many resources available to find what they want to know. (DWTZ009)

They are very sensitive to fashions and social trends. This is closely related to the era we are in. (SWTZY006)

**They are more independent.**

Students are more and more independent, and harder to control. They want part time jobs after class and fun time with their friends. (SWTCXF007)
Chapter 3  Data Description

I feel the new generation has more self-awareness. They won’t follow your instruction immediately before they make their own judgement. (SWTYID009)

They are very independent. When we were students, we respected our teachers greatly and did what they told us. They are not that ready to follow. (SWTYID009)

### 3.2.4.2 Student adjustment to their university learning

Making the adjustment to university can be a challenge for students. Teachers interviewed in this study find their students need some time, effort and support to adjust to university study. Students, at the beginning of their university study, often feel bewildered and wait for their teachers to tell them what to learn. Their learning is often influenced by their pre-university learning habits and experiences, for example, exam oriented learning.

> I notice in the first year students need a period of time to adjust to university life. The education in high school is the spoon-fed one. Some of them don’t know how to learn independently after entering the university. (DWTZ009)

A teacher noted that students were not active enough in their learning and often waited to be fed by teachers.

> I am not sure whether it is because they are lazy or they don’t know how to do it. In fact, there are so many resources available for their learning. Students seem to be used to waiting for their teachers to feed them with lectures. Only listening to lectures will make them feel they are learning. (DWTHT010)

In the eyes of teachers, students’ previous learning experiences greatly influences their current learning methods.

> Their concept is influenced by their previous learning methods. It is not easy to change. They do need to change their learning methods. (DWTHT010)

One teacher observed that a teacher’s guidance might be helpful in student adjustment to university study.
Chapter 3  Data Description

At the beginning, students know little about what learning and teaching in the university is like and how different it is from their high school experiences. Everything is quite fresh to them. Adjusting and forming new learning habits needs a teacher’s guidance. Learning a foreign language needs a certain kind of independent learning method. However, students may be used to duck-filling lecturing and exam oriented study. Teachers firstly need to help students change their concept of learning. (SWTYID009)

One teacher noted that an important element in student adjustment to university study was students’ repositioning of themselves in the new university environment.

Students are repositioning themselves constantly. For instance, some of them were top students in high school, but they find after entering the university that they are not the top ones any more. They often feel they are degraded, thus they need to reposition themselves in their study. At the same time, students become more and more mature mentally and cognitively, from being exam oriented to a person more open-minded and ambitious. (SWTZY006)

In the process of adjusting to university study, students value very much the score they get in their exams and other assessments. They also depend too much on their teachers’ guidance and need to develop independent learning. One difference university teachers have compared with higher school teachers is that they are not around students all the time telling them what to learn and what to do. One young teacher noted that developing student independent thinking and learning would be very useful in helping students adjust to the university study life.

Most students are used to being led by teachers. They value their scores very much. For instance, the assignment of memorising new words will be completed neatly if I tell them it will be tested and included in their study record. However, in the university, students need to know what they want by themselves and how to position themselves. Unlike teachers in high schools, teachers in the university are not around students all the time telling them what to do. Students in the university need to think by themselves. Since students trust their teachers, we should indicate to them the need of their adjustment. In this way, students may adapt to their university classes better, though they may still have questions. The mutual efforts of both teachers and students are useful. Otherwise, students will be lost in the first year of their study. It will be too late for them when they realise it in their third or fourth year. I think this kind of education and guidance is very important for student development. (SWTYID009)

Students can’t discern well when in their first and second year. The criteria used for scholarship grant distribution usually play a role in their weighing
courses and time distribution. Intensive Reading is a course with a high proportion in scholarship grant evaluation; therefore students usually give more attention and time to this course. However, when they get into the third and fourth year, they may have different opinion and will have their own judgements. (SWYID011)

Adjusting to university study is a psychological change, cognition development, and a process of setting up students’ learning methods. One teacher suggested that teachers should help students change their concept of learning.

*I feel what students need after entering the university is a psychological change. It is important and necessary to let them know what they need to do and what learning outcomes they may reach. Teachers need to help students change their concept of learning. (SWYID005)*

Another teacher gave her observation of what students need from teachers to adjust to university study.

*I feel the teacher’s role has changed from supervising students to facilitating students. Students seem to prefer self-management and to value their independence. What teachers are expected to give students is both knowledge and psychological support. (SWTZY006)*

Helping students going beyond their familiar exam oriented learning and establishing proper learning objectives was spotted by a teacher as an important task for teachers.

*Firstly, we need to let students reflect what they are learning for. Their experiences in high school make them feel learning is for exams. This won’t help their learning in the university. The guidance teachers should give to students is to make them think more about the aims of their learning in the university. With a clear aim of what they want to achieve at the time of graduation, they may work out how they can reach it. Being trained well at coping with exams won’t help students with their future work and communication. I often take any available chances to talk with my students about it. Some of them tell me that their learning is to find good jobs, and then I will follow their talk to let them think what kind of skills will be needed in their ideal jobs. Guiding students to understand learning a foreign language is for communication, not for exams, works quite well when I try to adjust their learning methods. (SWTYID009)*
3.2.4.3 How do our students learn?

The question of ‘how do your students learn?’ and ‘what learning methods do your students use in their university study?’ were given to the teachers to understand how teachers see student learning. A middle aged teacher told me that it was the first time that she was asked these questions. She shared with me her observation of student learning activities.

I am teaching the second year students. I think the student learning method is to prepare lessons by reading the text and looking up dictionaries for the meaning of new words. In class, they listen to the teacher’s presentation and take part in the class activities, such as discussion, debate or role play. I think the main learning method for the second year students is to memorise new words, their spelling and usages. When they have time, they will search on line for some interesting reading. Sometimes, I also give them some topics to collect information and to write a summary. (DWTH007)

Teachers identified some problems in their students’ learning, e.g. learning planning, efficiency, learning objectives, in their talk about how their students learn.

Many students are not good at planning and lack efficiency. Some of my students study every day and spend most of their time on learning from textbooks, but the efficiency is very low. It seems that they don’t know how to learn. (DWTZ009)

Students often don’t have clear learning objectives. Some students tell me that they want to continue to postgraduate study. When I ask them why they want to study further, some of them tell me that they want to work as a teacher in a university, but many of them have little idea about what they are going to do after their postgraduate study. (DWTL012)

Who and what shapes student learning method is often concerned in the talk about student learning. Teachers recognise their roles in shaping student learning methods.

Student learning methods are shaped by teachers’ design of learning tasks and activities. If the class activities are designed as open and knowledge based, students will have to go to the library to find reading and references. Step by step, students will form their own learning methods. If the class activities are designed to train students listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, they will be used to learn for skills narrowly without the awareness to extend their knowledge by searching and referencing broadly. I think what teachers require students to achieve will reflect itself in students learning methods and results. It is not very likely
for students to build up very good learning methods without the assistance of teacher instruction. (DWTW008)

There are students who come to me asking why they can’t reach their expected learning outcomes, especially a satisfying result in the exams. Seeking the comments from their teachers is a common solution, I guess. In my students, 70-80% of students are quite concerned with their learning methods. They often doubt whether they are using the right learning method, or wonder why they have not got the same result though using same methods as others do. (DWT007)

The first and the second year is a warming up time for teachers to shape up student learning methods. It will be too late if left to start from the third year. Teachers may give students assignments with clear objectives. Students will develop their own learning methods while in the process of completing those assignments. I think the design of learning tasks plays a great role in the formation of student learning methods. What teacher emphases in teaching is usually the focus which student will pay special attention in their learning. (DWTW008)

Teachers often give students some recommendations when students turn to them for diagnosis or advice on their learning methods.

My students often come to me and ask what the best way to learn is. I give them my advice. I think they will try the methods recommended, but there is no further exchange on that later. (DWTJ017)

A teacher told me that not all students follow her advice on students’ learning methods.

I teach two classes now. Students in one class follow my instruction fully, but students in the other class, a bilingual class, do not take my advice that well. I sometimes introduce study methods in class, sometimes after class. Usually the study methods given by teachers are constructive for them, for example, I ask them to preview lessons. They know the importance of previewing lessons, but they just don’t do it. I think it is because they are lazy. (DWTL012)

One teacher noted that students should give enough effort in their learning, develop their interest in learning, and enjoy the process of learning.

Foreign language learning needs time and effort. Students sometimes fail in securing enough input in their learning, but they are quite eager to see the improvement and good results. I often remind my students that without putting in enough effort, the methods recommended by teachers won’t work. Only with a big amount of input, will it be realistic to see quality output in learning. Students are often not diligent enough, nor do they enjoy the input process. They tell me that reading is boring. They are
not interested in reading. I also encourage them to start from simpler readings with topics interesting to them. Not all advice I give them works. Some students take it and tell me they benefit from it. But some of them haven’t found enjoyment in learning. I see that they lack learning motivations and feel study is boring. (DWTHT010)

3.2.4.4 What should our students learn?

What students should be learning in their university is a fundamental question, but it is often taken for granted. A Teaching administrator gave his comments.

Our university is specialised in foreign languages and studies. What students in our university should learn are in two aspects: one is specialised skills in foreign languages, for example, listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation skills. The other is the humanity spirit. The difference between people who have received HE and those who haven’t is in the humanity spirit. In our university, humanity spirit includes four things: Firstly, the knowledge of Chinese culture. This is our identity. Secondly, students should be open to other cultures on the basis of standing on our own culture. They should also develop the critical thinking to both foreign cultures and our own culture. Thirdly, students need to acquire the ability to observe, to find, to analyse and solve problems. Fourthly, students should have management skills. These are necessary for them to learn in the university. (SWJWCL021)

Subject knowledge and skills are primarily what students should learn in their university learning. This is a common opinion of all teachers.

Subject knowledge and skills is definitely something students should learn in their university. (DWTHT010)

No doubt, they should have a good grasp of the subject knowledge. For their subject knowledge, there are detailed requirements regulated by the national guiding committee. (DWTH007)

Subject knowledge is important, but as the interviewed teachers pointed out, students should learn beyond the boundary of their subject knowledge.

Students, at the time of graduation, should have a broad range of knowledge beyond their speciality. Many students are job oriented when they make choices of where to study. What leads them to choose a certain university is because they assume some subjects will enable them to earn a good salary after graduation. I don’t want my students to learn only for jobs. They should graduate from the university as a person with full-round quality and broad knowledge. (SWTZY006)

Besides subject knowledge, thinking skill is what most teachers think their student should acquire.
The most important is thinking ability, though its development is the theme of one’s whole life. I often remind them the importance of thinking. (DWTL012)

A young teacher gave me her idea of what kind of abilities students should have. She categorised the student abilities into subject abilities and personal abilities.

I think we may look at what students should learn from their subject abilities and personal abilities. For subject abilities, they should be competent for their future jobs with their foreign language skills. At the same time, we know that most graduates won’t use the subject knowledge they have learned in the university very much. For instance, my classmate works in the bank without relying on the speciality she has been trained in at university. Therefore, their general quality or personal abilities will be very important. This includes their thinking, understanding, learning skills, independence, spotting and solving problems, team working, etc. Most employers pay more attention to students’ general quality or personal abilities. No matter what graduates’ specialities are, if they have good personal abilities, they will learn fast. I hope my students will have independent learning ability after their university learning. Certainly, interpersonal skills are also crucial for them. (SWTYID009)

Teachers believe that subject knowledge and generic skills are both important to students, like two legs.

Subject knowledge and competence, and personal skills are the two legs for our students to walk in the society. (DWTHT010)

In general, I think students should have the awareness of learning, proper learning methods, and the skills of communicating, cooperating and competing with others. In addition, they need to learn how to manage time. (SWTJ009)

Students should learn how to learn, where to find information, and how to solve problems observed. If students may learn this in the first two years of their study, they may advance their learning methods further in the second half of their university study. (DWTW008)

Besides subject knowledge and skills, students should develop other skills, including coordinating skills, organisational skills, communication skills, how to cooperate with others, team work skills, and other skills they may need when entering the society. Many of my students don’t know how to get along with others. Some of my students pass me without any greeting when we meet in the corridor after I finish teaching them. My colleagues also have similar experiences. It seems that they lack knowledge of basic courtesy. We don’t understand whether it is because of their family education, or change of social values. (DWTH007)

How to communicate with others is what they should learn for it is related to their future survival in the society. (DWTL012)
Employability skills are also considered by teachers as important for students to learn in their university study.

*University is the last stage before they enter the university, so they also need to be ready for it. If students are not good at communication, they must learn how to communicate in university learning. Besides this, students also need to know how to cooperate, how to reach their aims, how to make a good planning, and how to balance their efforts.* (DWTHT010)

Teachers think students need to develop their morality while acquiring subject knowledge and generic skills.

*While enlarging their horizon, they need to develop their values and morality. Only after knowing how to be a moral person, will they apply their knowledge properly in the complex society.* (DWTL012)

Some teachers feel their students are often distracted by the certificate oriented exams organised outside the universities.

*Students are distracted by various kinds of exams for certificates when they get to the third year. Most of those students chasing certificates are not clear what they really want. They are just following others when they see their peer students are preparing for those exams for certificates. They don’t have clear objectives and planning.* (DWTL012)

*It is a common phenomenon among students to take exams for various certificates: Legal English Certificate, Minor Course Certificate, Certificate of Public Accountant, Business English Certificate, National Judicial Examination, etc. They often don’t know what they are going to do in the future. Taking various exams for certificates is just following others. These exams are quite costly in terms of time and money. They even don’t know whether these certificates will be useful or not. They start to send their resumes blindly.* (SWTYID009)

### 3.2.5 Our teaching

#### 3.2.5.1 How did I learn to teach?

Teachers and students are not riding in the same boat, but both of them are exploring learning in the same stream. A young teacher told me her experiences:

*When I started to teach, I had little idea what the students were thinking, but from the second year on, I started to accumulate my understanding of the students.* (SWTYID009)
Teachers’ understanding of their students is basically based on their observation and interaction with their student. Most teachers in universities are not majored in pedagogy. How have they learned to teach?

I have been influenced by the teachers of my university time. There were some teachers whose teaching impressed me when I was a student. I imitated them when I started to teach, even the way I talk in class. (SWTYID009)

When I just started to teach, I often asked for advice from other teachers. The communication with peer teachers is helpful and we like to talk about students. Senior teachers do not talk about students as often as young teachers. There are meetings of teaching at the beginning and the end of each term. We may put forward our suggestions, but it is hard to tell whether they will be adopted. (SWTJ010)

At the beginning of my teaching, I experienced the difficulty of presenting knowledge clearly to my students. After a few years teaching, I am more confident of my subject knowledge and more skilful in teaching. Now I am quite skilled in using different teaching methods to illustrate my points to students. At the beginning, I often felt frustrated with student class absence, but later I realised the need of understanding my students. Up to now, I have established my own teaching style with a clear planning and proper class organisation. This development makes me enjoy teaching more. (SWTCXF007)

Pre-teaching training is compulsory for new teachers in the Chinese HE system. It is supposed to prepare new teachers for their teaching by introducing pedagogy, educational psychology and education legislations to new teachers. The effect of this type of teacher training is quite limited, as expressed by a young teacher.

There is teacher training before we started teaching, but it is not very helpful. On the contrary, it is a burden because we have to do teaching and to take teacher training at the same time. The teacher training is quite boring. The courses include teaching ethics, psychology, and pedagogy. There is an exam after the training, and a test of speaking standard Chinese (pu tong hua kao shi). All are quite superficial and boring. I even don’t remember anything in that training since it is quite far away from our teaching. (SWTJ010)

### 3.2.5.2 What is important in teaching?

Every teacher has his/her own teaching experiences. What do they think important in teaching? One teacher told me her understanding.
As a teacher, we need to love teaching and to devote ourselves to teaching and students. Efforts in work, a good range of subject knowledge and pedagogical skills are all important. (SWTCXF007)

Different teachers have different understanding of teaching. They also develop their own appreciated methods in teaching with their accumulated experiences.

Involving students in learning is the most important. In my class, I do my best to give students more chances to practice, to talk, to express their opinions. I often give them assignments in writing. When organising class discussion, I particularly choose those topics connecting the text to their university life. Sometimes, I also give them opportunities to give questions to each other to check whether they have learned the key points they should learn from the class. (SWTCXF007)

It is very important and helpful to know what students are interested in. This helps my teaching design and class organisation. A proper class design and organisation considering student interests, to some extent, helps the retention of student’s participation in class. (SWTCXF007)

Updating my own knowledge and teaching content is important, otherwise, teaching will get boring and dry. (SWTZY006)

I adjust my requirements to students in different courses. When I teach an optional course for the third year students, I may find some of them read the textbooks of other courses. I would not make a fuss over that since I know students’ positioning of my optional course. Subject core courses have the priority in students’ mind. (SWTJ013)

Guiding students to develop their learning methods is important. I often point out immediately when I find they have problems in learning. For instance, I pick some nice sentences in the text for them to discuss and to adopt into their own expression. Most students are quite open and willing to accept my recommendations. (DWTZ009)

Students cannot be considered as containers that teachers passively throw knowledge into, but as learners who will continue their learning after graduation. This opinion is given by the director of English college of the regional university.

It is important for us to understand that education is about people, who will become members of society. What learners need to acquire is the capacity for development. Thus, it won’t work if we treat students as containers receiving knowledge passively. In fact, they are learning in many ways, learning from their peers, learning by making mistakes, etc. As teachers, when we teach them, we need not only to know they can write a good composition, but also to understand how they use the knowledge and skills we present to them when writing a composition. It is irresponsible if we think we have finished our job after presenting the knowledge to students. We should consider them as learners and find out what they have experienced in their learning. (DWECZ003)
Communication with students is valued by many teachers. They find that students like to communicate with teachers if teachers respect them and show a willingness to exchange.

*I feel the new generation has more self-awareness. They won’t follow your instruction immediately before they make their own judgement. They may appear to be less obedient, but they have wider knowledge than previous students. They are sincere and willing to communicate if you respect them. They are also more confident in their ideas than we were at the same age. I sometimes communicate with them after class. After getting their trust, they accept me and my ideas. Students don’t like preaching. It works often if I use my experiences to illustrate the points.* (SWTYID009)

While valuing communication with students, teachers also find that students seek support from their peer or senior students when facing problems. One teacher commented that students seemed to be more willing to accept the opinion of their peer students instead of their teachers.

*When students have difficulties or questions, they usually go to their peer students, instead of seeking help from their teachers. Students vary greatly. Some students often come to teachers for ideas. At the other extreme, some students never go to teachers. In the communication with teachers, if they trust their teachers, they may talk about things beyond their study. In general, not many students communicate regularly with teachers. We don’t have office hours, so most communication after class really depends on teachers. If one ignores or keeps a distance from his students, the students are not likely to communicate actively with him.* (SWTYID009)

Students vary greatly. Teachers think it is important to get students to communicate actively with their teachers.

*When you have several years teaching experiences, you will find the variance of student learning styles. Some classes are more expressive than others. It might be very different in another class. What I am thinking now is how to tune the students to the right channel of learning and communication with teachers.* (SWTZY006)

Some teachers find asking students to write their journals is a very useful tool to communicate with students.

*I ask my students to write their weekly journals. I will select some form them for my students to read and share.* (SWTZY006)

Good communication is not only important for teachers to know what their students are doing, but also it affects teacher’s teaching motivation.
Some students understand their teachers and their efforts in teaching. These students are very cooperative and active in class. But in some classes, it seems that the students do not care about their teachers’ efforts. Maybe it is because there is too little communication between teachers and students. (DWTZ009)

A professor, also the senior teaching administrator, told me that he appreciated ‘three more’ in his teaching, and his supervision of other teachers’ teaching.

In the process of teaching and learning, I think, there should be three ‘more’ for students and one ‘less’ for teachers: more reading, more discussion, and more writing and less lecturing. Reading is the foundation of foreign language learning. Writing makes exactness. Discussion is good for communication and knowledge construction. The function of a teacher is a guide, facilitator, and supervisor. There should be less lecturing. Nowadays, students have many channels to obtain information in contrast with the previous generation’s using teachers as the main information source. Students are very resourceful. We should trust our students and give them more opportunities to develop their creativity. I encourage collaborative learning with the contribution of everyone. Teachers are also participants. The collaborative learning will avoid the problem of the limitation of teachers’ knowledge range, students’ passive learning and lacking learning motivation. (SWJWCL021)

3.2.5.3 Learning support to students

Teachers’ understanding of what their students should learn in their university study is closely related to the learning support they may give to their students. A teaching administrator noted that an introduction to the discipline and the curriculum should be provided to students as a key learning support.

It is very necessary for universities to offer a course introducing to students the discipline structure and the curriculum so that they may have an idea of the history, development, structure of the speciality. Chinese students are quite weak in making judgment and selection. I think this is caused by their lack of knowledge of their speciality. If they get more idea of what their major is like, they will be more confident in making their selection. (DWJWCJ001)

This opinion is shared by other teachers. They feel that there should be a course introducing university study and life to students. One young teacher expressed her opinion of providing students learning guidance after they enter the university.
I often face the dilemma of feeling the need to give students guidance in their university learning and the limited time in class. It seems necessary to offer a course introducing university study to students to help them know how to adapt to university learning smoothly. (SWTYID009)

Conceptual and thinking skills are recognised by teachers as crucial parts of the skills their students should learn. These conceptual or thinking skills include planning and organising, decision making, problem-solving, etc. Teachers shared with me the support they gave to their students.

Students need to have good planning of how they are to spend their university time and what they are going to do after graduation. Students may not be very clear about it, or do their planning independently and actively. So, I think making a good use of their characteristics and guiding them to make good planning is what we need to support our students with. (DWTJ011)

Students in their second and third year become more mature. They face more opportunities to make their judgement and choices. This is also the crucial time for their learning. Students often ask me this kind of questions of whether they should take the postgraduate entrance exam or look for jobs. I do my best to give them my opinion, but I think tutors should do more in giving them guidance and advice. Guiding students to discern and making judgments and decisions is the support I think students will need. (DWTZ009)

When teaching the first and second year students, we often play the role of solving student puzzles in the university. Teachers teaching senior students often play a role of guiding and assisting students to make their own career and life planning. The best support to students at this stage is to help students develop their own career planning. It may be a driver for students to explore what they want to do in the future and how to realise it. With a clear objective, they may have a better life planning. (DWTJ016)

Personal skills, for example, adaptability, are soft skills and not easy to define, but these often are not explicitly included in the curriculum. Support to students in developing these latent skills has been identified by teachers as important.

Chinese students are under the supervision and care of their parents and teachers throughout the process of their growing up. It seems they are very used to following the route set up for them in their education. Entering a satisfactory university is the ideal for most parents. At the same time, parents and teachers’ supervision suddenly disappears after they enter universities, thus students feel lost without the ready route. Therefore, there should be a soft landing for students. Support to develop students’ adaptability is necessary. When we have staff meetings, most young teachers share the same opinion. Senior teachers often ignore their students’ bewilderment, instead they may value research and publication more. (SWTYID009)
Of all support that students expect from their teachers, the most they want is the guidance in learning methods. Sharing learning methods with students is considered by teachers as a kind of support to students.

*I think students need a teacher’s guidance on learning methods. They often come to me and ask how to learn English well. I usually tell them my experiences and methods I think useful. However, there is one thing students often ignore: that different people have different learning methods. The method I benefit a lot from may not work for others. I encourage them to explore by themselves and to use all possible resources, e.g. friends, books, online resources for their learning.* (DWTHT010)

Supporting student learning requires teachers to give students more encouragement and to adjust themselves to students’ needs. This is expressed by a teacher.

*Encouragement works better than criticism in motivating students to learn. Most of our teachers are used to picking out mistakes and shortcomings. We need to change our way of thinking and to encourage our students by giving them positive feedback on their improvements. However, praising students cannot be too cheap, but to pick the proper points to praise in the proper way.* (DWECZ003)

Attending to student needs and being available to students is a good support to students. A teacher finds that students usually ask for information from teachers they may access easily.

*Some students come to me and ask whether they need to take the IELTS exam, or a postgraduate exam. They need teachers’ advice to set up their learning objectives. I don’t know whether they ask their tutors, but usually they ask the teachers they meet more frequently.* (DWTZ009)

The tutorial system is often considered as a solution to student support, but a management staff gave his comments in a different way:

*The tutorial system is quite popular in many universities, and has been expected to be the solution to all student problems, for example, student life, learning, course selection, etc. The tutorial system is not easy to realise in Chinese universities, for the student number is too big. I think the puzzles of students you mentioned is very popular, but the tutorial system cannot solve it for teachers are far too busy with teaching to cope with the needs of individual students.* (DWJWCJ001)

Employability or career related support is what students need. Universities expect their teachers to give their students whatever support they can. Teachers understand students’ need, but they do not have better solutions.
Almost every year, when it is time for students to look for jobs, the college will organise a meeting where we are told to give whatever support we may give to help our students find jobs. I can feel the pressure of student employment. We know students need jobs, but we don’t have good solutions to this. (DWTHT010)

Graduates majored in English language don’t have advantages in job market. Some of our graduates work as teachers, and some of them work for companies. I know their worries, but I don’t know what I can do. (DWTZ009)

3.3 Summary

In this chapter, the data collected from students, academic staff and administrators has been presented via the main themes that emerged in the data analysis. As the result of the in-depth investigation, a large amount of data were generated. Rich data set up a good foundation for qualitative investigation, but on the other hand this raises the issue of what is the best way to present data. I could have described the data in the traditional case reporting, but I chose to organise it around the themes and to present it in a straightforward way to readers. The themes were presented following two tracks, student data and staff data. In the section of student data, students’ perceptions of quality and their learning experiences were presented. In the section of staff data description, teachers’ views on quality, QA, quality improvement, student learning and teaching were reported.

Student learning experiences are rich data for HEIs. Student satisfaction and views matter more and more in HE because they are not just the key stakeholders and receivers of HE, more importantly they are key agents and co-operators in achieving learning quality. Looking in detail at the data collected, we may find that students have clear views of HE quality and their learning experiences. In general, students appeared to understand HE quality from the aspects of teachers, curricula, university learning culture and resources, and their intellectual development. There is a clear picture of what students want. Besides intellectual development, they want their knowledge structure and skills developed in their universities to help them deal with challenges in the real world. Students believe their quality learning in HE may help them achieve a balanced development in the academic, career and social domains. What really matters in student learning is their intellectual development and satisfaction, the
support for their intellectual development, the access to teachers and learning resources, and feedback on their learning progress. Students have a lot of dissatisfaction, mainly in the areas of the alignment between teaching and the real world practice, curricula and textbooks, student learning support and interaction with teachers, career preparation, and learning resources. There is a kind of consistency between student data and staff data. What students are not satisfied with is exactly what lacks in teaching and educational provision as revealed in staff data. It exposes problems in the Chinese HE. Student experiences are in a sense a good indicator of HE quality, which should matter more in the Chinese QA agenda.

Students of the current generation have new characteristics that are challenging to their teachers and HEIs. We may see from the data that the traditional way of teaching is more and more challenged in the Chinese HE. Obviously the teacher-to-student unidirectional delivery of knowledge and the exams only testing their memory cannot make quality learning. These challenges require teachers and HEIs’ to develop more nuanced understanding of their students and a new conception of educational provision in a more complex knowledge society.

I started this study from the issue of QA, and grounded the research with the literature reviewed about QA. I investigated QA by asking people about their understandings of quality, QA and student learning. QA and student learning are the main issues coming out of the data. From the data, we may see that quality is really what most people in this study are concerned with. As readers may have noticed, the issue of quality in HE is closely linked to student learning in the views of both students and teachers. Out of the data, many things raised are really about learning. It seems that there will be no good analysis of QA until student learning is addressed. Therefore, I will start the discussion in Chapter 4 by addressing the issues of student learning, and what is meant by quality learning in the Chinese HE context. After identifying the key issues in student learning, I will discuss in Chapter 5 the understanding of quality and the current QA practice in the Chinese HE context, based on the interview and document data.
Chapter 4: Student Learning

As shown in the previous chapter, issues raised in both case studies speak more to the processes of student learning than they do to systems for QA. Therefore, before continuing with my analysis I will review appropriate literature about student learning experiences in general and student habits and expectations in China in particular. This will provide the reader with a broad context in which I situate the subsequent discussion.

We may see from the literature review that different approaches to quality reflect different conceptions of HE itself. Barnett's (1992) categorisation of concepts of HE provides the in-depth analysis on this connection. His 'Group 2' concepts of HE purposes, which is concerned with student development and the educational process to which students are exposed, stimulated this study and helped me in framing the angle to look at quality and QA in Chinese HE.

The data presented in the previous chapter show that despite the diversity in students’, teachers’ and administrators’ opinions, the issue of student learning underlies most of their understandings of quality. However, in the data from this study, I also find a discrepancy between the QA systems and students’ actual learning. There is little sign of any improvement in student learning, despite all the effort and investment in installing and developing the QA systems in Chinese HE. Naturally, we may ask ‘What are the QA systems assuring?’ The data presented in the previous chapter give a rich picture of student learning, which also exposes the problems and challenges in the current QA system. Therefore, the quality of the learning experience available needs to be analysed and discussed before we come to the discussion of quality and QA.

Learning is at the core of the commonly perceived functions of a university: teaching, research, and community service (Bowden & Marton, 1998). Thus, quality in a university context has a lot to do with the quality of learning. How Chinese students learn in their university education is a fundamental question for Chinese educators. There has been a tendency to take a ‘top-down’ approach to the identification of student learning in terms of what they should learn, and
how they should learn. This results in a lack of information that would permit systematic comparison of the impact of university on students, and minimal knowledge about students’ own learning. It also results in difficulty in improving the student learning experience. In this chapter, we will take a bottom-up approach to the identification of the key issues in student learning and the key areas that QA systems need to address to improve the quality of student learning.

4.1 The characteristics of current Chinese students

The characteristics of Chinese students have changed over time, and Chinese social and economic development. The change in student characteristics has been sensed by teachers. Teachers with years of teaching experiences often use their previous students as the benchmark to depict their current students. Younger teachers often use their own time at the university when describing the characteristics of the current students. From their descriptions, a picture of the current students in their eyes can be reached, based on the comparison with students of the previous generations.
Against the background of rapidly expanded Chinese HE, the door to universities is much wider open to students than in previous era of elite HE. With larger numbers of students recruited, the student entry requirements have been comparatively lowered. Teachers, in the front line of education, feel that in their teaching. In teachers’ eyes, student quality has declined in terms of their entry level, obedience to teacher instruction, sense of collectivism, and hard-working spirit. What annoys teachers most is that ‘Students are hard to teach now.’ In their view, students of the current generation are raised with more attention as the only child of their family. They are more self-centred, lacking in collectivism, more independent in their judgement, but more dependent on other’s encouragement and understanding.

Teachers find that students of the current generation are in general better than previous generations in terms of knowledge structure, awareness of career planning, and resourcefulness in finding information. Unlike hard-working students of the previous generations, students nowadays are more pragmatic. In

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<th>Students of previous generations</th>
<th>Current students</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Entry level</strong></td>
<td>Higher</td>
<td>Lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Study cost</strong></td>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>Higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student-teacher relationship</strong></td>
<td>Respect teachers as the knowledge possessor and deliverer.</td>
<td>Less obedient. More demanding in terms of teachers knowledge, teaching method and outcomes.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Following teachers’ instruction</td>
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<td>Gratitude to teacher support</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose of learning</strong></td>
<td>Learning as end in itself</td>
<td>More instrumental. More jobs.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Status</td>
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<td><strong>Learning channels</strong></td>
<td>Textbooks</td>
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<td>Readings recommended by teachers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Extra curricula activities organised by the university</td>
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<td>Extra courses offered by other departments, universities, or training institutions</td>
<td>Extra courses offered by other departments, universities, or training institutions.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge</strong></td>
<td>Subject knowledge focused</td>
<td>Wider interest. Wider knowledge. Keen on information and more capable of searching online for information.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Interpersonal relationship</strong></td>
<td>Collectivism and other-oriented.</td>
<td>Individualism. More open to express oneself. More independent, though still depending on their teachers and university.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less open to express one’s opinion</td>
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<td></td>
<td>More dependent on their teachers and university</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Career planning</strong></td>
<td>Less awareness</td>
<td>More awareness in their career planning.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: The characteristics of Chinese students perceived by their teachers
the view of teachers, students today have more learning resources and wider knowledge structures, but they are less diligent and persevering in their learning. Students seem to be keen on finding shortcuts to better performance in their study. Students these days are more active, more open to show themselves and to express their opinions. With increasing concern about employment after graduation, students have more awareness of their career planning and start to seek jobs earlier than students used to. Students enter universities with various learning needs and preparedness. For that reason, teachers feel teaching is becoming more challenging. Among students, some want to continue their education to postgraduate level, so they expect their teachers to teach in the way which will help them prepare for their postgraduate entrance exam; some students are more job-oriented so they want their teachers to teach them in a more practical way. Meanwhile, many students are involved in pursuing a second area of study, or training for various certificates in their spare time.

It is a great challenge to HEIs to acknowledge this difference and cope with it. The universities in this study have both constructed their new campuses on the outskirts of their located cities. The new campuses with updated facilities are big enough to accommodate the greatly enlarged number of students. The staff body is enlarged at the same time, as in most Chinese HEIs. Both universities have strengthened their student career services, adding the function of publishing job opportunities and offering career preparation training for students. Both encourage teachers to conduct teaching research to improve their teaching. All these initiatives have their contribution in quality improvement, but the question here is: Is it enough?

Students may sit in the well-equipped classrooms without studying. This means only responding to the changing student numbers by constructing campus hardware and infrastructure is not enough. What is needed is the conceptual change from the teaching-centred paradigm to a more learning-centred paradigm which requires a more nuanced understanding of student learning and effective support to develop student learning experiences.

From the interviews with both teachers and students, we can see that education at both universities is still for the most part in the teaching-centred paradigm, where teachers are the chief agents in the process of education. They deliver knowledge, while students are viewed as the receivers, ingesting knowledge for recall in tests. Teachers control the learning activities and know which chunks of
knowledge are important. Learning is assumed to be cumulative. The teachers interviewed in this study, in general, all favour students who will listen to them and follow the learning activities designed by them. They think those students who work hard on memorising the new words, read more, participate actively in class and spend more time on study are good students and will have good learning outcomes. This role model of good students is formed in the traditional education system and still occupies teachers’ concept. Both teaching and administrative staff are still using this concept in designing and operating the education process.

In fact, it is not only students who are learning in universities. There are a lot of things for teachers to learn in HE today too, since their role in HE is moving from simply instructing elite students to a more reflective professional who plays a variety of academic roles, knows students, understands learning, and empower students to be active discoverers and construct their own knowledge. With or without such awareness, teachers have to, or will have to, face a formidable task in adapting themselves to these major changes, within the context of a student body which is less well prepared for HE but more demanding of the outcomes of HE. Here are the questions on which teachers may need to speculate again, ‘Do we know students?’, ‘How do we know them?’, and ‘How shall we address the changing student body?’ These are also the issues QA systems should address but have not. QA systems should capture the new student expectations and encourage teachers to understand their students’ learning processes and to adjust their teaching to the changing student body.

4.2 Student expectations

Student expectations of university study is like a hub linking student learning motivation, how they understand education quality, how they position their aims of learning, how they adapt to university study, what approaches they use in learning, and what learning outcomes they may achieve. Students come to university with a variety of expectations and motives. They expect many things from HE and want to use their time in HE purposefully. In general, what the students want from HE in our data is:

- a degree, preferably from a prestigious university
- qualifications from an accredited institution which will be recognised for the purpose of employment
Student expectations are closely linked to what students want to learn through HE. This includes subject knowledge, a range of cognitive and intellectual skills, and personal development in values, including attitudinal, social and moral dimensions. Subject related knowledge and skills has the priority in students’ conception of what is learned in HE. Students often use ‘depth’ and ‘breath’ to describe how much they want to learn about subject knowledge. They are also aware of the importance of the ability to integrate knowledge and skills, and the ability to apply knowledge in practice. Students expect that they will attain full development through their university study. What they want to learn in terms of personal development covers a wide range, which they hope will help them become a person with broad horizons and will give them the opportunities and competence to achieve what they want. Students expect to learn the knowledge and skills which they will use in their future careers. They also want to learn how to make a good preparation for entering society. Students view their HE as a process for them to learn about life and to become more independent and confident in coping with their future lives in society. This includes communication skills, interpersonal skills, adaptive capacity, team work skills, time management, and self-discipline.

We may see from the data that student expectations seem to be changing with the development of their experiences in the university. A student’s expectations of university learning may change from learning ‘as much and broadly as possible’ to acquiring some concrete abilities and skills. After adjusting to university study they also have expectations for more choices in the course selection, updating of course content with frontier knowledge, good course instruction methods, and alignment between what they are learning and their career opportunities. Some students are not satisfied with the limited provision of courses related to their major, and expect more optional courses. Some students expect the quality of teaching to be improved and teachers to align teaching with the real world practice in reality. Students also have their own expectations and judgements of their teachers’ teaching, as one student commented ‘One of our teachers is prestigious in his field, but his teaching is so boring. We admire him, but just his lecturing style is too boring’. Many of them wish the course content to be updated frequently. Students expect what they are learning in the university to be useful and linked with the skills necessary for
their future jobs after graduation. Some students expect that the courses in their last year ought to be related to the skills they should have for future jobs.

Student expectations and their relationship to institutional expectations and priorities are very complex issues for analysis (James, 2002). The complexity is caused by the highly participatory nature of HE and the two-way interaction between the actions of students and those of universities, in that the HE process shapes student expectations, and students on the other hand influence the education process (James, 2002). Students come to university with various expectations and motivations. Some of those expectations they may achieve with the support of their teachers and universities, while some of them may not be achieved in the time of their university studies. It is crucial for teachers and universities to know student expectations, for they are closely linked to student learning approaches, their learning aims, their engagement in learning, their experiences in HE and their satisfaction with their university study.

HE has some features that make it difficult to guarantee that any particular student will have a good student experience (Baird & Gordon, 2009). HE needs students to involve themselves in co-production of the experience. There are certain standards which students need to attain in order to achieve their qualification and a productive learning experience. In this study, when coming to the issue of how students understand the expectations their teachers and universities have of students, some students appear to have little idea, and some students seem to take it for granted.

*I don’t know what the university’s expectation of us is. We have not been informed.* (DWXSFGCL005)

*Teachers expect us to study hard. If we show a good study performance, we will be recognised as good students.* (DWXSFGC001)

Hence, universities and teachers not only need to better understand student expectations, but also to communicate their expectations clearly to their students. These expectations may be communicated through the formal academic structure, such as course description, instruction, assessment, through other services and social structures, or through other informal approaches. Meanwhile, expectations to students should be communicated at appropriate times, for instance before semester begins, before and during peak stress times in the semester, so that students have enough time to understand these expectations and to adjust their own expectations and learning approaches.
Moreover, to enhance student learning quality and to promote their engagement in learning, the communication of expectations should not be one directional in a top-down way. Teaching and other support structures should be responsive to student expectations in order to shape them around learning outcomes.

Of course, the nature of student expectations are complicated (James, 2002). Student expectations are closely linked with student learning motivation and satisfaction. However, this does not mean a better educational outcome will be achieved by meeting student expectations. Some students might hold an instrumental expectation of HE, with short-term oriented goals, seeking shortcuts and employing narrowly reproductive approaches to learning. Some students hold some kind of consumer orientated expectations of their HE. Such expectations, poorly aligned with the core academic values, might be annoying for teachers. However, as pointed out by many researchers (e.g. James, 2002; McInnis, Griffin, James, & Coates, 2001; Tynan & Colbran, 2006), student expectations can be reshaped in their early formative experiences on campus in the first few weeks after entering university. Many students enter HE with only vague and unsophisticated ideas about specific aspects of the experience. Thus, the first few weeks after students enter university is a crucial transitional period when students’ early experience on campus is likely to be reflected and reshaped with appropriate support provided through teachers, learning environment, curriculum, learning communities, peer groups and other channels. It is advisable for teachers and universities to manage student expectations and to encourage students to develop their expectations in line with the ultimate goal of HE during this period.

An effective QA system should capture these; otherwise it is not likely to ensure the quality of learning. From the above analysis, we can see that student expectation links many key issues in student learning, such as their learning motivation, self-positioning, satisfaction, engagement, and learning results. Therefore, it can serve as the sensor to test the communication between students and universities. No matter how sophisticated a QA system is, it will not enhance education quality until it can influence student learning.

### 4.3 Student learning

QA systems should address student learning directly, since it is one of the fundamental functions of a university. To what extent and how effectively QA
systems address student learning determine the effect of QA on the improvement of student learning. The detailed analysis on the QA systems in Chinese HE will be presented in Chapter 6. Here we draw attention to some key issues in student learning which have not been dealt with effectively by the current QA systems, but which prove to be important in the data of this study. In this section, we will examine several key issues students identify as important in their learning, including learning methods, motivation, engagement, and learning support.

4.3.1 Learning motivation

Biggs (1987, 1992) argues that student learning approaches are composed of two elements: motive and strategy. Motive describes why students choose to learn, and strategy describes how students go about their learning. Student motivation has to do with students' desire to participate in the learning process. It also concerns the reasons or goals that underlie their involvement or non-involvement in academic activities. The motivational orientation of student learning is consistent with student learning expectations. The learning motivation shown by the students in this study can be summarised into three areas: academic, vocational, self-directed and independent.

- Academic: students want to take an interesting and stimulating course, to learn the subject in depth. Academic reason is in general the most essential reason for students because it seems the right thing for students to do.
- Vocational: students want to learn skills and knowledge for use in a career. They expect the qualification to enable them to get a good job.
- Self-directed and independent: Students want to develop themselves as a person and to broaden horizons. They wish to be given the chance to prove what they can do. Students want to learn about life and become more confident, more independent, more self-directional, and more able to cope with challenges.

**Academic motivation**

Academic motivation to learn is the biggest drive in student learning and is paramount to student success. I find that when students comment on their learning, the typical answer is they want to broaden their subject knowledge, to achieve good learning in their subject knowledge and skills, to know how to
learn. In the Chinese students’ conceptualisation of learning, they value diligence, endurance of hardship, integration of thinking and learning in the process of learning. They consider breadth and depth of knowledge, understanding, and abilities as their learning achievements. Seeking knowledge is the word with highest frequency in students’ comments on their learning motivation. This includes both subject related and more general knowledge with the extension to other fields beyond their subject. Student learning motivation can be intrinsic or instrumental. Students’ intrinsic academic motivation is influenced by interest in the topic and is experienced when performing learning tasks. Students’ academic motivation can be instrumental when they perceive how tasks are related to their academic performance, their future goals and everyday life.

**Vocational motivation**

Taking exams for various qualifications and certificates is a trend for many students in the two universities. They take those exams because of vocational motivation. They want to learn knowledge and skills for use in their future careers. However, what is taught in the university may not be directly linked to the real world practice, as complained of by many students. Their vocational motivation turns them to the qualifications or certificates which they think may enable them to get a good job. The peak time for students to take exams for various qualifications or certificates is in the second and third year of their university study. The qualifications they are chasing include Business English Certificate, Professional Interpreter Certificate, computer skills certificate, IELTS, TOEFL, and so on. This motivation is not from inside students, but mostly a student response to outside pressure, or to what they perceive as useful in job searching. Learning for such certificates is totally exam oriented. Many students told me that they were not sure whether those certificates would be helpful in looking for jobs. However, they feel that they should have those certificates, since so many of their peer students have taken various certificate exams. Students’ motivation for pursuing these certificates is pragmatic and temporary. Many of these certificate exams are not related to their courses, but they are very popular among students. This derives from their prediction of employers’ requirements and the competition among their peer students.

Students feel that preparing for those exams is quite time consuming and detracts from their performance on their courses. However, the fact that
students keep taking those exams, despite their doubts of their value, shows the students’ need for vocational preparation and such resources are lacking in their university. Students’ early experiences on campus is likely to be reflected and reshaped with appropriate support provided through teachers, learning environment, curriculum, learning communities, peer groups and other channels. Otherwise, as students told me, this tendency will increase: students minimise their efforts in their course learning, even escape classes; while on the other hand, they use a lot of their energy for those certificate oriented exams.

**Self-direction and independence**

Developing themselves as persons with broad horizons is commonly mentioned by the students in this study. Students consider that university is the time to shape them and to be ready for entering society. Many students express their will to know what they can do and wish to be given the chance to prove what they can do. As described by the students, they are usually very active in activities on campus because they intend to understand the university culture which is a new environment for them. Students want to learn about life and become more confident, more independent, more self-directed, and more able to cope with learning and life. This orientation of motivation is a good drive in student learning, but its influence on student learning depends a lot on how it has been tuned into student learning approaches by their learning environment, which is created by both course structure and teaching.

**4.3.2 Learning activities**

Students enter HE with a wide array of pre-university background characteristics, academic preparation and experiences, and also social and personal dispositions and experiences. Students vary in their traits, their academic preparation and performance, their personal and social experiences (for example, involvement in co-curricular and out-of-class activities), and their dispositions (for example, personal, academic, and occupational goals, achievement motivation, and readiness to change).

Student learning development is not straightforward and linear-causal. Students described the trajectory of their learning from Year 1 ‘*I have wasted my time*’, Year 2 ‘*It is our turning point*’, Year 3 ‘*chasing various certificates*’, to Year 4 a
busy and bewildering year. Every student has his/her own methods of learning, which have been formulated from their former learning experiences, how they perceive the new learning environment, and their conceptions of their own competences. Summarising students’ description of their learning activities, we may reach the following conclusions.

- Vocabulary is a threshold in their learning. Students spend a big amount of their time looking up new words before, and memorising those new words after class.
- Most students prepare their lesson by looking up new words in dictionaries and getting a general idea of the text.
- Attending classes is the main learning activity.
- Learning in class is directed by teachers, with focus on the vocabulary and meaning of the texts, though there might be some variance among course units.
- The textbook is the key learning material and defines the learning content. It is not common for undergraduates to have a reading list. Instead, there is a textbook for each course. Both teaching and learning are based on the textbooks.
- Many students go over their lecture notes individually after class.
- English learning has the priority in student learning for almost all students. Speaking and communication has a high priority. They like to talk with foreigners, but they also complain that there are not many opportunities for them to communicate with foreigners, except in some of their course units delivered by foreign teachers.
- Students value broad reading. They choose their reading based on their teachers’ recommendation or by themselves. However, there are few opportunities for them to discuss their interested reading.
- Students often use their free time for a second major, or other certificate oriented courses or training which they think future employers may consider when recruiting new staff.

The students from both universities repeated a metaphor, describing the state of their learning during the term time and exam preparation period. They used ‘lao ren yuan’ (a nursing home) and ‘feng ren yuan’ (mad house) to describe the relaxed state in their term time and the pressured state when preparing for the exams. They also told me how assessments shaped their learning methods. At the beginning, they reviewed what teachers taught in the class and the textbook word by word, which are the learning methods they have used in high school.
However, they realised that this method, which had led them to good performances in high school, failed in distinguishing them from others in the final exams. In their words, they don’t need hard work to pass exams. They find it is more useful to work hard for two weeks before the final exams, after their teachers give them the main areas to be tested. In their words, ‘basically this method helps us survive all exams’.

The above description of student learning activities reveals the discrepancy between students’ learning expectations and their learning activities. Students’ expressions of what they want to learn are mostly meaning oriented, but many of their learning activities are reproduction oriented. Among student learning strategies, memorising, note taking, reproducing the meaning explained by the teachers in class are very widely used. This discrepancy is problematic for student learning development, but it has been largely ignored. The quality of student learning relies on student learning activities and the meaning they make in these learning activities. If enhancing student learning quality is one objective in QA systems, student learning activities need to be investigated.

### 4.3.3 Learning approaches

Students experience the need for achievement. However, only good wishes are not enough. They need proper learning approaches and efforts to reach their goals. Marton (1988) describes learning approaches as the way in which knowledge is learned. Marton and Säljö (1976) introduced a model of qualitative differences in learning: deep learning approach and surface learning approach. Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) and Biggs (1987) introduced a third approach: the strategic or achieving approach.

- A student who applies a deep approach to learning pays attention to the fundamental idea or message of the material to be learned. This involves a real understanding of what is learned.
- A student who applies a surface approach to learning concentrates more on the surface features of the text itself and tries to remember it word by word. This involves a reproduction of what is taught to meet the minimum requirements.
- A student who applies a strategic/achieving approach to learning works hard to achieve good grades, and chooses their learning strategy to
maximise the chances of academic success with sharp awareness of assessment practices (Biggs, 1993).

The above theory of student learning is very useful in analysing students’ perceptions for it is a bottom-up model derived from in-depth qualitative interviews, with the emphasis on students’ qualitative reports of their own learning and motivation. Here are two students from this study. They have different goals and experience different learning approaches in their studies.

Yun is a fourth year student in the national level university. She majored in English education. She likes to learn English language and spends most of her time learning English. She has very good academic performance and very clear direction for her future. She doesn’t want to be an English teacher after graduation, instead she wants to work for travel agencies. She is working part time for a tourist agency and at the same time preparing for the exam for a tourist guide licence. She told me that she learns from practice, from the part time job. What she has learned is not only the working knowledge in the field of tourist industry, but also how to communicate with colleagues and how to get work done. I met her again at the library of her university. She borrowed some books about tourism from the library. She is happy with what she has learned and plans to apply for a long term job at a tourist agency. It is strange to see she decides to choose a career very different from her university major. She told me that she is not that interested in teaching, and more importantly, it is so hard for a bachelor degree holder to get a teaching job in Shanghai. She doesn’t like the courses that much, for they are too abstract and more suitable for those students who plan to take postgraduate entrance exams. She wants to learn things that are more practical and helpful in her future jobs. A commonly used learning strategy in the reading class is to ‘buy a teacher’s book, or an exercise answers book’ and to learn them. The teacher she likes most is her reading teacher who is quite well-known for his research on Shakespeare and Russell. She enjoys her learning in that course, for the teacher often links the content of teaching to its messages in real life, which bridges the gap students usually face in their learning.

Xiu is a fourth year student in the regional level university. She is majored in English language and culture. She is preparing for her postgraduate entrance exam and spends her weekends attending the exam preparation courses. She told me that she made up her mind for postgraduate study in
her second university year. She told me that in her first year, she experienced reconceptualising herself and setting up her goal for postgraduate study. She comes from a farming family. In her first university year, she lacked self-confidence because she found she could not understand and speak English as well as other students did. She did not feel good with her study, so she consulted her tutor for the idea of learning a minor. The tutor advised her to put more effort into her English language study since there would be three more years for her in the university. Her goal for the future is to become a teacher who has good knowledge of English language and can teach well with confidence. From her second university year on, she established her learning aims in the academic track in linguistics. She attends every course related to postgraduate examination with good preparation. She keeps careful notes in class, and goes over the lesson carefully after each class. She proposed to meet me at the lunch time of her weekend class for postgraduate exams. Xiu told me that she has good control of her time with a clear priority of what courses to take and how much effort to invest. She thinks it is crucial to find the most suitable learning methods, instead of just following teachers’ instruction. She communicates with teachers to maintain the learning motivation. She thinks it is very helpful to keep a good communication with senior students in the first three years of her university study.

Yun keeps contact with me and Xiu kindly shared her learning journal in the first year with me. Both Yun and Xiu are students with good academic records in their university. They have different goals for their future: Yun wants to be a tourist guide, deviating from her major in the university, while Xiu intends to further her study and to become a teacher in the future. They are both self-directed with clear goals and knowing how they may reach them. They have their own learning approaches to cope with their learning tasks in the university and to use the available resources to achieve their aims.

They are using different learning approaches according to their different ambitions. Yun, like other students, uses the teacher’s book to get the ‘correct’ interpretation of the texts and the answers to the exercises after the texts. When they review their class or prepare for the final exams, these ‘correct’ interpretations and answers will help them to get a good grade. After knowing this ‘shortcut’, they reduce their learning of texts to memorising those answers. This is the typical surface learning. On the other hand, as Yun described, when she takes her favourite teacher’s course, with the guidance of her teacher, she
relates what is in the text to other situations and contexts, and applies what she
learned in this course to other related courses, and problems in the real world.
This is in the category of deep learning approach. She is using both surface and
deep approaches to her learning. This shows that the learning approaches
adopted by students are situational. When students are in a situation where
surface learning will be sufficient for students to have a good grade, especially
for those students targeting only a good grade, they will be more likely to use
rote learning to memorise and reproduce what is presented in the text or the
teacher’s book.

Xiu is working hard on her academic track. She has the ambition of being a
teacher of English in a university. She also uses both surface and deep
approaches in her learning. To have a good grade in the postgraduate entrance
exam, she needs to memorise ‘correct’ answers recommended in the reference
books. On the other hand, she needs to know how to describe and explain
language phenomena, to apply the theories in linguistics and literature in the
problems listed in the exam paper. Obviously, she uses different approaches to
her learning tasks in order to achieve good grades. We may see that learning
motivation and goals plays an important role in deciding what approaches to use
among students.

Two main orientations, meaning and reproducing, are commonly used
(Richardson, 1997). The orientation of meaning typically includes a combination
of self-regulated learning and the deep approach to learning (Lonka & Lindbolm-
Ylanne, 1996; Richardson, 1997), and has been shown to be related to success
(Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Lindbolm-Ylanne & Lonka, 1999). According to
Biggs (2003), it is less likely that under poor teaching students will maintain a
deep approach. If teachers design and deliver courses and assess student
learning by requiring the students’ reproduction of what is taught in class,
students will focus their learning on what Marton (1981) calls the ‘signs’ of
learning: the words used, isolated facts, items treated independently of each
other (Biggs, 2003). In contrast, the deep approach arises from a felt need to
engage that task appropriately and meaningfully, so the student tries to use the
most appropriate cognitive activities for handling it. Biggs also points out that
encouraging students’ need to know, instilling curiosity, building on students’
prior knowledge are all things that teachers can attempt to do to facilitate
students to adopt a deep learning approach. Obviously, teaching and
assessment approaches are crucial for teachers to guide students to use more
deep approaches instead of surface approaches. The theory of student
approaches to learning, led by Marton and Biggs, is based on the idea that it is the learner’s perspective that defines what is learned, not what the teacher intends should be learned. Teaching is a matter of changing the learner’s perspective, the way the learner sees the world.

From the above analysis, we see that it is important to develop teaching strategies which promote opportunities to develop deep learning. The implications we may draw from this discussion of student learning approaches are:

- Students need to be more aware of their learning approaches and the strong and weak points of these learning approaches. As a result, they may develop their meta-cognitive skills, and learn to capitalise on their strengths and to adjust themselves to learning environments where their learning approaches may not be compatible.

- Teachers need to understand the existence of different learning approaches in their students, and may try to teach via a variety of styles so that all students, regardless of their preferred way of dealing with learning tasks, can benefit from their teachers’ instruction. Because students’ learning styles can be modified (Sternberg, 1988, 1997), teachers’ understanding of student learning approaches will help teachers to adjust their teaching methods and facilitate students’ effective learning so that they may best help their students to adjust their learning approaches to achieve the best learning results.

- Assessments impact on student learning approaches. Assessment methods influence the development of student learning approaches, because students adjust how they deal with their course learning tasks according to how teachers assess their learning progress and performance. We may see from the students’ accounts in this study that different assessment methods lead to different learning methods, especially in the first year of the university. As shown in this study, the students link their learning activities and invest their efforts according to how their learning is assessed. If concentrating on the preparation a few weeks before the final exams helps students pass their exams, most of them will not study hard during the term time. Furthermore, students’ learning approaches are also influenced by how assessment is designed. If student learning performance is measured by how well students can repeat the facts listed in the text, students may tend to take a surface approach. If assessments are designed to encourage the perception of a
holistic organisation of material studied, or problem solving, students may tend to use deep approaches.

- Difficulty in finding meaning in and commitment to study may cause anxiety. Teachers need to understand the intellectual development of their students. For instance, when students are at an earlier stage of intellectual development, they may assume there is a right answer to every question and the answer is known by an authority – namely the professors who teach them. At this stage, students, especially new students in universities, have a low tolerance of ambiguity. These students may have a tendency to use a surface approach. It is then crucial for teachers to have a good understanding of where their students are and to use their teaching and assessment tasks to guide students to develop their learning, at the same time maintaining their learning motivation. But as students step into the mid-level stage of development, they will discover there are many different views. Teachers need to identify what stage their students are at, so that students may have ample opportunity for group discussion, workshops, and interactive conversations. Teachers should also keep a teaching style that favours students’ taking responsibility for their own learning and using a variety of cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

From the angle of quality, the student approaches to learning is a key issue in their learning development in universities. However, this has been somewhat neglected in the current QA system. It is not likely for QA systems to assure the quality of student learning, if there is little knowledge of how students learn, little scrutiny of how teaching and university provision is aligned to student learning, no good understanding of where students are in their learning development, or no concise measure of how well students can direct their learning and how well it is aligned with the educational objectives. Indeed, one might ask what ‘quality’ is being assured with the current approaches, which seem preoccupied with administrative systems and procedures more than with the essence of the student experience.

### 4.3.4 Student learning engagement

In Chinese students’ conceptualisations of learning, a firm resolution to study, diligence, endurance of hardship in study, and pursuing knowledge with steady concentration have high priorities. When students comment on what they have
not learned and the reasons, they often criticise themselves for not engaging themselves productively in their study. From the side of teachers, they expect their students to invest more effort and to be more engaged in their study. A traditional Chinese metaphor of sailing is often used to describe the importance of effort and perseverance in learning, ‘Learning is like sailing a boat against the current; it moves backwards if not forward’. In both Chinese students’ and teachers’ conceptualisation of learning, students’ engagement in learning is the key to learning success. On the other hand, despite recognising the importance of learning engagement, it is often left solely to the students who are assumed to have primary responsibility for their own learning, to join in the learning tasks (Li, J., 2001).

Engagement refers to the time, energy and resources students devote to activities designed to enhance learning at university. Issues related to time are mentioned by students with the highest frequency. Some first year students explained that they had not adjusted to the university life completely and they still needed time to integrate into university culture. Many of them puzzled over how to use their time. Some first year students expressed their lack of confidence, and they thought that they needed more time to improve themselves. Quite a number of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th year students admitted that they had not devoted enough time to their studies.

The effort devoted to study is another thing students often mentioned. Some of the first year students realised they needed to invest more effort to reach their learning aims. Many students in their 2nd, 3rd, and 4th years confessed that they had not devoted enough effort to their study. Among the 2nd year students, some of them admitted that they had been distracted by other activities. Some of them confessed they were not active enough in their learning. Some of them expressed their lack of motivation. Many students used the word ‘lazy’ to describe their problem. They explained that they lacked perseverance and self-regulation in their study. The students in the fourth year also recognised the importance of effort, and they regretted that they had not made a good use of time and not invested enough effort. At the same time, many students in the fourth year commented that they had not established efficient learning methods, and some students expressed their dissatisfaction with the resources and learning activities organised by their universities.

We know that students can sit in the classroom for four years without engaging themselves in their study and they may participate in learning activities but not
be involved. In other words, students need to be motivated, actively engaged, self-regulated, and reflexive in their learning to achieve satisfactory learning results. This requires students to be engaged in their learning with the mind, and reflect on and monitor both the process and results of their learning. This active engagement in learning is nurtured by teachers’ teaching activities, but not limited by the learning activities organised by teachers. An actively engaged learner can involve himself/herself in a lecture by self-questioning, analysing, and incorporating new information into their existing knowledge.

The positive effect of student engagement in enhancing their learning has been recognised by students, teachers, and researchers. In fact, the reasoning here is very straightforward. The more students study a particular subject, the more they know about it, and the more students practice and get feedback from faculty and staff members on their learning progress, the deeper they come to understand what they are learning and the more adept they become at managing complexity, tolerating ambiguity, and working with people from different backgrounds or with different views. Engaging in a variety of educationally productive activities also builds the foundation of skills and dispositions people need to live a productive, satisfying life after college. As Kuh (2003) suggested, engagement helps to develop habits of the mind and heart that enlarge their capacity for continuous learning and personal development.

QA in Chinese universities is largely based on indicators about institutions, teaching and learning outcomes. The failure to include student engagement in QA weakens its capacity to measure the quality of education and to improve student learning. Student learning engagement can be a good indicator for HEIs to measure and assure their education quality, because it links what the student does and what the institution does. The information of student learning engagement may reach individual learners and provide concise information on what students are actually doing. This will make QA systems more sensitive to how well students are going about the learning activities. Therefore, incorporating student engagement into QA systems will encourage institutional reflection and action on effective practice, because student engagement has links with both students’ time and effort in their studies and learning resources and opportunities offered by educational institutions. The amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities leads to the experience and outcomes that constitute student success. ‘The way the institution allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities and services induces students to participate in and benefit from such activities’ (Kuh et al., 2005, p.9).
4.4 Quality learning

4.4.1 Quality learning

We started off with the issue of quality and reviewed the literature about QA. We investigated QA by asking people about quality. What this makes us aware of is that we need to know a lot more about what quality is before we talk about QA. I can see from my data, student learning is really what a lot of people are concerned with. In this chapter, we have discussed some key issues in student learning, based on the themes which emerged from the data, from the characteristics of current Chinese students, their expectations, learning motivation, learning activities, learning approaches, to their learning engagement. If we say QA in HE should assure the quality of student learning, we may need to clarify what kind of learning is ‘quality learning’ for students. In the process of synthesising both students’ concepts of learning in their account of various learning experiences and teachers’ viewpoints of student learning, we may get the following framework as shown in Figure 2 to present what ‘quality learning’ means.

Quality learning here is the learning in universities that increases students’ subject and general knowledge, deepens their understanding, develops students’ autonomy, fosters students’ ability to acquire intellectual integrity and the capacity to be their own person, and prepares students to cope with the challenges and to reach their best in the real world. This definition is abstracted from the viewpoints of students and teachers on HE quality and student learning. This concept has three domains, academic domain, career domain, and social domain. Here, the focus of quality learning is on individual students.
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**Academic domain:** Subject learning is identified by both students and teachers as the primary task of student learning in universities. Quality learning in the academic domain means students can:

- Develop well-structured subject knowledge and skills;
- Develop academic competence via higher-level engagement in learning;
- Acquire functioning knowledge underpinned by understanding via using subject knowledge in solving problems in practice;
- Communicate subject issues effectively in writing, speaking, and other academic contexts;
- Understand and develop subject related academic values.

**Career Domain:** Making a good preparation for career development is considered by students as the functional and important domain of university learning. Quality learning in this domain means students’ learning experience in universities can help them acquire the skills necessary for their career development. In this study we find that students feel their learning in this domain is not sufficient and the support given by their universities is not effective. At the same time, we also find that students are not clear what exactly these skills are. What can be included in this quality learning in preparing for future work and career includes:

- Understanding and identifying career directions and goals;
- Acquiring work related skills: conceptual/thinking skills, planning and time management skills, communication skills, making judgement, identifying and solving problems, self-reflection, creativity, and so on;
- The ability to work as a team member and the ability to work independently;
- Interests in life-long learning;
- Understanding the global context of learning and knowledge;
- Personal skills: being responsible and resourceful.

**Social domain:** Understanding what is going on in society and preparing for entering society are also an important domain in students’ conception of quality learning. Quality learning in terms of the social domain means that students may reach the following understanding through their university learning.

- Developing a good understanding of themselves and the world they are going to step into after graduation;
- Social, ethical and cultural understanding of self and others;
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- Social responsibility;
- Citizenship skills

Quality in a university context has a lot to do with the quality of learning, and with how students learn in their university. Students currently in Chinese HEIs, as perceived by their teachers, are more skilful in using information resources, more independent, more open to express themselves, more aware of their career prospects, asking for more effective learning opportunities for self-actualisation, are less obedient to their teachers, and less persevering and diligent in their study. This implies that Chinese HEIs need to respond to the changing student body and the challenges facing HE, if they are to assure their educational quality.

4.4.2 Factors influencing student learning quality

From students’ and teachers’ data in terms of quality and student learning, we may abstract that student learning quality is critically influenced by curriculum, teaching, assessment methods, learning support, student learning approaches, and their learning engagement.

Figure 3: Factors influencing student learning quality

**Curriculum**

University curriculum is an organisation of knowledge (Shulman, 1987; Stark & Lattuca, 1997). Its basic building blocks are courses (programmes of study) (Toombs & Tierney, 1991). Courses are aligned with how disciplines organise their knowledge (Clark 1983; Cobban, 1988). Curricula decide what kind of knowledge is to be involved in student learning, what topics teachers teach, and the level of knowledge students may learn.
Biggs (2003) distinguishes four types of knowledge that curricula might address: declarative knowledge, functioning knowledge, procedural knowledge and conditional knowledge. Declarative knowledge is theoretical knowledge, which is what is found in libraries and textbooks and what teachers declare in lectures. Skill-based procedural knowledge focuses on getting the sequences and actions right, and on knowing what to do when a given situation arises, and on having the right competencies. Conditional knowledge helps learners know the circumstances for using different kinds of knowledge. Functioning knowledge is based on understanding and in the experience of the learner. This requires a solid foundation of declarative knowledge, and involves skill-based procedural knowledge and conditional knowledge.

These distinctions help us detect problems in curricula. From students’ complaints, we may see that the curricula are very declarative. What students expect in universities is the competence to use functional knowledge in dealing with professional problems thoughtfully. In other words, if our curricula address only declarative/content knowledge and some procedural knowledge, if the knowledge in curricula is not well designed, it is not very likely that students will reach the quality learning outcomes as listed in Figure 2 on their own. A curriculum that supports quality learning should enable not only students’ quantitative development as the amount of their theoretical knowledge increases, but also students’ qualitative development as they integrate different types of knowledge into their understanding and practice. To help students achieve quality learning, curricula should focus not only on acquiring a reservoir of lifelong disciplinary knowledge but also on learning how to learn.

**Teaching**

Students in this study reported that the most common classroom teaching form is the lecture, which is dominated by teachers’ sole presentation of knowledge points. To most students, this monologue type of teaching is not welcomed. What is revealed in students’ complaints is that teaching should not be unidirectional from teachers to students without caring about student learning. There is a great need for conversation between teachers and students. Usually what those teachers with monologue teaching style try to teach students in their lectures is returned back to teachers after hours of monologue without the active engagement of students. Students will not have quality learning if teaching is the teachers’ task and learning is the students’.
Teaching matters greatly in quality learning. Kember (2009) notes that teachers’ conceptions of teaching influence their approaches to teaching, which will influence students’ approaches to learning and further influence student learning outcomes. Conventional teaching is based on a hierarchical model in which those who know teach those who do not know. Ultimately, there are answers to every question, and scholarship consists of knowing the answer or knowing how to find out (Cross, 1999). Students compete for who has the most or best answers. Students are rewarded for their right answers by high grades. However, with the rapid development of knowledge and technology, it is quite hard for teachers to perform the role of ‘experts’ giving answers to every question. Teachers cannot simply pour information into the heads of students; rather, learning is an active process in which people construct new understandings of the world around them through active exploration, experimentation, discussion, and reflection (Resnick, 2002).

In this study, we find that it seems that many teachers in Chinese universities have not fully understood that telling students what the experts know is not likely to result in the kind of deep learning which they hope to encourage. When listening to students’ views, we find that their constant complaints about teaching and the quality of their university education are generally about unenthusiastic lecturing with little efficient interaction with students; failure to encourage active and independent learning, lacking clearly stated aims, objectives and standards; failing to provide up-to-date course content; poor quality of assessment processes; and being treated as passive receivers of teaching. To facilitate student quality learning, teachers need to understand deeply that learning is not a simple matter of information and theory transmission. As noted by Tyler (1949, p.63; also cited in Biggs 2003), ‘Learning takes place through the active behaviour of the student: it is what he does that he learns, not what the teacher does’. The best teaching is to align teaching to learning.

The real challenge here in teaching is not as many teachers believe, failing to cover the material with the students; it is knowing how to uncover the material with the students (Smith, Sheppard, Johnson, & Johnson, 2005). Sadler (2000) notes that managing academic life today requires us to recognise the move away from a focus on good teaching in the sense of good presentation and management of subject content towards good learning. It is learning that is significant, up-to-date, and enduring in both value and depth. Teachers are no longer the main performers and controllers in the classroom. Learning-centred
teachers are guides, facilitators, and designers of learning experiences and teachers themselves are also learners. The action in the learning-focused teaching features the student, with careful design of experiences, activities, and assignments through which students encounter the content, being there to offer students guidance, explanations, wise counsel, critiques and encouragement, and giving a constructive critique motivating students to learn. Aligning teaching to learning is an important pillar to student quality learning, because the educational context created by teacher behaviour and attitudes has a dramatic effect on student learning.

Assessment

Assessment plays an important role in student learning. As Brown and Knight (1994) point out, assessment is at the heart of student learning experiences. Students take their cues of what is important in their learning from what is assessed rather than from what teachers assert as important (Brown, 1997). As mentioned by the students in this study, they use course assessments to direct their efforts into their learning. Much assessment practice as reported by students requires their reproduction of content from lectures and textbooks. These assessments do not require any conceptual change regarding learning. Hence, students become more assessment oriented in their learning, and lose the ownership of their own learning.

Summative assessment has been the conventional vehicle of learning assessment in Chinese HE, which produces a grade at the end of a topic, unit, or programme. The widely used summative assessment is easy to operate, but if not designed properly it may discourage students from engaging in their study actively. What students reported in this study shows that relying solely on summative assessment cannot produce quality learning. These days, more and more developmental and process-oriented formative assessment is used. Its primary purpose is to provide feedback that encourages adjustments and corrections. The teachers interviewed in this study expressed how they incorporate both summative and formative assessments in their practice, but summative final examination is still the most widely used. The problems observed concerning assessment in this study are:

- Relying heavily on summative assessment;
- Students do not know sufficiently what is expected of them;
• The match between assessment methods and the learning objectives of the course is not sufficient and effective;
• The feedback provided to student is not adequate.

Students value their grades in the final exam very much, because it means a lot to them. For students, good grades represent how well they have done in their learning. Their scholarship award uses their grade as the main reference. More importantly, it links to their self-confidence, and reputation among peer students. Relying heavily on summative assessment misleads students to use surface learning strategies. As several students have expressed, they rely very much on their teachers’ briefing of what is to be tested in the last session of their course. In their words, intensive preparation following this briefing will help them pass the exams, even getting a very satisfying grade. However, the examination oriented learning won’t help their development in the long run.

Another problem observed in assessment which discourages student learning engagement is that students do not know exactly what is expected of them. I asked students whether their teachers have informed them of the course objectives, and what they are expected to learn by the end of the course unit. From their reply, I see that the communication on these matters between teachers and students is not sufficient. Instead, their teachers usually tell them how their learning would be assessed at the beginning of their courses. In the meantime, their teachers often reinforce the importance of class attendance. Letting students know how their learning will be assessed is important, but it might be more important for teachers to introduce sufficiently what students are expected to learn from the specific course unit. If students have a clear awareness of course objectives and the best way to learn it, they may develop their own goal of learning and be more self-regulated in their learning.

To help students achieve quality learning, teachers should not assess student learning by the superficial and easily tested aspects of knowledge. From the communication with both students and teachers, we may see that the assessment methods are not picked subtly according to the course and learning purposes. The most commonly used assessment methods are multiple choice questions, short answer questions, essays and orals. What is needed is student learning development oriented assessment. In the context of foreign language studies, there are many courses which need developmental assessment to provide feedback to students to improve their learning, to motivate students, to
help students identify their strengths and weakness and develop their self-assessment.

Brown, Bull and Pendlebury (1997) introduce several developmental methods to use, i.e. reports on practicals, cases and open problems, mini-practicals, projects, poster sessions, reflective practice assignments, etc. Feedback has been shown to be most effective when it is timely, perceived as relevant, meaningful, encouraging and when it offers suggestions for improvement that are within a student’s grasp (Brown, 1997). Fenton & Watkins (2008, pp. 6–7) point out that there are many different ways to approach assessment, but to be effective in improving teaching and learning, assessment strategies involve the same basic steps:

1) identify a learning goal;
2) select an assessment technique that will measure to what extent the goal has been achieved;
3) apply the assessment technique;
4) analyze the results of the assessment and share the results with the student(s), ideally providing an opportunity for student feedback; and
5) respond to the results and implement any necessary change in teaching strategy or course content.

Learning-focused Interaction between teachers and students

Interaction between teachers and students on learning is crucial for quality learning. Students in the first year study expect to get recognition and encouragement from their teachers. Some students told me that the contact with teachers need not be lengthy, but they expect the conversation to be a quality one. Most students trust their teachers’ experiences and wish their teachers to help them find out their potential to develop in their major. The expectations of students in their 2nd year seem to be more concrete. They want to interact with teachers on their learning methods, career related recommendation and instruction. Some students stated that they expected their teachers to give them a useful reading list, to tell them how to improve their subject learning performance, and to answer their questions about their learning. Senior students expect their interaction with teachers to focus on effective learning methods and career planning and development. They wish to interact with their teachers about higher order skills, for example, how to do
analysis, how to make judgements, how to cope with real world problems using what they have learned. Some students wish to talk with their teachers about assignments and results in exams. Many students wish their teachers to identify weaknesses in their work and give them guidance on how to improve this. Senior students have more awareness of their career planning, so they also wish for more chances to interact with their teachers on that. In general, students want to communicate with their teacher about: course study, learning methods, their strong and weak points and how to improve, their career planning and preparation.

In addition to students’ identified need for interaction with their teachers, we also find that there is often a gap in terms of the conception of the pedagogical purpose of learning activities. Students often have misperceptions about the rationale for the task, or no idea at all why they were being asked to do particular tasks. Teachers, on the other hand, often ignore the importance of spelling out the rationale to students. Therefore, it is very important for teachers and students to keep an interactive learning conversation. Here, we need to realise that learning conversations are not idle chatter. They are a dialogue on the process of learning: the learner reflects on his or her learning with the participation of teachers, tutors, and other students. This conversation between students and teachers may include course based discussion on grades or assignments, getting feedback on academic performance, and activities other than coursework, for example talking about career plans. With such interaction, teachers know how students interpret the rationale and purpose of learning, and avoid or narrow the gap around the conception of the pedagogical purpose of learning activities. At the same time, such learning conversation provides students with a chance of reflection on their own learning in the process of participating in learning activities. In other words, teachers need to develop a conversational space where the praxis between reflection and action is fully recognised (Baker, Jensen, & Kold, 1997). Thus, we may say that it is necessary to sustain an ongoing conversation between teachers and students about learning. This learning focused conversation will enhance the quality and depth of learning. When students communicate about their learning with their teachers, what they communicate will naturally be rooted in what they have learned and how they perceive what they are trying to learn at the time of speaking. This is also the moment for teachers to encourage students to work towards quality learning outcomes by integrating what they have learned, what they are learning, and their reflection of their learning activities.
Students’ ownership of their own learning

Quality learning should enable students to be the owners of their learning. Regardless of background, students in this study identify developing independent learning as one of their aims in HE. It shows their will to direct their own learning, though they are often limited by their high school learning methods, and the lack of support in achieving ownership of their own learning. In years of schooling, students are socialised to accept authority and memorise knowledge. Thus, students need university teachers to help them reorganise their epistemic assumptions. In this situation, students need to adjust to a new relationship with their teachers. In the meantime, teachers need to help their students understand that they are not the primary source of information, but facilitators of student learning. If teachers fail to take students’ current assumptions into account, they will fail to engage their students in learning.

In the learning-focused campus, the emphasis is on a gradual transfer of learning functions from teachers to students, and the goals of learning are to enhance students’ ability to be the owners of their learning, to foster critical reflection and autonomy of learning. Students need to be empowered to take responsibility for their own learning by understanding how they learn best and the skills necessary to learn in areas that are uncomfortable for them.

Being the owners of their learning means that students integrate external control and internal learning responsibilities into their learning. It is centred on students’ taking responsibility for learning and controlling their learning activities, while at the same time reflecting on the cognitive aspects of the learning process. Being the owner of learning has the following meanings: having a clear goal in learning, having proper control of learning activities, and undertaking critical reflection on the learning process itself. Students’ ownership of their learning needs teachers’ support. What students need might be a space where teachers help students to take responsibility for and to control their learning. In this space students are motivated to take learning responsibility, to integrate external control from teachers into their learning engagement, and to play an active role in cognitive and motivational aspects of learning. Teachers need to develop in students the sense of agency, which occurs when students have the opportunity for choices and for playing a significant role in directing their own activities. Students will be more self-regulating as their responsibility for constructing understanding and for directing learning increases. Supporting
students to be the owners of their learning will give students opportunities to integrate contextual, cognitive and motivational dimensions of the educational experience. Supporting students to become the owners of their learning will help students grow into independent learners.

**Developing student deep learning**

Student learning quality is closely linked to student learning approaches. In discussing with both teachers and students about learning, I find that they have little awareness of the differences between different learning approaches. Memorising more English vocabulary and doing more reading are considered as the best way to learn the language in the university. Bowden and Marton (1998) point out differences between approaches to learning are differences in what the learners are focusing on, what they are trying to achieve and how they are going about it.

Students’ ability to discern aspects of a situation, to focus on what is most relevant to the situation, and to handle it effectively, underlies all of the skills students want to acquire in their university learning (Bowden & Marton, 1998). Students cannot discern the variation of a situation critically if they adopt a learning approach focusing on the surface characteristics of the situation, on the exact wording of a text being read, on the argument put forward, on the formula passively received from the teacher. Instead, students need to focus on the object of learning, and to get hold of the phenomenon dealt with in the text. This requires students’ organisation of these facts and ideas in a conceptual framework and the ability to retrieve knowledge for application and transfer it to different contexts.

Such deep learning needs to be facilitated by deliberate, recursive practice in areas that are related to the learner’s goals. A learning space needs to be created in teaching for students to understand the variation and to discern among those variations, and to develop their own expertise related to their life purpose. The director of the English College at the regional university emphasised that students should not be considered as passive receivers of teaching, but as learners who will continue their learning after graduation. In her view, students learn in many ways. They learn from their teachers, from their peers, and learn by making mistakes and by reflecting on those mistakes. Thus, she said, when teaching students, teachers need to know not only whether
students can read and write well, but also to understand how students digest the knowledge presented by teachers and use it in the new context.

Most teachers believe that students will improve their reading skills and learn the language naturally if they read more. This is in line with the traditional educational philosophy in China, ‘the more one reads, the better he writes’. However, not all students buy into this principle. One student commented:

*The answers from the teachers are similar. They told me that after reading more, I would improve naturally. I don’t think this advice is very useful.* (DWXSFGAW002)

We may say that this learning space is not filled by students’ quantity of reading, but in their qualitative improvement and change. Kegan (1994) points out that people grow best when they continuously experience an ingenious blend of challenge and support. For teachers, to develop students’ deep learning requires the balance and integration of learning challenge and support. Many educational institutions have been quite successful in challenging students. The deep approach arises from a felt need to engage with the task appropriately and meaningfully, so the students try to use the most appropriate cognitive activities for handling it (Biggs, 2003). When students feel the need to know, they automatically try to focus on underlying meaning, on the main ideas, themes, principles or successful applications. When using the deep approach in handling a task, students have positive feelings: interest, a sense of importance, challenge, even of exhilaration. Biggs (2003) recommends some strategies to develop student deep learning:

- explicitly bring out the structure of the topic or subject.
- to elicit an active response from students, e.g. by questioning, presenting problems, rather than teaching to expound information
- building on what students already know.
- confronting and eradicating students’ misconceptions
- assessing for structure rather than for independent facts
- giving students the space to make mistakes and learn from them.
- emphasising depth of learning
- letting students know the explicit aims and objectives of the course. (Biggs, 2003)

Again, these strategies may not play a role until teachers realise the focus in high quality learning is not on teaching methods, but empowering students.
These strategies may give students a space to develop their deep learning, to see the variation of situations now and in the future, to develop their capacity to discern those variations and focus on the most important simultaneously. This variation gives the space for students to explore, discerning the variations is the challenge for students to face, and the capacity to discern and focus on the most critical will help students transfer from the current learning to the real situations in the future.

In this chapter, we have looked in detail at some major issues identified by students and teachers as important in student learning. We have also discussed the concept of quality learning from its academic, career and social domains. At the same time, we have examined the main factors influencing learning quality, including curricula, teaching, assessment, teacher-student interaction, students’ ownership of learning, and developing student deep learning. We need to realise that these factors are not independent of each other. On the contrary, they are closely intertwined. For example, curricula and teaching are closely tied to each other. Students’ ownership of learning is greatly influenced by curricula and teaching. I know there are many ways to conceptualise quality learning. The purpose of examining what is involved in quality learning and reviewing student learning in Chinese HE context is to identify what QA in Chinese HE needs to address in order to improve student learning meaningfully and appropriately.

In the following chapter, we will come to the main focus of this study, QA. We will reflect on how quality is perceived by students, teachers, and administrators, how the QA process in Chinese HE is structured, and how effective the current QA is in assuring and improving education quality, by analysing its objectives, control, areas, procedures, and uses.
In the previous chapter, I made an analysis of some major issues identified by students and teachers as important in student learning experiences. I find that in students’ view what really matters in their learning is their intellectual satisfaction, HEIs’ support to their intellectual development, the access to teachers and learning resources, feedback on their learning progress, and preparation for their career. In the analysis of student quality learning, I also identified some factors influencing student learning quality, including curriculum, teaching, assessment methods, interaction between teachers and students, students’ ownership of their learning, and student learning approaches. If HEIs accept that HE is concerned with student learning development, what I have identified as important in student learning experiences should be valued by HEIs and addressed by QA systems. In this chapter, I will come to the main focus of this study, QA. The purpose of HEIs is not different from what students want to get from HE. All is about a balanced education. What QA systems should work on should be watching whether this balanced education is in the educational process. In this chapter, we will have the discussion on:

- How is quality perceived by students, teachers, and administrators?
- How is the QA process in Chinese HE structured?
- How does the current Chinese QA system watch the quality of HE through the analysis of its objectives, control, areas, procedures, and uses?
5.1 On quality

Harvey et al. (1992) noted that there are many ways to define quality in HE and that any definition of quality in HE is ‘stakeholder relative’. The stakeholders in the frame include students, employers, teaching and non-teaching staff, government and its funding agencies, auditors, assessors, and the community. Each has their own criteria and perspectives. A better understanding of the concepts of both teachers and students is important since they are key stakeholders of HE and that their conceptions of quality have an important impact on their participation and engagement in the HE process.

Analysing the data of understanding quality resulted in a list of themes describing the values associated with quality of HE as perceived by students and by teachers. These themes are related to their expectations, experiences, values and practice. Students’ views on quality can be put into five main categories: quality in relation to their teachers, quality in relation to courses, quality in relation to university culture, quality in relation to resources, and quality in relation to their own development. Student and staff views on quality tend to converge in terms of teacher quality and student development, but diverge in terms of course quality, university culture, resources, research performance and quality management.

5.1.1 Quality in terms of teacher quality

Teachers matter in HE. Students attach great importance to teacher quality when conceptualising the idea of HE quality. Students value their teachers’ educational qualification, their academic background (experiences and publications), their teaching capacity/instructional quality, and their ability to communicate with students, their approachability and support to students. Teachers’ conceptualisations of quality in terms of teacher quality can be categorised into teacher qualification, research and publication at the individual level, the structure of the course team at the course level, and the number of ‘ming shi’ (celebrity teachers) at the university level. Administrative staff also think teacher quality is a primary component of HE quality. One senior teaching administrator believes that ‘all efforts for quality are based on the quality of the faculty’ (SWJWCL021).

There is a convergence of understanding between teachers and students on teacher qualifications. By qualification, both include teachers’ level of education,
their educational background and experiences, and their teaching and research experiences. Both teachers and students value teachers’ overseas academic experiences. This shows that both teachers and students care about what teachers bring with them when they enter the classroom to teach, for example, teachers’ degrees and certifications, subject-matter education, and supplementary training and professional development. Teachers attach great attention to their research and publications, which at the same time put them under more and more pressure these days. Students also welcome teachers with high research profiles and are interested in knowing about their research.

Teaching ability is also valued by both teachers and students. Students believe teachers should have a very good knowledge of the subject, of instructional techniques, a good preparation for teaching, and ensure alignment of teaching and assessment. Both students and staff think teachers are the guardians and deliverers of knowledge. Teachers are supposed to know the subject and the teaching content well. This is in line with the accepted role of a teacher in teacher-centred Chinese HE. They know the subject-matter well and their responsibility is to expound teaching content clearly within the lecture time. Having high degrees and good subject knowledge, delivering knowledge clearly to students are the essential conditions for a qualified teacher in views of both students and staff.

Approachability or availability of teachers to students is a primary aspect of support. Some students had the view that quality means teachers are approachable to students. They are dissatisfied when they have no chance to talk with teachers in class and to contact teachers after class. Communication and approachability of teachers are also important elements in the student perception of HE quality. Students believe that quality teachers care about their students, about connectedness with students, communication with students, and availability to students. They expect their teachers to be not only the authority and deliverer of subject knowledge, but also the mentor who knows their progress, and is ready to communicate with them. Students especially appreciate those teachers who can discover their potential and tell them how to develop it. Students of this generation appreciate independence, but also heavily rely on their teachers, especially in the first year of their university study. Their demand for more contact with teachers can be understood as a reflection of the changing relationship between teachers and students: teachers are less valued as the authority and deliverer of subject knowledge, but more valued as the facilitator of student learning. However, this raises the question of whether
teachers are really ready or willing to take on this new role? Is there already a system in the university which may sustain this paradigm shift? From students’ comments, we see that their appreciation and emphasis on communication with teachers reflects the lack of effective communication mechanisms between teachers and students in reality. Though students admit teachers have office hours, they are not efficiently used, and often teachers are not seen as approachable for students.

5.1.2 Quality in terms of student development

Between the moments of entering and leaving HE, students are on the receiving end and participate in the educational process (Barnett, 1992). The intention of undertaking this process is, for students, to develop themselves from their state of intellectual maturity at the point of entering universities. Students attach a great importance to their development. Clearly, there are different views as to what kind of development students should achieve by the time they leave their universities and the HE process changes students in various ways. Students’ perceptions of HE quality in terms of their own development can be categorised into four areas: the acquisition of discipline-related knowledge and skills, the development of generic abilities and skills, employment-related preparation and competence, and moral and ethical development.

Almost all students think their development of subject knowledge and skills shows the quality of the university. They think that the subject knowledge and skills acquired should be well structured with ‘depth and breadth’, certain ‘academic strengths’, and ‘ability to apply them in practice’. In their view, the subject knowledge and skills acquired in their university study should facilitate their career development after graduation.

Students are also aware that quality university learning should extend beyond the development of knowledge and skills in their specific subject domain. They include the development of generic skills, for example, learning skills, analytical skills, thinking independently and creatively, interpersonal skills, perseverance, problem solving skills, developing their own interests, planning and working toward long term goals, ability to take actions, organising skills, adapting to changes, and team work, etc.

Students link their perception of HE quality to how well the university experience prepares them for employment. Students borrow those popular terms,
‘employment rate’, ‘employment satisfaction rate’, and so on to express their concerns about job opportunities after university study. Besides this concern, they also express their dissatisfaction with insufficient linkage between their course content and the development of their employability. They are not sure whether this should be included in their courses. And equally, they don’t know what will be useful when looking for jobs, so they take different kinds of certificate-oriented exams organised by various outside bodies. All their anxieties about the uncertain future job searching is aggregated and transformed into their perception that quality HE should offer students good job opportunities after graduation. Here the concept of quality is not a standard, not a requirement, not even an institutionally defined goal, but the student hopes for their future careers.

Most students include their moral and ethical development in their conceptualisation of HE quality. The specific qualities they put under the umbrella of moral and ethical development are good social values, integrity, sense of responsibility, patriotic spirit, good attitude to life, the sense of contribution to the country and society. Most students believe quality HE should enhance students’ subject knowledge and skills, moral and ethical development, and physical and psychological wellbeing.

Staff look at quality in terms of students and their development from the aspects of student entry level and what development students should achieve, and concern with graduate employment rates. Most teachers interviewed agreed that student intake and student development are critical for any HE institution. They think a high entry level is crucial for a university’s quality. ‘Student performance in the CEE is a key indicator for student quality’ (DWTH007). More prestigious universities find it easy to recruit students with better performance in NCEEs. ‘Students with higher entry score usually have higher learning motivation’ (SWTCXF007). Many teachers describe students as products of HE. In that sense, universities need to secure the quality of the raw material in order to secure the quality of the products. There are also some teachers who disagree with this view. They think the quality of HE is in the process of cultivating students into adults needed by the country and society.

Most teachers view student development from the aspects of students’ subject knowledge, skills, personalities, disposition, values and ethical development. Integrating the development of student subject knowledge, skills, and generic skills is called ‘general/all-round education (tong shi jiao yu)’ . This is a very
popular term in Chinese HE accompanying various policies in the process of redirecting Chinese HE from its previous narrow and highly specialised Soviet Union model of education. In reviewing teachers’ data, we find teachers often consider general / all-round development of students as a synonym for student education quality and use this term to umbrella various skills that students should acquire. This shows teachers’ conceptual change regarding student development; but on the other hand, both teachers and teaching administrators cannot elaborate on what this student development should embody and how to develop it in a concrete and systematic way. One teaching administrator at the regional university expressed his concern that switching to general / all-round ability development of students may ‘weaken students’ professional skills acquisition’ (DWJWCJ001). This shows that in the process of shifting Chinese HE to general education, this idea is popularised, but the supporting system is not ready.

Graduate employment becomes more and more topical as the size of HE enrolment increases. When commenting on student development, almost every teacher interviewed related quality and student development to graduate employment. Teachers realise that graduate employment rates become an important indicator for parents and students when selecting which university to go to and universities compete to maintain high employment rates.

The convergence with regard to student development between teachers and students is not a surprise, because student development is part of the fundamental purposes of HE. However, this does not mean teachers and students understand student development in the same way. The teachers include the entry level of students and student employment into their understanding of quality in terms of student development. The students attach more importance to the process of their development and value what they can take away from their learning in the process of HE. They want to learn how to think. They evaluate university quality by looking at how university cultivates the all round development of their thinking. This development of thinking embraces their subject knowledge and skills, their generic competences and skills, their development of morality, and competence to lead them to success in finding jobs. In this sense, quality HE stimulates and supports students as they progress through their developmental process. This is an individualised process, the more teachers understand this, the more support students may gain from the interaction between students and teachers, and the better opportunities they will have for their own development. The deficiency of teachers’ understanding
of quality in terms of student development shown in this research reflects the need for educators to have better understanding of the process of student development, and the diverse needs of students in this process. Only with this understanding, can educators create challenging and supportive learning environments for students to develop their learning.

5.1.3 Quality in terms of course content

In the Chinese HE sector, for almost every discipline, there is a national instruction committee guiding the design and provision of the education in that discipline. Take the discipline of English language for example; there is a ‘Curriculum for Courses of English Major in Higher Education’, which regulates the curriculum of courses related to English in all Chinese HEIs. The current Curriculum guidance was structured by the HE Foreign Languages’ instruction Committee in 2000. It covers the educational objectives, course units, course hours, teaching methods and mediums, assessment, and the principles of teaching reforms in this field. The undergraduate education is four years, with the first two years focusing on the basics of English language knowledge and skills, and the second two years focusing on enlarging knowledge in English language and related culture, developing sensitivity to cultural differences and competence in communicating in English. All course units are in three categories:

- Courses of English language skills: basics of English, advanced English, pronunciation, grammar, listening, speaking, reading, writing, oral translation, written translation, and so on, as the main language skill courses, which are required to offer to students; and video & speaking, applied writing, news reading, and online material reading as optional courses which are provided depending on the specific HEIs.

- Courses of the related major knowledge: introduction to linguistics, English literature, American literature, academic writing, and other courses as the core courses which are required to offer to students; and British society and culture, American society and culture, introduction to western culture, history of English and American literature, English novels, English essays, English drama, English poems, English phonetics, English lexicology, English grammar, English teaching methods, stylistics, rhetoric, and so on, as optional courses which are provided depending on the specific HEIs.
Chinese HEIs may decide by themselves which extended courses they will provide to their students. These courses cover a broader area in: introduction to diplomacy, introduction to international relationship, western political systems, internal law, language acquisition, English language assessment, history of English education, Chinese culture, media, English news writing, international trade and practice, international business, economic, international finance, international corporate management, statistics.

Chinese HEIs offering a degree programme in English language are supposed to construct their own curricula in line with this national curriculum for English majors. The national curriculum also regulates the course hours of the above three types of courses, which should be between 2,000 to 2,200 hours in total. In the meantime, the national curriculum also gives a timetable as guidance for distributing course hours.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Types</th>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
<th>Year 3</th>
<th>Year 4</th>
<th>Total Hours</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English language skills</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English knowledge</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>extended courses</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total hours per week</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: The distribution of course hours

This guideline works as a framework for Chinese HEIs to design their curricula. As shown in the above table, the training of English language skills of listening, reading, writing, speaking and translation occupies 67% of the course time during the students’ four year undergraduate education, the course of English knowledge in terms of literature, linguistics, etc. covers 15% of the whole course time, and the extended courses in line with the name of the programmes student register when entering the university covers 18%. This course time distribution is the guideline, but it also varies among different universities. Courses included also vary among universities depending on the capacity of their teaching staff.
Students view curriculum content as a fundamental dimension of quality. Some students express their dissatisfaction with their programme, and the curriculum is problematic in their eyes. ‘It is hard to say the quality of our course is high, though we are satisfied with most of our teachers. The design of our programme is problematic. Our course is not much different from other courses, except for a few course units related to our subject’ (SISU033). Students value courses with good design, clear objectives, coherent course content with breadth and depth, and links with practice in the real world, and updated textbooks.

Students expect the curriculum design to enable them to grasp a good picture of their subject. The students often have complaints about the course design of those new programmes, which are designed to integrate foreign languages and ‘easy to sell’ subjects titled with the name of ‘international’. The complaints focus on the number of core courses of their subjects which is ‘too limited’ in their words and cannot give them the expected breadth and depth of the subject. Some students complain that certain key issues in their subjects are not covered by their course provision.

Students also believe that course objectives should be clear and concise. Students express their appreciation of courses and curriculum that have clear and concise objectives. Clearly stated course objectives will not only give them an overview of the subject of study, but also enable them to link it to and plan their own learning. In the teaching documents, every programme and course has its objectives, but students think these objectives are too often abstract and not concrete enough, and so cannot give students ‘a clear picture’ and opportunities to ‘evaluate learning progress’ by students themselves.

Students also think a high quality programme or course should include updated textbooks and practice based teaching/learning content. Students are not satisfied with the textbooks with outdated content. These textbooks disconnect student learning from the current world, and demotivate their learning. Most courses in Chinese HEIs are based on one or a few appointed textbooks. Students want the content of textbooks and teaching content updated with the latest developments in their subject.

Curriculum provides the structure of what students should learn in the process of their HE. Students’ views on quality in terms of course quality reveal their need for a clear, concise description on the tin of what is in it, how to use it, and what job prospects it will lead them into at the time of graduation. The proportion of the non-language skills training courses related to students’ majors appear to be
limited. The students from the programme of English language education complain that they have not learned how to teach, for quite limited courses have been provided to them. In their eyes, learning how to teach English should be more than following the few courses with the name of teaching methods, education, educational psychology, and assessment. Some students from other programmes also complain on similar points, about the limited core courses in their programme, which are not enough for them to have a general understanding of their discipline. An appropriate curriculum, in their perspective, should have a good design which enables them to have a good picture of their subject. The courses included should be rationally related with proper cohesion. Those cross disciplinary programmes with international orientation or the title of ‘international’ should include enough and better designed core courses. Otherwise, it is not a surprise to hear students registered in these programme comment that their programme is not very different from other programmes in their colleges, except for a few courses related to the title of their programme.

Reviewing the common practice of evaluating and improving quality in terms of curriculum, two points of focus appear: what is covered and how it is delivered. Curricula are structured by those who dominate the discipline and this learning context, and reflect the typical characteristics of the institutions and discipline dominators. The construction of curriculum and evaluation of course quality conveys the idea of those ‘experts’ regarding what should be taught and how it should be taught. There is very little voice from students, the receivers of the curriculum. From the students’ perspective, the curriculum not only provides them the list of courses they will have to complete in order to graduate, but more important it creates for them a learning context in which they open themselves to their chosen subject, and start their observation and exploration of the subject. As revealed in students’ feedback, there are very limited opportunities or channels of communication for students to express their needs. The deficiency in communicating curricular information to students may limit student development of active and independent learning, because students need to have a general picture of what they are to learn and what standard they need to reach when structuring their own learning plans and organising their learning activities. We can see that quality course in students’ view should have the following features:

- Informative and explicit course information;
- Measurable and clearly stated course objectives focusing on fundamental knowledge and processes;
• Articulation of the scope and sequence of course content;
• Exhibition of strong connections between the course content with students’ prior knowledge, and also the frontier knowledge and practice related to the subject;
• Promotion of their in-depth learning by indicating to students appropriate methods of learning and reflection on their learning activities, process, outcome and improvement;
• Provision of updated course materials contributing to understanding the subject matter;
• Interactive with student learning and development needs;
• Supporting the realisation of the aims of HE.

There is another important issue which is often ignored by Chinese HEIs in terms of the channels and timing of communicating curriculum information to students. Though not very commonly used, some universities give students a brochure about the basic information of their courses. It is a good thing to see the national university in this study uses this kind of brochure to give students a general picture of what courses they will learn. However, as some students reflected, the rosy picture depicted in the brochure is a bit different from the reality. Universities should use multiple channels to communicate curriculum information and suggested learning methods to students so that students may develop their learning in an informed learning context. University websites, digital and printed course outline, self-reported student learning progress plan and reports may all be used as communication channels. And more important, within the structure of communicating curriculum information to students, teachers play a crucial role. They are not only the curriculum deliverers, but also the best channel to collect students’ feedback and incorporate this into their curriculum development.

5.1.4 Quality in terms of university culture and resources

Culture can be viewed as the norms, values and beliefs of those associated with the universities (including administrators, faculty, students, board members and support staff), developed in a historical process and conveyed by use of language and symbols (Deal & Kennedy 1982). University culture is another theme in students’ identification of quality. University culture in students’ eyes is a shared pattern of beliefs, values, attitudes and traditions. For them, university culture, on the one hand, is the accumulated heritage of their universities, and
on the other hand, it is ongoing process of what is valued and what is communicated to them. In their talk of university culture, they seldom mention the missions stated in their university reports. Instead, they observe, understand and judge with their own principles. They use the lenses of learning ethos, history of the university, university tradition, celebrity teachers, leadership, and the diversity of resources, to make their judgement of their university culture. Learning ethos is an expression of the collective values of their university. By learning ethos, they mean the interest of their teachers and peer students in subject knowledge and general knowledge, their peer students’ engagement in learning, and the openness, reflection and cooperation of the teachers, administrative staff and peer students, in analysing and solving problems in their learning and university life.

Students are very sensitive to their university culture. They often say they do not know how to describe university culture in a few words, but they can feel it. Students from different groups at the national university use a common example of another university in the same city to tell me what they think a rich university culture and a healthy learning ethos is like. In their perspective, a university with an admirable culture has a long history, a comprehensive structure of discipline, known academics and achievements, various resources, and, most importantly, both teachers and students there have interests and engagement in pursuing knowledge. Quite a number of students in the focus groups go to that university for various courses. I was also invited by several students in a focus group to visit that university at the weekend. I saw there were many students going there for the learning of a second major or some specific courses. Many students from the universities of foreign languages often feel their major is not enough for their career development, so they go to their desired university for a second major or some additional courses over the weekend. They told me that they had a lot of opportunities to communicate with students from other universities. Most of them agree that they appreciate the university with a ‘rich and positive’ learning ethos where students study for their own interest. The students confess that they don’t know exactly, but they feel that the teachers there gain their respect because they seem to be more focused on knowledge and research rather than money.

Meanwhile, celebrity teachers, the university’s history and tradition, are considered by students as key elements of university culture. In their words, it is a kind of ‘nutrition’ in their university study. Students expressed their appreciation for the opportunities of listening to the lectures given by visiting
celebrities in a wide range of fields. They think it enhances the diversity of their sources of learning, examples for their own learning, and contributes to their learning culture. In addition, in students’ eyes, a university’s history, reputation and social impact are also important dimensions of university culture. In their words, their teachers’ research, publications, social influence, and even their values will influence their students. A university with long history, higher reputation and social influence will attract more high quality academics and students.

In the students’ view, university culture is intertwined with other dimensions, in which leadership plays a key role. Students find university leadership is important for it ‘decides a university’s style and quality’. A student from the national university uses her experiences to tell us how leadership influences the university culture. In their understanding, the president of their university is keen on making students’ voices heard, so under his leadership students have the opportunity to have their own student society and to reflect students’ criticisms and demands to the university administration. Their peer students were not satisfied with the arrangement of optional courses, so the student society talked to the teaching administration department. This resulted in a change of the optional courses arrangement. Students appreciate this very much. In that student’s words, ‘If the university does not value students’ voices, there is nothing we can do with it...’ (SWXSFGAT006). A student from the regional university expresses a similar opinion, ‘The management style of the leadership decides the culture of a university’ (DW042). Students attach importance to leadership, because university leadership will contribute to the development of their university culture. This needs to be understood in terms of Chinese culture and governance structures. University presidents are appointed by the government as the official head of the university. They have the direct power to decide the management style of a university. If the head of a university treats students as important components of HE and is keen on hearing students’ voices and making adjustments to meet students’ needs and demands, the university culture will be more open to students. If he/she and the administrative structure under his/her leadership tend to be less open to students’ experiences and ignore the effect of their management style on student learning, the university culture, in students’ words, might be more ‘static’. Students feel university culture as a kind of ‘nutrition’ for them. They are attracted to the university by the history, reputation and profile of the university, but what they feel during their university study is its current culture, facilitated by the integration of the leadership and faculty culture of the
university. In summary, students believe university culture is ‘the best indicator’ of university quality, because it underlies university academic activities on campus, even though it is hard to measure.

In students’ eyes, university infrastructure, teaching facilities, library, laboratories, sports facilities, accommodation conditions, are the hardware of university resources. Among all resources, they most value the library, reference books, and online resources. In the past decade, most Chinese universities have extended their campus, and updated the infrastructure, teaching facilities, libraries, and other sport and accommodation facilities. The two universities in this study both have newly built large campuses with modern buildings and facilities. Both of the universities are located in the suburbs of their cities and next to the campus of other universities. Students attach importance to university resources in terms of HE quality, but when students are discussing the topic of quality in terms of resources and learning environment, almost no student complains about their campus buildings, teaching facilities, and other infrastructure. What they attach more importance to is the collections of their library, the availability of their library and other information resources, the internet availability and speed, and whether the services of other facilities are user friendly or not.

Both university culture and university resources are important components of students’ learning environment. Both of them are identified as key dimensions of a university’s quality. It might be easy to build a new and modern campus, but it might not be easy to build university culture. A university is a place where knowledge, thinking and efforts for advancing knowledge matter. This is what students value most, and it cannot be built up as easily as the new building and new campus.

5.1.5 Understanding quality

The notion of quality is not a simple one; rather it is problematic, contested and multidimensional and requires examination at various levels; national, institutional, departmental, and individual levels (Elton, 1998). When considering the quality of HE, one needs to resist the temptation of seeking simplistic and single dimensional classifications, rankings and explanations (Hill, Lomas & MacGregor, 2003).
Analysing quality in HE is a process of scrutinising the rationality underlining them. One key point might be to find out the construct which helps identify quality. Gustavsson (1971) identifies two forms of rationality: rationality in relation to a value, and rationality in relation to a goal. Borrowing this concept in analysing ‘quality’ in Chinese HE, government agencies and politicians act in ways which appear rational in relation to the goals they set out to achieve and for which they bear responsibility. The notion of quality tends to be a sign of excellence from the aspect of the Chinese government’s strategy of developing an excellent university strategy, i.e. ‘211 Project’ and ‘985 Project’. The notion of quality also tends to be a sign of satisfying specified requirements, as reflected in the various evaluation activities that have been initiated by the government to sustain HE standards, educational effectiveness and efficiency (see Appendix 9). No matter whether quality is seen in the sense of chasing excellence or in maintaining basic standards, these all relate to the goals of the government.

HEIs follow a different form of rationality, despite being funded by the government, and act in ways which appear rational in relation to the value of widening and deepening knowledge. They are driven by the ultimate end of advancing knowledge and the betterment of conditions of humankind. This tool, of analysing rationality and the actions driven by it, can also be applied to analysing the rationality and actions of politicians, academics, or institutions. When different rationalities are employed, quality will be perceived and assessed differently.

Barnett (1992, p. 15) suggests that ‘we cannot form secure ideas about the quality of HE unless we first have a reasonably clear conception of what might be included under the umbrella concept of HE.’ Not surprisingly, there is no consensus on the purpose of HE. Writing in the 16th century, Francis Bacon insisted that knowledge should be practical and ‘not be a courtesan, for pleasure’. More recently, Cardinal John Newman took the opposite view. ‘Useful knowledge’, he said, is a ‘deal of trash’. Consensus on the aims of HE remains a long way off (Schwartz, 2003). Barnett (1992) analyses aims in HE on two levels: both course-specific and general ends that an educational process should serve. As stated by Barnett (1992, p.32), ‘identifying such general aims across all of HE is fraught with difficulty for different sets of overarching aims that are on offer’, because there are not only competing conceptions within the academic community, but there are also general conceptions held by influential interest groups outside HE. As once expressed by the US educator Harlan Cleveland, the
outsiders want the students trained for their first job out of university; the academics inside the system want the student educated for 50 years of self-fulfilment; and the students want both (cited in Schwartz, 2003). This study uses Barnett’s (1992) perspective that the aims of HE are ‘essentially a filling out of the particular characteristics and aspects of intellectual and personal growth which educators intend their student to acquire’ (Barnett, 1992, p.31).

There is a logical connection between concepts of HE and different approaches to quality. If we treat HE as an instrument to satisfy the needs of labour markets, the quality of HE is seen as the output of HE, in terms of how graduates are employed, and especially employed in the discipline they register at the university. If, using the Chinese HE typology, HE is to satisfy the need of developing a socialist country with Chinese characteristics, the quality of HE will therefore be assessed by both the destination of students and the educational provision of Chinese socialist ideology. Quality policy in Chinese HE is initially formulated in a top-down process by the national policy making bodies. It is subsequently translated into regulations and resources and is implemented within educational institutions. It then affects the behaviour of individual faculties and how they conduct their research, teaching and administrative tasks. This process follows a macro level of national policies, the meso level of institutional behaviour and the micro level of individual behaviour. The decisions made at a higher level become structural conditions that affect behaviour at lower levels. However, if we start from a different value position, and believe HE is in the nature of the intellectual development taking place in students’ minds, in the depth and breadth of understanding that students achieve, in their ability to be self-critical, and in their capacity to apply that understanding and self-critical capacity to all they experience and do, quality then resides in the educational process within the HEIs. If the paradigm is shifted from top-down to student learning centred, the new paradigm will be a bottom-up one. This study takes the conceptual standpoint that it is the students who do the achieving, and attain the aims of HE. Hence, we may find it necessary to know how our students perceive the quality of their experiences. In this study we find that what influences students and teachers’ perception of quality involves a blend of factors such as the curriculum and learning environment and resources; instructor factors such as qualification, expertise and teaching style, communication with students; and student factors in terms of their development in knowledge, understanding, skills and morality (see Chapter 3).
A better understanding of the quality values of both teachers and students is important because they have an impact on their participation in education processes. In the context of universities in the new century, one may recognise the need to move away from a focus on good teaching, in the sense of good presentation and management of subject content, towards good learning, which is significant, up-to-date, and enduring in both value and depth. In Chinese HE, there is a lot of teaching going on, a lot of teaching quality evaluation happening every day, but it is not touching the key process of HE, student learning. Here, an alternative paradigm of ‘bottom-up’ is proposed to examine quality, to work out mechanisms to capture quality and sustain quality improvement in the context of Chinese HE.

5.2 Understanding QA in Chinese HE

The term ‘quality assurance’ refers to the policies, systems, and processes designed to ensure the maintenance and enhancement of quality within a programme or institution (Girdwood, 1997). QA is not new. It was originally an integral part of craftsmanship and professionalism (Morley, 2003). More recently, it has been disaggregated from the professions, and formalised and transformed into an object of inquiry (Hart, 1997). Before the quality imperative prevailed globally, the concern for quality and development of quality management arose within HEIs. Teachers and administrators within universities and colleges identified what was right for them to teach and made sure it was taught in the accepted way. In the past two decades, the quality imperative in HE has come from the market and from government (Houston, 2008). The political agenda towards legitimating changes in the sector’s structures and funding; focusing on value-for-money and performance practices, and questioning the extent to which HEIs produce work-ready graduates, has been imposed by interest groups outside HEIs. QA is seen as the antithesis to the chaos of global expansion of HE and a way of ensuring that systems and structures can process ever-increasing numbers of students effectively (Morley, 2003).

Over the last two decades and across the globe, QA processes have been implemented, then modified, replaced or augmented with more stringent policies and procedures (Neave & van Vught, 1991). The irony is that despite the accelerated pace and intensity of quality evaluation and QA activities, their impact on the improvement of educational programmes and student learning
remains less clear. The question of how external quality monitoring might be transformed to enhance the quality of academic programmes and services and to improve the learning of students is particularly salient (Ratcliff, 2003).

After the period of making sure that QA systems and procedures have been developed and are in place, we are currently in an era more characterised by realism, in which a more nuanced understanding of what QA and quality processes can or cannot do is needed. In the following part of this section, QA systems in Chinese higher education will be analysed from its structure, its objectives, control, areas, procedures, and uses.

### 5.2.1 The structure of QA in Chinese HE

In the past decade, the introduction of QA regimes into Chinese HE has covered a broad spectrum of initiatives (see Appendix 9), from national policy, methodologies of quality evaluation, institutional adoption of QA schemes, to a matrix of quality evaluation systems (with teaching quality evaluation and discipline-based evaluation as the main focus supplemented by a range of other evaluations). In China, at the national level, the responsibility for QA lies with the NEEC, the specialised agency set up by the MoE in 2004. It is mandated to coordinate evaluation processes, develop appropriate methods for future quality assessment, guide institutions in their QA development, and compile and publish information on HE quality. Overall, the structure of the QA system in Chinese HE can be summarised into EQA processes, and QA systems within HEIs themselves, as shown in the following figure.

![Figure 4: The structure of QA in Chinese HE](image)

The EQA system can be characterised by three main components: the government’s supervision through policy guidance; the government’s monitoring
through various evaluations carried out by government agencies, among which the most influential ones are the national teaching quality evaluation and the discipline based reviews; the newly emerging non-governmental evaluation agencies and university rankings produced by various non-governmental institutions.

Various measures have been adopted to enhance the quality of education and research activities in Chinese HE, especially the launch of Project 211 and Project 985. These have had a great impact on quality enhancement in Chinese HE (Huang, 2005). In addition to these two big projects, other efforts have also been made to assure and improve the quality of education in all Chinese HEIs since 2002, including:

- requiring all professors to teach undergraduate courses and encouraging senior professors to teach core courses and undergraduate courses;
- setting grants for learning resource renovation;
- setting grants for developing courses of excellence;
- setting grants for compiling textbooks of excellence;
- selecting and awarding the “national outstanding professors in teaching”;
- Establishing the NEEC to coordinate various kinds of quality evaluation activities.

Up to now, the education evaluation network in China has been based on evaluation agencies at both national and regional levels (Ding, 2008). At the national level, the Evaluation Office of the Higher Education Department, MoE, is the government administrative unit in charge of education quality evaluation. The HEEC and the China Academic Degrees & Graduate Education Development Centre are agencies affiliated to MoE, specialising in conducting evaluations in the Chinese HE sector. At the regional level, most provincial governments have established their own education evaluation agencies, responsible for education quality evaluation in their provinces.

Currently HE quality evaluation in China is compulsory and operated by evaluation panels appointed by HEEC. The process of HE evaluation in China, as in many other countries, includes five basic elements:

1) standards and guidelines issued by the quality evaluation agency and an evaluator panel appointed by the government agencies;
2) an institutional self-review report is provided;
3) the evaluation panel conducts on-site visits;
4) the panel reports back to the institution and MoE;
5) HEIs write their self improvement report and carry out their self improvement activities.

In the past decade institutions have been faced with an increase in levels of legislation and involvement from national and local governments, especially in attempts to assure the quality of HE through formal evaluation techniques and accountability processes. The development of IQA systems in Chinese universities is the current main emphasis of the quality movement in the Chinese HE sector. Following the first five-year cycle of national teaching quality evaluations (2002-2007, with an extension to 2008), HEIs in China are now encouraged and required by the MoE to develop their own institutional based QA systems. The common features of IQA systems in Chinese HEIs are (Ding, 2008; Li et al., 2008; Shi, Liu, Chen, & Yang, 2008):

- The establishment of institutional teaching evaluation centres. These centres are affiliated to or in cooperation with the teaching management office of the institution. Those universities without independent teaching evaluation centres have their own sub-section playing similar roles under the supervision of the teaching affairs/management office. The main responsibilities of these centres are developing and operating the IQA system.

- The formation of teaching supervision/steering groups. This is also a common practice among Chinese HEIs. The group members are the senior teaching staff or retired senior staff with expertise in teaching and teaching management. They are under the supervision of the Vice President for teaching. They are expected to carry out their work directly with teachers and students by observing classes, talking with teachers and students after class. Their responsibilities are to find problems in teaching, and to provide advice on the solutions.

- Peer review. Class teaching observation is also a common practice in most Chinese HEIs. Teachers are required to observe each other’s classroom teaching, which is considered as a useful way for teachers to learn from each other and to monitor each other’s teaching. Besides peer teaching observation, leaders at different levels inside the HEIs are required to observe teachers’ teaching.

- Student feedback, which is considered as one of the most important QA components, is conducted through surveys, individual and group interviews, student representative reporting, etc. Student surveys are the
most commonly used form of student feedback collection, which covers course evaluation, teaching evaluation, and other fields of interest.

- **Annual report.** Annual institutional self-review report is also a component of IQA systems. Though the main purpose of such annual self-review reports is not specifically for the sake of QA, it indirectly contributes to realising QA in those institutions.

- **Teacher training.** Teacher training includes pre-work training, in-service training, and other types of training for teachers. Teachers’ pre-work training is considered as the most important of all training schemes. All new teachers are required to attend such training in all Chinese HEIs.

There has been a tendency to take a ‘top down’ approach to the identification and classification of QA issues in Chinese HE. As a result of the nationwide teaching quality evaluations from 2002 to 2008 and of international exchange, there is a growing body of experience and knowledge of quality and QA paradigms and cultures. Building up IQA systems was initiated by the MoE after the first round nationwide of external teaching quality evaluations. A new round of experimentation and exploration has followed. Various theories, paradigms, and models are being adopted in the Chinese universities’ exploration of the quality jungle.

### 5.2.2 Analysing the OCAPU of QA in Chinese HE

QA in the contemporary university is not a neutral or value-free concept, but a process reflecting a particular power-knowledge regime (Anderson, 2006). It is argued that many of the trends in HE quality have been management-driven, underpinned by a desire to develop a range of mechanisms of control (Jones, 2003; Mertova & Webster, 2009). Any improvement potentially depends on the development of definitions and interventions that reflect the interests and concerns in the sector (Houston, 2008). Following the description of the current state of QA in Chinese HE, further analysis will be undertaken under the following headings:

- **Objectives:** What are and what should be the aims and objectives of QA?
- **Control:** Who does and who should control the process of QA?
- **Areas:** What are the domains covered by QA procedures?
- **Procedures:** How are QA procedures set up?
- **Uses:** How is the information collected used?
Objectives: What are and what should be the objectives of QA?

Clark’s (1983) classic ‘triangle of coordination’ suggested three principal modes for coordinating or controlling behaviour in academic institutions: state regulation; professional self-regulation, and market forces. This typology is helpful in understanding the contemporary situation of HE and the quality debate, for the three forces picked out by Clark can be seen to have given rise to three methodological approaches to quality (Barnett, 1992). Barnett (1992) points out that the state will tend to favour performance indicators as a means of assessing quality; that the academic community will tend to favour peer review; and the market-led system will generate consumer-oriented approaches to quality assessment.

Chinese HE is in the mode of state regulation with a limited though increasing role for market forces. The quality policy and its implementation in Chinese HE is a top-down process. The quality movement or quality revolution in Chinese HE has underscored the expectation that universities must demonstrate that they are providing quality education and producing quality research and are constantly striving to improve both. The objectives of quality initiatives as stated repeatedly in quality policies (see Appendix 9) are:

- To realise the state’s macro supervision and guidance of teaching provision of Chinese HEIs and to improve the level of Chinese HE;
- To raise the attention and to elevate the efforts of local government in supporting HEIs’ teaching;
- To push HEIs to clarify their missions and principles, to improve educational infrastructure and facilities, to improve teaching management, to deepen teaching reforms, to improve teaching quality and performance.

This summary of the quality policy objectives shows that QA policy and implementation is an instrument allowing the state government to steer the practice of Chinese HEIs. Against the background of the rapidly expanding system of HE and the decentralisation of Chinese HE, local governments, especially at the provincial level, are supposed to strengthen their coordinating function and to take their financial responsibility for the HE sector; meanwhile Chinese universities are supposedly given more managerial autonomy. QA policies and schemes are used, in this context, as the means of regulating the
rapidly expanding system of HE, pushing local governments to give more financial input into HE, promoting a more efficient university management system, through which the government’s role in the control of HE has actually been strengthened.

Discussion of overall organisational objectives or overall organisational long-term plans is both grand and mysterious, for it is general enough to accommodate almost anything, but it is accepted socially as important. The grand and ideal goals of universities are in contrast to the discourse of QA at the operational level. Quality evaluation based EQA in Chinese HE, both institutional teaching quality evaluation and discipline / programme based quality evaluation, scrutinise HEIs’ missions and objectives. In our study, the motto of the regional university is ‘Morality, Humanity, and Integrity’, and the motto of the national level university is ‘Integrity, Vision and Academic Excellence’. The goals of the two universities as stated in the mottos are grand, ideal, and vague. In line with the requirement of quality policies, Chinese universities are learning to articulate their educational objectives and principles in a balance between conforming to government policies and highlighting their institutional features. It does not mean that Chinese HEIs did not have educational objectives previously, but there was more compliance without the requirement for a featured institutional profile as there is now. In the statements of guiding principles of education, both of the universities articulate their stance of following the state education policy and guidance, with the mission of meeting the need of the state development for intellectuals in the field of their provision.

Goals here are so broad and ambiguous that in Clark’s (1983) terms, the university or system will find it difficult to demonstrate that it has accomplished the goals – or failed to accomplish them. A crucial effect of simplified definitions of purpose is that they mislead those who believe them (Clarks, 1983) or disappoint those who expect more than is stated. The statement of ‘meeting the need of the state development for intellectuals’ is both concrete and slippery. It is concrete because it clarifies the direction of HE, to produce people who are needed. It is also slippery, since it is hard to capture and control the state’s need in the paradox of the demand of ready product and the process of education. In addition, students are put in the category of instruments for the purpose of state development, which is true in reality in most countries. However, this might be in conflict with the aim of securing more individualised ends. Barnett (1992, p. 16) suggests:
... the quality of HE is more demonstrated in the nature of the intellectual development that takes place in students’ minds, in the depth and breadth of understanding that students achieve, in their ability to be self-critical, and in their capacity to apply that understanding and self-critical capacity to all they experience and do...

The aims of HE included in the two universities in this study are production of qualified manpower and efficient management of teaching provision. Students themselves and their intellectual growth have not been given enough attention in the process of articulating HE aims and the objectives of QA, as revealed in both Chinese national quality policies and the practice of the two universities in this study. Producing qualified manpower to meet the needs of state development is the expectation for HE from the stakeholders outside HEIs. The purpose of efficient management of universities’ educational provision is too narrow and operational. Neither of these embodies the real essence of HE, and Chinese HE and QA with such aims is problematic and misleading.

**Control: Who does and who should control the process of QA?**

It has been evident from the start that quality management has been used as a vehicle for delivering policy requirements within available resources (Harvey & Askling, 2003). The degree of government control, the extent of devolved responsibility, the funding system and the overall and internal organisation of HE vary from one country to another, but there has been a convergence in all systems towards a dominant model of top-down QA implementation and delegated accountability using a fairly standardised review methodology.

QA in Chinese HE has been initiated by the national authority of HE. The EQA is mainly in the form of external quality evaluation organised by the MoE and HEEC. They control EQA by drawing up standards and evaluation indicators, and by making judgements about the performance of HEIs. In such a QA structure, teachers, as the key actors in HE, are the object under scrutiny instead of the controller of QA. Students, the key learners in HEIs, are only used as instruments of information provider for course and teacher appraisal. In a constructive IQA system, both teachers and students should be actively involved, for they are the key achievers and markers of HE quality. It is very hard to achieve quality improvement without featuring students and teaching in control of the QA process.
Areas: What are the domains covered by QA procedures?

The principle of the external teaching quality evaluation is to promote ‘evaluation to encourage institutional QA, evaluation to facilitate quality improvement; integrating evaluation and construction and focusing on construction’. QA, as the new discourse in HE, is considered in the Chinese HE sector as the process of modernising HE management. Therefore, the focus of EQA from this perspective encompasses the governance and regulation of an institution.

In the practice of quality evaluation, the indicators (see Appendix 4) listed in the Teaching Quality Evaluation Index System (TQEIS) are used as both the standard and the tool for Chinese HEIs to draft their own quality management regulations and standards. This requires the complete compliance of Chinese HEIs. The TQEIS shown in Appendix 3 has seven primary indicators, 19 secondary indicators, and 44 observation points. The main areas covered are institutional mission, teaching staff, facilities and its use rate, educational programmes, teaching management, university culture, institutional performance and institutional profiles.

- Evaluating an institution’s mission, educational philosophy and positioning is to make sure that it is in line with the general direction of national education policy and systems.
- Evaluating teaching staff relates to faculty size and structure, and teachers’ qualifications. Facilities and their usage rate cover teaching facilities, library, labs, and the budget for teaching-related activities.
- The indicator for programmes and their development is based on evaluation of the structure and plan of the programmes, the curriculum content, textbooks, teaching reforms and usage of CAT, provision of bilingual programmes, and the content, system of practicum teaching, as well as the opening of labs to students.
- The indicator of teaching management scrutinises the structure and qualification of the institutional teaching management body, the existing quality control regulations, standards, and procedures of HEIs.
- The university academic culture is reviewed using the indicators of teachers’ ethics and involvement in teaching, and students’ obedience of university discipline, and also the extra-curricular activities organised by the university.
The teaching performance, in other words, the ‘output’ of the HE process, is evaluated from the theories and skills that students acquire, the quality of graduation theses or design, the morality and ethics of students, student physical fitness, students’ entry level and their employment rate. These are the domains covered by EQA, though it does not mean the quality of the area covered has been assured. We may find that the main domains of QA are on the availability of institutional QA regulations and procedures, the political correctness and compliance of HEIs with national education policies, the management of teaching provision, and the outputs of HE.

The IQA generally applied in Chinese HEIs, as analysed in the previous section, covers the establishment and updating of systematic requirements regulating teaching, teaching management, the supervision of teaching conducted by the committee of teaching supervision and evaluation, appraisal of teachers, and student feedback on teachers and teaching. These are in the domain of educational provision supported by systematic and detailed documentation. The IQA has not gained wide acceptance among teachers and students, because its focus on teaching brings more work to teachers to produce the documentation required by the QA regulations. Students do not ‘buy’ into it because it does not capture the core of their learning experiences, although it is compulsory for them to fill in questionnaires every term. Monitoring and evaluation will not improve quality. QA has to touch the process of student learning and what the students do, otherwise it will stay in the loop of displaying costly and inefficient IQA for self-comfort and for explaining to the external quality review bodies how good and efficient it is. This may partly explain the finding that ‘while the pace and intensity of QA and enhancement activities have increased greatly, their impact on the improvement of programmes and students remains less clear’ (Ratcliff, 2003).

**Procedures: How are the QA procedures set up?**

In the past decade, Chinese universities have adopted various forms of internal and external mechanisms for assuring the quality of their work. In general, these mechanisms are top-down in nature, with inflexible, non-negotiable approaches based on standards (see Appendix 9). Examining the question of how QA systems are set up is a process of addressing the range of methods for translating quality policies into practice. This process can be further examined
through addressing the methodologies and the degree of involvement of HEIs in the process.

Currently HE quality evaluation in China is compulsory and operated by evaluation panels appointed by HEEC. The process of translating quality evaluation and QA policies into practice in the Chinese HE sector can be described by the following processes:

- the MoE and its appointed quality evaluation agency publishes the teaching quality standards and guidelines;
- the training and orientations for HEIs are organised by HEEC to assist them to set up their own quality management and assurance regulations;
- recruiting and training evaluators;
- the notices published by HEEC for the timing and name list of institutions for quality evaluation;
- HEIs’ self-reviews of their quality;
- HEIs submit institutional self-review reports;
- the evaluation panels conduct on-site visits;
- the panel’s report back to institution and the Ministry with recommendations;
- HEIs submit their self improvement report to HEEC and the MoE;
- Institutions carry out their self-improvement activities.

The participation of Chinese HEIs in the QA procedures is compulsory. Following the guidance of MoE and HEEC and the top-down implementation of quality policy, Chinese HEIs have established their own IQA. The main processes in setting up IQA procedures are:

- Understanding and learning the top-down quality policies and standards;
- Sending quality managers to participate in training of quality evaluation organised by HEEC;
- Drafting the institutional quality controlling and management regulations;
- Establishing an office in charge of quality management and assurance;
- Establishing quality supervision and assurance committee;
- Introducing quality management and QA concepts to faculty and administrative staff;
- Encouraging departments to draft their own quality control and management regulations with reference to the institutional regulations;
Similar to many other imported educational reforms, the quality movement in Chinese HE cannot be interpreted properly without locating it in the specific context of China. Both EQA and IQA procedures in Chinese HE check mainly the process of educational delivery and its outcomes through performance indicators. The EQA procedures rely on the drafts of self-review reports which are prepared on the basis of guidelines defined by the MoE and HEEC; the external procedures rely also on the judgement of the evaluator panels appointed by the HEEC. The IQA procedures are based on HEIs’ interpretation of the guidelines defined by the MoE. The IQA procedures rely on the leadership of the university, and involve the scrutiny of teaching by institutional quality supervision committees, teaching process management conducted jointly by departments and institutional teaching quality centres, and student surveys for collecting the course experience or teacher appraisal. Furthermore, quantitative methods and performance indicators are used for the convenience of cross-institution comparison.

In almost every QA policy and document quality improvement is highlighted. Among outcomes of the quality movement, there is little or no sign of quality improvement apart from such items as a new campus, newly updated facilities, or new management and regulations. As a common opinion among staff and students interviewed in this study, ‘all is for the sake of the quality evaluation and the good results we may have.’ It is not a surprise to see little actual improvement after the costly and exhausting evaluation. The reports given by the review panels to the two universities in our study have turned out to be too general. Besides recognising achievements, very limited specific and detailed recommendations have been made. Furthermore, these summary reports are very similar between the evaluated institutions, covering mostly the point of upgrading teaching staff in terms of their qualifications and research, the improvement of the new interdisciplinary programmes, and better management of student dissertations. The recommendations in the evaluation reports appear to be very general, even just within 300 hundred words. Such brief recommendations and responses to the heavy workload of institutions’ preparation are consistent with the result that more than 70% of the institutions have been evaluated as ‘excellent’, but do not address effectively the quality problems in Chinese HE. Self-improvement is the final stage of the quality evaluation process, when the evaluated institution submits a self-improvement report to the HEEC. However, self-improvement often stays at the level of paper
work (see Appendix 9). As Patton (1982) has suggested, effective evaluations are those that are acted upon.

**Uses: How is the information collected used?**

What information to collect, how to collect information, and how to use the information collected are fundamental choices to be made in QA policy and practice. In Chinese HE, there has increasingly been the delegation of responsibility for quality but at the price of being required to be accountable and open to scrutiny. While both government agencies and HEIs routinely collect a considerable amount of data for the purpose of QA, it might be necessary to speculate the indicators and measures used. The information collected is mainly about institutions and teaching in terms of resources at institutions, teaching and teachers, and current student levels. Information collected is used for quality judgement in a small circle. The difficulty for the public in accessing such information shows that it is not as transparent or as open to public as it should be. Some self-review reports of those newly evaluated HEIs are accessible on the HEEC website. The evaluators’ review reports are only open to the evaluated institutions and the government agencies. Institutional self-improvement reports are in general available on the HEEC website but do not include all evaluated institutions. It is like a black box, so hard for stakeholders outside the small circle of government agencies, institutional management body, and evaluators to see how quality is assured, judged, or improved. The information on quality is not transparent, not up-to-date, not informing educational practice, and most importantly, not reaching the key process of HE – student learning.

Using institutional resources to measure the quality of university education is based on the assumption that the institution’s resources are related to institutional strength, educational provision and the quality of student learning. However, as criticised by many researchers, students may sit in well furnished and equipped classrooms without engaging themselves in authentic learning. Another reason to pick the resource provision of institutions as the indicator is because it is a relatively easy thing to measure and compare. Unfortunately, despite popular emphasis on them, institutional resources are only contingently rather than directly related to the quality of university education (Coates, 2005). The lack of causal connection with student learning implies that focusing predominantly on institutional resources will not address sufficiently the issue of educational quality.
A great deal of effort has been made to measure teachers and their teaching in the QA of Chinese HE. This is underlined by the assumption that high quality teaching will lead to high quality learning. This shows the dominant perception in Chinese HE is that high qualifications and the disciplinary knowledge teachers possess is sufficient for quality teaching. The evaluation of teaching focuses on the teaching process and its control. This is in line with the logic of QA in manufacturing industry that quality comes from strict control of process. Teachers and teaching can be planned and controlled, and are measurable in terms of teachers’ qualifications, teaching hours, teaching objectives, teaching content, teaching methods, and the satisfaction of students, and other measures. In contrast, learning is less tangible, more individual, and hard to grasp and measure.

In both institutional and programme based reviews, current student performance in grasping theoretical knowledge and skills, their creativity and practical skills, the quality of student dissertation, and employment rates are used as indicators for QA (see Appendix 4 and 5). All these are performance indicators measuring learning outcomes. Such information about outcomes may provide a snapshot of what is happening at a certain point in time, but it may not be sufficient for quality management and improvement activities (Coates, 2005).

In collecting data for QA, there is a widespread use of questionnaires to collect students’ perceptions of their course experiences, their teachers and teaching. The emphasis of the questionnaires is on appraisal of teachers and teaching through measuring teachers’ enthusiasm in teaching, control of teaching content, presentation skills, knowledge delivery, the integration of theory and practice, use of computer assisted teaching, textbooks recommended, affinity with students, etc (see Appendix 7 and 8). However, there is no evidence that the use of the questionnaire was making any contribution to improving the overall quality of teaching and learning, at least as perceived by the students. It is compulsory for students to fill in those questionnaires, but the outcomes of those questionnaires are not reported back to them.

5.2.3 Summary

As the principles and practices of QA become more and more embedded in HE, it becomes increasingly important to examine QA in the light of ongoing changes
in the phenomena being measured and the domain being covered by QA procedures. In the current QA procedures, there is a strong atmosphere of compliance and too much emphasis on information about institutions and teaching and not enough emphasis on what students are actually doing. Sadler (2000) writes that managing academic life today requires us to recognise the move away from a focus on good teaching, in the sense of good presentation and management of subject content, towards good learning, that is learning that is significant, up-to-date, and enduring in both value and depth. Learning comes from being reflective and thinking critically upon issues and events linked with the guided experience (Schon, 1991). The participation of students and teachers in current QA process is in a very passive pattern. They, at the receiving end, are not supposed to interfere with or influence the implementing process. Although in the implementation process staff involvement is in principle encouraged, such involvement is expected to support the external agenda (see Chapter 3). There is little concern in the current practice of QA about how students are interacting with their universities and with the practices that are most likely to generate productive learning (see Chapter 4). Chinese HE needs to consider the new paradigm and needs to take account of how and to what extent students engage with activities that are likely to lead to productive learning. Most directly, this will provide an accurate picture of what universities are doing about those things which are likely to generate higher quality learning outcomes. Furthermore, this will provide a means of determining the productivity of university education in terms of maximising individual academic performance and potential. Ultimately, focusing on how and how well students are learning emphasises the core process of HE.
Chapter 6: Towards Learning Focused Quality Assurance

I started this research with the question of why there is little quality improvement in Chinese HEIs, despite the nationwide installation of QA systems and the large number of publications in this field. The literature review about quality in HE helps in discerning the intertwined complexity in the concept of quality. The review of literature on the rationales, focus and approaches to QA set up the theoretical foundation of my inquiry on the QA in Chinese HE.

The data of this study shows that quality in a university context relates strongly to the quality of learning. In Chapter 4, we discussed the main themes in student learning that emerged in the data, from the characteristics of current Chinese students, their expectations of university education, learning motivation, learning activities, to their learning approaches and learning engagement. Based on these themes, the concept of quality learning was examined. It is very hard to reach a unified definition of quality learning because both quality and learning are slippery concepts and there is a strong cooperative nature in higher HE, but we can see from the data that quality learning involves three main domains: academic, career and social domains. In both students’ and teachers’ conceptualisation of student learning in universities, we can identify some key factors influencing student learning quality, including curriculum, teaching, assessment, teacher-student interaction, students’ ownership of learning, and student learning approaches. We may see from these factors that the quality of student learning is actually affected by what universities offer to student to learning, what students do in their learning, and interaction between universities, teachers and their students. What I want to argue in this study is that since the quality of HE is reflected in student learning, QA should focus on the factors influencing student learning quality and procedures generating quality learning.
In Chapter 5, we have analysed the QA system in Chinese HE from its objectives, control, areas, procedures, and uses, based on the cases of two selected Chinese universities. We find that:

- The objectives of QA are largely external influence driven and targeted at efficient and effective management of teaching. The problem observed is that the ultimate aim of HE, namely the intellectual development and growth of students, has not been given enough emphasis.

- Chinese QA policies were initiated by the government. The EQA is controlled by the government agencies, and the IQA is in the hands of teaching administrators. This top-down implementation remains dominant and controls QA activities. The problem observed in this top-down QA is that it has not involved teachers and students actively. Teachers are used as the objects of quality scrutiny and students as the providers of information for teacher and teaching appraisal.

- The areas covered by EQA in Chinese HE can be seen from the institutional QA regulations and procedures. It is the product of the HEIs’ compliance with the national education policies. The areas covered by IQA mainly include the systematic regulations on teaching, teaching management, teacher appraisal, and students’ feedback on teachers and teaching. We may see that the current QA does not address directly the processes of student learning.

- The procedures of QA establishment and development in Chinese HEIs are a top-down, external influence driven process. They are initiated by the MoE, and their implementation is guided and supervised by the HEEC. This requires the HEIs’ compliance in establishing and developing elaborate and comprehensive internal procedures to support the assertions of quality. Such top-down procedures have very little effect on the actual process of student learning and development.

- The information collected through QA procedures focuses on resources, teacher qualifications, teaching management, and performance indicators measuring learning outcomes, for example, graduate employment rates. Such information may indicate institutional resources and management and provide a snapshot of what is happening at a certain point in time. However, it is not sufficient to inform quality improvement and student learning development.

We may see the discrepancy between student learning quality (see Chapter 4) and what the current QA assures (see Chapter 5) from the above summary. If we intend to improve the quality of HE, we should consider how we can incorporate the student learning experience into QA systems to inform the
university, teachers, administrative staff, students what and where to work on for improvement. The key issue here is how to incorporate student learning into QA and how to make sure the direct factors influencing student learning quality are managed in a meaningful way, so that continuous quality improvement becomes realisable.

6.1 Learning-focused QA and its three principles

Many problems analysed above are linked to a teaching oriented conception of education. The efforts to improve student learning have been underpinned by the belief that learning quality can be assured by teaching quality (see Chapter 5). The QA mechanisms mostly scrutinise the compliance of teaching with the criteria (see Appendix 9). This is why the quality movement in Chinese HE has not promoted quality learning (see Chapter 3). Subtly but profoundly it is time to shift from the conception of being an institution providing instruction to one producing quality learning. What this study calls for is a learning-focused concept of education and a way of ensuring the quality defined under this concept. This learning-focused concept is put forward against the background that the prevailing teacher centred concept of teaching fails in producing quality learning, and the context that the current QA fails in assuring and promoting student learning.

As previously noted, in current QA systems, quality improvement procedures stated in the HEIs’ follow-up reports are mainly about improving teaching profiles and teacher qualifications, but in reality the responsibility for quality enhancement is left to the sense of responsibility or to the priorities of individual teachers. Teachers tend to view external imposition of evaluation and changes as a burden. The quality enhancement initiative, mostly in the form of teaching projects, will only work for those teachers who have an interest in it. Their research usually ends in their publication. It is unlikely to cause an overall improvement in teaching and learning. Most teachers still teach in the same way, and the quality of learning still relies on who the students are (see chapter 3).

Learning focused QA (LFQA), as shown in its name, shifts the focus of QA, away from scrutinising HEIs’ compliance with external requirements and scrutinising teaching, towards focusing on improving student learning quality. LFQA shown in Figure 5 adopts a more student-oriented approach to learning and teaching and
is more sensitive to student learning development. It appreciates student learning experiences, emphasises the interface of teaching and learning, and focuses on student learning activities and approaches.

![Diagram: University level integration of top-down & bottom-up QA for continuous quality improvement]

**Figure 5: Learning focused quality assurance**

Quality improvement is a complicated process, which needs a holistic system and the engagement of teachers, administration staff, and students. Students’ learning experience needs to be integrated into a regular and continuous cycle of data collection, analysis, reporting, transforming into feasible enhancement plans and action, and integrating into learning and teaching practice. Enhancing student learning quality requires a system which may collect appropriate learning and teaching data, identifying the areas for improvement after analysis, delegating responsibility for action to the agents involved, encouraging the ownership of improvement action through the facilitation of the appropriate institutional support of both internal and external resources that can be used, exchanging experiences among students, teachers and administration staff, and stabilising positive experiences into learning and teaching practice. Establishing this is not an easy task, and needs a holistic system of dialogue, participation and responsibility. LFQA is student learning oriented and supported by the principle of dialogue, participation and responsibility.

The agents of quality improvement are teachers, students, QA administrative staff, and other staff related in universities. **Dialogue** is the communication between them. This dialogue will enhance students’ understanding and motivation to learn and teachers’ understanding of student learning and their support for this process. The dialogue among teachers will help them be more reflective in their teaching, improve the curriculum, and give better teaching to
students. The dialogue between teachers and QA administrators and other staff will help teachers communicate their expected support to their teaching and student learning and keep the university informed of resources needed. The dialogue between university and students through QA systems will help students to understand the vision and values of their universities and help the staff understand student learning needs so that they may configure the necessary support appropriately.

**Participation** is the second principle in LFQA. Quality improvement is unlikely without the active participation of the three main agents inside HE: teachers, students, administrators. In almost every step in LFQA, their participation is necessary. Quality learning at any university requires the active participation of both teachers and students. This process is guaranteed by QA staff’s action of involving both teachers and students in designing how to collect student learning data, to best understand and grasp the information about student learning and to disseminate the information to related departments and people. This participation at the stage of data collection can be in multiple forms: by contributing ideas in designing questionnaires and themes of qualitative enquiry, giving feedback to the designed questionnaires, communicating opinions and insights in discussion groups, and providing reliable information in any student learning data collection processes. The participation at the stage of analysing results is mainly in the way that all related agents contribute their interpretation, which will make the next step of identifying necessary action more evidence based and will better address the needs in reality. The participation at the stage of identifying areas for action is to discuss what and how to improve quality and to reach a consensus, so that the appropriate quality enhancement procedures will be established. Participation at this stage of delegating responsibility for action implies that all involved agents are to take their respective responsibilities in taking action.

**Responsibility** is the third principle in LFQA. It is essential for any quality enhancement initiatives to have effects. Teachers’ responsibility is to undertake the quality enhancement initiatives actively, to reflect on their own teaching, to understand student learning, to explore how to better align their teaching to student learning, to organise a better learning environment through their teaching and their dialogue with other stakeholders, to develop their curriculum regularly, to provide appropriate feedback to students, and to encourage them to take their own responsibility for learning. Students’ responsibility is to become the owners of their own learning by thinking and developing their learning
objectives, participating actively in learning, managing their learning time and activities appropriately, reflecting on their own learning approaches and engagements regularly, communicating their learning needs and questions to teachers and other staff promptly, participating in the QA process and providing feedback actively, and making good use of resources and support to reach the best learning outcomes. University administrators are the facilitators and coordinators in the whole process. Their responsibility is to manage data collection and analysis, to coordinate the participation of teachers and students in the process of data collection, analysis, interpreting results, and identifying areas for action; to ensure the quality of their participation and the feasibility of the enhancement plan, to identify and provide effective support to both teachers and students in the process of their undertaking the quality enhancement actions by organising training, workshops, courses, forums, consulting sessions with the support of internal and external experts and resources.

The proposed LFQA is conceptualised on the basis of a realistic analysis of current QA policy and practice in Chinese HE, a close observation of student learning at two Chinese universities, and the challenges Chinese HEIs are facing. To improve education quality, universities need to identify and address the new characteristics, needs and expectations of students, to respond to different levels of student preparedness while maintaining academic standards, to re-conceptualise teaching and learning in the new paradigm of HE, to reposition its knowledge functions, and to managing multiple external forces influencing them.

In LFQA, the responsibility for quality enhancement will not be left to the sense of responsibility or to the priorities of individual teachers, as the current QA does. Universities will take their responsibilities in providing the incentives and support structures for teachers to enhance their teaching, and for students to become the owners of their learning. Both teachers and students are not staying passively at the receiving end of QA; instead, they are the key agents in LFQA and drivers of continuous quality improvement. It is also important to approach quality holistically and combine cultural elements, structural dimensions and competencies into one holistic framework, in order to enable stakeholders to develop visions, shared values and beliefs, and to delegate the ownership of learning and improvement at all institutional levels.
6.2 The OCAPU of LFQA

Quality in university education is closely related to what universities are supposed to achieve and what they are achieving. In a learning focused university, this should be expressed in terms of the learning quality that they expected to bring about and the learning that they actually bring about.

**Objectives**

The objectives of LFQA are related to the purposes of HE, and the missions of HE institutions. Kant (1960, p.3) claims that the purpose of education is to enable humanity to develop and to improve: ‘Man can only become man by education’. Harvey (1998, 2002) identifies that good education is based on the concern for the growth of the student. Pursuing a real and continuous improvement of learning and teaching is the main purpose of LFQA. In essence, quality improvement is generated during the processes of teaching and learning. It is difficult for external review or compliance oriented IQA to impact the interface of learning and teaching. The quality improvement assured by LFQA is through focusing on student learning, facilitating the continuous improvement of teachers’ understandings of and contribution to the quality of student learning, and students’ active engagement in their own learning. It is only when students and staff are able to enquire into their practice through self-investigation and discussion, in a culture that is not potentially punitive, that critical issues in learning and teaching can be fully acknowledged and addressed.

**Control**

The centre of LFQA is student learning, so the responsibility for QA should be delegated to the direct participants in student learning: students, teachers, administrative staff who are directly involved in student learning.

LFQA, integrating student learning with bottom-up process, enables the participation of students, teachers, and quality administration staff to control the process of QA. In such a QA structure, the advantage is that students and teachers are involved actively in the process of QA and improvement. Teachers’ role in controlling QA and improving quality is fulfilled by reflecting on their teaching, by aligning teaching to student learning, by identifying the areas in teaching where they need to improve their own understanding and practice; by actively interacting with students and extending students’ needs to related
departments, and by participating in the process of QA system design, execution, development and refinement.

As important agents in LFQA, quality administrators play an important role in encouraging and ensuring continuous quality improvement, but this time they will fulfil their role by developing a sensitive and effective monitoring process for student learning experiences and growth, by collecting learning and teaching information, by involving students and teachers in quality evaluation and the QA mechanism design and development process. They will also help to sustain a holistic learning culture, by ensuring an appropriate linkage between teaching and student learning, by ensuring that the way the institution allocates resources and organises learning opportunities and services induces students to participate in and benefit from such activities, by providing initiatives to encourage teachers to explore how to link their teaching to student learning, and by organising effective teacher development projects and workshops to give teachers sufficient support in exchanging and developing teaching practices and materials.

In LFQA, students are encouraged to be active discoverers and constructors of their own learning. They are not passive receivers of knowledge transmission; instead, they are the owners of their own learning. They need to integrate course provision, internal cognitive monitoring, and motivational issues into an individualised learning environment, where they may shoulder their responsibility for learning, develop their understanding and construction of knowledge and meaning, and interact with external processes to construct and confirm meaningful learning outcomes. In LFQA, students will be actively involved in developing approaches for measuring, interpreting and improving their learning experiences. Students, who are the direct participants in this process, can identify the key aspects of the student learning experience and pedagogical, institutional and systematic contexts that are important for student learning; and should have a voice in identifying sound and efficient indicators for a learning focused QA system. They will also have a voice in judging the quality of teaching and educational provision. Working together with teachers, they are the key force in realising quality improvement by taking more responsibility for their own learning and in being more involved in QA processes.
Area

LFQA will avoid the observed problems in the current QA by incorporating student learning, which includes the following main areas as identified in Chapter 3 and the analysis of student learning in Chapter 4:

- **Dimensions of the student learning experience**
  - Student expectations of their university study;
  - Students’ learning needs;
  - Students’ learning engagement: the amount of time, effort, content of learning;
  - Students’ approaches to learning;
  - students’ self-regulation in their learning;
  - students’ development of competences: communication skills, working with others, problem solving, numeracy, the use of information technology, learning how to learn;
  - student perceptions of the learning environment.

- **Dimensions of course delivery**
  - Course objective: clarity, and quality of objectives;
  - Course structure: linking up with advance knowledge, harmony with other courses in the programme;
  - Course materials: contributing to understanding the subject matter, updated content with advance of knowledge;
  - Assessments: the use of both formative and summative assessment; validity and reliability of assessments, encouraging deep learning, linking to course objectives;
  - Curriculum development mechanisms.

- **Dimensions of teaching quality**
  - Effective transmission of course objectives to students;
  - Teachers’ presentation and discussion with students on the nature of their subject and the ways students learn;
  - Teachers’ sufficient support during the learning process;
  - Teachers’ proper stimulation, encouraging and preparing students to become the owners of their own learning;
  - Teachers’ availability to students for consultation outside class time
  - Quality and prompt feedback to students on their learning.

- **Dimensions of institutional environmental factors influencing the student learning experience**
- Libraries: books, journals, online resources, training for students to make good use of library resources;
- Sufficient space for students to work collaboratively;
- Departmental culture attuned to student learning support;
- Learning resources and opportunities to make possible and promote learning oriented interaction.

- Dimensions of learning support
  - Mechanisms supporting students and staff to enquire into their practice: discussions, projects and workshops;
  - The ethos that critical issues in learning and teaching can be fully acknowledged and addressed;
  - Peer observation of teaching and adequate dialogue between teachers, teachers and quality administration staff, teachers and students;
  - Initiatives encouraging individual teachers to link their efforts in teaching improvement and curriculum development with important aspects of the student learning experiences;
  - Teacher development training support.

**Procedures**

The procedures through which LFQA operate are important. These can be looked into at two different levels. The first level is related to the methodological issues. The second level concerns the degree of involvement of institutions, quality administration departments, teachers, and students in the processes.

In contrast to the current external and internal QA procedures in Chinese HE, LFQA is not a top-down imposed process, but a bottom-up one with a clear objective of quality enhancement by continuously improving student learning. Unlike previous quality management approaches, the outcomes of LFQA are not numerical scores, but a more complete profile of the student learning experience and related dimensions supporting student learning: the course, teaching aligned to student learning, institutional environmental factors influencing student learning, holistic learning and so on. LFQA needs to be generated from inside HEIs, with the active participation of teachers, students, administration staff, and other stakeholders.

Indeed, LFQA itself is in the progress of improvement via the active participation of teachers, students, and administration staff. Through developing awareness
and speculating on their own learning, communicating on teaching and learning, students become the owners of their own learning; teachers become the coordinators of meaning in the student learning environment and owners of education QA; QA administrators become the facilitators of learning and teaching, managers of the institutional environment crucial to student learning, and maintainers of the whole QA system.

LFQA is a bottom-up process in the sense that quality enhancement cannot be reached without conceptual changes among teachers and students, their engagement in the improvement of their practice, and their taking on the responsibilities associated with LFQA. However, we need to realise that the QA built up completely in a bottom-up way is ideal but neither realistic nor easy to sustain. LFQA is proposed with the clear purpose of addressing the problems that the current QA systems have in improving student learning quality. This is a paradigm shifting from externally imposed and top-down and control-oriented procedures to internally generated and self-emancipation oriented procedures. The establishment of such a QA system and the positive role it may play in quality enhancement depends on the joint efforts of all stakeholders insider HEIs, senior management teams, teachers, students, quality administrators, and other staff.

**Uses**

What to do with the information gathered depends greatly on the principles underpinning QA systems and their objectives. As analysed in Chapter 6, the current QA system has a strong colour of compliance and the information collected is mainly for external evaluation, so the information stays mainly in the reports, with limited accessibility to students, teachers, and the public outside HEIs. Quality improvement has rarely been observed in Chinese universities because the efforts for improvement stay only in the increasingly complicated regulations and the follow-up reports. In almost every university’s follow-up report, the issue of teacher development is included. Teacher development initiatives are mainly in the direction of improving teachers’ discipline knowledge and research competence by pressing their staff to achieve their PhD degrees or by sending some selected teachers on academic visits to overseas universities. What happens in practice is that these initiatives are helpful for teachers to update their knowledge but have little impact on the quality of student learning.
In LFQA, the information included in the key dimensions can be collected with multiple methods:

- **Questionnaires**: for example, learning experience questionnaires, course questionnaires;
- **Formal qualitative data collection**: interviews, focus groups, discussion groups;
- **Informal discussion or conversations**;
- **Written records**: student portfolios, written feedback to students, reflective commentaries, students’ learning logs;
- **Observation**: teaching observation, student learning observation, teaching squares, digital recording-playback-discussion, etc.

The choice of methods depends on what data to collect and for what purpose. When collecting the student learning experience data for the purpose of measuring and improving students’ ownership of learning, the data about student expectations of their HE, their self-identified learning needs, students’ involvement with university study (the amount of time, effort, content of learning), their approaches to learning, their engagement, their self-regulation in learning, and their development of competences can be collected through both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data and qualitative data can be used separately or combined, depending on the purpose. For example, we may use quantitative data to find the common pattern of student learning and to spot where the problem is. Qualitative data are usually very rich. We may therefore use them to examine the reasons, impacts, and to draw implications for improving learning quality. The information of the student learning experience collected can be used for both quality monitoring and quality improvement by investigating where and how to improve quality. Since the rationales of quality monitoring and quality improvement are different, the information needed, data analysis methods and the publication of information and analysis results might be different. From the standpoint of quality improvement, it is necessary to find where student learning is weak, but it is not enough. It is crucial to find out how students can improve their learning. For instance, if we find student learning approaches is the key problem in a specific programme, teachers in collaboration with students may explore what hinders students from developing their deep learning approach by organising discussion groups, checking student journals, teaching observation and so on. This examination may help teachers and students to find out and work out how to improve it. Teachers may address it directly in teaching and students may try to
improve it in their learning. In this way, data collection is not just for quality monitoring. Such a more generic process turns the process of data collection and analysis into a positive engine for quality enhancement. LFQA gives enough emphasis on what students are actually doing, how teaching and institutional resources are aligned to student learning. Collecting student learning information in such a way is more meaningful and may enhance the sensitivity of QA systems in improving learning quality.

6.3 Implications

Quality in HE – how to evaluate it and how to enhance it – has been placed squarely on the agenda in HE (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002). In response to government pressure and the introduction of external quality evaluation procedures, Chinese universities have introduced new QA schemes or extended existing ones. The new schemes are well documented, and the plans are submitted to external evaluation panels for scrutiny. However, it is another matter whether these quality schemes have been put into practice and how well they assure the quality of HE. In fact, what really matters for improving quality is what happens in practice, especially what happens in teaching and learning (see Chapter 4). Whether a QA model works depends on its impacts on learning and teaching. The current QA systems in Chinese universities are characterised by a top-down mechanism, with administrative staff as the main agents of quality management. The participation of teachers and students is in the form of compliance. Despite more than one decade’s effort, there is little evidence to say that these QA initiatives and policies have any effect on quality improvement. As we have analysed, QA’s limited success in improving students learning is because it does not address learning directly meaningfully and effectively.

In this study, I started off by looking at quality assurance, but the whole research journey has taken me to the question of the whole understanding of quality in Chinese HE and what this means for the future university system. It seems QA systems have become less important than the reform of shifting Chinese HE from a teaching-centred paradigm to a learning-centred one. Putting a learning-centred education system in place should go before any QA systems since QA does not make HE quality. Therefore, the implications drawn here are based on the concept of reforming Chinese HE to a more learning-centred system and the model of LFQA developed in this study.
6.3.1 Implications for Chinese HEIs

Improving quality is about a change in culture, which involves a slow process of evolution (Harvey, 1999). After the first round of national teaching quality evaluation, Chinese HEIs have established their QA systems for both external scrutiny and internal quality management. However, it is still a question whether the quality of HE has been improved along with the development of QA schemes. We are clear that ‘quality’ in the context of HE is bound up with our values and fundamental aims in HE. It is never unnecessary for HEIs to ask themselves what the term ‘quality’ means to them. In this study, we have taken the view on quality from student learning and development. Therefore, the implications we draw here are based on the viewpoint that student learning quality is the focus of a university’s quality.

- It might be useful for universities to consider ‘quality’ from the quality of learning brought about within the university. To improve the education quality, universities may need to identify and address the new characteristics, needs and expectations of students.
- Chinese HEIs have sophisticated QA systems, but this does not mean students’ learning quality can be assured. It is not necessarily a problem related simply to methodology, but to the underlying assumptions of QA and the standard top-down implementation approach. The QA mechanisms should focus on the quality of student learning.
- It is necessary to create a structure for teachers, students and administrators to have dialogue on learning, to actively participate in the quality improvement actions, and to take their responsibility in assuring and improving learning quality. A regular self-review on this at the institutional level will help HEIs to develop a reflective quality culture.
- The student learning experience needs to be integrated into a regular and continuous cycle of information collection, analysis, reporting, transforming into feasible enhancement plans, action, integrating into learning and teaching practice. Keeping the ongoing dialogue, sustaining active participation of students, teachers and administrative staff, and encouraging them to take responsibility for learning and improving quality play a significant role in assuring and improving learning quality. Integrating individual learning into a learning-focused culture will strengthen quality learning on campus and nurture the learning of individuals involved.
• Universities should encourage and support teachers with all possible resources to reflect on their own teaching, to understand student learning, to explore how to better align their teaching to student learning, to organise a better learning environment through their teaching and dialogue with other stakeholders, to develop their curriculum regularly, to provide appropriate feedback to students, and to encourage them to take their own responsibility for learning.

• Institutional support in sustaining the quality engagement of teachers, administrators, and students is critical because quality improvement is not something regulated but something attained through critical engagement of all stakeholders involved. The LFQA proposed in this study may help since it encourages care for quality at all levels in institutions through care for learning. Such a QA system requires HEIs to establish clear learning orientation, to actively involve students, teachers and administrators, to ensure dialogue between teachers and students, peer teachers, teachers and administration staff, to support teachers to research and improve their teaching, and to create and sustain an environment which may enable students to be the owners of their own learning.

6.3.2 Implications for teachers

Coming to a new era of HE where knowledge is being redefined and high marks given to knowing-how (Gokulsing and DaCosta, 1997), teachers have to, or will have to, face a formidable task in adapting themselves to these major changes within the context of a student body which is less well prepared for HE but more demanding of the outcomes of HE. It is crucial for teachers to know their students and their learning, because in HE the chief agent in the process of education is the learner. Teachers have to reconsider their role from holding content-oriented conceptions of teaching, to empowering students to be active discoverers and to construct their own knowledge. There are certain implications for teachers drawn from this study:

• Learning is more complex than might be assumed, so is teaching. There is symmetry between teachers’ and students’ learning. Understandings of how students learn can also inform teachers’ learning. It is essential for teachers to know how students learn.

• In the time of knowledge booming, it might be advisable for teachers to reflect and update their knowledge and skills for teaching, which may include
their discipline knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, curriculum knowledge, knowledge of students, and knowledge of learning.

- Teaching is not a performance in front of students, but a collection of teachers’ activities to help students learn. Teachers therefore need to consider how to maximize the chances that students will learn. They need to focus on promoting conceptual change. It is crucial for teachers to realise learning should not merely be compliance in the acquisition of the course content, but an active and reflective construction of the subject and the ways a student sees himself as a person.

- Assessment affects student learning greatly. Students’ quality learning experiences needs teachers’ good understanding of assessment theories and good practice in giving students valid and reliable assessments, constructive for their learning development.

- It is important for teachers to know that they should become less an imparter of knowledge and more a designer and facilitator of student learning experiences. Engaging students in learning and making meaning of what they are learning is an important responsibility of teachers. One thing teachers need to bear in mind might be that the best support to student learning is to align teaching to learning.

- Good students are made, not born. Study techniques and practices can be learned. Teachers need to encourage and support the deep learning approach and discourages the surface one. Maximising the chances for students to use a deep learning approach and its impact on students is far reaching for student development. This is what teachers should address.

- Teachers are the key agents in generating education quality. Therefore, they need to make a powerful contribution to improving university teaching. By taking quality improvement initiatives actively, becoming reflective teachers, aligning teaching to student learning, keeping a meaningful and constructive interaction with students while learning, updating knowledge and skills for teaching, teachers will not only empower their students but also make a powerful contribution to improving education quality.

### 6.3.3 Implications for policy makers and QA administrators

As shown in this study, QA policies and the efforts of QA administrators have contributed to the formation of the QA system in Chinese HE. In the meantime, we find there is definitely a need to develop a more generic QA system in HEIs, in which the emphasis is given to student learning through fostering the quality
improvement process via the active participation of and good communication between stakeholders, and delegating responsibility for improving learning quality to teachers, students, and administrators. Here are some implications we may draw for QA policy makers and administrators.

- It is important for QA policy makers to reconsider the objectives of QA policies and their function in steering the practice of Chinese HEIs. Only targeting efficient management of HEIs’ educational provision is too narrow, operational and misleading. Quality improvement cannot be regulated by policies because it is generated and maintained in the universities. Thus, quality improvement should be in the hands of universities.

- As we can see from this study, without addressing directly the interface of student learning, it is very hard to achieve any improvement in educational quality. To realise the continuous quality improvement in Chinese HE, policy makers may consider giving more focus on student learning and supports to HEIs’ and researchers in exploring how to improve it.

- Quality improvement should shift the focus from documented procedures and teachers’ teaching, to engaging teachers, students, and QA administrators in an integrated process of reflecting on student learning, identifying what to improve, delegating responsibility for action, and taking action to improve student learning. The support of policy and the active involvement of QA administrators are crucial in this process.

- Upgrading teachers’ qualifications and teaching skills have been given great attention. However, we need to understand that only upgrading teachers’ qualification and teaching skills is not enough. The teacher development policies should encourage a more comprehensive framework necessary for teachers in a learning focused HE, which will help them become reflective professionals and cover a wider range of knowledge, skills and values, including discipline knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, curriculum knowledge, knowledge of student, knowledge of learning, and so on.

- QA policies should encourage HEIs to reflect upon their practices and to develop what they do. QA procedures in HEIs need to be designed and developed to encourage continuous improvement of the learning process and the range of outcomes through a continuous process of institutional self-reflection with the participation of administrators, teachers and students.

- Who should be the owner of QA and its impacts should be considered seriously by policy makers. Whether teachers and students should shoulder more responsibility in QA, and how to involve them are questions worth thinking about for QA policy makers and administrators.
• It is very necessary for policy makers to consider making quality information more open to the public. Firstly, Chinese HEIs should open their walls for public scrutiny. Secondly, publishing such information regularly pushes HEIs to reflect on their quality and practice. Furthermore, such information may keep prospective students and employers informed when making their choices.

• Close co-operation and good communication between key stakeholders should be built and maintained, so that QA policies and quality improvement activities may have the best effect.

• We know regulations and evaluation do not generate quality in HE. How QA procedures can go beyond the regulative and evaluative loop and address the core of HE, i.e. student learning, needs research, informed exploration, and experiment. QA policy makers and administrators definitely need to consider transforming the top-down QA featuring compliance of HEIs, to learning centred, research-informed, improvement oriented QA in HEIs, which involves the active participation of teachers, students, and administrators.

6.4 Limitations of the study

All qualitative research is limited because biases may come out from the prior knowledge, experiences and prejudices of the researcher. Although I have done my best to eliminate these, unfortunately it is possible that some persist. This study also presents some limitations that need to be considered when analysing the results and trying to generalise them to a wider context in Chinese HE.

Firstly, there are many types of HEIs in Chinese HE. The two universities chosen as the cases in this study are specialised in foreign languages. Though their educational provision has been extended to business, journalism, information technology, law, management, and other disciplines, these are still in the domain of humanity. The problems observed and discussed in this study may not apply in the context of science education. Therefore, using the analysis and results of the study in a wider context of Chinese HE needs a careful scrutiny of the context and analysis in this study.

Secondly, there are also limitations in the data collection in this study. This study started from the issue of QA. In the process of investigating quality issues in Chinese HE, the issue of student learning came into the centre of the study. When collecting data, interviews and focus groups were used as the main methods to collect students’ perceptions of HE quality and their own learning.
Due to the reason of access, observation as a data collected method was used in a very limited way in recording the student learning experience. I have recognised that the validity of this study might be further increased if good observation data had been collected and analysed.

Thirdly, based on the analysis of this study, an ideational model of learning focused QA was recommended for quality improvement. Because of time and accessibility issues, this model was left at the conceptual level at the completion of this study. This might be a limitation. The conclusion might have been more powerful if I had had opportunities to go back to the field to see how the teachers, students and administrators in the two universities perceive this model.

6.5 Further study

In this study, I have investigated the issue of quality, QA, and student learning from the standpoint of how to incorporate student learning into QA systems to realise continuous quality improvement in Chinese HEIs. Based on the analysis of key aspects in student learning and QA, a learning-focused QA model was put forward. Based on this study, I recommend that further research be undertaken in the following areas:

Firstly, there is a need to direct attention of QA to student learning in the same way as we have focused attention on quality management and evaluation.

Secondly, in this study, I identified several key aspects in the student learning experience and quality learning. However, these issues have not been addressed in any great detail, since the focus of this study is on QA. More in-depth empirical research on Chinese student learning would help us to establish a greater degree of accurate and better understanding on this matter.

Thirdly, in this study, we have emphasised the importance of shifting from a teaching-centred concept of teaching to a learning-focused one, which emphasises students’ conceptual change and encouraging students to become the owners of their learning through active engagement in learning activities. Teachers play a key role in this process. A future study investigating how teachers might improve student learning quality by researching on their own teaching would be very interesting.
Fourthly, the model of LFQA has been put forward in this study, but it is ideational. Further studies investigating how to motivate teachers, students and administrators to commit themselves in improving learning quality might be needed.
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Appendix 1: The Consent Letter and Form

Consent Letter

Date: XX XX 2008

Dear XXX,

I am a PhD student at the School of Education, the University of Manchester. I am inviting you to participate in my PhD research project, *A Study of Quality Assurance in Chinese Higher Education*. This research is to explore the approaches to quality assurance in Chinese higher education, how students perceive higher education quality from their university learning experiences, and how student learning experiences can be incorporated into the quality assurance systems in Chinese universities for continuous improvement in quality. Would you like to be interviewed at your convenient time? The interview would last about 40 minutes.

Your participation in this research will be voluntary and you can withdraw from it at any time. The information you give me will be kept confidential. All records will be deleted after the completion of my PhD research.

Thank you very much for participating in this study. If you would like to discuss the research, or if you have questions, please feel free to contact me at any time.

Yours sincerely,

Yuan Li
PhD student,
School of Education,
The University of Manchester
Tel: XXXXXXXXXXXX
Email: XXXXXXXXXXXXX
Interview Participation Consent Form

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Yuan Li from The School of Education, the University of Manchester. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about understanding of quality, quality assurance and student learning.

My participation in this research is voluntary. I understand that I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time.

I understand that if I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.

The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. Notes will be written during the interview. The interview will recorded for the purpose of data analysis.

I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure.

I understand that all information in this interview will be held in confidence. No one else outside the research team will have access to raw notes or transcripts. This precaution will prevent my individual comments from having any negative repercussions.

By signing this consent form, I confirm that I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

I have been given a copy of this consent form.

_________________________________  ______________________________________
My Signature                             Date

_________________________________  ______________________________________
My Printed Name                           Signature of the researcher

For further information, please contact:

Yuan Li
School of Education, the University of Manchester
Tel: XXXXXXXXXXXX
Email: XXXXXXXXXXXXXX
Appendix 2: Translation of the Interview Questions

A. Translation of the interview questions to QA administrators:

1. What does education quality mean to you?
2. What is the quality assurance system like in your university?
3. How is the quality assurance system operated in your university?
4. Who are responsible for sustaining the quality assurance system?
5. What are the threats to education quality?
6. What do you think of student learning experience?
7. How is the information on student learning experience collected and used?
8. What was the experience of your university in the national teaching quality evaluation?
9. What was the result of your university in the national teaching quality evaluation?
10. What feedback did your university receive from the national teaching quality evaluation?
11. What happened after the teaching quality evaluation?
12. What do you think is important in quality improvement?
B. Translation of the interview questions to teachers:

1. What does education quality mean to you?
2. How does your university assure its education quality?
3. How is the quality assurance system operated in your university?
4. What are the responsibilities of teachers in the quality assurance system of your university?
5. What do you think are the threats to education quality?
6. What are your students like? What are their characteristics?
7. What do you think is important in student learning?
8. How do your students learn?
9. What learning methods do your students use in their learning?
10. How do your students handle their course learning?
11. What are your expectations of your students? How do you understand their expectations of you?
12. How do you communicate with your students?
13. What do you find important in your teaching?
14. How is the information on student learning experience collected and used in your university?
15. What was your experience in the national teaching quality evaluation?
16. What feedback did your university receive from the national teaching quality evaluation?
17. What happened after the teaching quality evaluation?
18. What do you think is important in quality improvement?
C. Translation of the questions used in focus groups:

1. Could you give us a brief introduction about yourself and describe why you chose this university and programme?
2. What are your expectations of university study?
3. How do you like your experience in this university?
4. How do you handle your course learning?
5. What kind of learning support do you need in your learning? Have you got that support?
6. What have you learned from your university study? What more do you want to learn?
7. How is the information on student learning experience collected and used in your university?
8. What does education quality mean to you?
9. What do you think your university should do in improving education quality?
Appendix 3: Translation of the National Teaching Quality Evaluation Index System


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Indicators</th>
<th>Secondary Indicators</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Institutional mission</td>
<td>1.1 Institutional positioning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1.2 Educational mission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Faculty</td>
<td>2.1 Faculty size &amp; structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2 Teaching staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Facilities and utilisation</td>
<td>3.1 Facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.2 Budget</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Programme development &amp;</td>
<td>4.1 Academic programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation in teaching</td>
<td>4.2 Curriculum</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.3 Practicum teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Teaching management</td>
<td>5.1 Management team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.2 Quality control</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Academic culture</td>
<td>6.1 Faculty morale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.2 Learning ethos</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Educational performance</td>
<td>7.1 Basic theories and skills</td>
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<td></td>
<td>7.2 Graduation thesis or designs</td>
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<td>7.3 Morality and ethics</td>
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<td>7.4 Physical fitness</td>
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<td>7.5 Social reputation</td>
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<td>7.6 Student Employment</td>
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</table>

Individual institutional profiles and characteristics
# Appendix 4: Translation of the Teaching Quality Evaluation Index System for Foreign Languages Programmes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Indicators</th>
<th>Secondary Indicators</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Discipline planning</td>
<td>1.1 Discipline positioning</td>
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<td>1.2 Discipline construction features</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1.3 Development goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Faculty</td>
<td>2.1 Faculty structure &amp; planning</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>2.2 Teaching staff profile</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2.3 Teaching staff’s teaching competence and research performance</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>2.4 Teaching staff’s participation in teaching reforms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Teaching resources</td>
<td>3.1 Teaching infrastructure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.2 Library and reference books</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.3 Online resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.4 Intra &amp; International academic exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Teaching content &amp; management</td>
<td>4.1 Teaching plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.2 Curriculum construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.3 Extra-class activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.4 Quality control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Teaching outcomes</td>
<td>5.1 Students’ foreign language skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.2 Students’ subject knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.3 Students’ creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.4 Students’ comprehensive quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.5 Graduate employment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 5: Translation of the List of Contents in University A’s Self-Review Report

Part 1: Introduction to the University
1.1 The history of the University
1.2 The campuses and student size
1.3 Academic departments and programmes
1.4 Discipline construction and research
1.5 International exchange and cooperation
1.6 Management reforms
1.7 Party and Ethics construction

Part 2: Educational Mission
2.1 Positioning & discipline construction planning
   2.1.1 General goals
   2.1.2 Educational level positioning
   2.1.3 Educational type positioning
   2.1.4 Discipline positioning
   2.1.5 Student education goals
   2.1.6 Social service positioning
2.2 Establishing educational scientific development concepts
   2.2.1 Establishing educational scientific development concept
   2.2.2 Emphasising the importance of teaching

Part 3: Faculty
3.1 Faculty structure
3.2 Emphasising development with policy guidance
3.3 Innovations in regulations and the integrated development

Part 4: Teaching Facilities and Usage
4.1 Teaching infrastructure construction and improvement
4.2 Developing library resources and constructing the 'digital campus'
4.3 Assuring teaching funding and developing educational development capacity

Part 5: Teaching construction and reforms

5.1 Improving new programme quality
5.2 improving teaching planning & promoting the general education
5.3 Reforming curricula and teaching content & improving teaching quality
5.4 Improving textbook quality
5.5 Promoting teaching reforms & improving teaching outcomes
5.6 Emphasising practice

Part 6 Teaching management

6.1 Improving teaching management and increasing service awareness
6.2 Establishing complete regulations, scientific management process and quality standards
6.3 Improving teaching quality assurance and monitoring systems

Part 7: Learning Ethos

7.1 Emphasising the ethics of teachers
7.2 Enhancing learning ethos
7.3 Developing campus culture, creativity and student societies

Part 8: Teaching Effects

8.1 Students' subject theory and skills
8.2 Students' creativity and practice skills
8.3 The quality of student dissertations
8.4 Students’ morality and well being
8.5 Graduate reputation

Part 9: Institutional Featured Projects

Part 10: Preparation for the teaching evaluation

Part 11: Problems and Solutions

Part 12: Self-review Result
Appendix 6: Translation of the List of Contents in University B’s Self-Review Report

Part 1: Introduction to the University
Part 2: Undergraduate Education

2.1 Guiding principles in education provision
    2.1.1 Positioning
    2.1.2 Educational concepts

2.2 Teaching staff
    2.2.1 Teaching staff numbers and structure
    2.2.2 Senior-lecturing Staff

2.3 Teaching facilities and their usage
    2.3.1 Teaching infrastructure
    2.3.2 Teaching funding

2.4 Discipline construction and teaching reforms
    2.4.1 Disciplines
    2.4.2 Curricula
    2.4.3 Practicum teaching

2.5 Teaching management
    2.5.1 Management team
    2.5.2 Quality control

2.6 Learning Ethos
    2.6.1 Teaching ethos
    2.6.2 Learning ethos

2.7 Teaching effects
    2.7.1 Students' knowledge and skills
    2.7.2 Undergraduate dissertation
    2.7.3 Morality of students
    2.7.4 Physical education
    2.7.5 Social reputation
    2.7.6 Graduate employment

Part 3: Features in educational provision
Part 4: Preparation for the Evaluation and Performance
### Appendix 7: Translation of a Student Survey (University A)

**Course Evaluation Form**

| Notes | | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Course:** | **Teacher:** | **Time of filling the form:** | | |
| - | | | | |
| **Primary Code** | **Secondary Code** | **Evaluation Items** | **Score** | **Comments** |
| Teaching attitude | 144 | The teacher teaches on time and plays a good role model. | --请选择-- | |
| Teaching attitude | 145 | The teacher is energetic in teaching and shows good teaching responsibility. | --请选择-- | |
| Teaching attitude | 150 | The textbooks and reference books recommended by the teacher are good for students’ active learning. | --请选择-- | |
| Teaching content | 146 | The teaching content is well-structured and presented clearly and concisely. | --请选择-- | |
| Teaching methods | 147 | The use of multimedia in teaching is effective | --请选择-- | |
| Teaching methods | 148 | There is cooperative teaching in class, which is helpful for students to understand and grasp the course content. | --请选择-- | |
| Teaching methods | 149 | The teacher gives students guidance in learning methods and answers students’ questions patiently. | --请选择-- | |
| Teaching methods | 151 | The teacher encourages students to express their views and gives students proper guidance. | --请选择-- | |
| Teaching effects | 152 | The teacher can give valuable feedback on assignments. | --请选择-- | |
| Teaching effects | 153 | The teacher emphasises developing students’ ability to analyse and solving problems related to the course. | --请选择-- | |
| Student feedback | 141 | Please rate the importance of what is learned in this course. | --请选择-- | |
| Student feedback | 142 | Please rate your interest in the course. | --请选择-- | |
| Student feedback | 143 | Please rate your general impression of the course. | --请选择-- | |
# Appendix 8: Translation of a Student Survey (University B)

## Teaching Feedback Form (for student use)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Evaluation Items</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The teacher has been late for class or finished the class earlier than it should be. (5 points)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The teacher is enthusiastic in his/her teaching. (10 points)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The teacher plays a good role model which is instructive in our learning and development. (5 points)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The teacher respects our feedback on teaching and accordingly makes reasonable adjustments in his/her teaching. (5 points)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The teacher has a good grasp of the teaching content and teaches skilfully. (10 points)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The teaching is well-structured and focuses on the key points. (10 points)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The teacher gives attention to the frontier knowledge in the field and gives proper comments on the trends of its development. (10 points)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Every lecture is well-structured and informative. Class time has been effectively used. (5 points)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The teacher chooses proper cases to illustrate the points and has a good combination of theory and practice in teaching. (10 points)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The teacher initiates our interest in learning by using computer assisted instruction. (10 points)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>The textbooks and reference books recommended by the teacher are good for learning in the class and for self-learning. (5 points)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>The teaching is good for developing our skills in analysing and solving problems. (10 points)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>The teaching is helpful for my further exploration in the field. (5 points)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>In general, your impression of the course is</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Which of the above items do you think your teacher is very strong in? Please list:

Which of the above items do you think your teacher needs to improve? Please list:

Other things for attention, please list:

Note: A is the full score, B=0.8A, C=0.6A, D=0.4
Appendix 9:

Quality Assurance in Chinese Higher Education

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School of Education, University of Manchester, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT Quality assurance has been integrated into the fabric of higher education in China, with the issue of quality in higher education – how to evaluate it and how to enhance it – now taking centre stage in Chinese higher education. In the past decade, the development of quality assurance in Chinese higher education has covered a broad spectrum of initiatives, from national policy, quality evaluation methodology, and institutional adoption of quality assurance schemes, to the matrix of quality evaluations. This article attempts to present a comprehensive overview of quality assurance in Chinese higher education by reviewing and analysing the context and development of quality assurance initiatives, alongside the current structure and management of quality assurance in Chinese higher education. By commenting on the current realities and remaining challenges in Chinese higher education, this article also points to some implications for Chinese higher education institutions in their further progress along the quality assurance path.

Welcomed, resisted, or debated, quality evaluation/assurance has become a staple of Chinese higher education over the last decade. As Vlk (2006) points out, quality assurance schemes are being developed in many states and higher education systems as one of the instruments necessary to adapt higher education institutions to the increasing demands put upon them by the states’ economy and society, and equally to prepare or adapt the states’ systems for the increasing impacts of globalisation on higher education.

‘Quality higher education’ often remains undefined in operational terms, because there is no uniform understanding of the purpose (or multiple purposes) of higher education in current society (Westerheijden et al, 2007). The term ‘quality’ is applied to a number of characteristics, including excellence, value for money, conformance to specifications, transformation, and value added (Woodhouse, 2003). Similarly, there are many definitions of ‘quality assurance’ in the literature (e.g. Ball, 1985; van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993; Birnbaum, 1994: Frazer, 1995, Woodhouse, 1999). Harman (1998) suggests that, in essence, quality assurance refers to the systematic management and assessment procedures adopted to ensure achievement of specified quality or of improved quality, and to enable key stakeholders to have confidence in the management of quality and the outcomes achieved. Quality assurance may, in other words, be seen in a context of the regulation of higher education.

Hood (1983) has pointed out that there are in principle at least four different tools available to support quality assurance: economic resources, legal requirements, organizational structures, and demands for information. Westerheijden et al (2007) observe that 'in many states the debate on quality assurance is often an indirect result of the choice of instruments: Should quality be economically rewarded? Should new laws on the rights and duties of higher education institutions be clarified? Should an intermediate body be established to control or enhance quality? Should governments limit themselves to informing the general public about the importance of having a focus on quality?' (p. 3). The dynamics and effects of quality assurance can be viewed from an academic perspective as a policy instrument and management tool in higher education (Westerheijden et al, 2007).
From being a novelty a couple of decades ago, quality assurance has slowly but steadily become an integral part of most higher education systems. As Stensaker (2008) has summarised, the emphasis in quality assurance was first given to design issues and the relationship between quality assurance systems and the governance of higher education (Neave, 1988). Interest later turned to methodological issues, then to human factors (Vroijenstijn, 1995, Neave, 1996), and to how interest in quality may be stimulated by leadership, and to ways to stimulate staff and student involvement and ownership (Brennan & Shah, 2000). Stensaker (2008) suggests that higher education is now entering an era in which a more nuanced understanding of what quality assurance and quality processes can or cannot do will prevail.

This article, by reviewing and analysing the development of quality assurance initiatives alongside the current structure and management of quality assurance in Chinese higher education, offers a foundation for developing a deep and nuanced understanding of quality assurance and quality improvement in the Chinese higher education scenario.

The Context of Establishing Quality Assurance in the Chinese Higher Education Sector

Driving forces for changes in China's higher education sector over recent years have resulted from a combination of worldwide trends, in conjunction with domestic socio-economic factors within China (Huang, 2005). Significant achievements have been achieved by the reform and development of Chinese higher education in the past two decades. In line with international practice, significant progress in implementing the reform agenda can be seen in various aspects of the Chinese higher education sector. Structural reform has been at the core of China's higher education reforms in the past two decades. The costs of higher education are being increasingly met by students and families via tuition fees, and cost-effective, market-responsive learning is now the goal of most institutions. The financing of universities is taking into account measurable output indicators, and the government is developing corresponding expenditure authorities for the institutions. Entrepreneurship is growing rapidly within every university, at the institutional, departmental, and individual faculty levels.

Decentralisation

The promulgation of the 'Decision on Reform of the Educational System' by the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee in 1985 represents the first comprehensive reform of the Chinese higher education sector. The new blueprint put emphasis on local responsibility, diversity of educational opportunities, multiple sources of funds, and decentralisation of power to individual institutions to govern their own affairs. The 'Outline for Reform and Development of Education in China' issued in 1993 identified the further reduction of centralisation and government control in general as the long-term goals of reform. The government undertook the macro-management through legislation, allocation of funding, planning, information services, policy guidance and essential administration, so that universities might independently provide education geared to the needs of society under the leadership of the government (Mok, 2005). With the process of national decentralisation, local governments, especially at the provincial level, have strengthened their coordinating function and enhanced their financial responsibility in the higher education sector (Mok, 2005).

Introduction of Market Incentives

After the adoption of a socialist market system in the 1990s, educational development was strongly influenced by market forces (Mok, 2000). The socialist market economy has been greatly influenced by the accelerating progress of globalisation (Xu, 2005). Different market-related strategies, such as fee charges, diversification of non-state services, market-driven curricula, international competition, and cost-recovery activities, are becoming more and more prevalent in reforming education policy and governance (Mok, 2005). The emergence of private educational institutions, the shift of state responsibility in education provision to families and individuals, the
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prominence of fee-charging, as well as the introduction of internal competition among educational institutions clearly indicate that China's education has been going through a process of marketisation (Mok, 2000). The features of this marketised education in China include (Chan & Mok, 2001; Mok, 2002):

- multiple sources of educational financing;
- the changing structure of financing in public schools towards more user charges;
- diversification of educational providers and provision;
- the emergence of private education in China;
- the introduction of internal competition among educational institutions to enhance efficiency and effectiveness;
- the stress on consumer choice in education;
- the popularity of revenue-generating activities;
- market-driven curricula and programmes.

By making use not only of the market forces, but also of other funding sources such as individuals, families, local communities and society, the state hopes it will not be over-burdened by continual increases in education financing.

University Merger

A significant reform since the late 1990s has been the amalgamation of several higher education institutions to create strong, comprehensive universities. The principal goal is to achieve administrative, economic and academic benefits by merging institutions into large units, based on the assumption that larger units would yield qualitatively stronger academic institutions and better management and use of administrative resources (Mok, 2005). Some amalgamations have involved a number of small institutions in areas with similar or related fields merging to form a new institution. Others have involved smaller institutions merging into an existing larger institution. 'University merging' has been encouraged since the mid-1990s to enhance efficiency and effectiveness, as well as standards and competitiveness (Mok, 2005). The process of merger involves the unification of leadership and governance mechanisms of institutions, and the readjustment of programme setting, resource distribution, staff personnel and support-unit management. The reform is based on the principle of '1+1>2' (i.e. an extra value can be added and productivity gain can be achieved via merger) (Mok, 2005). Zhejiang University is the most successful example in terms of its transformation into a comprehensive university with a leading position in both size and diversity of educational provision and research.

Internationalisation

In China, internationalisation signifies an integration of China's higher education community with the international community. The internationalisation of higher education in China at present takes the following major forms:

- sending Chinese students and members of faculty abroad for advanced study or research;
- attracting foreign students to study in China;
- integrating international dimensions into university teaching and learning, including introducing foreign textbooks and references, and developing both English programmes and bilingual programmes (mainly in Chinese and English);
- providing transnational programmes in Chinese universities in cooperation with foreign institutional partners.

Expansion of Higher Education

The development of Chinese higher education since the late 1990s displays two striking features: quantitative growth and qualitative enhancement (Huang, 2005). The expansion of higher education involves student enrolment, campus size, and the number of higher education institutions. Trow (1973) defines 'mass higher education' as when over 15% of the age grade has
access to higher education. The Chinese government set a national goal to reach 15% gross enrolment in higher education by 2010. The objectives of the expansion were stated in detail in the ‘Action Plan of Educational Promotion for the 21st Century’, issued by the Ministry of Education in 1998 (Huang, 2005). In 1999 the Chinese government began to accelerate the pace of higher education growth, and in 2002 it achieved its goal, eight years earlier than originally planned.

The decision to substantially increase university student enrolment was made by the Chinese national government for multiple purposes: to stimulate the economy by encouraging Chinese parents to spend their money on their children’s higher education; to promote domestic consumption through the stimulation of construction work in higher education institutions; and to maintain social stability by delaying employment for part of the population (Yang, 2003). In 2008, the total number of college students on campus in China had reached 20,210,000, not including adult students studying at adult educational institutions. Figure 1 shows the rapid growth of Chinese higher education through the number of students recruited, the number of students on campus, and the number of graduates from 1998 to 2008.

![Graph showing the increasing size of Chinese higher education](image)

Figure 1. The increasing size of Chinese higher education.

This explosive expansion produced many structural and financial strains, causing China to rethink its expansion policy, and in 2006 the government decided to slow down the expansion, and to shift the priority from the growth of higher education enrolment to the improvement of educational quality (Zhao & Sheng, 2008).

### Quality Concerns

The rapid expansion of higher education in China prompted debates about its efficiency, efficacy and equity. Public interest in and concern about quality has also intensified with the expansion of student numbers. The old optimistic conception of realising personal ambition through university education has been strained by growing difficulties in university graduates’ job placement. As a result of the process of Chinese higher education reaching its ‘massification’ stage, various quality-related problems have arisen (Gu, 2006; Song & Song, 2006; Ding, 2008; Li & Zhang, 2008), such as:

- a mismatch between financial input and student numbers: the rapid increase of student numbers leads to a decrease in resources per student;
- a structural shortage of qualified faculty; this shortage leads to a work overload for the current teachers, and to class sizes doubling or becoming several times larger than before. In this situation, there is very limited capacity to develop sufficient teacher-student interaction, or to adapt teaching to student needs;
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• lower student entry levels: the broader entry into universities automatically lowers the student entry level;
• eagerness to achieve quick success: some institutions strive for a 'larger size' and 'higher level' in their educational provision. In order to get more research projects and to raise revenue, some institutions deliberately lower their entry requirement to attract additional students. The inappropriate use of teaching evaluation for purposes of teacher appraisal in these institutions increases unhealthy competition among teachers.

Another problem is the lack of differentiation among Chinese higher education institutions. Smaller colleges attempt to model on the structure of large and comprehensive universities, and vocational schools seek to evolve into research institutions (Zhao & Sheng, 2008). These problems weaken the quality of higher education and the public's trust in higher education institutions and their graduates. It is in this context that the Chinese government has realised that conventional higher education quality management structures are inappropriate in the context of a mass higher education system. 'Quality' is now a common theme and concern in various Chinese higher education policies and reports. Building quality assurance systems is perceived as part of the higher education modernisation process. In the meantime, quality assessment might be seen as a government tool to regain some degree of control over institutions (Amaral & Maassen, 2007) and to meet the challenges of the government's steering capacity and policy effectiveness in the process of reforming Chinese higher education.

The Development of a Quality Assurance Policy in Chinese Higher Education

The exploration of quality assurance in Chinese higher education started in the mid-1980s and has gone through stages of research, experiment, enlarged experiment, and implementation nationwide (Zhou, 2005). The evaluation system is summarised in Figure 2.

![Diagram](image)

Figure 2. The development of China's higher education quality evaluation system.

In November 1985, China's Education Committee (now called the Ministry of Education) issued the 'Higher Education Evaluation Research and Experiment in Engineering Programmes', which
aimed at using engineering education evaluation, in terms of institutional review, discipline and curriculum review, as the pilot for higher education quality evaluation. The pilot evaluation was carried out in around 500 higher education institutions.

In October 1990, the 'Draft Regulation of Higher Education Institution Evaluation' was issued by the National Education Committee, the first regulation of higher education evaluation defining its aims, tasks, principles, system and procedure.

In early 1994, the National Education Committee started to implement higher education evaluation on a large scale. The evaluation evolved through the following stages: qualified evaluation; excellence evaluation; randomised evaluation; and general evaluation. Qualified evaluation started in 1994 with the purpose of promoting standards of teaching and administration. This was only applied to those institutions that were established after 1976. A total of 179 institutions underwent this form of evaluation from 1994 to 2001. Excellence evaluation started in 1996 in the form of 'Project 211' for developing 100 first-class universities, with a number of key fields of research to be developed for the challenges of the twenty-first century. This form of evaluation was applied to those institutions with already well-established histories and reputations. Randomised evaluation started from 1998, targeted at those institutions situated between the post-1976 institutions and those of Project 211. Twenty-six institutions were evaluated under this form.

In 2002, these three forms of evaluation were integrated into the one entitled 'Undergraduate Teaching Quality Evaluation'. This was revised again into the current one in operation, with four resultant categories: excellent, good, pass and fail (Zhou, 2005).

In 2003, the '2003-2007 Education Revitalisation Action Plan' was issued by the Ministry of Education. In it, five years was specified as the time in which the cycle for the undergraduate teaching evaluation should be repeated. The guidelines expressed were:

- building a teaching quality assurance system;
- establishing agencies for educational evaluation;
- developing a system of periodic review of teaching quality;
- building links between program evaluation and professional qualifications and certificates;
- formulating evaluation standards and indicators;
- building data banks on college teaching;
- developing an analysing and reporting system.

In April 2003, the 'Project for Quality Assurance and Further Reform in Higher Education Institutions' was initiated by the Ministry of Education, as an important component of the '2003-2007 Education Revitalisation Action Plan'; it comprised a twelve-point framework for developing quality assurance in Chinese higher education, that consisted of:

1. carrying out further reform on teaching and educational structures with the help of information technology;
2. encouraging professors to teach undergraduate courses;
3. offering a number of top-quality courses via the Internet to students all over the country;
4. further improving the standards and methodology of teaching English to students of non-English majors;
5. enhancing quality evaluation of higher education institutions, with five years as an evaluation cycle;
6. establishing a series of national teaching bases and experiment bases via the facilitation of the Internet;
7. further developing vocational education to meet the needs of the market economy;
8. further improving the structure of disciplines at Chinese higher education institutions with a focus on tertiary vocational programmes;
9. promoting reform in medical education;
10. building more efficient e-libraries and improving the quality of textbooks;
11. enhancing students' ideological, ethical and cultural development;
12. inviting top-quality teachers both at home and abroad to teach at Chinese higher education institutions.

In August 2004, the Higher Education Evaluation Centre (HEEC) of the Ministry of Education (MoE) was established in order to institutionalise and direct evaluation towards a regular, scientific, systematic and professional process. As Harman (1998) summarises, there are a number of different
Yuan Li

models for administrative responsibility for the management of quality assurance at both national and institutional levels, and at national level the most common pattern is for responsibility to lie with a specialised unit or agency set up by the government. As a central agency that reports back to the Ministry of Education, the HEEC shoulders the responsibility for quality assurance management. Its main responsibilities are:

- to organize and implement higher education evaluation;
- to conduct research in policies, regulations and theories relating to higher education reform and evaluation;
- to develop international cooperation with evaluation agencies in other countries;
- to undertake evaluator training;
- to provide evaluation-related consultation and information services.

At the beginning of 2006, Zhou Ji, the former Minister of Education, emphasised in a speech that all the universities and colleges in China should give more attention to the raising of teaching standards and quality assurance. The following four aspects were further elaborated in his comments on the implementation of the 'Project for Quality Assurance and Further Reform in Higher Education Institutions' that started in 2003 (He, 2007):

1. Selecting excellent teachers. Teaching is specified as the priority for all teachers. Professors and associate professors are required to teach undergraduate courses. The senior teachers are also encouraged to participate in teaching reforms to improve their own teaching. At the same time, the Ministry of Education initiated an award in 2003 to reward the top 100 excellent teachers on a three-year cycle.

2. Establishing high-quality courses. Chinese higher education institutions are encouraged to adjust their curriculum to the demands of economic and social development. Institutions are expected by the government to achieve a balanced development of students' acquisition of knowledge, abilities, and ethical and ideological qualities. Teachers are expected to keep their teaching content updated and to adjust their teaching method from being oriented towards knowledge delivery to being oriented towards student capability building. Starting from 2003, a series of high-quality courses have been selected on the basis of their curriculum, structure, contents, textbooks, teaching staff, pedagogy, follow-up exercises, experiments, and supportive materials. The Ministry of Education intends to select 3000 courses within five years, covering major disciplines in Chinese universities and colleges.

3. Further promoting the reform of teaching English to students of non-English majors.

4. Regulating and improving the higher education evaluation system. The Ministry of Education intends to further regulate the higher education accreditation system in China. The basic statistics related to the management of universities and colleges will be published annually, and this will be used as a key indicator of higher education quality evaluation. To improve quality evaluation practice, more attention will be given to the differences between universities of various types and levels, which may lead to changes in the standards used in current higher education quality evaluation. Starting in 2007, a number of disciplines have been chosen as an experiment for the discipline-based education quality evaluation in universities and colleges.

The Management Structure of the Quality Assurance System in Chinese Higher Education

Chinese higher education institutions are structured hierarchically according to their functions and goals (Zha, 2009). In the highest tier are the national research-oriented elite universities, including universities in the list of Project 211 and particularly in Project 985. They are regarded as the spearhead to lead research and innovation in China and educate the majority of doctoral students, in addition to master’s and bachelor students. The universities in the second tier are oriented to both research and teaching, providing undergraduate and postgraduate education at master level mainly, and doctoral education only in a very limited number of disciplines. The universities in the third tier are teaching-oriented in general, providing mainly undergraduate education. At bottom of the hierarchy is a new tier of institutions, the tertiary vocational colleges, providing 2-3-year programmes (Zha, 2009).
Quality Assurance in Chinese Higher Education

Stensaker (2008) points out that in analysing national quality assurance systems in different parts of the world one discovers a number of similarities, with a common top-down implementation approach. Earlier, Harman (1998) had summarised the main approaches to quality assurance management using the following criteria:

- responsible agency or unit;
- participation in reviews and other activities;
- main methodologies of review and assessment;
- focus of quality assurance activities;
- purposes of such activities;
- report and/or follow-up activities.

Van Damme (2000) summarises further the international commonalities and variation in quality assurance models. Billing (2004) adds more dimensions to the list. These approaches, models and dimensions are integrated into the model shown in Table 1, to give an overview and idea of the structure of quality assurance in Chinese higher education.

A. The purpose of the QA system: accountability and improvement of education quality
B. Responsible agency/unit
   (a) National level: HEEC, a quality assurance agency established by government
   (b) Institutional level: an office responsible for QA within the institution
C. Voluntary or compulsory participation in reviews: compulsory
D. Methodologies of review and assessment
   - Self-evaluation
   - Review by panels of external evaluators with site visits
   - Analysis of statistical information and use of performance indicators
   - Survey/interview of students and staff
   - Testing students' knowledge, skills and competencies
   - Teaching observation
E. Focus
   (a) National level
      Institutional evaluation: comprehensive review including teaching, management and quality assurance processes (broadly applied nationwide since 2002).
      Discipline-based evaluation: review of both research and teaching (currently only applied in a few disciplines).
   (b) Institutional level: also known as internal quality assurance, the current focus of development
F. Reporting; confidential or public
   Institutions' self-review reports are published on the website of NEEC.
   Formal evaluation feedback is only provided to the Ministry of Education and the institution.
G. Grading/ranking; the current four categories are: excellent, good, pass, and fail.
H. Follow-up activities: institutional self-improvement report back to the Ministry of Education and NEEC.
I. Initiator and decision maker: the Ministry of Education.
J. Funding-related decision-making; not directly related to funding in teaching quality evaluation.
K. Extent of standardisation: nationally standardised.
L. Evaluators: from the panel of experts at NEEC, composed mainly of senior managers of universities (i.e. university presidents or vice-presidents).
M. Professional bodies' participation: little participation by professional bodies at present.
N. External examiners: used mostly in the examination of student dissertations/theses.
O. Transparency of internal and external QA process: lack of transparency to the public.

Table 1. Approaches to quality assurance management in Chinese higher education.

There are a number of different models of administrative responsibility for the management of quality assurance at both national and institutional levels across the world (Harman, 1998). In China, at the national level, the responsibility of quality assurance lies with the National Education Evaluation Centre (NEEC), the specialised agency set up by the Ministry of Education in 2004. It is mandated to coordinate evaluation processes, develop appropriate methods for future quality assessment, guide institutions in their quality assurance development, and compile and publish information on higher education quality.
Overall, the structure of quality assurance systems in Chinese higher education can be summarised into (1) external quality assurance systems, and (2) quality assurance systems within higher education institutions, as shown in Figure 3.

![Diagram of quality assurance systems]

Figure 3. The structure of QA in Chinese HEIs: external QA and internal QA systems.

1. The External Quality Assurance System

The external quality assurance system can be characterised by three main components: (a) the government’s supervision through policy guidance; (b) the government’s monitoring through various evaluations carried out by government agencies, among which the most influential ones are the national teaching quality evaluation and the discipline-based reviews; and (c) the newly emerging non-governmental evaluation agencies and university rankings produced by various non-governmental institutions.

a. The government’s policies. Various measures have been adopted to enhance the quality of education and research activities in Chinese higher education, especially the issuing of Project 211 and Project 985. These have had a great impact on quality enhancement in Chinese higher education (Huang, 2005).

Project 211 was launched in 1995, and is believed by some researchers to be the first move by the Chinese government to make an issue of the quality of higher education (Huang, 2005). It is often explained as the attempt by central government to establish 100 key universities in China for the twenty-first century. Its specific objectives are: (1) to give Beijing University and Tsinghua University large amounts of additional funding to enable the two universities to improve their level internationally and become world-class institutions; (2) to enhance the quality of 25 other leading universities through the provision of additional public revenue; and (3) to make efforts to improve the quality of over 300 key disciplines in different institutions. During 1996-2002, 99 universities had been selected and given special financial support by both central and local authorities. The central government allocated nearly 18.63 billion RMB to the selected universities on Project 211, including 6.47 billion RMB for quality improvement in key disciplines selected by the Ministry of Education and 8.55 billion RMB for improving the infrastructure and equipment in related universities. During 2002-2007, 18.75 billion RMB was allocated to the 107 universities selected, including 9.79 billion RMB for quality improvement in key selected disciplines, 3.04 billion RMB for
improving infrastructure and equipment, and 2.22 billion RMB for teacher training (MoE, 2008). Project 211 is regarded as the first national key project to be funded intensively in higher education by the government (Huang, 2005).

Project 985 is intended to develop world-class Chinese research universities. It was established to concentrate high-level funding of 33.3 billion RMB from 1999 to 2008 on a smaller number of top Chinese universities. It is seen as a major element of the national strategy to rejuvenate the country through science and education (Huang, 2005). Initially, only Beijing University and Tsinghua University were selected to be funded intensively by the central government. From July 1999, the MoE decided to add seven more universities and fund them jointly in cooperation with local authorities (Huang, 2005). By 2008, the number of institutions included in Project 985 amounted to 39.

In addition to these two big projects, other efforts have also been made to assure and improve the quality of education in all Chinese higher education institutions since 2002, including:

- requiring all professors to teach undergraduate courses and encouraging senior professors to teach core courses and first-year undergraduate courses;
- setting grants for learning-resource renovation;
- setting grants for developing courses of excellence;
- setting grants for compiling textbooks of excellence;
- selecting and awarding the 'national outstanding professors in teaching';
- establishing the National Education Evaluation Centre to coordinate various kinds of quality evaluation activities.

b. Evaluations organised by the government. External quality audit has been implemented in a wide variety of systems in many universities around the world (Carr et al, 2005). Up to now, the education evaluation network in China has been based on evaluation agencies at both national and regional levels (Ding, 2008). At the national level, the Evaluation Office of the Higher Education Department, Ministry of Education is the government administrative unit in charge of education quality evaluation. The Higher Education Evaluation Centre (HEEC) and the China Academic Degrees & Graduate Education Development Centre are agencies affiliated to Ministry of Education, specialising in conducting evaluations in the Chinese higher education sector. At the regional level, most provincial governments have established their own education evaluation agencies, responsible for education quality evaluation in their provinces.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary indicators</th>
<th>Secondary indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Institutional mission</td>
<td>1.1 Institutional positioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Faculty</td>
<td>1.2 Educational mission and philosophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Faculty size &amp; structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Teaching staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Facilities and utilisation</td>
<td>3.1 Facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Budget</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Programme development and innovation in teaching</td>
<td>4.1 Academic programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Curriculum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Practicum teaching</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Teaching management</td>
<td>5.1 Management team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Quality control</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Academic culture</td>
<td>6.1 Faculty morale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 Learning ethos</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Instructional performance</td>
<td>7.1 Basic theories and skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2 Graduation thesis or designs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3 Morality and ethics</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7.4 Physical fitness</td>
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<tr>
<td>7.5 Social reputation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7.6 Student employment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II. The Teaching Quality Evaluation Index System (2004).
The Teaching Quality Evaluation is the most influential evaluation activity in Chinese higher education. The first round of five-year Teaching Quality Evaluation started in the second half of 2003. The ‘Teaching Quality Evaluation Index System’ was introduced, including seven primary indicators, 19 secondary indicators, and 44 observation points, as shown in Table II. The evaluation results are categorised into excellent, good, pass, and fail.

The evaluation results of the sub-indicators are placed in A, B, C, and D categories, which form the basis of the final evaluation result. The final results are shown in Table III.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Final result</th>
<th>Scoring of the 19 sub-indicators</th>
<th>Institutional profile and characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>$A \geq 15$, $C \leq 3$ (key sub-indicators, $A \geq 9$, $C \leq 1$), $D = 0$</td>
<td>With distinguished characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>$A+B \geq 15$ (key sub-indicators $A+B \geq 9$, $D = 0$), $D \leq 1$</td>
<td>With certain characteristic projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass</td>
<td>$D \leq 3$ (key sub-indicators $D \leq 1$)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table III. Criteria of evaluation result calculation.

The evaluation index system was first published in 2002 and further refined in 2004. The results of the undergraduate education quality evaluations from 2003 to 2008 are shown in Table IV.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of institutions evaluated</th>
<th>Evaluation results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Excellent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table IV. Results of undergraduate education quality evaluations 2003-2008.
Source: http://www.pgxx.edu.cn/PageControl/channel_name=xzpg_pgzbk_zonghe

Currently, higher education quality evaluation in China is compulsory and operated by evaluation panels appointed by the HEEC. The process of higher education evaluation in China, as in many other countries, includes five basic elements:
1. Standards and guidelines are issued by the quality evaluation agency and an evaluator panel is set up.
2. An institutional self-report is provided.
3. The evaluation panel conducts on-site visits.
4. The panel reports back to the institution and the ministry.
5. Higher education institutions write their self-improvement report and carry out their self-improvement activities.

For evaluations to be effective, evaluators need to have the required skills and there should be proper standards for evaluator selection (Harris-Hümmert, 2008). In China, the HEEC is responsible for the selection and training of evaluators. In 2003, the HEEC, under the supervision of the MoE, started to set up a pool of examiners for undergraduate teaching evaluation. Higher education institutions may recommend their candidates in line with the quota allotted to them: institutions directly affiliated to MoE have a quota of five, and other types of institutions are coordinated by their provincial government agencies. The required skills for the recommended evaluators include: a good knowledge of educational policies; a good understanding of higher education; a good grasp of theories; research in and experience of education quality evaluation; a strong professional background and management skills; a sense of responsibility; teamwork skills and experience; integrity; good judgement; familiarity with undergraduate teaching; and possessing the qualification of associate professor or higher.

Recently retired educational management experts can also be considered, given their expertise in pedagogy and management experience. In June 2006, the HEEC started the second
round of recruitment of examiners. This time, the education administration agencies of provincial
governments were responsible for the coordination involved in selecting candidates from the
universities and colleges, research institutes, and government education administration
departments in their provinces.

A list comprising an expert pool with 1369 evaluators for the undergraduate teaching quality
evaluation was published (MoE, 2005). The HEEC organised its first training workshop in 2005,
which included the following: the report by the Director of HEEC on the higher education reforms
in China; introduction to the higher education teaching quality evaluation, its objectives, guiding
principles, and evaluation criteria system; introduction to the working requirements for evaluators;
and a discussion about the common concerns in evaluations. 'Working Requirement for Evaluators
in Undergraduate Teaching Quality Evaluation' is the key principle guiding evaluators' practice and
is also an essential component of their training. It regulates the mission and objectives of
evaluators' work, the composition of evaluator panels, their responsibilities in conducting
evaluations, expected activities during the visit, the structure of review reports, and other practice
codes to keep their evaluation activities objective and just.

In the practice of teaching quality evaluation, each evaluation panel comprises nine to
thirteen evaluators. Panel chairs are appointed by the Ministry of Education. Before evaluation,
evaluators will analyse the self-review report submitted by the higher education institutions and
work out the schedule for their on-site visits. This schedule will include: observation; interviews;
surveys of key groups; tests of students’ knowledge, skills and competencies; and other approaches
as appropriate. Three items are particularly important: the extent to which the institution’s
educational practice meets the demand of state, society and student development; the extent to
which teaching practice conforms to the educational objectives defined by the institution; and the
extent to which students achieve those educational objectives.

Self-improvement is the last stage of the quality evaluation process. The evaluated institution
submits a self-improvement report to the evaluation agency. This appears to be evidence of good
practice; however, self-improvement is often ignored and stays at the level of paperwork. Some
evaluators therefore recommend that a check of the self-improvement report’s implementation
should be included in the next evaluation cycle. As Patton (1982, p. 15) has suggested, effective
evaluations are those that are acted upon.

After the first five-year round of teaching evaluation in 2008, the Ministry of Education and
HEEC started to adjust the quality assurance system in Chinese higher education into a three-
dimensional system:

- HEEC’s random inspection of the HEIs’ improvement after their undertaking the national
teaching quality evaluation;
- Encouraging educational administrative departments at provincial level to play a more active
role in their regional quality evaluation and assurance practice, and to further carry out
programme reviews;
- Encouraging and guiding higher education institutions to build up and improve their own
internal quality assurance system.

Teaching quality evaluation in China at institutional level is similar to the practice of institutional
audit carried out by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in the UK. Besides the Teaching Quality
Evaluation, another nationwide quality evaluation is the discipline-based review, carried out by
discipline-based higher education teaching steering committees, also under the supervision of the
Ministry of Education.

c. Evaluation and ranking activities organised by the non-governmental agencies and media. Non-
governmental evaluation agencies and international quality evaluation agencies have developed
very quickly since the mid-1990s. These evaluation agencies came into the Chinese quality
assurance arena in the context of:

- China’s higher education reform, where the provision of education is diversifying with the
increased number of private higher education institutions. The diversified provision requires
multiple evaluation systems;
- the function of the Chinese government shifting to macro-level guidance and management. This
gives space for non-government agencies to carry out education quality evaluation;
the internationalisation of higher education, which is bringing out a need for supranational external quality monitoring (accreditation and evaluation) and increasing pressure for international or cross-national recognition of qualifications (Harvey, 2004).

Non-government education quality evaluation agencies are supplementary to the evaluation organised by governmental agencies in China. Up to 2008, there were 17 non-governmental agencies in China which publish their results of university rankings (Ding, 2008). The most influential ones are the Academic Ranking of World Universities by Shanghai Jiaotong University, and other university rankings by the Guangdong Research Institute for Management, Netbig.com, the China Scientific Evaluation Research Centre of Wuhan University, Shanghai Institute for Educational Studies, Hunan University, etc. When ranking universities in China, the performance of individual universities is assessed along the lines of the number of doctoral programmes and doctoral advisors, research output, and the number of research grants. Such ranking exercises conducted in China in recent years have aroused heated debates. Despite the critiques of the validity and reliability of the ranking results provided by the non-governmental organisations and media, the rankings are increasingly attracting the attention of potential university candidates and their parents. However, doubts about those ranking systems are increasing, especially after recent scandals that some institutions achieve better positions in some ranking systems by offering financial contributions to the ranking organisations. The ranking produced by Shanghai Jiaotong University has nonetheless gained broad recognition both inside China and overseas.

2. Quality Assurance Systems within Chinese Higher Education Institutions

As the massification and globalisation of Chinese higher education increases, higher education institutions are faced with increased external pressures and levels of accountability. In the past decade institutions have been faced with an increase in levels of legislation and involvement from national and local governments, especially in attempts to assure the quality of higher education through formal evaluation techniques and accountability processes. The development of internal quality assurance systems in Chinese universities is the current main emphasis of the quality movement in the Chinese higher education sector. Following the first five-year cycle of national teaching quality evaluations (2002-2007, with an extension to 2008), higher education institutions in China are now encouraged and required by the Ministry of Education to develop their own institutional-based quality assurance systems.

The common features of internal quality assurance systems in Chinese higher education institutions (Ding, 2008; Li et al, 2008; NEEC, 2008; Shi et al, 2008) are:

- The establishment of institutional teaching evaluation centres. These centres are affiliated to or in cooperation with the teaching management office of the institution. Those universities without independent teaching evaluation centres have their own sub-section playing a similar role under the supervision of the teaching affairs/management office. The main responsibilities of these centres are developing and operating the quality assurance system inside their institutions.
- The formation of teaching supervision/steering groups. This is also a common practice among Chinese higher education institutions. The group members are the senior teaching staff or retired senior staff with expertise in teaching. They are under the supervision of the vice-president of teaching. They are expected to carry out their work directly with teachers and students by observing classes and talking with teachers and students after class. Their responsibilities are to find problems in teaching, and to provide advice about the solutions.
- Peer review. Class teaching observation is also a common practice in most Chinese higher education institutions. Teachers are required to observe each other’s classroom teaching, which is considered to be a useful way for teachers to learn from each other and to monitor each other’s teaching. Besides peer teaching observation, leaders at different levels inside the higher education institutions are required to observe teachers’ teaching.
- Student feedback, which is considered to be one of the most important quality assurance components, is gained through surveys, individual and group interviews, student representative reporting, etc. Student surveys are the most commonly used form of student feedback collection, and cover course evaluation, teaching evaluation, and other fields of interest.
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- Annual report. An annual institutional self-review report is also a component of internal quality assurance systems. Though the main purpose of such annual self-review reports is not specifically for the sake of quality assurance, it indirectly contributes to realising quality assurance in those institutions.
- Teacher training. Teaching staff are the key factors in teaching quality assurance. Teacher training includes pre-work training, in-service training, and other types of training for teachers. Teachers' pre-work training is considered to be the most important of all training schemes. All new teachers are required to attend such training in all Chinese higher education institutions.

3. Discussion

Quality assurance policies in most countries are currently in a process of rapid evolution and change, and at the same time there is an increasing convergence internationally in terms of government approaches (Harman, 1998). Quality in higher education – how to evaluate it and how to enhance it – has been placed squarely on the contemporary agenda in higher education (Srikantan & Dalrymple, 2002). Quality assurance schemes in many states are being developed as an instrument to adapt higher education institutions to the increasing demands put upon them within the state's economy and society (Westerheijden et al, 2007). The range and diversity of response to the 'quality imperative' in higher education internationally reflects the tensions and dilemmas of the broader quality movement (Houston, 2008).

The transformation of Chinese higher education from elite to mass participation has been accompanied by conflicts and challenges to the existing education values, systems, structure and models. While higher education governance in China has developed towards the 'deregulated state model' (Mok, 2005), central government and local government still maintain a considerable amount of control over higher education policy and development (Mok, 2005). In developing quality assurance in higher education, China makes use of quality assurance schemes to balance the conflicts and challenges arising from the changes in its higher education sector and the process of integrating it into the global higher education arena.

In the past decade, the introduction of quality assurance regimes into Chinese higher education has covered a broad spectrum of initiatives, from national policy, methodologies of quality evaluation, and institutional adoption of quality assurance schemes, to a matrix of quality evaluation systems (with teaching quality evaluation and discipline-based evaluation as the main focus, supplemented by a range of other evaluations). There has been a tendency to take a 'top-down' approach to the identification and classification of quality assurance issues in Chinese higher education. As a result of the nationwide teaching quality evaluations from 2002 to 2008 and of international exchange, there is a growing body of experience and knowledge of quality and quality assurance paradigms and cultures. Building up internal quality assurance systems inside the Chinese higher education institutions was initiated by the Ministry of Education after the first nationwide round of external teaching quality evaluations. A new round of experimentation and exploration has followed. Various theories, paradigms and models are being adopted in the Chinese universities' exploration of the quality jungle.

External quality evaluation as a key component of quality assurance has encountered criticisms from higher education institutions and academics in China. Criticisms of external quality evaluation in the Chinese higher education sector include the following arguments:

- Quality evaluation is an intrusion into institutional autonomy. Institutions only go through the formalities in the process of conforming to top-down quality evaluation (Mo & Wang, 2008).
- Institutions emphasise the infrastructure and formal systems, but overlook the essence of educational quality (Zhao, 2008).
- There is a great need to improve the external quality evaluation approaches and procedures (Zhao, 2008).
- The unified standards ignore the diversity of higher education institutions.
- Some institutions' practice of falsification in preparing the quality evaluation is very harmful.
- It is too costly (Li & Zhang, 2008).

Despite such problems in the process of quality evaluation, supporters of external quality evaluations believe strongly that external quality evaluation has made a significant positive
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contribution to higher education in China (Li et al, 2008), although globally there is a dearth of information on the actual impact of quality audits (Carr et al, 2005).

Quality assurance in the contemporary university is not a neutral or value-free concept, but is a process reflecting a particular power-knowledge regime (Anderson, 2006). It is argued that many of the trends in higher education quality assurance have been management-driven, underpinned by a desire to develop a range of mechanisms of control (Jones, 2003; Mertova & Webster, 2009). Any improvement potentially depends on the development of definitions and interventions that reflect the concern of the interest groups in the higher education sector (Houston, 2008). However, higher education in all countries and systems should not forget the human-centred aspects, which play a crucial rule in most areas of higher education, and these should not be missed in quality mechanisms employed in higher education (Mertova & Webster, 2009).

At a theoretical level, there are several well-articulated models in the literature of higher education quality assurance (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002) which might enable Chinese higher education institutions and researchers to progress along the path of education quality enhancement. These include: the widely used TQM model, applying the management concept of control, quality, process, and customer to the regime of higher education; the transformative model (Harvey & Knight, 1996), focusing on student experience; the engagement model, focusing on student, faculty and administrative engagement in teaching and learning (Haworth & Conrad, 1997); the university of learning model, emphasising that the quality of a university is in the quality of learning, which has a lot to do with qualities of different ways of seeing (Bowden & Marton, 1998); the responsive university model, with student-centred programmes, community-centred outreach and nation-centred research; and the Holistic Model for Quality, emphasising learning and organisational culture in quality management with the advocacy for system ideas and systematic action in higher education (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2002, 2005).

Deming (1986) identifies the 'hope for instant pudding' as an obstacle to quality improvement, and Houston (2008) indicates that there is no formula for improvement that can replace the need for detailed thinking about the challenges for particular institutions. Further, in developing quality assurance systems, it is of great importance to select elements to suit the culture and other characteristics of the particular national higher education system or institution (Harman, 1998). Each higher education institution serves different combinations of interests through different patterns of activities with different purposes. Real appreciation of quality issues requires exploration of what the university is, and what it should be like (Houston, 2008).

In fact, no matter what systems or models the Chinese universities adopt, the core function of a university, learning and teaching, should remain the main focus. Quality improvement should concentrate on the core processes of curriculum development and on teaching as the means to learning (Houston, 2008). Quality should focus on student learning and the impact on students' experience of curriculum and learning-centred interaction with teachers.

While the pace and intensity of quality assurance and enhancement activities have increased greatly, their impact on the improvement of programmes and on students remains less clear (Ratchiff, 2003). It is quite obvious that evaluation and other external forces do not necessarily create quality. When adopting quality assurance strategies to deal with the danger of quality deterioration (Zhao & Sheng, 2008), the following issues should be considered in the Chinese higher education sector:

- HEIs' quality assurance schemes should continue to be more internally driven, with more emphasis on self-regulation, self-planning, self-evaluation, and the support of institutional infrastructures.
- Government agencies should confine themselves to their role at the macro level of planning and supervision, with an emphasis on improvement and feedback from stakeholders, instead of working as an intrusion into HEIs and leaving them confused after costly evaluations.
- There is a need to transform quality management from senior management-based to teacher- and student-based. In the current higher education quality management system, managers are the decision makers of quality policies in most institutions, which is in conflict with the location of quality generation. Teachers and students should be involved, and should engage themselves in the quality development of their own teaching and learning.
Universities are learning organisations, and their quality management should be knowledge-based. Every university, with its own knowledge repertoire and knowledge map, may achieve better quality management and improvement through managing its knowledge repertoire and optimising its quality-generation processes.

- There should be more pressure on higher education institutions to publicly articulate what they are doing and to measure the achievement of objectives.
- Universities should adopt a more learning-oriented approach, focusing on learning and course quality. Quality management in education should focus overall on the empowerment of the course team across all of the boundaries to facilitate a dialogue centred on learning (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2005).
- Pedagogical research, the scholarship of learning and teaching, and research-informed teaching in higher education should be encouraged, identified and disseminated with the aim of empowering students to acquire knowledge, skills and the will to learn.

Against the background of the global economic recession, higher education across the world is facing the most difficult situation in recent history, with its surplus graduates as a result of changing its purpose from elite cultivation to mass manpower production. In China, as early as 2003, when the 1999 cohort began to enter the job market, a huge number of college graduates could not find a job, and the situation did not improve thereafter, despite China’s rapid economic growth. In 2007, 1 million out of 5 million college graduates were unemployed a year after graduation (Zhao & Sheng, 2008). The employment of the 6.1 million college graduates in 2009 is even more problematic, given the global economic recession. Given the increasingly complicated situation that higher education is facing, the exploration of quality assurance in Chinese higher education should be firmly based on empowering students to transform and develop themselves in the current 'supercomplex' world (Barnett, 2000) of unprecedented uncertainty, where there is no consensus even on what a university represents (Smith & Webster, 1997), and where all of our intellectual frameworks are being questioned (Skelton, 2009).

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