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QUALITY ASSESSMENT OF UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION IN CHINA: A POLICY ANALYSIS

Thesis presented to the University of Aveiro to fulfil the formalities essential to obtain the degree of European Master in Higher Education (Erasmus Mundus), done by the scientific supervision of Dr. Maria João Pires da Rosa, Invited Auxiliary Professor of the Department of Economia, Gestão e Engenharia Industrial of the University of Aveiro, and James S. Taylor, Professor Catedrático Visitante de University of Aveiro.

Dedication to my grandmother in heaven

The juri

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Palavras-chave Ensino Superior; Avaliação da Qualidade; Análise Política

Resumo

Na presente dissertação é feita uma análise de uma política de ensino superior estabelecida na China em 2002: *a Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education Policy.* O principal objectivo da investigação realizada foi o de explorar as consequências mais relevantes da implementação da política referida, incluindo os problemas e dificuldades inerentes a essa implementação, o que permitiu propor um conjunto de sugestões para a sua melhoria.

De forma a alcançar o objectivo referido, a investigação conduzida baseou-se nas perspectivas teóricas sobre avaliação da qualidade no ensino superior, enquanto enquadramento teórico subjacente à análise da política Chinesa de avaliação da qualidade.

A análise realizada sobre a política Chinesa de avaliação da qualidade permitiu identificar quatro objectivos principais subjacentes à implementação de um sistema de avaliação da qualidade do ensino de graduação Chinês: melhoria, conformidade, informação e *accountability*. No entanto, a implementação da política estabelecida não logrou cumprir completamente os seus objectivos, especialmente os relativos à melhoria da qualidade do ensino e à prestação de contas *(accountability)* por parte das instituições. Adicionalmente a implementação da política de avaliação da qualidade conduziu a alguns problemas não previstos inicialmente, tais como o aumento da carga burocrática das instituições de ensino superior, a emergência de uma cultura de conformidade e de falsificação dos dados e documentos subjacentes à avaliação, bem como a um movimento no sentido da homogeneização das instituições de ensino superior.

A reflexão realizada sobre esta política Chinesa para o ensino superior permitiu ainda verificar que as limitações do sistema de avaliação da qualidade implementado, bem como a relação existente entre o governo Chinês e as instituições de ensino superior influenciam significativamente a sua eficiência. Adicionalmente, os objectivos da política que constam dos documentos legais, a definição de qualidade adoptada e as abordagens à avaliação da qualidade empregues também contribuem para a sua reduzida eficiência.

Com base nos problemas identificados, e tendo em vista a sua resolução, foi estabelecido um conjunto de recomendações para a melhoria da política de avaliação da qualidade em análise, com base nos princípios dos modelos incremental e racional de definição de políticas e reforma.

Keywords Higher Education; Quality Assessment; Policy Analysis

Abstract

This thesis analyzes a higher education policy issued in China in 2002: *the Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education Policy.* The study explores the main consequences of the policy implementation, and the problems and difficulties inherent to it; the thesis ends up by giving some suggestions on how to improve the policy. Given this as the focus of the study, we resort to the theory behind quality assessment in higher education to make an analysis of this quality assessment policy in China.

The analysis of this policy reveals that in the context of Chinese higher education there are four main policy objectives: improvement, compliance, information and accountability. However, the policy has not completely fulfilled its objectives, especially regarding improvement and accountability. Moreover it also led to some unintended problems, such as the increase of bureaucratic burdens on higher education institutions, the rising of a compliance culture and documents/data falsification, and the homogenization of higher education institutions.

The reflections on the quality assessment policy show that both the limitations of the quality assessment system *per se* and the relationship between the Chinese government and higher education institutions influenced the policy's efficiency. Additionally the policy objectives put forward in policy discourses, the quality definition adopted and the approaches to quality assessment employed also contribute to its low efficiency.

Based on the problems identified, and aiming at solving them, some recommendations are offered to improve the policy following the principles of incremental and rational models of policy-making and reform.

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Abbreviations

MOE	Ministry of Education
HEEC	Higher Education Evaluation Center of the Ministry of Education
NPM	New Public Management
CCP CC	Communist Party of China Central Committee
SEC	State Education Commission
ADGEDC	Academic Degrees & Graduate Education Development Center

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

Quality has become a key word in the public debate about higher education in China since the end of the 20th century. First of all, like in other countries, the rapid expanding access to higher education and the decreasing of unit costs per student brought on doubts about educational quality, which has triggered much public criticism. How to find a way to tackle the dilemma of quality without ignoring quantity comes to the fore, meaning how to guarantee the educational quality and still continue the growth of the student-body. Secondly, the establishment of a formal quality assessment/accreditation system for the purposes of international communication and cooperation is nowadays an international trend. Finally, in order to respond to the requirement of accountability to society, information on higher education institutions should be published. For example, it can help students to choose universities and facilitate employers to recruit graduates. Therefore, it is necessary to construct a national educational assessment system to guarantee the teaching quality of higher education institutions and increase their accountability towards society (Wang, 2004).

On the basis of some former informal evaluation regulations, the Ministry of Education (MOE) issued the *Project of Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education* in 2002 and a new organization, *Higher Education Evaluation Center of the Ministry of Education* (HEEC) was established to undertake this specific assessment. According to this project, all higher education institutions should be evaluated within a period of five years on a rotating basis. Three hundred and eleven universities and colleges had been evaluated as of the end of 2006 (HEEC, 2007).

As a result, on the one hand, the quality assessment policy has enhanced the transparency regarding the actual performance of the higher education institutions. Currently, Chinese students can make better-informed choices about their higher educational options and be less driven by the allure of traditional (and often out-dated) reputations alone. And the assessment system has also contributed to the improvement of some institutions with “really poor teaching” and assured all students access to a minimally acceptable level of higher education. These mean to some extent the quality assessment system is effective and it should be reserved (Whitman, 2004). On the other hand, the actual enhancement of higher educational quality has not been completely observed. And the assessment policy also causes some unintended problems. For example, the external compulsory assessment is not consistent with the daily work of institutions, becoming a bureaucratic burden on them; the standardization of evaluation methods and criteria puts pressure on the harmonization of

higher education institutions (Zhang & Liu, 2003); and the close relationship between evaluation results and funding decisions leads to a "compliance culture", which means that the aim of most universities participating in evaluation appears to be to meet the assessment criteria in order to get more funding from the government (Du, Zhou, Li & Xia, 2006). What is worse, it is very common to see higher education institutions making some false documents to cater for the evaluation. This means that there are still many problems and challenges facing the quality assessment policy.

In this context, the Chinese government needs to find an effective way, as soon as possible, to improve the policy of quality assessment. Therefore, academic research in this field is necessary in order to shed light on the main reasons leading to the problems mentioned above, aiming at developing strategies that help to solve them.

1.2 Research Problems

According to the description of the quality assessment policy above (policy causes, policy formation and implementation, policy consequences), the research will deal with **the analysis of the main difficulties of the Chinese quality assessment of undergraduate education policy, trying to find suggestions on how to improve it.**

This research problem can be further elaborated resorting to the following five research questions, which are depicted in the *policy cycle* below (see Figure 1.1).

(1) What is the context underlying the formation and implementation of the quality assessment policy?
(2) What are the main purposes of the quality assessment policy?
(3) What are the main consequences of the quality assessment policy, intended and unintended?
(4) Has the quality assessment policy realized its purposes or not and why?
(5) Is it possible to improve the quality assessment policy? How?

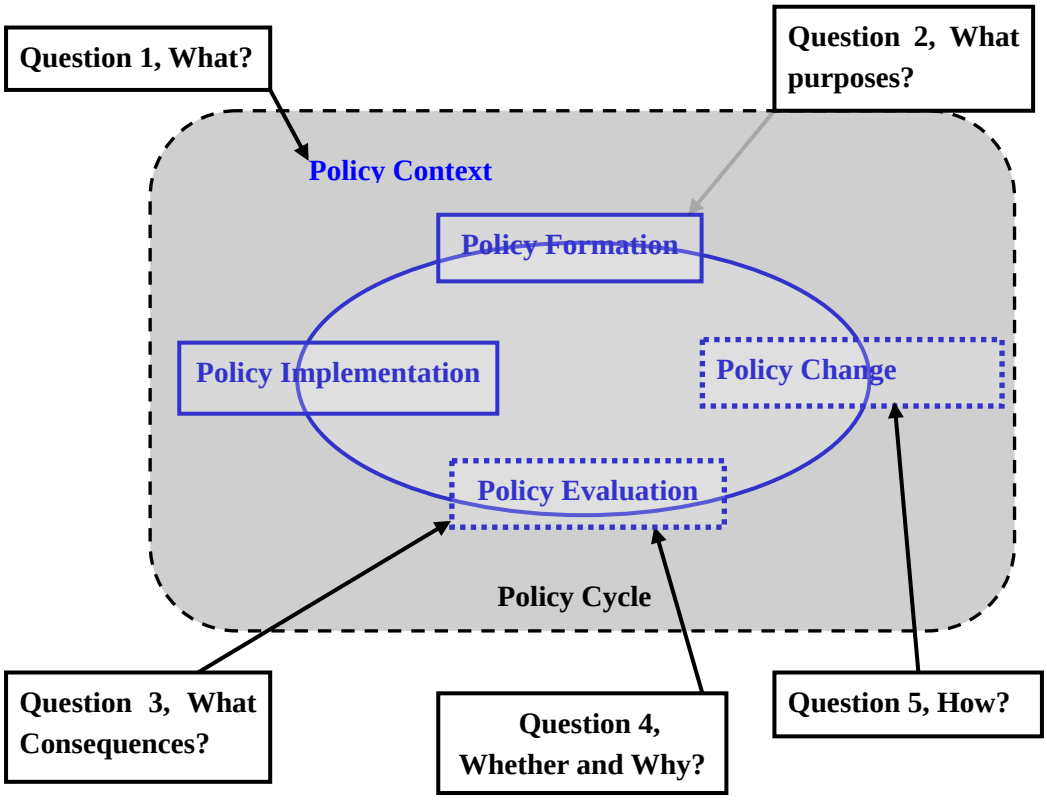

Figure 1.1 The five research questions in the thesis

1.3 Research Aims and Delimitation

The aims of the study can be formulated as follows:

- To illustrate the main problems the Chinese higher education quality assessment policy is confronted with;
- To inquire about the main shortcomings of the assessment policy that led to such problems, using a theoretical approach to quality assessment in higher education;
- To propose some feasible ways to change the assessment policy in order to make it more effective.

With regard to the delimitation of the study, Brennan and Shah (2000) propose that quality assessment in higher education mainly focuses on three aspects, i.e. teaching quality, research outcomes and management. The levels of the review contain institution, faculty/department, subject/programme and individual. The quality assessment policy I will analyze in the thesis is focused on the *teaching quality* at *institutional level* in higher education institutions. The policy concentrates on the teaching quality of *undergraduate programmes* rather than graduate or other tertiary educational programmes. Then the research scope can be narrowed for an in-depth study.

1.4 Methodology

Research Approach: Policy Analysis

There are three basic "research styles" in policy analysis: (1) policy analysis, (2) policy research, and (3) applied social science research. *Policy analysis* refers to a staff memorandum on a narrowly defined problem; *policy research* means a monograph on a broad problem; and *applied social science research* refers to a scholarly assessment of the effects of a policy intervention on some narrowly defined set of outcomes (Lester & Stewart, 2000). From this perspective, the policy analysis in this thesis belongs to the third type, *applied social science research*.

Strictly speaking, the analysis instrument in the thesis is *policy evaluation*, which is concerned with learning about the consequences of public policy. Its definition is "the effort to understand the effects of human behavior and, in particular, to evaluate the effects of particular programs on those aspects of behavior indicated as the objectives of this intervention" (Lester & Stewart 2000: 126).

Furthermore, Lester and Stewart (2000) identify four types of policy evaluations according to different evaluation objects. First, *process evaluation* focuses on the means by which a program or policy is delivered to clients, or the way in which the program is implemented. Secondly, *impact evaluation* concerns the end results of particular programmes and gives the answer to whether the policy objectives have been met in terms of outputs. Most policy evaluations are of this type. Thirdly, *policy evaluation* is concerned with the impact of the policy or program on the original problems to which it was addressed. Finally, *metaevaluations* are syntheses of evaluation research findings (Lester & Stewart, 2000). In my research I will adopt the second type of policy evaluation - *impact evaluation* - to find an answer to whether the higher education quality assessment policy has produced the intended results.

Therefore, in this thesis, I will try to identify the objectives underlying the quality assessment policy, including the explicit and implicit ones; additionally I will explore the main policy consequences examining the policy efficiency in terms of the goals it was meant to achieve, in addition to the unintended problems it has brought on. Based on the examination, I will reflect on the quality assessment policy and try to find some feasible strategies to improve it.

Theoretical Framework: Quality Assessment in Higher Education

In this thesis, I will employ the theoretical background supporting quality assessment in higher education to analyze the quality evaluation policy in China, referring to the following aspects: the context, purposes, implementation, and impacts of quality assessment in higher education.

Information Source: Literature Review and Secondary Analysis

The policy analysis is mainly based on literature review and secondary analysis. On the one hand, the historical retrospection of higher education quality assessment policies in China, the operation of the quality assessment of undergraduate education and its purposes are illustrated by reviewing related policy documents. At the same time, there are some other related literatures providing important references for analyzing the contexts of the policy formation. On the other hand, secondary analysis is used to review the consequences of the quality assessment policy, intended and unintended. I will use two recent studies that focus on the policy consequences of the quality assessment of undergraduate education, one made by the institution responsible for the policy implementation (HEEC) and the other by a research group of Beijing Normal University.

1.5 Significance and Limitations

Significance

As mentioned in the research background, academic research about quality assessment policy is imperative in the field of Chinese higher education. There is more and more criticism about the quality decline in higher education in the mass media. And many scholars and administrators in the realm of higher education also worry about the decline of educational quality and call for a more effective quality assessment policy in their published papers and public speeches. Some representatives of National People's Congress also proposed to reform the quality assessment system. Therefore, reform of quality assessment policy is essential, and academic research about the topic can make much contribution to it (Ministry of Education, 2006).

Unfortunately, an in-depth policy analysis has not yet been made by either the policy implementing agency or an independent organization, although there is a lot of literature discussing higher education quality assessment in China. They point out some problems that Chinese quality assessment policy is currently confronted with together with some suggestions. However, like researchers in other academic fields in China, they appear to lack from a sound theoretical approach and creativity. And their methodologies have many problems. Some of them even do not use matured analysis instruments. Consequently, advocacy is frequently a substitute for analysis. Their suggestions are based on “what should be” rather than “what can be”, lacking feasibility because their analyses ignore the context of Chinese higher education. On the whole, a comprehensive policy analysis of higher education quality assessment in China is absent. I hope my research can help to fill in this blank. In the following chapters, I will try to resort to theoretical approaches to quality assessment in higher education to explore the main shortcomings of the quality assessment policies in China. Based on this analysis, I will propose some suggestions for

policy changes in the future which are feasible in the context of Chinese higher education.

Notwithstanding, there are inevitably some limitations in this research work, originating from, respectively, the research approaches, the author's experience and information sources.

Common Obstacles to Policy Evaluation

In an article that critiques evaluation of social policies, James Q. Wilson formulates two general laws about policy evaluation (Lester & Stewart, 2000):

Wilson's First Law: All policy interventions in social problems produce the intended effect- if the research is carried out by those implementing the policy or their friends.

Wilson's Second Law: No policy intervention in social problems produces the intended effect- if the research is carried out by independent third parties, especially those skeptical of the policy.

In terms of Wilson's argument, it is almost impossible for the thesis to avoid the second law completely. This is one of the limitations in the thesis, which originates from research approaches.

Value Free and Objectivity

Although social science research can not be value-free, it is necessary for the thesis to take into account the perspectives of different interest groups in quality assessment, such as the government, universities of different levels, faculties, students and their parents, and employers, especially when analyzing the policy consequences and problems of different stakeholders. It is a challenge for the thesis to try to make a balance among the perspectives of so many interest groups, since I belong to one of them: the students' group. That is to say, the subjectivity is another limitation of the thesis, which is evoked by the author's experience.

Secondary Analysis

As mentioned above, the analysis of policy consequences and problems are mainly based on two investigations conducted by the institution responsible for the policy implementation (HEEC) and a research group of Beijing Normal University. On the one hand, the key problem of secondary analysis is validity, i.e. "whether the question that the original researchers asked provides a valid measure of the variable you want to analyze" (Babbie 2001: 270). Obviously, the two investigations mainly focus on the impacts on quality improvement of higher education institutions, without investigating the impacts on other stakeholders. On the other hand, one of the studies is made by HEEC, the agency implementing the quality assessment policy. According to *Wilson's*

First Law above, it is inevitable that the policy positive impacts will be magnified, because of the potential political and economic gains of being a "good implementer" of quality assessment, although it is an anonymous investigation. In sum, the secondary analysis is another cause of the thesis limitation in the dimension of information source.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

Chapter One: Introduction

The first chapter will contain the research background, research problems, research aims and delimitation, methodology, research significance and limitation, and structure of the thesis.

Chapter Two: Quality Assessment in Higher Education: A Theoretical Approach

Chapter Two is devoted to literature review, which will outline a theoretical approach to quality assessment in higher education for the policy analysis. In this part, I will present the main theories and conceptions of quality assessment in higher education combined with some characteristics of the higher education systems related with quality assessment mechanisms. The definitions of quality in higher education, as well as the conceptions, context, purposes, implementation and impacts of quality assessment will be analyzed and summarized in this chapter.

Chapter Three: Policy Outline: The Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education in China

This chapter will outline the higher education quality assessment policy in China, providing the background information for policy analysis. Firstly, Chinese higher education system will be introduced, including its historical retrospection, structure, and access conditions, the development of different HEIs and the relationship between the Chinese government and higher education. Secondly, the historical retrospection of higher education quality assessment policies in China will be described, which can be divided in two phases: the initial and experimental phase and the formation phase. In addition, the operation of the quality assessment of undergraduate education will also be presented, including its coverage, actors and ownership, formal rules and actual implementation, consequences of evaluation and funding. Finally, other types of quality assessment schemes in China will also be outlined.

Chapter Four: Policy Analysis: The Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education in China

In this chapter, the policy on the quality assessment of undergraduate education in China will be analyzed by answering the five research questions indicated above. Firstly, the policy context,

policy purposes, policy impacts and main problems will be studied in terms of the theoretical approach made in Chapter Two. Secondly, the question on whether the quality assessment policy has realized its purposes will be answered, and the main reasons explaining it will be explored in depth. Based on the answers to the research questions above, some recommendations to policy reform will be proposed.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Further Research

The research main conclusions will be presented together with some ideas about future work that could be done in order to go deeper in the analysis of the higher education quality assessment policy in China.

CHAPTER TWO: QUALITY ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A THEORETICAL APPROACH

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I intend to make a review of the literature on quality assessment in higher education, which has developed quickly from the 1980s in western countries along with the development of quality assessment practices in many countries. Quality assessment in higher education is a young research field. Generally speaking, literature on this topic can be divided into two sorts in the light of research approaches. The first type uses deduction as the main method. Different definitions of "quality", characteristics of higher education systems and the main factors affecting higher education quality assessment are analyzed and based on that, effective assessment methods and possible impacts on higher education institutions are detected. The other type of literature uses induction as the main research method. Based on case studies and empirical research, methods for implementing quality assessment are introduced and studies are conducted on the impacts of implemented quality assessment schemes.

As mentioned above, my research will try to provide some suggestions on how to improve the quality assessment policies in China through research on the difficulties in implementing the *Project of Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education*. In this chapter I will firstly discuss the different definitions of "quality" in higher education which are important guidance for the quality assessment policy formation. Secondly, I will elaborate on some characteristics of higher education systems, such as the purposes of higher education and models of authority distribution, which are closely related with the formation and implementation of quality assessment policies. Finally, I will focus on quality assessment *per se*, including its definition, context, purposes, implementation and impacts.

2.2 Definitions of Quality in Higher Education

Quality, like "freedom" or "justice", is an elusive concept. We all have an instinctive understanding of what it means but it is difficult to articulate. Green (1994) distinguishes five ways of conceptualizing quality, i.e. (1) *the traditional concept of quality*, which is associated with the notion of providing a product or service that is distinctive and special, and which confers status on the owner or user. In higher education, it might equate with most people's perception of Harvard

and Cambridge Universities. (2) *Conformance to specification or standards.* Quality assessment in this context relates to testing the product or service to see whether it meets the standards set. (3) *Quality as fitness for purpose*, which is adopted by most analysts and policy makers in higher education. Quality is judged in terms of the extent to which a product or service meets its stated purpose(s). (4) *Quality as effectiveness in achieving institutional goals*, which requires an institution can state clearly its mission (or purpose) and is efficient and effective in meeting the goals that it has set itself. (5) *Quality as meeting customers' stated or implied needs.* According to this definition, high priority is placed on identifying customers' needs as a crucial factor in the design of a product or service.

Barnett (1992) proposes objectivist, relativist and developmental conceptions of quality that may be seen as an analytical framework for approaches to quality (see Table 2.1). The *objectivist* conceptions of quality assume that it is possible to identify and quantify certain aspects of higher education, and that the same assessment can be accorded to all courses or all institutions, depending on one's focus of interest. Thus, the resulting figures can tell a story not only about the institution but also about this institution in relation to others, which can be used to make a comparison. There are two *relativist* perspectives of higher education quality being run together. The hierarchical view means that the relationship between different institutions of higher education is different and unequal and "the gold standards" exist in the higher education system. According to the parallel one, institutions are indeed seen as equal but different, and they are encouraged to produce and implement their own "mission statement", which means that their quality is non-judgmental. Both perspectives of quality to assess have their own problems. Barnett (1992) believes that the objectivist approach suffers from insensitivity to the differences of purpose, tradition and social location across institutions of higher education, while the relativist approach, in its extreme form, implies anything goes, that there are no boundaries to what is to count as higher education, and that cross-institutional judgments are *ultra vires.* Therefore, Barnett (1992) draws out a third conception of quality, the developmental one. The developmental approach is an internal approach to quality in higher education and it is oriented towards improving the quality of the work of an institution. In addition, the developmental conception to quality assessment mainly focuses on the delivery of programmes of study rather than the performance of institutions (Barnett, 1992).

Table 2.1 Approaches to quality: an analytical framework (adapted from Barnett, 1992)

Approach	Source of approach	Dominant level of assessment	Focus of evaluation	Form of performance indicators	Institutional context
Objectivist	External	Institutions	Inputs and outputs	Quantitative	Comparative
Relativist (fitness for purpose)					
Hierarchical (gold standard)	External	Institutions	Inputs and outputs	Quantitative	Comparative
Parallel (non-judgmental)	External	Institutions and courses	Inputs, outputs and processes (marginally)	Quantitative and qualitative	Non-comparative
Developmental	Internal	courses	Processes	Qualitative	Non-comparative

Given the difficulties in defining quality in higher education, some have opted out of trying to find an underlying theory or definition. Vroeijenstijn (1995) thinks that it is a waste of time to look for a definition of quality. The basis of this argument is that quality is a relative concept, and it means different things to different stakeholders: governments, employers, students, academic, society as a large, and so on. In governments' eyes, quality can be described as, "as many students as possible finishing the programme in the scheduled time with a degree of an international standard with reduced costs" (Vroeijenstijn 1995: 13). Employers focus on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes graduates obtain during their period of study. As for students, the quality of education is connected with the contribution to individual development and the preparation for a position in society. The academic will define quality as a good academic training based on good knowledge transfer and a good learning environment and a good relationship between teaching and research. For quality assessment of higher education, quality is a matter of negotiation between all parties concerned (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). Weert (1990), Barnett (1992) and Tam (2001) also propose similar ideas. Therefore, it is a common idea that different interest groups will have their own ideas as to what constitutes quality and how to measure it; and in any democratic society, the actual quality assessment arrangements in use will be the outcome of a political, economic and social interplay (if not conflict) between the competing interest groups.

After initial, sometimes vehement discussions on the meaning of "quality", a rather pragmatic consensus in practice was reached that quality means "fitness for purpose" as well as "fitness of purpose" (Westerheijden, Stensaker, & Rosa, 2007a). They originate from two basic distinctive quality assessment approaches: mission-based and standards-based evaluation. In mission-based

evaluation, the higher education institution's own statement is taken as the standard to be reached: "fitness for self-defined purpose". In standards-based evaluation, external evaluation will first of all establish the "fitness of purpose" judged against an externally given standard (Westerheijden, 2007). To some extent, "fitness for purpose" and "fitness of purpose" are empirical terms: they can mean anything, depending on what is given as purposes. Consequently, "quality of higher education" often remains undefined in operational terms, because there is no single understanding of what the purpose(s) of higher education in current society is (Westerheijden, Stensaker, & Rosa, 2007a). Regarding the purposes of higher education, I will review related literatures in the next section.

The definition of quality is a starting point for the development of assessment policies. The quality definition adopted closely relates with the quality assessment approaches implemented. Therefore, in this dissertation I will try to find which definition is being applied in the Chinese quality assessment policy and its rationality rather than seeking a precise definition of quality. And I will also assess, from the different definitions presented, the one that seems more adequate in the context of the Chinese higher education system.

2.3 Main Characteristics of Higher Education Systems

As mentioned above, different higher education stakeholders have different definitions of quality and any assessment policy must try to achieve a balance among them. Consequently, the authority distribution of different interest groups in higher education systems will have a significant impact on the development of quality assessment policies in a particular context. I will resort to a set of literature on the authority distribution and integration in higher education systems and their connection with quality assessment.

Higher education has its own purposes, which are prerequisites for the "fitness of/for purposes" model of quality assessment, as analyzed above. However, is it possible to specify the purposes of higher education institutions? Are all HEIs' purposes the same or not? I will also try to find answers to these questions by reviewing related literature in this part.

2.3.1. The state and higher education: different models to conceptualize their relationship

Four national models of authority distribution

Clark (1983) summarizes four national models of authority distribution in higher education:

- *Continental model:* authority has been distributed traditionally according to this model in most of the academic systems of the Continental Europe. It is a combination of faculty guild and state bureaucracy;
- *British model:* the traditional British style of authority distribution has combined faculty guilds with a modest amount of influence of institutional trustees and administrators;
- *American model:* like the British, the American model has combined beloved faculty forms with institutional trusteeship and administration. But in comparison with the British, faculty rules have been weaker and the influence of trustees and administrators stronger;
- *Japanese model:* the Japanese authority structure has elements similar to both the Continental and American models. Thus, Japanese model is a fascinating mixture of contrary forms of organization and authority.

Integration: state, market and academic oligarchy

Clark (1983) also proposes a triangular model of state, market, and oligarchical forms of coordination of higher education systems. Each corner of the triangle represents the extreme of one form and a minimum of the other two, and locations within the triangle represent combinations of the three elements in different degrees (Clark, 1983). In this triangle, Chinese higher education system is traditionally located near to the point of "state authority", although nowadays one can notice a movement towards the other two points (see Figure 2.1) (Hu, 2003).

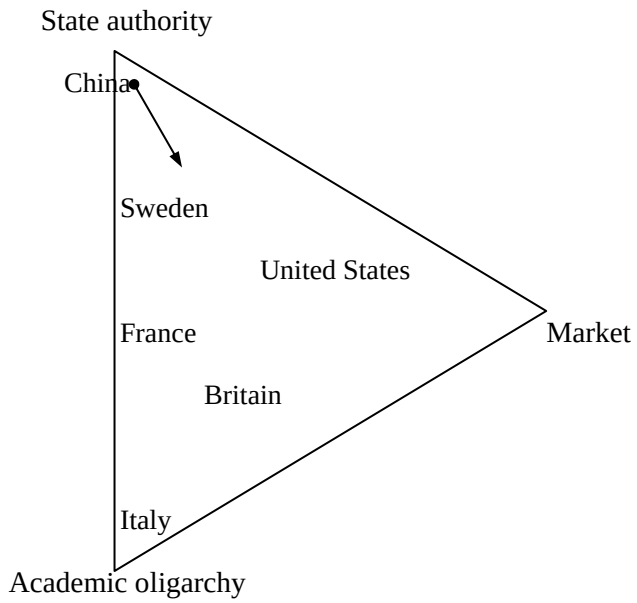

Figure 2.1 The triangular model of state, market, and oligarchical forms of coordination (adapted from Clark, 1983)

Different "state models"

State steering and control characteristics are important to focus upon because they are assumed to mediate, constrain and facilitate both the formation and development of quality assessment policies and institutional responses. "State models" refers to different approaches to the national government's control and steering of higher education institutions as well as to the institutional context of policy processes. Neave and Van Vught (1994) propose that two types of state governance strategies or models towards higher education institutions can be discerned, namely the state-control model, and the state-supervising model. In the state-control model, the state is the overarching and highly powerful regulator of the system; in the state-supervising model, the state sees itself as a supervisor, steering from a distance and using broad terms of regulation. In addition, Gornitzka (1999) interprets Olsen's four state models in the field of higher education:

- *Sovereign, rationality-bounded state model*, which is closely associated with the interventionist state or model of state control. In this model, higher education is seen as an instrument for reaching economic or social goals.
- *Institutional state model*, in which higher education institutions have a special responsibility to protect academic values and traditions against the whims of shifting political regimes and the shifts in coalitions and short term interests of interest groups.
- *Corporate-pluralist state model*, which challenges the view that the state is a unitary actor with monopoly over power and control; instead there are several competing and legitimate centers of authority and control.
- *Supermarket state model*, in which the role of the state is minimal. In its crude form it assumes that practically all state actions and activities by public bodies will be less efficient, effective or fair than the activities of private individuals relating through markets.

According to the statement of Neave and Van Vught (1994), the key state governance approach to higher education in China is the state-control model; and it is the sovereign, rationality-bounded model in Olsen's term. However, the Chinese government has been trying to change the state-control model by devolving parts of authority to HEIs (Hu, 2003), as I will illustrate in detail later.

Connection with the quality assessment models

Barnett (1992) insists that there is a direct connection between the forces of integration of higher education and the quality assessment models. He defends that the three social forces picked out by Clark (1983) can be seen to give rise to three different methodological approaches to quality assessment. Barnett (1992) hypothesizes that the state will tend to favor performance indicators as

a means of assessing quality while the academic community will tend to favor peer review; additionally the market-led system will generate consumer oriented approaches to quality assessment (see Figure 2.2).

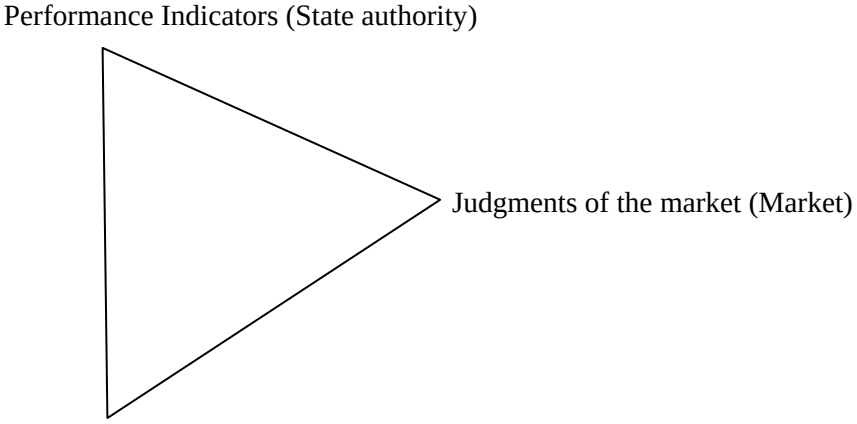

Figure 2.2 Forms of quality assessment (adapted from Barnett, 1992)

But does the direct correspondence between the forces of integration and assessment methods really exist? Some authors propose other kinds of relationship between them. Based on case studies, Brennan and Shah (2000) exemplify that the national quality assessment model is an element of compensation for the dominant form of the existing relationships between government and higher education institutions. Referring to the study of Clark (1983), they think that if there is a high degree of institutional autonomy, like in United Kingdom, quality assessment will emphasize more accountability. On the contrary, when government has a high degree of control over higher education, like in continental Europe, quality assessment is more improvement-oriented and helps to support a greater degree of decision-making at institutional levels (Brennan & Shah, 2000). Contrary to the findings of Brennan and Shah (2000), Xu (2000), based on an analyses of the models of higher education quality assessment in five countries (Former Soviet Union, France, United States, Netherlands and United Kingdom), comes to the conclusion that:

- the “state model” decides the state’s authority boundary in higher education and the governance approach to quality assessment;
- if the “state model” changes, it is inevitable that the governance approach to higher education quality assessment will change accordingly;
- *vice versa*, the governance approach to higher education quality assessment will affect the reform of the “state model”.

However, when it comes to the standpoint of Brennan and Shah (2000) that the national quality assessment model is an element of compensation for the dominant form of the existing relationship between government and higher education institutions, we should identify the changing directions of different national models. In the Continental model, reform has sought to pull authority from the top (state) and the bottom (faculty guild) in order to strengthen the weak middle levels of administration, that is, administration at regional and institutional levels. And in the British model, reform has sought to develop a superstructure responsive to central policy in order to strengthen the top level of coordination (state) in what was previously, in formal terms, a nonsystem of autonomous institutions. And similar compensating efforts also have been made in American model and Japanese model (Clark, 1983). Thus, we can conclude that the governance approaches to quality assessment reflect the change directions of national models of authority distribution.

Therefore, the "compensation" proposed by Brennan and Shah (2000) and the "parallelism" argued by Xu (2000) are not incompatible. The governance approach to quality assessment reflects the existing relationships between government and higher education institutions. And to some extent, the "state models" decide the governance approach to quality assessment in higher education, which is an important principle for the analysis of Chinese higher education quality assessment policies.

2.3.2. The purposes of higher education

The natural ambiguity of purposes

Clark (1983) emphasizes the natural ambiguity of purposes of higher education as a whole. He thinks that with the task of higher education being both knowledge-intensive and knowledge-extensive, it is difficult for those involved to state the purposes of comprehensive universities and colleges, and especially of a state or national system. Goals are so broad and ambiguous that a university or system is left with no chance to accomplish the goals-or to fail to accomplish them. Therefore, there is no way that anyone can assess the degree of goal achievement. No one even knows if any or all the stated goals are accepted by significant groups within the system, and with what priority.

Distinguishing purposes

Based on this idea, Barnett (1992) believes that HEIs have a pretty hazy idea of what the essential purposes of higher education might be. In other words, HEIs just tend to assume that they are remaining faithful to the essential character of higher education. It is a case of "We exist, therefore we are worthwhile" (Barnett, 1992: 87). Notwithstanding, not all kinds of HEIs have the same

purposes. Barnett (1992) tries to distinguish these elusive purposes adopting two dimensions. The first distinction concerning institutional purposes is the distinction between the general purposes which mark out the educational territory inhibited by all HEIs and the particular purposes which an individual institution might set for itself. The second key distinction is that between the purposes that HEIs fulfill which are set within the academic community and the purposes which are set outside the academic community. These two sets of distinctions can be superimposed on each other, which can generate four kinds of purposes. That is to say, we can talk of general purposes which characterize HEIs as a whole, such purposes being set either within the academic community or outside it. We can also talk of purposes particular to a single institution which are set by that institution or set for it by bodies or agencies in the external community. In modern society, the area of purposes set outside the academic community is growing; and the extent of those set within it is diminishing. This situation is depicted in Figure 2.3 (Barnett, 1992).

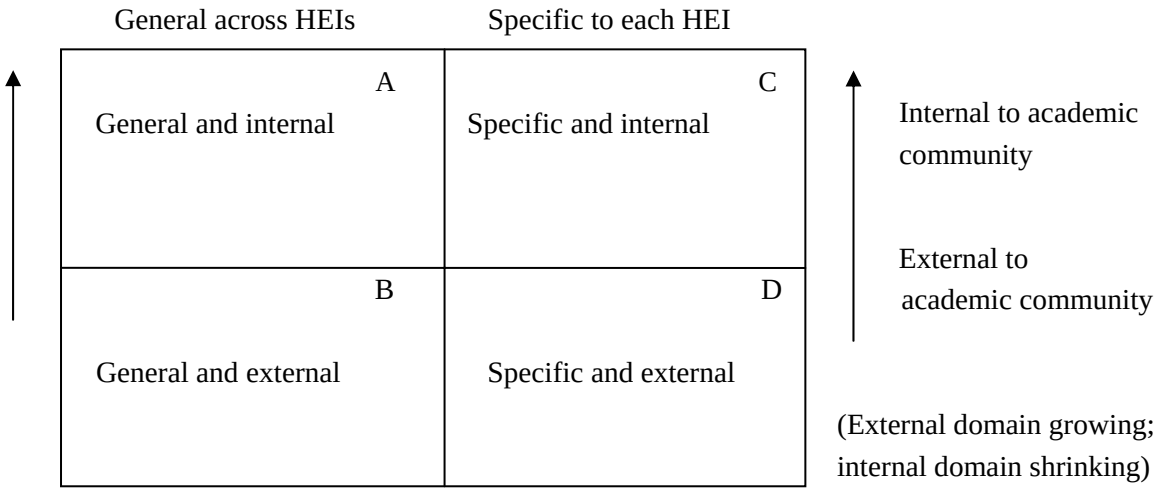

Figure 2.3 Purposes of higher education institutions (adapted from Barnett, 1992)

In conclusion, it is very difficult to state the purposes of higher education, because they are broad and ambiguous. Nevertheless, it is obvious that not all of HEIs have the same purposes. HEIs have general purposes such as disseminating knowledge to students. But there are also particular purposes for different oriented universities. For example, some universities emphasize research outcomes, while others focus on labor training.

2.4 Quality Assessment in Higher Education

After discussing the definitions of quality and some characteristics of higher education systems,

including its authority distribution and particular purposes, in this sub-section, I will explore some more practical issues ranging from the conception of higher education quality assessment, the context, purposes and implementation of quality assessment to the impacts of quality assessment, which can provide some reference for discussing the quality assessment policy in China.

2.4.1 Definitions of quality assessment in higher education

Quality assessment is a means of assessing the quality of what is actually provided by institutions (Pearce, 1995). Green (1994) adds that quality assessment involves the judgment of performance against criteria, either internally or externally. Vroeijenstijn (1995) defines quality assessment as every structured activity which leads to a judgment of the quality of the teaching/learning process and/or research, whether self-assessment or assessment by external experts. And Harvey and Newton (2004) classify external evaluation into four types of activity: accreditation, audit, assessment, and external examination. For present purposes, assessment means passing a judgment (often with a grading) usually about the quality of a teaching or research subject area.

I will resort to the definition of Vroeijenstijn (1995): “quality assessment is every structured activity which leads to a judgment of the quality of the teaching/learning process and/or research, whether self-assessment or assessment by external experts.” However, in my research the focus will be on the external quality assessment. Also I will not make a difference between assessment, evaluation, review and monitor, using these terms interchangeably in the dissertation.

About the level and focus of quality assessment I will use Barnett’s (1992), Brennan and Shah’s (2000) classifications, which are the following:

- The focus of the review includes teaching, research, management/administration, or input, output and process;
- The levels of the review include institution, faculty/department, subject/program and individual.

2.4.2 Context of quality assessment in higher education

The context underlying the emergence of quality assessment in higher education

First of all, Vroeijenstijn (1995) summarizes that there are five elements constructing the context for the emergence of quality assessment in higher education.

- The massification of higher education together with an economic recession caused that governments wanted a better insight into costs and benefits of higher education;
- The relationship between higher education and society has changed in the last decades and society has become more and more interested in higher education;
- The numbers of students enrolled are increasing and investments in higher education are decreasing. But at the same time, quality is expected to be maintained;
- Students exchanges and international cooperation require insight into quality;
- Governments promised more autonomy to higher education institutions and required quality assurance in exchange (Vroeijenstijn, 1995).

In addition, Green (1994) illustrates that the growing concern about higher education quality assessment is brought on by the rapid expansion of student numbers against a backcloth of public expenditure worries, the general quest for better public service, the increasing competition within the educational "market" for resources and students, and the tension between efficiency and quality. In this context, the resources available for higher education grew at a slower rate than the participation rate. Higher education institutions need therefore to demonstrate the same efficiency gains as other public services (Green, 1994).

Also, Brennan and Shah (2000) present a set of conditions that put forward a context for the raise of quality assessment: the expansion and diversification of higher education, funding cuts, changing relationships between higher education institutions and the state, the international exchange of students and staff and the labor mobility.

In summary, the massification and diversification of higher education and the decreasing funding, the changing relationship between higher education and society, the general quest for better public services, the internationalization of higher education, and the reforming governance methods of state can be seen as drivers of the quality assessment movement.

The exploration of reasons for quality assessment in higher education

The quality gap

Barnett defends that there is a possible conflict of interest between higher education systems' expansion and diminishing unit costs, this conflict being reflected in Figure 2.4. Being pulled in the directions of both expansion and the squeezing of resources, doubts about the quality of the higher education systems' outputs emerge (Barnett, 1992). As a result, quality assessment systems are introduced to bridge the gap. However, can the ensuing quality gap be bridged or is the gap irreconcilable? Is it possible to have simultaneously greater numbers of students and lower unit

costs while maintaining quality? Is a quality assessment policy an effective way to bridge the quality gap?

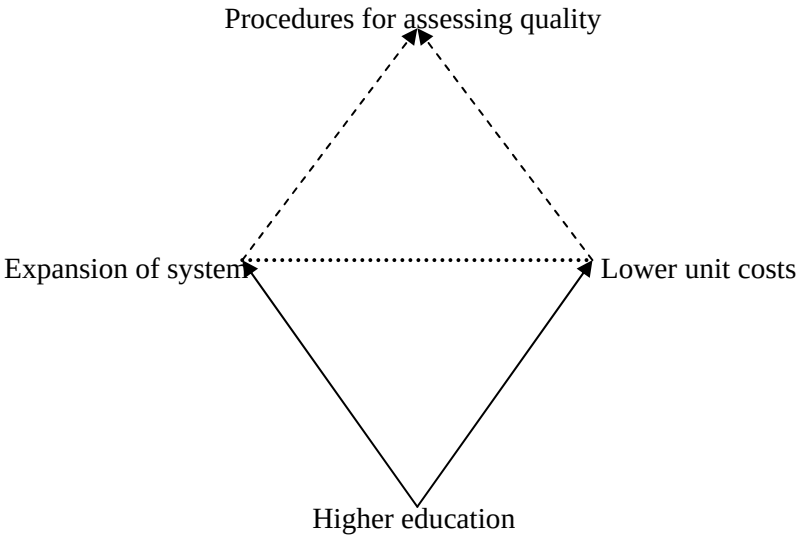

Figure2.4 Higher education: the quality gap (adapted from Barnett, 1992)

The changing relationship between the state and higher education

Neave and van Vught (1994) have described the changing pattern of the relationship between higher education and the state as a shift from the model of state control to the model of state supervision. The state was supposed to refrain from detailed scrutiny of the daily life of institutions to steer the higher education system from a distance.

This raises a fundamental question: how will more autonomous institutions behave in a market-like competitive environment? Will institutions comply with the emerging and existing governmental policies? According to Rosa, Tavares and Amaral (2006), in this context governments tend to introduce mechanisms to ensure that institutions will behave as governments want them to behave. Among these mechanisms one finds an extensive array of performance indicators and measures of academic quality, is it called quality assurance or accreditation. That is to say, in the context of the reforming relationship between the state and higher education institutions, the use of quality assessment becomes a compliance tool (Rosa, Tavares & Amaral, 2006b).

New Public Management

New Public Management (NPM) has dominated public sector reform over the last two decades. Any specific discussion of higher education management needs to be set within the broader context of NPM. One of the main principles behind NPM is that public actors such as higher education

institutions should maintain core public service values and they should place great emphasis on achieving the desired results or outcomes of service rather than on the processes and rules of service delivery. It is assumed that efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery will be achieved through the use of private sector management techniques, such as specifying service objectives and competition for customers, performance measurement**,** decentralization of decision making and the use of markets to deliver services (Meek, 2003). As for higher education institutions, students are referred to as customers or clients. Thus, under NPM and in most higher education systems quality assessment is put in place to enhance the efficiency of HEIs, and to ensure that academic provision can meet clients' needs and expectations.

The erosion of trust and the rise of accountability

Trow (1996) defines threes fundamental ways in which colleges and universities are linked to their surrounding and supporting societies: accountability, trust and the market. The rise of quality assessment as a policy instrument has been interpreted as indicating a decrease in the trust in society that higher education "delivers the goods" without giving special attention to it. The decline in trust is the main result of policies aimed at reshaping higher education in the image of private enterprises while increasing the regulatory power of central government, for example in Britain. In addition, a decline in trust is inherent in the growth of mass higher education systems and its effects on both teachers and students, in the tremendous increase in its costs, especially to the public purse, and in the increasing diversity of forms that higher education takes, many of which cannot claim the academic authority of elite forms of higher education.

In conclusion, firstly, the massification and diversification, as well as the decreasing funds per student have brought on the quality gap. The quality assessment is introduced to bridge this gap, maintaining and improving quality. Secondly, the relationship between higher education institutions and the state has changed. The state has retreated from its former central control and favors *ex post* evaluation over *ex ante* regulation. Thus, quality assessment becomes a compliance tool. Thirdly, being influenced by the ideas of NPM, the general quest for better public services has increased. Hence, the quality evaluation mechanism is employed to enhance the efficiency of higher education institutions to meet the needs of students as their clients. The doubts about higher education quality, as well as the prosperity of private sector management techniques in higher education institutions resulted in the loss of trust in HEIs; the emergence of quality assessment system is an indication of the erosion of trust, and also an instrument to raise the accountability. In addition, the internationalization also pushes the inflation of higher education quality assessment and accreditation globally, partly because it is an international trend, and partly because it is convenient for the international mobility of students and cooperation/comparison of HEIs. In this

context, higher education quality assessment schemes thrive in the global space.

2.4.3. The purposes of quality assessment in higher education

Main purposes

Vroeijenstijn (1995) summarizes six goals of higher education quality assessment: accreditation of new institutions or programs, providing information for funding, accountability to society, achievement of governmental goals and planning, information for students and employers and quality improvement. Weusthof and Frederiks (1997) distinguish four main functions: accountability, quality improvement, validation and information (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004). Brennan and Shah (2000) summarize ten purposes of quality assessment as follows: to ensure accountability for the use of public funds; to improve the quality of higher education provision; to inform funding decisions; to inform students and employers; to stimulate competitiveness within and between institutions; to undertake a quality check on new (sometimes private) institutions; to assign institutional status; to support the transfer of authority between the state and institutions; to assist the mobility of students; to make international comparisons. And Harvey and Newton (2004) stress that there are four rationales to establish quality evaluation systems: accountability, control, compliance and improvement. Based on surveys conducted, Billing (2004) summarizes five purposes of external quality assessment, which are improvement of quality, publicly available information on quality and standards, accreditation, public accountability for standards achieved and for use of money, and contribution to the higher education sector planning process.

All these authors' proposals on the purposes of quality assessment present obvious similarities. Based on the reviews above, there are six purposes dominating higher education quality assessment:

- Accreditation;
- Quality improvement;
- Accountability to society, mainly focusing on public funding and the standards achieved;
- Examining the achievement of governmental goals and planning (Compliance);
- Information for funding decisions and for students/employers;
- Facilitating international mobility of students and international comparison of institutions.

The tension between accountability and improvement

It is argued that the basic divide is between accountability and improvement, as the main purposes of quality assessment systems (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004). Vroeijenstijn (1995) proposes that

managing the quality assessment process is like navigating between two extremes, in order to fulfill the two purposes. The challenge is to keep on course and, by doing so, reconcile the two purposes in one system (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). However, Harvey and Newton (2007) claim that this discussion on the dichotomy of accountability-improvement conceals as much as it reveals. Firstly, they argue that this dichotomy conceals another two purposes of quality assessment: compliance and control. Secondly, that it reinforces a perceived irreconcilable tension: to be accountable, it is claimed, requires different mechanisms than to improve. The authors further analyze the tension between accountability and improvement, criticizing the following views: (1) Improvement follows accountability, which sees improvement as a secondary function of the monitoring process; (2) Improvement is its own accountability, which means if an organization continually improves it is being accountable; and so on. Finally, they emphasize that all these positions tend to miss the point. Accountability and improvement are not two related dimensions of quality, rather they are distinct and there is no intrinsic tension between them. Quality assurance has created an illusory tension by pretending that quality is intrinsically linked to the process of monitoring quality (Harvey & Newton, 2007).

Regarding the preferences between improvement and accountability in the implementation of quality assessment policies, Brennan and Shah (2000) propose the cynical idea that an improvement function is stressed in order to gain support for the introduction of quality assessment systems and that an accountability function becomes more important once the system is established. They emphasize the role of quality assessment processes in the struggle for power and influence over the sector. Similarly, Harvey and Newton (2004) state that the rhetoric and documentary preambles in many countries refer to quality evaluation as a process of improvement, yet all the emphases are on accountability, compliance and, in some cases, control of the sector. Indeed, the political initiative driving much external evaluation is about establishing delegated accountability. It is noticeable that, with few exceptions, most systems start off in this vein, even if they subsequently introduce an improvement element.

In sum, it is a moot point whether the tension between improvement and accountability exist or is just illusion. According to the six main purposes of quality assessment, I will discuss the main goals of Chinese higher education quality assessment.

2.4.4. The implementation of quality assessment in higher education

“General model” of quality assessment

Following a survey for the European Union, van Vught and Westerheijden (1994) propose that

there are a number of common features of national quality assessment frameworks and construct a general model of quality assessment, which is a classic model of external quality assessment.

- There is a national agency with responsibility for co-coordinating and setting out the procedures and methods to be used by higher education institutions for the assurance of quality. Such an agency should have a legal status but be independent of government.
- Based on the procedures and methods set out by the national coordinating agency, institutions should undertake regular self-assessment and report to the assessment agency on a regular basis. For this process to be effective, the self-assessment should be undertaken by the academic staff of the institutions themselves.
- The institutional self-assessment would form the basis of an external peer review. Such an evaluation should include discussion with academic and administrative staff, students and alumni. The external peers would need to be selected to represent specific expertise (academic, management, etc) depending on the focus and purpose of the visit.
- A published report setting out the findings of the peer review visit should be made. The main purpose of the report should be to make recommendations to institutions in order to help them improve the quality of their teaching and research.
- There should be no direct link between the outcomes of quality assessment and the funding of institutions (van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994).

Brennan and Shah (2000) challenge the applicability of the general model. They think that while the general model appears on the surface to be fairly widely applicable, there are many variations and differences in the methods used. These reflect practical considerations that have to do with the size and diversity of the higher education systems as well as with political and sociological factors connected with the role of the state, the extent of consumerism and the traditions of institutional autonomy.

Based on several reported comparisons, Billing (2004) states that the general model of external quality assessment does not completely apply in all countries, although most elements of it do apply in most countries. A useful conclusion, therefore, is that the “general model” established by van Vught and Westerheijden (1994) provides a starting point from which to map deviations, and to which to relate them. So perhaps it can be useful as a basis for transferring quality assessment structures and processes to new contexts (Billing, 2004).

From another perspective, Schwarz and Westerheijden (2004) analyze that there are three pillars of quality monitoring in relation to each other: evaluation, accreditation and approval. They follow the

framework of coverage, actors and ownership, formal rules and actual implementation, consequences of evaluation, funding and fees to analyze the three types of quality monitoring in European countries. And they find that whereas evaluation activities follow a common "general model of quality assessment" (van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994) in all European countries, accreditation currently is not following any type of common general approach in Europe. In the context of this work, the evaluation pillar is the most relevant to analyze the Chinese policy. According to the authors, this pillar can be presented according to the following items:

- *Coverage:* As a rule, it covers all public higher education institutions or programmes initiated or supported by government. Where higher education institutions as a whole are evaluated, there is a tendency to look not at teaching or research directly but rather at the institutions' own arrangements for quality assurance.
- *Actors and ownership:* Usually, governments originate almost all evaluation schemes. The operational control over the process and quite often also over the criteria and standards used in a national accreditation scheme are, as a rule, under a national separate body which at least in the operational aspects is independent from both the government and the higher education institutions. The organizational location of these national accreditation agencies usually is not too far from the ministry of education. The evaluators, in majority come from the academic world. However, a minority representation from other stakeholders (professions, employers) is widespread practice.
- *Formal rules and actual implementation:* In a rule, the processes of quality assessment mainly follow the steps defined by van Vught and Westerheijden (1994).
- *Consequences of evaluation:* Consequences of evaluation depend heavily on the functions for which it was introduced, which will be reviewed in depth in the next section, under the heading impacts of quality assessment.
- *Funding and fees:* In most countries evaluation agencies are state agencies, funded from the government budget.

The main elements of quality assessment approaches

Referring to the two models above, the approaches to quality assessment can be further summarized in terms of evaluation agency, evaluators, evaluation procedures, the measurement of quality, and the connection between evaluation results and funding. They can provide important reference for the analysis of the Chinese quality assessment policy.

Evaluation agency

The ownership of quality assessment systems ranges from one extreme where the system is owned

by the state or a state agency to the other extreme where the system is owned by the institutions themselves (Rosa, Tavares & Amaral, 2006b). Usually, the government originates evaluation schemes, and a national agency takes charge of coordinating and setting out the procedures and methods to be used for the quality assessment. And this agency should have legal status but be independent from both the government and the higher education institutions at least in its operational aspects, although it usually is not too far from the ministry of education.

Evaluators

The external evaluators should be selected to represent specific expertise (academic, management, etc) depending on the focus and purpose of the visit. They mainly come from the academic world. However, a minority representative from other stakeholders is widespread practice.

Evaluation procedures

The evaluation procedures should be a combination of self-assessment and external peer review: the former is the basis of the latter, which are followed by a published report setting out the findings of site visit, and recommendations made to institutions.

The measurement of quality

Basically, there are two way of "measuring" the quality of education: through fixed procedures, often quantitative, associated with performance indicators, or through the intrinsically subjective process of peer review. Of course, things are not as clear-cut as that (Westerheijden, 2007). Both approaches have their own advantages and disadvantages. For those adopting quantitative techniques, qualitative methods of appraisal are unreliable, unable to inform third parties about the quality of the programmes or institution in question. They are fuzzy soft, and lacking a cutting edge for decision-makers. For those favouring qualitative methods, peer judgments, words and dialogue are preferable to numbers, for human interactions and evaluations require more subtle forms of statement than are possible in the language of arithmetic. Numbers, as a way of making statements about the complex of activities we call "higher education", may have the replicability demanded of reliable instruments of assessment but (for this side) in the end they must lack validity (Barnett, 1992). In sum, the quality assessment should combine the use of performance indicators with peer review. Performance indicators play some role in quality assessment, but can never have the last say or take the place of peer review, *vice versa* (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). And in the process of quality assessment, it is impossible to formulate beforehand overall criteria for higher education. They will differ from discipline to discipline (Vroeijenstijn, 1995; Kekale, 2000).

Connection between evaluation results and funding

Vroeijenstijn (1995) regards performance indicators and performance-based funding as the two ghosts of quality assessment. He claims that a link between quality and funding is inevitable. And the question is what this link should be. Van vught and Westerheijden (1994) argue that creating a relationship between quality assessment and funding will almost certainly lead to a compliance culture. In addition, performance-based funding is often aiming at rewarding excellence or promoting excellence, which may lead to the strengthening of the better HEIs and the weakening of the bad ones (Vroeijenstijn, 1995).

2.4.5. The impacts of quality assessment

Measurement problems

There are some obvious methodological problems attached to studying the impacts of quality assessment in higher education. First of all, research on the impacts of quality assessment is difficult because it is impossible to control all relevant factors to be able to map causal relationships. Secondly, measuring impact is further complicated due to universities' and colleges' complex forms of information-processing and decision-making traditions. Thirdly, a particular problem when analyzing effects relates to the many purposes associated with quality assessment. Finally, the methodological problem is related to the potential political and economic gains of being a "good implementer" of quality assessment (Stensaker, 2003; Harvey & Newton, 2004; Rosa, Tavares & Amaral, 2006a).

Impacts studies of quality assessment

First of all, as for the effects on the quality improvement of higher education institutions, in Vroeijenstijn's (1995) opinion, there will never be a direct, short-term link between the activities in the field of quality assessment and improvement. But in general a lot is happening in the faculties, in a direct or indirect way, as a result of the quality assessment. For example, the existence of the quality assessment system already affects the way of thinking about quality in the university (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). As mentioned above, Schwarz and Westerheijden (2004) propose that consequences of evaluation depend heavily on the functions for which it was introduced. If accountability is the main aim, direct consequences may have been few. If quality improvement is a main aim, giving consequences to evaluation normally is in the hands of the HEIs evaluated. Does quality assessment really gives an impetus to the higher education institution's desire to engage in actual quality management, or is it seen as just another bureaucratic burden to be executed with as little connection to the "inner life" of the higher education institution as possible? Research led to the conclusion, that "really poor teaching" may have been weeded out but above the actual

threshold level of quality (i.e. as long as one gets not too heavy criticism from the review teams), the impetus for quality improvement from external evaluations remains scarce (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2002; Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004).

Stensaker (2003) gives answers to the question above from two perspectives: the impact on teaching and learning, and the impact on organization and academic leadership. He reviews some studies that address the impact issues and concludes that the impact of quality assessment on teaching and learning seems indeed to be quite mixed, positive in early studies while some negative effects are revealed in later research. As for the impact on organization and management, he concludes that one trend is more centralization in procedures and in organizational decision-making and HEIs having become more "bureaucratic"; and a more autonomous role for the institutional management, including giving managers greater responsibility for taking actions to follow up external evaluations, is another trend.

Thus, on the one hand, positive claims are made that quality assessment triggers, for example, increased attention towards teaching and learning and signs of a cultural change in the attitudes of the academic staff, weeding out "really poor teaching" although above the actual threshold level of quality, the impetus for quality improvement from external evaluations remains scarce. In especial, it contributes little to any effective transformation of the student learning experience (Harvey & Newton, 2004). On the other hand, quality evaluation also contributes to more ambiguous or even negative outcomes. For example, it is claimed that the money spent on quality assessment outweighs the potential benefits for institutions and for the system as a whole, and that various evaluations trigger greater centralization and more "bureaucratization" in HEIs (Stensaker, 2003).

Secondly, with regard to the information for students and employers, quality assessment systems seem to be effective. According to Stensaker (2003) increased institutional transparency is the most noticeable impact of quality assessment systems and it seems that evaluations have made the "black box" more open and quantifiable. And students can make more informed choices in selecting their location of study according to quality assessment results. Employers also can use the evaluation results as an argument in their decisions to hire one graduate rather than another (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004).

Further, about the information for governmental funding-decisions, opinions still remain divided on the paradoxical situation between the standpoint that real consequences, i.e. incremental or decremental funding, are necessary to take evaluation seriously, and the standpoint that attaching real consequences to evaluation turns it into a power game where the results count rather than the

quality. As a way out of this paradox, many governments have stated that evaluation results may inform funding, but in a non-formulaic way (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004).

All in all, lack of effects directly related to quality improvement is a common conclusion. For example, Harvey and Newton (2004) think that much of quality assessment is a game between policy makers, quality assessment agencies, institutional managers and quality professionals. And the institutional quality assessment has not yet contributed much to actual improvements in teaching and learning. However, Stensaker (2003) proposes that lack of contribution to quality improvement should not be conceived as a quality evaluation error alone but as a misconception of how organizational change actually takes place. In addition, increased institutional transparency is obvious. To some extent, claiming that transparency is the dominant impact of quality monitoring suggests that institutions have not been very active in relating their own quality improvement initiatives to the external procedures (Stensaker, 2003).

Thus, in this chapter, the different definitions of quality in higher education, the state models and main purposes of higher education have been reviewed. In particular, the context, purposes, implementation and impacts of quality assessment in higher education have also been summarized, which is a significant theoretical framework for the policy analysis in this thesis. And in the next chapter, I will focus on the higher education quality assessment policy in China, providing necessary background information for the policy analysis.

CHAPTER THREE: POLICY OUTLINE

The quality assessment of undergraduate education in China

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will start by introducing background information on the Chinese higher education system, including its historical retrospection, structure, and access conditions, in addition to the homogenizing trend of Chinese HEIs and the relationship between the Chinese government and higher education institutions. Secondly, I will shed light on the historical evolution of quality assessment policies in China, which can be divided in two phases: the initial and experimental phase that last from 1985 to 2001 and the phase of formation that started in 2002 with the promulgation of the *Project of Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education* and lasts until today. Thirdly, the newly-established quality assessment system will be sketched, including its coverage, actors and ownership, formal rules and actual implementation, consequences of evaluation, and funding. Finally, other types of evaluation schemes existent in China will also be outlined.

3.2 Background Information: The Characteristics of the Chinese Higher Education System

3.2.1 The historical retrospection and *status quo* of the Chinese higher education system

Historical retrospection

The Chinese higher education system is young. The first modern Chinese higher education institution was set up in 1895, *Beiyang Gongxue* (Tianjin University). And in 1898, *Peking Imperial University* (Peking University) was also established. The emergences of these two universities are regarded as the beginning of the Chinese modern higher education, which followed the European models of universities. During this period, foreign missionaries played a significant role in Chinese higher education formation. Up to the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, there were 205 HEIs, including public, private and missionary institutions. From 1952, the new Chinese government started to restructure the higher education system, simulating the Soviet higher education system. Thus, all private and missionary HEIs were turned into public ones, and a

new higher education system with highly centralized planning was established in China. However, during the Cultural Revolution period (1966-1976), higher education was devastated: institutional administration was paralyzed and classes suspended. Higher education was restored in 1977. From 1980's, within the stable political and economic environment, Chinese higher education started its era towards prosperous development. As of 2004, there were 2236 public universities/colleges, 1187 private HEIs and approximate 20 millions students enrolled (Yang, 2005).

Structure of the Chinese higher education

Chinese higher education institutions can generally be divided into two sectors: regular and adult higher education institutions. The regular HEIs are the mainstream, including 4-year undergraduate (*benke*) and 3-year specialized (*zhuanke*) programs, leading to a Bachelor's degree and diploma respectively. The adult sector includes 2- and 4-year diploma programs of study. Students in the regular HEIs are normally full time, while students in the adult sector are usually part-time. And there are also some private institutions in China, mainly providing vocational education, although a minority of them has undergraduate programs. Table 3.1 presents information on the number of HEIs in 2004 according to their types.

Table 3.1 Number of higher education institutions in China in 2004 (Source from Ministry of Education, 1998-2005)

	Public HEIs			Private HEIs
	Regular HEIs		HEIs for adults	
	HEIs providing degree-level programs	Short-cycle HEIs and tertiary vocational colleges		
Number	684	1047		
Total	1731		505	1187

Access conditions

Students holding the upper secondary school leaving certificate do not automatically have a formal right to a place in higher education. They are merely eligible to take the nationwide competitive entrance examinations for universities/colleges and apply for a place in higher education. Normally the national examination is made twice a year, at the beginning and the mid of the year, administered by MOE. The decisions to admission are strictly based on the scores of the applicants on the national examinations. With the expansion of enrollment policy in 1998, 19% of the students

in the age cohorts were admitted by HEIs in 2004, which represented an enormous increase *vis a vis* the 1980 percentage of 1.2% (Yang, 2005).

3.2.2 The Chinese higher education system: a thousand flowers bloom that are nevertheless all of the same species

The Chinese higher education system is dominated by public universities regarding the provision of undergraduate education. A few years ago, private universities began to be established on a large scale. Nonetheless governmental regulations and the low prestige attached to them, due to inferior teaching quality and high tuition fees, restrict their development. Within public institutions, it is obvious that although there are a thousand flowers bloom, they are all of the same species, since almost all universities are desirous to imitate the top Chinese universities, such as Tsinghua University and Perking University, trying to become research-oriented and comprehensive universities (Mohrman, 2003). They tend to focus on high-level research outcomes and on the number of advanced professors rather than on teaching quality or other kind of services to society.

Therefore it is possible to say that a so-called ‘malposition’ phenomenon is happening in China: while HEIs at lower levels strive to reach university status and even deliver postgraduate education to heighten their social reputation; high-level universities, including some prestigious ones, exploit their brand effect to offer vocational training programs to attract more funding through students’ tuition fees (Yang, 2005). If we look at prestige, Chinese higher education can be described as a pyramid. However, all HEIs seem to have the same goals, tasks and organization forms, which certainly constitutes an obstacle for Chinese higher education development, due to the fact that this system has to respond to a very diversified students’ population with quite different social needs.

3.2.3 The relationship between the Chinese government and higher education institutions

As indicated in Chapter Two, Chinese higher education is moving from the vector of state authority towards the market and academic oligarchy directions on Clark’s triangle of coordination (Hu, 2003). Before the nationwide market-oriented economic reform that started in the earlier 1980s, Chinese higher education was structured and operated under a rigid state-control model, following the Soviet higher education system. The government controlled almost all the substantive and procedural matters of the universities: HEIs had no autonomy at all. Influenced by the market-driven economic reform, acknowledging that over-centralization and stringent rules would

kill the initiatives and enthusiasm of local educational institutions, the Communist Party of China Central Committee (CCP CC) began to reduce the rigid control over schools at all levels, as stipulated in the 1985 document named the *Decision on the Educational System Reform*. One of the major themes of the decision relates to the reform of the higher education sector, transferring decision making power from the central government to individual higher education institutions (CCP CC, 1985). Successive policies in the 1990s made Chinese higher education experiencing a large-scale and systemic structural reform. The central government has lessened some degree of control over Chinese higher education and the institutional capacity for self-development has been enhanced. Consequently, Chinese HEIs have begun to enjoy a certain degree of substantive and procedural autonomy. At the same time, in the context of decentralization, universities are increasingly urged to cooperate with the private sectors, and respond to market demand. Marketization of higher education is flourishing, mainly in terms of the creation of private universities, diversification of funding sources and the establishment of a new model for graduates' employment. Additionally, the expert committee's role has also become more significant, being more called by the State to give advice in decision-making processes. Nonetheless, the state authority is still the dominating force in higher education coordination, although the governance model is shifting from a rigid state-control to a certain degree of state-supervising (Mok, 2002).

3.3 Historical Retrospection of Higher Education Quality Assessment Policies in China

3.3.1 The initial and experimental phase: 1985-2001

In 1985, as China began its transformation from a plan to a market economy, CCP CC issued the *Decision on the Educational System Reform.* As mentioned above, the *Decision* called for resolute steps to streamline administration, devolving decision-making power from the central government to individual higher education institutions and strengthening their cooperation with research institutes and private sectors, so that they may have the ability and flexibility to serve economic and social development. In the mean time, this *Decision* prescribed that the departments of educational administration should organize the assessment of HEIs periodically (CCP CC, 1985). The quality assessment of higher education was then launched by this *Decision* that determined the beginning of its initial and experimental phase in China. As a result, the former State Education Commission (Ministry of Education) initiated the pilot quality assessment of the higher engineering education in 1985, which had been implemented in 87 universities until 1990, at institution, faculty and programme levels (Yang, 2002).

Based on the five-year experience of quality assessment, the formal State Education Commission (SEC) promulgated the *Draft Regulation of Higher Education Institutions Assessment* in 1990, which was the first official regulation for higher education quality assessment. This regulation defined the rules of *quality accreditation* for newly-built HEIs, *regular assessment* for institutions that had been accredited, and *excellence assessment* for high-level universities, as well as *self-assessment* for individual universities (State Education Commission, 1990). Henceforward, higher education quality assessment began to be institutionalized in China.

In 1993, the CCP CC and the State Council jointly issued the *Guidelines for the Reform and Development of Education in China.* These guidelines reassured that "government has to change its function from direct control to managing schools (including higher education institutions) through legislation, funding, planning, advice on policies and other necessary means", and stipulated that "performance indicators of all kinds of educational quality assessment should be established; and educational quality assessment should become the routine work of departments of educational administration" (CCP CC & State Council 1993: 7, 10). In 1998, *Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of China* was enacted. Its Article 44 prescribed that "educational quality of HEIs should be subject to the supervision and evaluation by departments of educational administration." Hence, the higher education quality assessment was legislated (CCP CC, 1998).

From 1994 to 2002, three types of quality assessment *(Quality Accreditation, Excellence Assessment and Random Assessment*) were implemented in different levels of HEIs. *Quality Accreditation* focused on higher education institutions with little experience on undergraduate education. *Excellence Assessment* was designed for the universities with high-level teaching quality and a relatively long history of undergraduate education. And *Random Assessment* was aimed at higher education institutions locating between the first two categories. It was the main purpose of these evaluations to examine the teaching quality and monitor the existent conditions in universities and colleges (HEEC, 2004).

Table 3.2 summarizes the main quality assessment policies established and implemented in China during the first phase.

Table 3.2 Main higher education quality assessment policies and their implementation in China from 1985 to 2001

Time	Policy Establishment	Policy Implementation
1985	Decision on the Educational System Reform	Disposing the pilot quality assessment of the higher engineering education
1986-1989		Implementation of the pilot assessment of undergraduate engineering education in 87 universities
1990	Draft Regulation of Higher Education Institutions Assessment	
1993	Guidelines for the Reform and Development of Education in China	
1994		Implementation of *quality accreditation* in 192 HEIs, *excellence assessment* in 10 HEIs and *random assessment* in 26 HEIs
1998	Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of China	
2001		

3.3.2 The phase of formation: 2002-present

Starting in 2002, the MOE combined the three types of quality assessment together and promulgated a new regulation, the *Project of Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education*, which defined the beginning of the second phase of higher education quality assessment in China. According to this project, all HEIs should be assessed in a cycle of five years. And a new organization, the *Higher Education Evaluation Center of the Ministry of Education* (HEEC) was established in August 2004 to undertake these specific assessments. As of the end of 2006, three hundred and eleven HEIs had been evaluated under this new scheme (HEEC, 2007).

Table 3.3 summarizes the most important quality assessment policies established in this phase, as well as its implementation.

Table 3.3 Main higher education quality assessment policies and their implementation in China from 2002 to 2006

Time	Policy Establishment	Policy Implementation
2002	Project of Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education	Implementation of the quality assessment of undergraduate education in 311 HEIs
2004	The establishment of the Higher Education Evaluation Center of the Ministry of Education	

3.4 The Operation of the Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education System in China

In this part, I will present the operation of the quality assessment of undergraduate education in China following the framework used by Schwarz and Westerheijden (2004): coverage, actors and ownership, formal rules and actual implementation, consequences of evaluation, and funding.

3.4.1 Coverage

In principle, all higher education institutions providing undergraduate programs should be covered by the *Project of Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education*, and all of them should be evaluated by HEEC within a period of five years on a rotating basis (HEEC, 2004).

3.4.2 Actors and ownership

The national evaluation agency

As indicated above, the *Project of Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education* is implemented by the *Higher Education Evaluation Centre of the Ministry of Educatio*n (HEEC). As a department of MOE, HEEC presides over the implementation of the quality assessment according to the regulations and specific evaluation criteria set out by MOE, research in educational reforms and evaluation theories/policies. It also provides assessment consultation for universities and training for evaluators.

Expert committee

As for evaluators, a pool of 1369 experts is involved in the quality assessment of undergraduate education currently. And another 573 experts were proposed to the pool in the end of July 2006, but they have not yet been included until now. They are scholars of various disciplines with high academic reputation and/or management experience. They are proposed by universities according to the quota decided by the MOE and appointed ultimately by the MOE. HEEC takes charge of the training of evaluators and organizes expert teams for each assessment program. It is worth mentioning that up to now there are no examiners from other countries in the pool (HEEC, 2007).

3.4.3 Formal rules and actual implementation

Assessment procedures

The review procedures are standardized, including three phases: self-assessment, site visits and

follow-up reforms. First of all, each participating institution is required to prepare a self-assessment report before the site visits of external evaluators. Self-assessment is an important mechanism for internal quality assurance as well as necessary groundwork for external peer review. The contents of the self-assessment reports are not totally pre-determined: institutions to be evaluated can stress some dimensions which are significant or extraordinary for them. However, a fixed format is given by HEEC for comparability (HEEC, 2007). There are eight areas for self-assessment that must be covered in the report, to which I will return in this chapter (Ministry of Education, 2002).

Self-assessment reports of evaluated institutions are collected by the visiting committee, which is composed by 7 to 13 experts, before it starts its "tour". On the basis of the self-assessment reports, the expert committee can formulate specific evaluation schedules, and visit the institutions for almost one week. Their evaluation methods include looking around, in-class inspection and interviews. The content of the self-assessment reports together with the information gathered during the on-site visit, allow the expert panel to elaborate a review report. This report usually consists of some recommendations to the evaluated institution and a judgment on the overall teaching quality of the institution, adopting four grades: excellent, good, qualified or unqualified (HEEC, 2007).

After the site visits and the elaboration of the review report, the panel should report back the assessment results to the MOE. Higher education institutions should implement reforms in the light of the recommendations of the external examiners. They are required to present reform projects to the MOE. And MOE have the right to check whether these projects have been successfully implemented or not, which it does randomly (HEEC, 2007).

Evaluation criteria

The evaluation criteria set out by MOE contains eight major indicators sub-divided in 19 sub-indicators. The indicators are *(1) the direction of institutions' development*, which means the orientation of institutions and the rationale of university running; *(2) the staff*, which include staff numbers and their qualifications; *(3) the facilities for teaching*, i.e. the infrastructure and financing for teaching; *(4) disciplines and teaching*, including the discipline structures, curriculum plans and extra-curricular activities (such as internships); *(5) teaching management*, containing the administration mechanism and internal quality assurance; *(6) the learning climate*, which represents professional morale of teachers and learning environment; *(7) teaching outcomes*, which include the knowledge, skills and morality of students, the quality of graduation projects and theses, physical training, employments and reputation of institutions; *(8) specific characteristics* of each university (Ministry of Education, 2002).

From the perspective of the qualitative-quantitative distinction, the second, third and fourth indicators are mainly quantitative; while the first, sixth and the last one are qualitative, the other two being quantitative-qualitative. As for the objects of the assessment, the second, third and fourth indicators focus on the inputs of education; the seventh one focuses on the outputs; the last one can be used to evaluate any dimensions in the whole input-process-output line; the remaining three concentrate on the process of education and management. Table 3.4 summarizes the analysis made of the eight indicators used for quality assessment.

Table 3.4 The eight indicators used in quality assessment: sub-indicators, methods and focuses (Ministry of Education, 2002)

Number	Indicators	Sub-indicators	Assessment methods	Assessment focuses
1	The direction of institutions' development	✧ The orientation of institutions ✧ The rationale of university running	Qualitative	Process
2	Staff	✧ Staff numbers ✧ Their qualifications	Quantitative	Input
3	Facilities of teaching	✧ Infrastructure of teaching ✧ Expenditure of teaching	Quantitative	Input
4	Disciplines and teaching	✧ Discipline structures ✧ Curriculum plans ✧ Extra-curricular activities	Quantitative	Input
5	Teaching management	✧ Administration of institutions ✧ Internal quality assurance	Quantitative-qualitative	Process
6	Learning climate	✧ Professional morale of teachers ✧ The learning climate	Qualitative	Process
7	Teaching outcomes	✧ Knowledge and skills of students ✧ Physical training ✧ Morality of students; ✧ Quality of graduation theses and projects ✧ Employments ✧ Reputation	Quantitative -qualitative	Output
8	Specific characteristics of the university		Qualitative	Input-Process-Output

3.4.4 Consequences of evaluation

Evaluated institutions – scores obtained

From 2003 to 2005, 171 higher education institutions have been evaluated. The numbers of excellent, good, qualified and unqualified universities are respectively 93, 66, 12, and 0 (see Table 3.5) (HEEC, 2007). This means that 93% of the HEIs assessed are excellent or good, while no institutions were considered unqualified.

Table 3.5 Scores obtained by the evaluated institutions from 2003 to 2005

	Evaluated institutions	Excellent	Good	Qualified	Unqualified
2003	42	20	19	3	0
2004	54	30	19	5	0
2005	75	43	28	4	0
Sum total	171	93	66	12	0
Percentage		54.39%	38.60%	7.01%	0%

Evaluation results and the allocation of resources

In his speech for the foundation of HEEC, the Minister of Education, Zhou Ji, pointed out that the link between evaluation results and funding decisions will be established directly. It is recognized that the evaluation results not only impact universities' public funds but also have implications in the quota the university has for students' recruitment (this is centrally planned by the government) and the authorization of master and doctoral programs, which is quite significant for institutions' reputation and development (Zhou, 2004).

3.4.5 Funding

In China, the quality assessment of undergraduate education system is funded from the government budget.

3.5 Other Types of Quality Assessment Schemes in China

In terms of ownership, two types of quality assessment in higher education, governmental and non-governmental, exist in China nowadays. On the one hand, there are two main governmental evaluation agencies: HEEC and the Academic Degrees & Graduate Education Development Center (ADGEDC), and both of them are departments of the MOE. The HEEC takes charge of the quality evaluation of undergraduate education and vocational education on institutional level. And the

ADGEDC presides over the accreditation of degree-granting units, including masters and doctorates, and the quality assessment of national key subjects at the subject/program level, as well as the excellence evaluation of master and PhD dissertations (ADGEDC, 2003).

On the other hand, there are also two kinds of non-governmental evaluation organizations. University rankings are made by some research institutes and educational for profit companies, such as Wu Shulian and Netbig, based on the assessment of teaching and research quality of higher education institutions. Because these reviews are not made by academic experts on the subjects being reviewed, their evaluations are though to be not scientific and are not approved by academics. However, they are influential in society (mainly to prospective students and their parents, as well as for the labor market) because they allow for comparisons among HEIs. In addition, there are some professional evaluation agencies, such as Jiangsu Agency for Educational Evaluation. They can undertake quality assessment and accreditation for HEIs that intend to be evaluated. Table 3.6 summarizes the different types of quality assessment in higher education in China.

Table 3.6 The types of quality assessment in higher education in China

<table>
<tr><th rowspan="2">Ownership</th><th rowspan="2">Evaluation agency</th><th colspan="3">Evaluation levels</th></tr>
<tr><th>Institution</th><th>Subject</th><th>Individual</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Governmental</td><td rowspan="2">Higher Education Evaluation Centre (HEEC)</td><td>Quality assessment of undergraduate education</td><td rowspan="2"></td><td rowspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>Quality assessment of vocational education</td></tr>
<tr><td>Academic Degrees & Graduate Education Development Center (ADGEDC)</td><td rowspan="2"></td><td>The accreditation of degree-granting units (Masters & Doctors)</td><td rowspan="2">The excellence evaluation of dissertations (Masters & Doctors)</td></tr>
<tr><td>The quality assessment of national key subjects</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Non-governmental</td><td>Research institutes and educational companies</td><td>University rankings</td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Professional evaluation agencies</td><td colspan="3">All types of quality education</td></tr>
</table>

Thus, in this chapter, the Chinese higher education system has been sketched out. The historical evolution of higher education quality assessment policies in China has also been described. In particular, the operation of the quality assessment of undergraduate education system in China has been presented. These provide an important background for the policy analysis in the next chapter, which will focus on the quality assessment of undergraduate education in China, exploring its main problems and trying to find suggestions on how to improve it.

CHAPTER FOUR: POLICY ANALYSIS

The quality assessment of undergraduate education in China

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the policy on the quality assessment of undergraduate education in China will be analyzed by answering the five research questions indicated in Chapter One. Firstly, the main contextual factors underlying the emergence of higher education quality assessment in China will be presented, including the existing quality gap, international communication and cooperation, the changing relationship between the state and higher education institutions, and the requirement of information and accountability towards society, in addition to the pressure of university rankings.

Secondly, the objectives of the quality assessment of undergraduate education policy will be discussed. The policy document identifies its main goals as the enhancement of the governance and direction of the state (compliance) and the improvement of educational quality. Simultaneously the evaluation system undertakes another two implicit functions: information for students/employers and funding agencies and accountability towards society.

Thirdly, I will try to shed some light on this policy's consequences, referring also to some of the problems that have occurred during its implementation (it is now four years since the policy was implemented), based on the results of two empirical studies. Three dimensions of policy effects on the quality improvement of HEIs will be analyzed, i.e. the establishment of teaching regulations and universities' development planning, the inputs, and the outputs of teaching. In addition, the impacts of the evaluation policy on transparency of HEIs and accountability towards society will also be discussed.

Fourthly, through comparison with the stated policy objectives, I will discuss whether the quality assessment policy has fulfilled them.

Fifthly, I will reflect on the quality assessment of undergraduate education policy in China, exploring the reasons why its objectives have not been completely fulfilled, especially regarding improvement and accountability. Resorting to the theoretical approach made in Chapter Two, an analysis will be made of the factors that can affect the quality assessment policy leading to different types of consequences. These include the relationship between the Chinese government and higher

education, the policy objectives elaborated, the definition of higher education quality adopted and the evaluation model and methods used.

Finally, I will try to put forward some recommendations on the quality assessment policy aiming at solving the main problems and the unintended consequences detected. To do this, I will follow the incremental and rational models of policy making and reform.

4.2 The Policy Context Underlying the Emergence of Higher Education Quality Assessment in China

4.2.1 The quality gap

The expansion of enrollments

The dramatic transition from an elite to a mass system of higher education in China was initiated in 1998. The initial motivation for boosting enrollments to universities was to expand domestic demand and accelerate the economic growth, in combination with a cost sharing policy. The expanding enrollment policy was nevertheless made without the necessary previous preparation, such as the foundation of new HEIs. Consequently, from 1998 to 2004, the total number of undergraduate admissions in China multiplied by three times, whereas the number of higher education institutions providing undergraduate education only increased by 15.9% (Ministry of Education, 1998-2005). That is to say, the expanding enrollment was mainly undertaken by existing universities rather than newly-built institutions. The numbers of HEIs and undergraduate students in Chinese higher education in 1998 and 2004 are presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Numbers of undergraduate students and higher education institutions in 1998 and 2004 (Source from Ministry of Education, 1998-2005)

Year	Institutions	Students admitted	Students enrolled
1998	590	653,135	2,234,647
2004	684	2,099,151	7,378,436
Percentage increase	15.9%	221.40%	230.18%

The decline of unit educational resources

Chinese universities receive the majority of their funding from public sources. After the reform for expanding enrollments in 1998, and although appropriate funds for higher education have increased significantly, the resources available for higher education grew at a slower rate than the participation rate. Therefore, the unit costs per higher education student have stepped down from

1998 to 2004 although there were short-term increases in 1999 and 2000. Simultaneously, the rate of teachers' increase in universities was also lower than the expansion of admissions. Consequently, the undergraduate student-teacher ratios have increased steadily, except for a decrease in 2004. Both the unit costs per student and student-teacher ratios are depicted in Table 4.2 and Figure 4.1 and 4.2.

Table 4.2 The unit costs per student and student-teacher ratios of Chinese higher education from 1998 to 2004 (Source from Ministry of Education, 1998-2005)

Year	Unit cost (Yuan)	Student-teacher ratio
1998	9,667	11.63
1999	10,164	13.67
2000	10,230	16.04
2001	9,429	18.47
2002	8,630	20.60
2003	8,124	21.07
2004	7,850	17.44

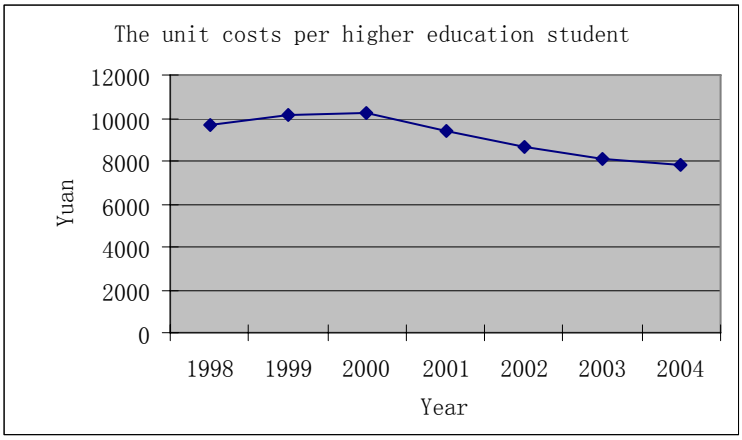

Figure 4.1 The unit costs per student of Chinese higher education from 1998 to 2004 (Source from Ministry of Education, 1998-2005)

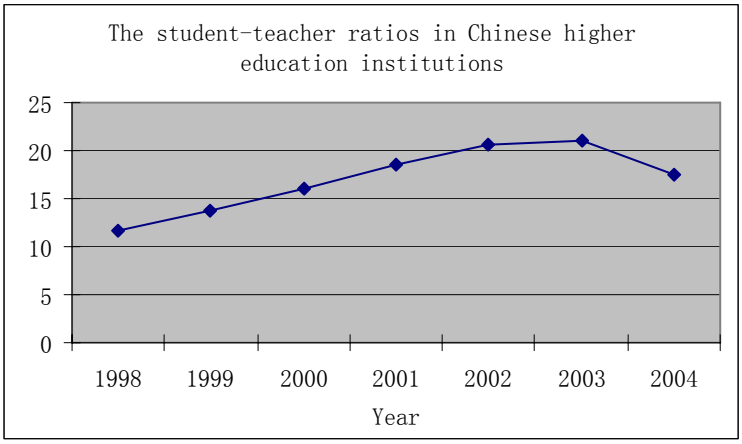

Figure 4.2 The student-teacher ratios in Chinese higher education institutions from 1998 to 2004 (Source from Ministry of Education, 1998-2005)

The reform of the faculty evaluation system

In the last few years, global competition and the knowledge economy made research productivity more important in Chinese universities. Newly instituted faculty assessment systems reflect these changes. More and more universities begin to adopt the international convention of "publish or perish" and use the number of papers published annually as the main indicator to evaluate academic work. Compared to research, teaching efficiency and effectiveness are not at all emphasised in the criteria used to decide on the promotion of staff. With the pressure to conduct more research, professors prefer to stay in laboratories and supervise graduate students rather than teach undergraduate courses. As a result, professors lecturing undergraduate students become less and less.

All these factors contributed to a quality gap (see sub-chapter 2.4.2) that was becoming broader and harder to close. Quality assessment emerged then as a way to bridge it or at least to diminish its size.

4.2.2 International communication and cooperation

In the context of internationalization, Chinese universities broaden their sights to an international perspective. The international flows of students and scholars are unprecedented in the history of China. In 2003, the total number of students and scholars studying abroad was 117,300, among which 3,002 people were state-funded, 5,144 employer-funded and 109,200 self-funded (Ministry of Education, 2004b). In the same year, 77,715 students from 175 countries were accepted by 353 Chinese HEIs. In addition, the cooperative programs with foreign institutions and various forms of

communication flourished (Ministry of Education, 2004a). In this context, it is necessary to enhance the transparency and comparability of educational quality for international exchange of students and academics, cooperation among institutions and other forms of international communication. Quality assessment systems are usually regarded as ways to promote this transparency and comparability.

4.2.3 The changing relationship between the state and higher education

Beginning in the 1980s, the Chinese government started to reform the governance model of higher education. As indicated in sub-chapter 3.2.3, *the Decision on the Educational System Reform* promulgated in 1985 emphasized decentralization of power to individual institutions that would be responsible for governing their own affairs (CCP CC, 1985). Since then, the former SEC (Ministry of Education) no longer directly controlled and managed nearly every aspect of the higher education system. Instead, the SEC just assumed overall leadership, providing policy guidance and direction. With other successive reforms in the 1990s, the Chinese government identified the reduction of centralization and government control as the long-term goals of the reform. Consequently, the Chinese government began to shift its role from education controller to the architecture of the educational system and its quality assuror. Quality assessment then appeared as the other face of autonomy (Neave & van Vught, 1994).

4.2.4 The requirement for information and accountability towards society

The cost sharing policy and the changing graduates' employment model

A cost-sharing policy was implemented in China in 1997. Undergraduate students began to pay tuition fees, almost equal to 25% of unit costs, and this amount is still increasing (State Education Commission, State Planning Commission & Ministry of Finance, 1996). Furthermore, significant changes took place in the area of a tightly controlled job-assignment system for graduates. In the past, graduates in China were assigned to different posts and jobs according to the centralized plan of government. Since the mid 1990s, no graduates have been guaranteed jobs. They find employment in the labor market by themselves. In this context, students and their parents claim they have the right to know the quality of the "products" they have to pay for. Employers also want to get more information about the quality of their prospective employees. Quality assessment is then seen as a way to provide information to students, their families and the labor market (employers).

The intense financial deficit

From 1998 to 2004, educational expenditures in terms of GDP in China have been respectively 2.59%, 2.79%, 2.87%, 3.19%, 3.32%, 3.28%, 2.79%, and 2.82% (Ministry of Education, 1998-2005). However, the percentages of higher education expenditure in relation to the total educational expenditures have increased a lot, from about 18% to 28% (Pan, 2006). The unbalance of educational input between basic education and higher education evoked many complaints from primary and secondary schools. However, as indicated above, the funding for higher education grew at a slower rate than the participation rate. Consequently, HEIs turned to loans from commercial banks as a way to increase their levels of funding. In China nowadays public higher education institutions have debts of more than 25 billion dollars. It is then very difficult for universities to get loans from banks, since they do not have the capacity to pay the debts in the short term (Wu, 2004). Even the interest has become a heavy financial pressure for HEIs. Currently in China there is a huge debate about who should repay these big loans for HEIs. The Chinese government (general taxpayers) may be the only answer, because almost all of the universities in debt are public universities. And the Minister of Education, Zhouji promised that these universities will not be bankrupt (People, 2007). Some local governments have paid their universities' debts: Zhejiang province paid 0.5 billion dollars to subsidize the interest of local universities' loans (Wang & Xi, 2006). In this context, quality assessment is seen as an instrument to be accountable to society for the public funds, parts of which are "grabbed" from basic education.

The general request for better public services

The Chinese government has launched a reform of the public service sectors, in order to provide high-quality service and at the same time retrench their expenses. Higher education institutions, as the main locus of basic and applied research, as well as the producers of high-level labor force, get growing concern about their "service" quality. Quality assessment is seen both as an instrument to enhance the efficiency of HEIs and to provide accountability towards society for the "service" standards achieved by HEIs.

The negative reports on higher education students

Negative reports about higher education institutions and students have become a reality in past years, as published by mass media. These reports have been criticized and considered a "distortion of university students" (Liu, 2006). A recent investigation on universities/colleges students' opinions about these reports shows that 67% of respondents feel that there are more negative reports about higher education students than positive ones; while only 18% of respondents feel the opposite. And 61% students think that the current reports in the mass media denigrate higher education students (Chen, 2006). Inevitably, these "negative reports" contributed to the erosion of

trust in higher education quality. A quality assessment system can then be viewed as a substitute for trust, assuring society that its higher education system has indeed quality.

4.2.5 The pressure of university rankings

An additional impetus to establish the quality assessment schemes with an official nature seems to come from the publication of university rankings, which are disseminated extensively by mass media, such as newspapers, magazines and networks from 1987 onwards, after the first Chinese university ranking was published in *Science Technology Daily.* As mentioned in sub-chapter 3.5, the "unscientific" evaluation criteria and the methods used are criticized by higher education institutions and researchers. Notwithstanding, universities and colleges can not ignore the rankings totally because they are influential in society, especially for prospective students. Consequently, they can significantly affect the recruitment capacity of universities. Ministerial officials seem to realize that "we had rather do something (better) ourselves", as a response to the complaints from HEIs. Therefore, MOE of China has published annually the results of the quality assessment of undergraduate education in mass media.

In sum, similarly with the developments that occurred in other countries, Chinese higher education quality assessment policy was promoted by the quality gap, international communication and cooperation, the changing relationship between higher education institutions and the state, and the requirement for information and accountability towards society, in addition to the pressure of university rankings.

4.3 The Policy Objectives Underlying the Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education in China

Policy objectives vary in the degree to which they are explicit/clear versus implicit/ambiguous (Gornitzka, 1999). The policy objectives underlying the quality assessment of undergraduate education in China also can be stated in terms of this explicit/implicit dichotomy.

The *Project of Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education* established the following functions for the quality assessment system:

> On the basis of the *Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of China*, the quality assessment policy is initiated to promote educational reforms and improvement, and enhance educational administration. The quality assessment and educational improvement

> should be combined, while improvement should be stressed. In addition, the quality assessment is an instrument to intensify the macro-management and guidance of the state, promote all departments of educational administration to support teaching in higher education institutions. At the same time, it can be used to direct universities to implement the educational guidance of the state, improve the teaching conditions, ameliorate the educational infrastructure, strengthen management of teaching, change some traditional teaching methods, and improve the educational quality and effectiveness (Ministry of Education 2002: 10).

As mentioned in Chapter Two, it is possible to identify six purposes for higher education quality assessment: quality improvement, accountability to society for public funding and the standards achieved, examining the achievement of governmental goals and planning (compliance), information for funding decisions and for students/employers; facilitating international mobility of students and international comparison of institutions. On the one hand, based on the statement above we can affirm that there are two main explicit objectives for the quality assessment according to the project, i.e. intensifying the governance and direction of the state, and improving educational quality, meaning the *compliance* and *improvement* purposes of quality assessment.

On the other hand, against the backdrop of policy formation, the main functions that the quality assessment policy should undertake in China can be summarized. Above all, quality assessment is introduced to bridge the quality gap, maintaining and improving teaching quality. Secondly, based on the changing relationship between HEIs and the state, the quality assessment system takes the functions of examining the achievement of governmental goals and planning to ensure that institutions will behave as the government wants them to behave. Thus, quality assessment becomes a compliance tool. Thirdly, in the context of internationalization, the new cost sharing policy and the changing employment model, the quality assessment system also functions as an information publisher, promoting transparency and comparability of HEIs. It can both provide information for funding agencies and for students/employers and facilitate international mobility of students and international comparisons of institutions. Finally, on account of the intense deficit spending of HEIs, the "negative reports" on higher education students and the reforms of the public sectors, the quality assessment policy has an accountability function, both for public funding and the standards achieved.

In conclusion, *improvement* and *compliance* are the explicit objectives in the quality assessment policy discourse. At the same time, the discourse also implicitly includes the functions of *information* and *accountability*.

4.4 Main Policy Consequences and Problems for the Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education in China

In this section, I will use the results of two research studies on the policy impacts of quality assessment, made respectively by the institution of policy implementation (HEEC) and a research group of Beijing Normal University. Both of them mainly focus on the institutional consequences of quality assessment policy and the main problems it has brought on. On the one hand, HEEC investigated all the 117 HEIs which had been evaluated by the end of 2005. The main subjects of the investigation are presidents, secretaries of the Party Committee, vice-presidents and deans of universities, leaders of educational administrative organizations and a sample of evaluators (Li, 2006). On the other hand, the research group of Beijing Normal University made a sampling survey in 54 higher education institutions, including 14 evaluated universities and 40 that will be assessed in two years. Staffs coordinating the work of quality assessment in HEIs are the main subjects of the survey (Zhang & Zhu, 2007).

It is worth mentioning that the studies on the consequences of quality assessment policy have some measurement problems, as indicated in sub-chapter 2.4.5. First of all, it is impossible to control all relevant factors to map causal relations. Secondly, measuring impact is further complicated due to universities' and colleges' complex forms of information-processing and decision-making traditions. Thirdly, a particular problem when analyzing effects relates to the many purposes associated with quality assessment. Both studies mainly focus on the effects of one of the quality assessment purposes: improvement. Finally, there is a methodological problem related to the potential political and economic gains of being a "good implementer" of quality assessment, especially in the study conducted by the HEEC.

4.4.1 Main policy consequences

Both studies mainly focus their efforts on the analysis of the policy consequences on the set up of teaching regulations, the input of teaching (funding, teachers, and infrastructures), and the output of undergraduate education (the improvement of students and universities). They intend to examine to what extent the assessment policy has improved the teaching activity and effectiveness in HEIs. The research conducted by HEEC focuses on 12 kinds of policy consequences and the data can be shown in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3 The main policy consequences on higher education institutions I (Li, 2006)

The effects of the quality assessment policy on higher education institutions	**Significant effects**	**Moderate Effects**	**No effects**	**Negative effects**
Regulating daily teaching activity	95%	0	4%	1%
Reforming teaching regulations and the implementation of internal quality assurance mechanisms	81%	18%	1%	0
Improving teaching conditions	84%	15%	1%	0
Constructing laboratories	75%	23%	1%	1%
Clarifying the rationale of university running and fostering the characteristics of universities	69%	29%	1%	1%
Increasing the funding of undergraduate education	58%	40%	2%	0
Improvement of the quantity and quality of staff	Approx. 50%	Approx. 40%		
Improvement of libraries				
Improvement of sports equipment				
Reforming teaching methods and instruments				
Improving quality of graduates				
Improving knowledge, skills and creativity of students				

In the second investigation, the research group of Beijing Normal University asked respondents to score opinions on various effects of quality policy on a scale of 1 (significant effects), 2 (moderate effects), 3 (slight effect), and 4 (no effects) (Zhang & Zhu, 2007). The data collected with the survey is presented in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4 The main policy consequences on higher education institutions II (Zhang & Zhu, 2007)

The effects of the quality assessment policy	**Means**	**Standard deviation**
Clarifying the rationale of university running	1.80	0.65
Fostering characteristics of universities	2.06	0.65
Regulating daily teaching activity	1.72	0.58
Promoting the foundation of internal quality assurance mechanisms	1.85	0.56
Improving teaching conditions	1.89	0.77
Promoting the reformation of discipline structures and teaching	1.99	0.66
Improving the quality and quantity of staff	2.06	0.64
Improvement of educational quality	2.34	0.60
Improvement of universities' reputation	2.40	0.62
Improvement of students	2.56	0.62
Amelioration of learning climate	2.63	0.66

In general, there are mainly three kinds of policy impacts on institutions that have been investigated, i.e. the planning of universities' development and the establishment of teaching regulations, the input and output of teaching. As for the planning of universities' development and the establishment of teaching regulations, the percentages of respondents, assuming they are affected significantly, are comparatively high in the first research. And in the second investigation, the average scores are mainly distributed between 1.5 and 2. That is to say, the first dimension of impacts is considerable. As far as the second kind of impacts is concerned, i.e. the input of teaching, the percentages of respondents considering they are impacted strongly are moderate, fluctuating around 60% in the first survey. And in the second investigation, the means are scattered around 2, which means the policy affects the improvement of teaching conditions to some extent. Regarding the output of teaching, the percentages of respondents answering they are influenced significantly is approximate 50%, in the first investigation. While in the second investigation, the means are around 2.5, which means the impacts are less relevant.

In conclusion, according to the survey data above, a majority of respondents think the quality assessment policy has significant effects on the establishment of teaching regulations and the planning of universities' development. However, the impacts on the input of teaching are moderate. And the output of teaching, such as the development of students, has hardly been improved by the implementation of the new policy. Table 4.5 summarizes the analysis just made on the results of the two studies.

Table 4.5 Main policy impacts on higher education institutions

	Number	**The effects of the quality assessment policy**	**The percentage of significant effects** (in the first investigation)	**Means** (in the second investigation)
The planning of universities' development and the establishment of teaching regulations	1	Clarifying the rationale of university running	69%	1.80
	2	Fostering characteristics of universities	69%	2.06
	3	Regulating daily teaching activity	95%	1.72
	4	Promoting the foundation of internal quality assurance mechanisms	81%	1.85
	5	Reforming of teaching methods and instruments	50%	1.99
The input of teaching	6	Improving the teaching conditions	84%	1.89
	7	Increasing the funding of undergraduate education	58%	
	8	Improving the quality and quantity of staff	50%	2.06
The output of teaching	9	Improvement of educational quality	50%	2.34
	10	Improvement of universities' reputation		2.40
	11	Improving knowledge, skills and creativity of students	50%	2.56
	12	Amelioration of learning climate		2.63

4.4.2 Main Policy Problems

Both research studies focus on the main problems the policy is confronted with. In the first research (conducted by the HEEC) open-ended questions were employed allowing summarizing four main problems of the newly-instituted quality assessment policy. First of all, many respondents complained that the cost of assessment is really high. Secondly, the external compulsory

assessment is not consistent with the routine work of institutions, bringing a lot of bureaucratic burdens to the institutions. Thirdly, the close relationship between quality review reports and funding decisions in higher education leads to a "compliance culture", which means that the aim of most universities participating in evaluation appears to be to meet the assessment criteria in order to get more funding from the government. What is worse, it is very common to make some false documents to get positive results in the evaluation. Finally, the standardization of assessment methods and criteria puts pressure on homogenization of higher education institutions (Li, 2006).

The second survey (conducted by the research group of Beijing Normal University) used close-ended questions, enumerating eight kinds of problems that the quality assessment has brought on. The data collected is depicted in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6 Main problems of the quality assessment policy (Zhang & Zhu, 2007)

The problems of the quality assessment policy	**Percentages of agreement answers**
The cost of assessment is too high	26.8%
Assessment methods and performance indicators are standardized	20.0%
The assessment is too bureaucratic	20.0%
Higher education institutions are passive and have no right on the assessment	12.7%
The quality assessment leads to corruption	6.8%
The quality assessment neglects the development of students	4.9%
The disregard for the essence of educational quality	4.4%
The performance indicators are unscientific	4.4%

According to this survey, it is evident that the main problems detected are similar to the ones highlighted in the investigation conducted by the HEEC, i.e. the assessment is not cost-effective; the evaluation methods and performance indicators are standardized, the assessment processes are too bureaucratic and the status of institutions is compulsory and passive without right to participate in the decision about assessment procedures.

In summary, the quality assessment is not cost-effective. The right of universities to participate in the decision-making of the assessment policy is neglected. Hence, the external compulsory assessment is not consistent with the routine work of institutions, and becomes a bureaucratic burden on academics. In addition, the performance-based funds result in a "compliance culture".

Especially, the false materials are rampant in universities evaluated, which not only affect the equity of the assessment, but also give a negative morality education to students (Du, Zhou, Li & Xia, 2006). Last but not least, the use of uniform performance indicators is leading to the homogenization of HEIs.

Aiming at dealing with the common cheating behaviors of HEIs, Zhou Ji, the minister of Education, proposed the project of *Sunny Evaluation* on the Conference of Higher Education Quality Assessment in April 18, 2006. The main goal behind the *Sunny Evaluation* is to increase the transparency of the assessment processes. Under this new project, the self-assessment reports, the review judgment made by the external evaluators and the reform projects of evaluated institutions will be published and available to the general public. Furthermore, a database of HEIs will be constructed and published once a year. In addition, HEEC has the right to punish universities which are found to make false materials for evaluation by judging them unqualified (Zhou, 2006).

The HEEC has also modified the uniform set of performance indicators. The assessment indicators were adjusted for the medical universities in August 2004. Successively, performance indicators for institutions of art and physical education were also modified in September 2006. At the same time, the evaluation criteria for high-level universities were upgraded (HEEC, 2007).

4.5 Objectives vs. Consequences of the Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education Policy in China

According to the two studies reported in the sub-chapters above, the quality assessment policy has promoted the establishment of teaching regulations and the planning of universities' development, but teaching outcomes, such as students' learning, have hardly been improved by the implementation of the new policy. In addition, it is recognized that Chinese students can make better-informed choices about their place to study and be less driven by the allure of traditional (and often out-dated) reputations alone. Employers also can use the evaluation results as an argument in their decisions to hire one graduate rather than another. And central and local governments have more reference to decide the incremental or decremental funding of universities (Whitman, 2004). However, the policy also brought on some unintended problems. For example, there is the complaint that the policy is not cost-effective and has become a bureaucratic burden on higher education institutions; its uniform evaluation methods and criteria are also criticized due to the possibility of contributing to the homogenization of HEIs. Additionally the performance-based funding is seen as leading to a "compliance culture" in HEIs, namely to the falsification of relevant

documents, which not only affects the integrity and fairness of the assessment, but also gives negative ethical examples to students.

When it comes to the policy objectives, as indicated above, *improvement* and *compliance* are the main objectives of the quality assessment policy, *information* and *accountability* being its secondary purposes. Therefore, it is evident that the purpose of quality *improvement* has been fulfilled only to a certain degree, mainly in the dimension of the establishment of teaching regulations and the planning of universities' development. With regard to *information*, the quality assessment policy seems to be effective for funding agencies and students/employers. However, the falsification that was detected in the process of quality assessment has weakened its authority as a source of serious information on the quality of undergraduate education. As for *accountability,* the evaluation result that 93% Chinese HEIs are excellent/good is not convincing. On the one hand, the assessment shows that the teaching level is really satisfactory in China, and that there is only a small space to improve. On the other hand, the international comparison and reports in mass media show the opposite picture. As a result, the quality assessment becomes an instrument to conceal the decline of essential quality and to legitimate that decline. Because accountability depends on truth-telling, the rampant falsification makes accountability only a rhetoric issue. Finally, regarding *compliance,* indeed, it is very difficult to measure to what extent it has been realized in practice.

4.6 Reflections on the Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education Policy in China

4.6.1 A rationale

In this part, I will try to put in perspective the main factors contributing to the low efficiency of the quality assessment policy, combining the principles of policy-making and the theoretical framework of quality assessment in higher education discussed in Chapter Two. As a rule, a policy is designed to solve policy issues identified in a specific policy environment. That is to say, the context underlying the establishment of the quality assessment system can have some influence on its objectives (Thomas, 2001). In this tone the relationship between the government and higher education, as an important political context, can affect the objectives of the quality assessment policy; at the same time, it can also influence the national quality assessment model, as discussed in 2.3.1. In addition, policy objectives influence the approaches used to implement the policy. Moreover the "quality" definition adopted also relates to the models and approaches that quality assessment schemes take (see sub-chapter 2.2). Finally, the assessment objectives and methods will

be determinants of the quality assessment policy's consequences and efficiency (Brennan and Shah, 2000). This rationale for the analysis of the quality assessment policy is depicted in Figure 4.3.

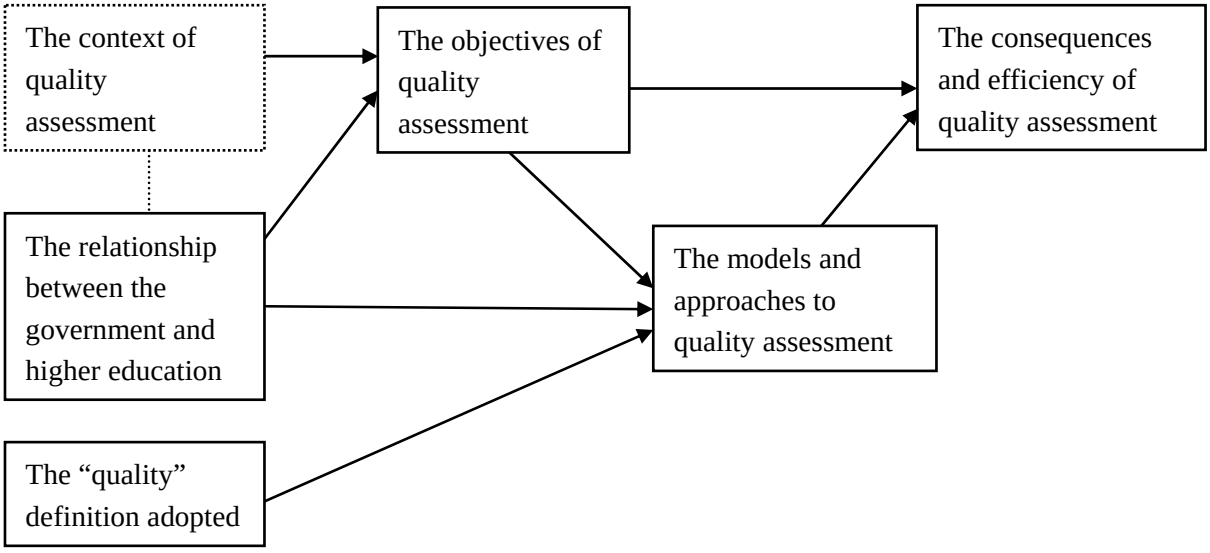

Figure 4.3 A rationale for the reflections on the quality assessment policy

Bearing in mind that the Chinese governance model is shifting from a rigid state-control to a certain degree of state-supervising, although the state authority is still the dominating force over academic oligarchy and market in higher education coordination, I will use the proposed rationale to reflect on the quality assessment policy implemented in China. Firstly the rationality and feasibility of the policy objectives: improvement, compliance, information and accountability will be explored in the context of the quality assessment policy formation. Secondly I will examine whether the definition of "quality", which is the starting point for the formation of the quality assessment policy, is adequate or not in the context of the Chinese higher education system. Finally, I will concentrate on the model and methods of quality assessment, analysing its main shortcomings and the way those can hinder the fulfilment of the policy objectives.

4.6.2 The objectives of the quality assessment policy

Improvement

Similarly with the situation in other countries, the quality assessment of undergraduate education scheme claims to encourage *improvement*. The rapid expansion of higher education enrollments, without an adequate increase of staffing and resources, made the quality decline of higher education inevitable. On the one hand, in an era of mass higher education, the increasing student

number leads to the diversity of students and teachers, whose levels are not as high as those in an elite education era. At the same time, the increased diversity of both students and teachers forces a fundamental change in curriculum and pedagogy. On the other hand, the lacking of teaching infrastructures and the increase of student-teacher ratios also affect educational quality. In principle, it is almost impossible to compare the standards of an elite higher education system to the ones of mass higher education. Thus, the quality gap between the expansion of the higher education system and the diminishing unit costs (see Figure 2.4) is highly difficult to reconcile and can not be bridged only through quality assessment or quality assurance schemes.

However, this does not mean that the existing evaluation scheme is useless for quality improvement. As mentioned above, the quality assessment policy has contributed to an increased attention towards teaching. To some extent, it is a potent instrument to balance the deflection to research in universities caused by the reform of the faculty evaluation mechanism. Notwithstanding, the concern about teaching quality also brings heavy workloads for staff. Teaching activities, like all other work carried out in higher education institutions depends heavily on the creative commitment of their staff. Obviously, added burdens and the feeling of being scrutinized can demotivate staff who is already involved in innovation and quality initiatives, especially in the long run.

The external quality evaluation is also beneficial to the modification of teaching methods, the establishment of teaching regulations, and the clarification of universities' development planning as indicated in the two studies' results reported in sub-chapter 4.4. The quality assessment scheme can contribute to enhancing the efficiency of the limited resources by requiring the production of strategic plans, clear objectives, quality assurance schemes and the modification of teaching methods. Thus, it can be an initial impetus towards quality improvement. However, for the moment it is still unclear whether there is a tendency towards continuous quality improvement in the long run as a result of this initial push.

Therefore, although in the policy under discussion the objective of *improvemen*t is rational, it seems to lack feasibility especially in the long run.

Compliance

Differently from the situation in other countries, *compliance* is a purpose indicated in the quality assessment policy documents in China. The quality assessment procedure is used to check whether the governmental policies have been implemented and the governmental goals have been achieved. In the context of the changing relationship between the state and higher education institutions, it is necessary to use the quality assessment as an instrument to monitor the HEIs from a distance. The

policy objective of *compliance* may be very easy to realize, but it will inevitably erode the autonomy of HEIs, hindering their development in the long run. Therefore, the objective of *compliance* is feasible, but not very beneficial for HEIs.

Information

With the new cost sharing policy and the changing graduates' employment model, it is imperative for prospective students and employers to know more about universities, especially about the educational quality they provide. The quality assessment of undergraduate education system is an important way to increase the transparency of HEIs, competing with university rankings as a more authoritative source of information. Notwithstanding, it still does not replace university rankings, because the degree of comparability of its four-grade evaluation results is lower. In China, increased institutional transparency seems to be the most noticeable effect of quality assessment policies, like in other countries. As mentioned above, prospective students can make better informed choices in selecting their HEIs; employers get more opportunities to know about the quality of their future employees and central and local governments also have more information to base their decisions of the university funding on. Thus, the objective of *information* is both rational and feasible in the context of Chinese higher education.

Accountability

"*Accountability* is the obligation to report to others, to explain, to justify, to answer questions about how resources have been used, and to what effect" (Trow 1996: 2). The intense financial deficit, the general quest for better public services and the significant number of negative reports on university students in mass media erode the trust in higher education institutions. Thus, the quality assessment policy can contribute to make HEIs *accountable* towards the general public for the use of huge public funds and for the standards they achieved.

4.6.3 The quality definition underlying the quality assessment policy

There is little theorizing about quality in higher education. Worldwide, the preponderant approach to external quality evaluation is pragmatic, often working backwards from the political presumption. In some cases, the method is determined before the purpose. In China, the term quality in higher education also remained undefined during the formation and implementation of the quality assessment policies. Therefore, the definition of quality that underlies the Chinese quality assessment of undergraduate education policy should be explored from the perspective of the quality assessment approaches.

"Fitness for/of purposes"

Taking into account the five definitions of Green (1994), it is possible to say that "quality" means a combination of "conformance to specification or standards" and "fitness for purposes", i.e. "fitness for/of purposes" in the existing Chinese quality assessment policy. The evaluation of teaching input mainly takes the standards-based method to check whether the quality of staff and infrastructures can meet the standards established in the Project. And the monitoring of processes and outputs of undergraduate education primarily use the mission-based ways to judge whether they reach the purposes of higher education, such as providing a satisfactory learning environment and high-level graduates.

As criticized by Barnett (1992), using approaches of this kind, leads to judge institutions in terms of the dominant value existent in the wider society, rather than judging them based on the values that lie at the heart of the enterprise of higher education itself. Additionally instrumental reasons in this domain encourage the use of performance indicators. And this type of thinking goes further: there develops all too easily a focus on the size of institutions and quantity comes before quality. For example, the number of a lecturer's publications becomes more important than their quality and the number of books in an institution's library is more important than their quality. Finally, higher education all too easily focuses on the means, rather than on its purposes; so much so, that means become purposes in their own right. Performance indicators are not, therefore, just measures which those on the outside of the academic world use to judge institutions. They also become the means by which institutions organize and direct themselves, and judge their own performance. In conclusion, the definition of "fitness for/of purposes" results in the external value dominating the quality criteria, prioritizing quantity over quality, and emphasizing means of evaluation (performance indicators) rather than purposes of higher education. Although the surface structure of the idea of "fitness for/of purposes" is that of a general interest in the maintenance and the development of standards, its deep structure turns out to have little to do with the quality of what is going on in HEIs and more to do with legitimating an institutional hierarchy and an instrumental control of it (Barnett, 1992). The cynical view would be that the purpose of "fitness for/of purposes" is to conceal the decline of essential quality and to legitimate that decline (Harvey and Newton, 2007). Therefore, terming quality as "fitness for/of purposes" is the primary reason why the quality assessment policy has not been very effective when it comes to education quality improvement in China.

Objectivist

Regarding Barnett's definitions of quality (1992), it is obvious that the definition underpinning the Chinese quality assessment policy is the objectivist one, assuming that it is possible to identify and quantify certain aspects of higher education, and that the same assessment can be accorded to all courses or all institutions. The resulting figures can tell a story not only about a particular institution but also about the institution in relation to others, which can be used to make a comparison.

Based on the definition of "fitness for/of purposes", the operation of the quality assessment implies having a clear idea of HEIs' purposes, or else it is impossible to measure how well an institution is doing in achieving them. What are the purposes of higher education in China? Clark (1983) emphasizes the natural ambiguity of higher education purposes as a whole. Notwithstanding, not all kinds of higher education institutions have the same purposes. In terms of the classification of Barnett (1992), there are general purposes, which mark out the educational territory inhibited by all HEIs, as well as particular purposes that an individual institution (or one kind of institutions) set for itself or themselves (see sub-chapter 2.3.2).

However, almost all of HEIs in China have similar goals that essentially have to do with becoming comprehensive, research-oriented universities, simulating Tsinghua University and Perking University. Nonetheless, diversification is imperative for the Chinese higher education system (see sub-chapter 3.2.2) and, in this context, the objectivist definition of quality is not appropriate, since this definition suffers from insensitivity to the differences of purposes, tradition and social location across HEIs. Having a dominant objectivist definition of "quality" underlying the quality assessment policy linked to standardized evaluation criteria is certainly a driver towards the homogenization of HEIs. Therefore, it can be concluded that the definition of quality as objectivist and the standardized evaluation criteria reflect the reality of Chinese HEIs' homogenization, and exacerbate it further.

4.6.4 The models and approaches used in the quality assessment policy

Referring to the general approaches to quality assessment in higher education described in sub-chapter 2.4.4 and the operation of quality assessment of undergraduate education in China elaborated in 3.4, in this part, I will discuss the approaches to the quality assessment in terms of the evaluation agency, evaluators, evaluation procedures, the measurement of quality, and the connection between evaluation results and funding.

The evaluation agency

In terms of the general model, the government initiates evaluation schemes, and a national agency takes charge of coordinating the quality assessment system. This agency should have a legal status but be independent from both the government and the HEIs at least in the operational aspects. However, as indicated in Chapter Three, the quality assessment procedures and methods are defined by the MOE in China, the compulsory evaluations being implemented by the HEEC, one of MOE's departments. Without the active participation of higher education institutions, their requirements have been disregarded. As a result, it is inevitable that the evaluation process becomes a highly bureaucratic burden on HEIs rather than a chance for learning and improvement. At the same time, due to the fact that the quality assessment system can not be ignored, HEIs must respond to it in a rather formalistic way, which leads to the anxious rehearsals towards a forthcoming site visit, whole days given to walking through the visit and every moment and conversation choreographed and planned for the fullest effect. Thus, the routine work of universities is disturbed, and the staff's precious time is used on the meaningless preparation for site visit rather than on creative work to really improve the teaching quality of HEIs.

Evaluators

According to the general model, the external peers would need to be selected to represent specific expertise (academic, management, etc) depending on the focus and purpose of the visit. They mainly come from the academic world, and a minority representative from other stakeholders is also widespread practice. As mentioned above, members of the expert pool are mainly scholars of various disciplines with high academic reputation and/or management experience in China. On the one hand, if thinking about the teaching quality of undergraduate programs, there is no specialist in teaching-learning, higher education and quality evaluation involved in the assessment. Consequently, the scientificity and reliability of evaluation has been pined down to some degree, which is not beneficial to quality improvement and accountability towards society. On the other hand, no evaluators come from outside the academic world, such as representatives from employers or alumni, nor is there the participation of current students. It is recognized that different interest groups have their own ideas as to what constitutes quality and how to measure it; the actual quality assessment arrangements in use will be the outcomes of interplays between the competing interest groups, as indicated in sub-chapter 2.2. That exemplifies that other stakeholders have no voice in the process of teaching quality assessment in China. And the quality assessment process is a game between government and HEIs, the government being preponderant. Because the opinions of students, employers and other stakeholders on the assessment and improvement of teaching quality can not be taken into account, the policy efficiency in realizing the quality improvement is reduced. At the same time, the accountability towards these stakeholders is also weakened.

Evaluation procedures

As proposed by the general model, the evaluation procedures should be a combination of self-assessment and external peer review: the former is the basis of the latter, which are followed by a published report setting out the findings of site visit, and recommendations made to institutions. And in China the quality assessment procedures include three phases: self-assessment, site visits and follow-up reforms, as stated in 3.4.3, which follows the general model and combines the self-assessment and external evaluation effectively.

The measurement of quality

As summarized in 2.4.4, the measurement of quality should combine performance indicators with peer review. Performance indicators play some role in quality assessment, but can never have the last say or take the place of peer review, and *vice versa* (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). The evaluation criteria are composed of performance indicators and peer review in China. Evaluation indicators include quantitative and qualitative ones, taking into account the whole teaching process: input-process-output (see the subchapter 3.4.3). However, the peer review in the process of quality assessment mainly relies on the indicators regulated by MOE while its other functions have not been performed sufficiently. External experts have not been active in dialogue with staff of the evaluated universities to help them reveal particular weaknesses and give them relevant suggestions for improvement. As a result, the comparability of quality assessment results has been enhanced, but the improvement objective has been neglected. In addition, as mentioned above, the evaluation criteria are uniform for all of HEIs evaluated, which is a significant driver for the harmonization of HEIs while it is claimed that diversity is needed in the context of Chinese higher education system: a thousand flowers bloom that are nevertheless all of the same species.

The relationship between evaluation outcomes and resources allocation

The direct connection between evaluation results and funding allocation intensifies the “compliance culture”. When the information flowing up the line powerfully affects the resources flowing down from the government, it is a rational choice for HEIs to report their strengths rather than their weaknesses, their successes rather than their failures-and even to hide their weaknesses and shortcomings, which in the end will hamper HEIs’ improvement. What is worse, in order to cater for the criteria of quality assessment, falsification of materials, such as students’ examination papers, graduate’s theses and teaching regulations, is occurring in evaluated institutions. The “creation” of false materials becomes a huge work for staff, for which students’ help has even been asked. To a considerable extent, the falsification not only weakens the transparency and validity of the quality evaluation system but also violates professional and scholarly norms and ethics, contributing to further erode society’s trust in higher education. Furthermore, as criticized by some

authors, the “cheating” behavior also affects the ethical and moral education of universities’ students (Du, Zhou, Li & Xia, 2006).

Even if there is no falsification during the process of quality assessment, the direct links between funding and evaluation results push HEIs to comply with the requirements of quality assessment. As a result, the evaluation indicators used in the process become the guidance for the university development, destroying the creative work that lies at the heart of quality in higher education. Finally, we can not ignore another possible consequence of this direct link: “strengthening the better ones and at the same time weakening the bad ones”.

In sum, if the “general model” is used as reference, the three-phase assessment procedure follows the model, but the relationship between government and the agency responsible for the quality assessment, as well as the links between evaluation outcomes and funding allocation are different from what are proposed under the general model. In addition, the composition of the expert committees and the measurement of quality basically follow the general approaches, although still presenting some shortcomings that should be improved.

4.6.5 Conclusions

On the whole, two of the policy objectives, *improvement* and *accountability*, have not been fully fulfilled, mainly due to two dimensions of factors: inevitable and contingent.

Inevitable factors

First of all, any quality evaluation system has its own limitation *per se.* Although the improvement function is always stressed when introducing a quality assessment system, the impetus for quality improvement, above the actual threshold level of quality, from external evaluations remains scarce. As mentioned above, the quality gap between the expansion of the higher education system and diminishing unit costs is very difficult to reconcile and can not be bridged only through quality assessment or assurance schemes.

Secondly, the evaluation process and the objects are not “value neutral” nor apolitical; they exist in the context of a “state model”, i.e. the relationship between the state and higher education. In China, the state authority is still dominating over academic oligarchy and market as a force of coordination, although the state model is shifting from a rigid state-control type to a certain degree of state-supervising, as mentioned in 3.2.3. The aim of the higher education reform is to serve economic and social development (CCP CC, 1985). That is to say, higher education in China is

seen as an instrument for reaching economic and or social goals. In this context, it is inevitable that the evaluation agency is dependent on the government, which directly leads to bureaucratic burdens, and hinder the quality improvement of higher education institutions. In addition, in terms of the direct connection between the forces of integration in higher education and the quality assessment models proposed by Barnett (1992), the sovereign status of the state in higher education also contributes to emphasizing the use of performance indicators in the evaluation process in China (see Figure 2.3).

The purposes of the quality assessment policy in China clearly demonstrate the "state model" in China. *Compliance* (to intensify the governance and direction of the state) and *improvement* are the main objectives in the policy discourse. Although *compliance* is not a rational orientation, it inevitably ensues from the state model. As the same time, consequences of evaluation are heavily dependent on the functions for which it was introduced (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004). So this *compliance* objective of the quality assessment policy brought on some unintended policy consequences, such as compliance with the evaluation criteria and falsification.

Contingent factors

Indeed, there are also some contingent factors leading to the unwanted problems. Firstly, the adoption of the quality definition-"fitness for/of purposes" results in external values dominating the quality criteria, prioritizing quantity over quality, and emphasizing means of evaluation (performance indicators) rather than purposes of higher education. Thus, defining quality in higher education as "fitness for/of purposes" is not beneficial to the improvement and creativity of HEIs. In addition, the definition of quality as "objectivist" also produces the uniform evaluation criteria that intensify the homogenized development of HEIs in China: similar goals and organization forms.

Secondly, the shortcomings of the policy design, such as the close relationship between the evaluation outcomes and funding decisions, intensify the compliance culture and the flooding of falsification. Additionally the assessment panels do not have pedagogical experts or specialists on quality evaluation, which reduces the scientificity and reliability of the quality evaluation results; and the representatives of employers, alumni and current students are also excluded. Both of them weaken the *accountability* and *improvement* functions of the quality assessment system.

Figure 4.4 summarizes the analysis just made on the main factors leading to the low-efficiency of the quality assessment policy in realizing the purposes of *improvement* and *accountability*.

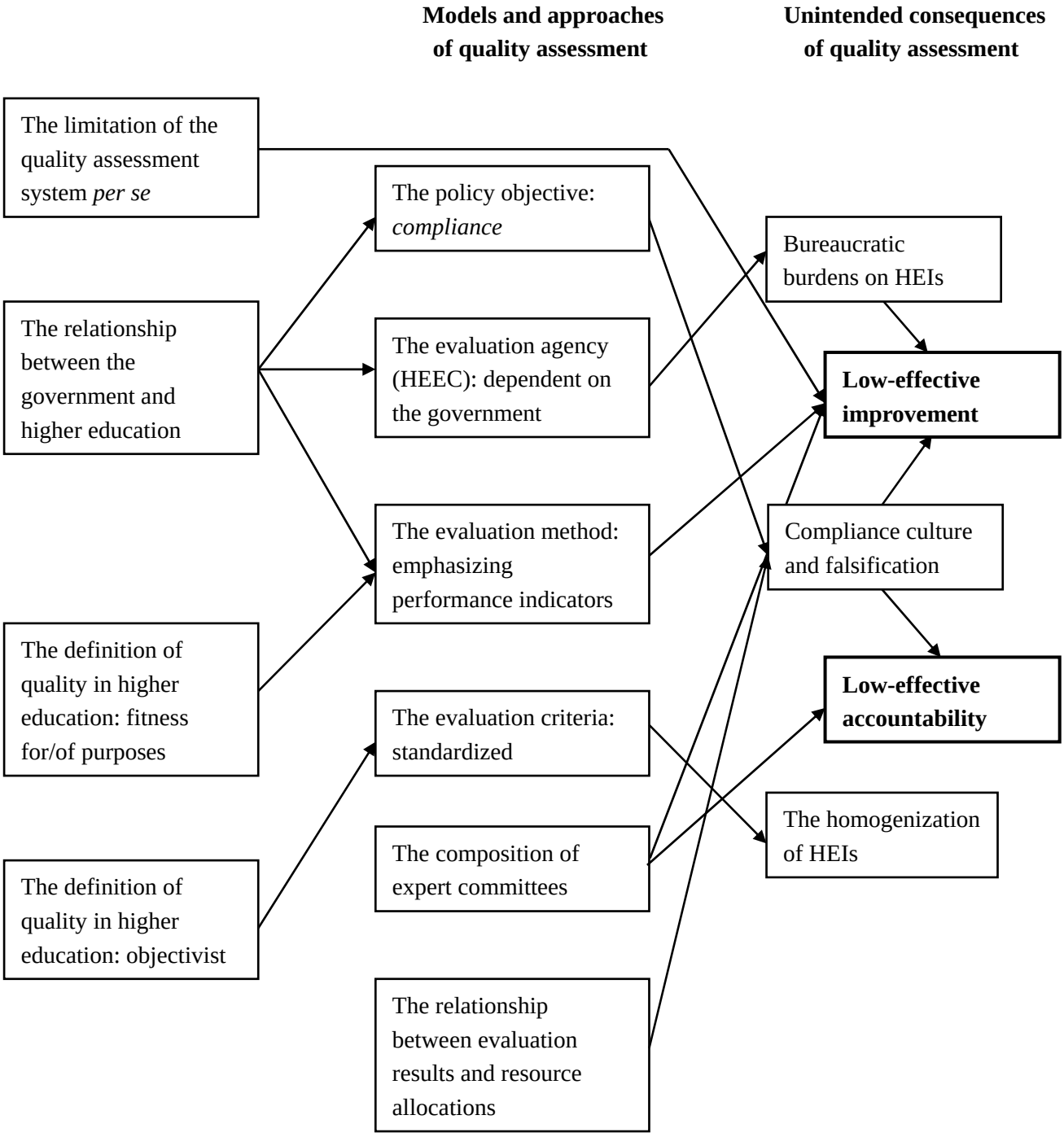

Figure 4.4 Main factors leading to the policy problems

4.7 Some Policy Recommendations on the Quality Assessment of Undergraduate Education Policy

4.7.1 Rationales

Incremental model

Policy change does not occur on sand and has to cope with the resilience of former institutions and rules which have inevitable inertia (Musselin, 2005). According to the incremental model, public policies are variations on the past. Thus, it is necessary to emphasize the continuity of policy evolutions, rather than enact an absolutely new policy ignoring previous ones (Thomas, 2001). Incremental reform is an important principle for the policy recommendations put forward in this thesis.

Rational model

Westerheijden, Stensaker and Rosa (2007b) analyse the histories of quality assurance in three European countries, clearly illustrating the political dimension of quality assurance: politics and quality are closely intertwined. Those in charge of the design and implementation of quality assessment schemes feel accountability pressures, and the need to do something-the "don't-just-stand-there-but-do-something" syndrome-sometimes outweighs reflection and sustainable development of existing quality assurance schemes. Moreover empirical knowledge on the functioning and effectiveness of various quality assurance schemes only occasionally influence the decision-making processes: policy-making remains "muddling through" (Westerheijden, Stensaker & Rosa, 2007b). Obviously, as mentioned in sub-chapter 4.2.4, the quality assessment policy formation in China partly resulted from the accountability pressure. However, the recommendations below are based on the "rational model" of policy formation rather than on political preference, in order to achieve "maximum social gain", i.e. the main intention behind the recommendations made is the quality improvement of higher education institutions.

4.7.2 Policy environment

"State model"

As summarized by Xu (2000), the "state model" decides the state's authority boundary in higher education and the governance approaches to quality assessment (see sub-chapter 2.3.1). In China, although the state model is shifting from state-control to state-supervising, "state control" is still the dominant model, which means that in the process of quality assessment the Chinese government still has the most relevant role. Recommendations will be provided based on this

reality.

Cultural characteristics

Every policy is implemented in a specific environment and not in isolation. It is well-known that "emphasizing human relations" and "keeping up appearances" are important and unalterable Chinese cultural characteristics. Taking into account the significant force of human relations, it is necessary to increase the opportunities of making collective instead of individual decisions during the policy implementation in order to avoid corruption. The intention to "keep up appearances" enhances the compliance function of quality assessment. The increase of compliance means that the focus of quality assessment can be highly influential on higher education institutions, dictating their main concerns and the preferable areas to invest in. That is to say, due to the Chinese cultural background, quality assessment may have a direct and effective influence on the development of HEIs. Indeed, this has both advantages and disadvantages, depending on how institutions are capable of using it.

The Chinese higher education system

As mentioned in Chapter Three, all Chinese higher education institutions seem to have the same goals, tasks and organization forms: a thousand flowers bloom that are nevertheless all of the same species. However, in the context of massification and international competition, diversity is required. On the one hand, elite and research-oriented universities are necessary to take original research and cultivate high-level graduate students. On the other hand, institutions more oriented towards teaching and other educational services are also required to promote social and economic development. Therefore, the quality assessment of undergraduate education system should become a driver for the diversification rather than for the homogenization of HEIs.

4.7.3 Some recommendations on the quality assessment policy

Based on the rationales above and the specific policy environment existing in China, I will try in this sub-chapter to provide some recommendations on how to improve the quality assessment policy. These recommendations mainly aim at the contingent factors, while try to counteract the effects of the inevitable ones on the quality assessment system's low-efficiency in the improvement and accountability dimensions and on some other unintended problems mentioned.

The quality definitions underlying the quality assessment policy

The objectivist definition of quality that is nowadays used in China should be combined with the relativist one. As discussed in 4.6.3, the fact that the objectivist definition is dominant in the quality assessment policy has contributed to a higher degree of homogenization among HEIs in China. Both perspectives on how to define "quality" have problems. Barnett (1992) summarizes that the objectivist approach suffers from insensitivity to the differences of purposes, tradition and social location among HEIs, while the relativist approach, in its extreme form, implies that anything goes, that there are no boundaries to what is to count as higher education, and that cross-institutional judgments are *ultra vires*. Therefore, they should be combined. The objectivist definition of quality should be used to examine general requirements that all HEIs must meet, such as teaching facilities; the relativist definition of quality should be employed to review the specific institutions' purposes. For example, the criteria to assess staff qualifications in research-oriented and teaching-oriented HEIs should be distinct. Thus, the fitness for both the general and specific purposes of HEIs can be evaluated. And the shift of the quality definition adopted from the objectivist to a combination of the relativist and objectivist is relevant, since it brings on pluralism of the quality assessment methods and criteria.

The design of the quality assessment policy needs to explore the essential quality of the programme or institution that is being reviewed: a mission-based, fitness-for-purpose checklist will not do so (Harvey & Newton, 2007). Therefore, we can not rest on this pragmatic quality definition, but to explore the essence of quality in Chinese higher education through academic research. Thus, the design of the quality assessment policy should base on research outcomes and rational decisions rather than only on political preference. That is to say, the national evaluation agency should pay more attention to one of its responsibilities: research in theories of education and evaluation, as outlined in sub-chapter 3.4.2, to get a research-informed approach to evaluation and improvement.

The objectives of the quality assessment policy

Outcomes of policies depend on their intentions, they are more likely to succeed if their intentions are focused and well defined rather than implicit/ambiguous (Gornitzka, 1999). Therefore, the quality assessment policy should enhance its *improvement* purpose, while decrease the extent to which it emphasizes the function of *compliance*. The changing relationship between the government and higher education contributes to make the quality assessment system a compliance tool: in exchange for autonomy HEIs must comply with the regulations set up by the government. Notwithstanding, *compliance* should not be an explicit purpose in the policy discourse since like that some unintended policy consequences, such as compliance culture and falsification, tend to become a reality.

The implementation of the quality assessment policy

Evaluation agency

The operational agency responsible for the quality assessment of undergraduate education should be independent from both the government and the higher education institutions, according to the theoretical model proposed by Schwarz and Westerheijden (2004). It is then necessary to reassert the position of the national quality evaluation agency in China. On the one hand, according to the "state model", the organizational location of the national evaluation can not be too far from the MOE in China. Notwithstanding, it also should not be a department of MOE, which means directly controlled by the government. According to the incremental model of policy evolution, it is more feasible that the regulation and specific evaluation criteria are still set out by MOE like now, but operated by a national agency, which is independent from both the government and the higher education institutions. On the other hand, bureaucratization and "window dressing" are dangerously lurking behind. To counteract these tendencies, quality assurance systems need to be designed with a built-in facility for positive change. This can be seen as an internal drive for dynamism in evaluation schemes. Thus, the active participation of HEIs in the evaluation is necessary. During the formation process of quality assessment policies, HEIs should be consulted and their opinions and requirements taken into consideration. In sum, the project design of the external quality assessment of undergraduate education should be set out by MOE, emphasizing the requirements of HEIs, and implemented by an independent body, rather than one department of MOE. It is worth mentioning that according to the model proposed by Schwarz and Westerheijden (2004) the evaluation agency should be financed by the government budget.

The measurement of quality

First of all, as commented in 4.6.4, the peer review in the process of quality assessment mainly relies on the indicators regulated by MOE. External experts have not been active in establishing a dialogue with staff of the evaluated universities. And as Vroeijenstijn (1995) states performance indicators can never have the last say or take the place of peer review. Thus, the peer review in the quality assessment should be enhanced in China. During the evaluation process, HEIs can reveal their particular weaknesses, and evaluators, as "external consultants" rather than only inspectors, should give them relevant suggestions to improve.

Secondly, the standardized evaluation criteria, which have contributed to the homogenization of HEIs in China, should be reformed, under the proposed combination of the relativist and objectivist definitions of "quality". In the context of the Chinese higher education system, described as "a thousand flowers bloom that are nevertheless all of the same species", it is feasible to use the first cycle of the quality assessment to assign institutional status (see sub-chapter 2.4.3), i.e. to assist

HEIs to re-identify their orientations focusing on research, teaching or a combination of both. At the same time, the evaluation indicators for HEIs with different disciplines, such as medicine, art and physical education, should be diversified (indeed, this reform has already been initiated for some specialized institutions in China, as indicated in sub-chapter 4.4.2). Then in the second cycle, distinct evaluation criteria should be designed for institutions with different orientations. And the reform of diversified indicators for institutions with different disciplines should also be extended to different subjects in the same universities.

Finally, the focus of evaluation should also be transformed. On the one hand, the evaluation should pay more attention to the process of teaching-learning than to the infrastructures (Du, Zhou, Li & Xia, 2006). On the other hand, the existence of an internal quality assurance scheme should be emphasized, which is just one sub-indicator in the evaluation criteria that have now 18 sub-indictors (see sub-chapter 3.4.3). It is argued that in a mature quality assessment system internal reviews and assessments are more valid and fruitful for quality improvement than those done by outside evaluators (Harvey & Newton, 2007). However, currently China is still in an initial phase of quality assessment. Thus, it is necessary to promote internal reviews in HEIs and its units systematically. And the design and operation of serious and tough internal reviews of quality can be monitored through external assessment. According to the idea expressed above that “the focus of quality assessment can strongly influence higher education institutions’ concerns and preferable areas to invest in”, if the external evaluation emphasizes the review of internal quality assurance schemes, it will certainly contribute to the effective establishment in HEIs of adequate internal quality assurance schemes. Moreover external evaluators can play a role as “critical friends” or “external consultants”. That is, in my opinion, the way to link external and internal reviews, making them mutually supporting.

Evaluators

On the one hand, as argued in sub-chapter 4.6.4, the expert committees are lack of specialists in teaching-learning, higher education and quality evaluation, and the participation of current students, alumni, employers and other stakeholders is also neglected, which decrease the efficiency of evaluation on improvement and accountability. Thus, the external evaluation teams should include members with pedagogic expertise and professional experience of quality evaluation as well as the representatives from other stakeholders, such as students and employers.

On the other hand, based on the significant force of human relations in Chinese society and the rampancy of corruption, it is necessary to try at all levels to obviate the involvement of experts related with the institutions that are going to be evaluated, and to increase the opportunities of

making collective instead of individual decisions on the evaluation judgment. It is then suggested to include one foreign expert in every expert committee, in order to reduce corruption, as well as to get experiences from other countries with matured quality assessment systems.

The relationship between evaluation outcomes and resources allocation

The direct link between evaluation results and funding allocation has brought on the "compliance culture" and "window dressing" in China. Vroeijenstijn (1995) regards performance-based funding as a ghost for quality assessment. However, the link between quality and funding is inevitable, and the question is what this link should be. Referring to the experiences in other countries, I suggest that the results inform funding, but in a non-formulaic way (see sub-chapter 2.4.5). However, the existence of links between evaluation results and resource allocation will certainly lead to "compliance culture". From the perspective of feasibility, we can only decrease this "compliance" but can not completely eliminate it.

4.7.4 Conclusions

In summary, six main directions for future reforms of the quality assessment policy have been pointed out, involving the definition of quality in higher education, policy objectives and implementation. First of all, the definitions of "quality" adopted should change from an objectivist one to the combination of both the objectivist and relativist ones; moreover it is necessary to explore the essence of quality in Chinese higher education recurring to academic research as guidance for the design of quality assessment system. Secondly, one of the objectives of the quality assessment policy, *compliance*, should be excluded from the policy discourse. Thirdly, the governance approaches to the quality assessment system should be reformed. The system should be implemented by an independent agency both from the government and the HEIs and, at the same time, the participation of HEIs in the process of the quality evaluation system formation should be increased. Fourthly, the methods of quality assessment should include both performance indicators and peer review. Diversified criteria should be used and more attention should be paid to the process of teaching-learning and the existence of internal quality assurance schemes. Finally, the composition of the expert committees and the relationship between evaluation outcomes and funding decisions should also be modified.

There is interplay between policy environment and policy formation/reform (Thomas, 2001). The reform of quality assessment mechanism, which is an important component of higher education system, will contribute to the transformation of the Chinese higher education system to some extent. On the one hand, according to Xu (2000), if the "state model" changes it is inevitable that the

governance approaches to higher education quality assessment will change accordingly; *vice versa*, the approaches to quality assessment will affect the reform of the "state model" (see sub-chapter 2.3.1). Thus, changing the governance approaches to the quality assessment system will facilitate the devolvement of decision-making power from the central government to individual HEIs in China. It will become an instrument to promote the change of the Chinese "state model" from state-control to state-supervising, rather than an approach to intensify the state control on higher education in another form.

On the other hand, the diversified evaluation criteria will assist Chinese higher education institutions to re-identify their orientations focusing on research, teaching or a combination of both, instead of simulating some top universities to become comprehensive, research-oriented universities. With the various evaluation methods and criteria, the quality assessment of undergraduate education system will become a driver for the diversification rather than the homogenization of HEIs in China.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

5.1 Central Messages and Findings

The research goals underlying this thesis are to explore the main difficulties of the quality assessment of undergraduate education policy in China, and try to give some suggestions on how to improve it.

First of all, regarding the policy efficiency, it is possible to say that the quality assessment system implemented has effectively enhanced the transparency of HEIs, making the “ivory tower” more open and quantifiable. And it also has contributed considerably to the establishment of teaching regulations and the development plans in universities. However, the consequences in terms of teaching outputs, such as students’ development, are scarce. In addition, the evaluation results state that 93% of the Chinese HEIs are excellent/good and this can not represent the real quality level of Chinese universities. Together with the rampant falsification in the process of evaluation, accountability becomes a word of mouth and a rhetoric issue. At the same time, the system has brought on some unintended consequences, such as bureaucratic burdens on HEIs, “compliance cultures” and “window dressing”, and the homogenization of HEIs. Hence, the quality assessment policy in China has not realized its purposes sufficiently, especially concerning its *improvement* and *accountability* dimensions.

Secondly, probing into the main factors resulting in the low-efficiency of the quality assessment policy, it is possible to detect both inevitable and contingent factors. On the one hand, the quality evaluation system has its own limitations *per se.* In essence, the quality gap between the expansion of the higher education system and the diminishing unit costs is very difficult to reconcile and can not be bridged only through quality assessment or assurance schemes. In addition, the “state model” in China, where the state authority is still the dominating force of coordination over academic oligarchy and market also affects the policy efficiency. This decides that the assessment agency could not be absolutely independent of the government, which ultimately leads to bureaucratic burdens on HEIs.

On the other hand, there are also contingent factors leading to the low efficiency of the quality assessment policy. First of all, *compliance* as one of the policy objectives is inappropriate and has brought on some unwanted policy consequences, such as the “compliance culture” and “window dressing”. Secondly, the “quality” definition used is the “fitness for/of purposes” one, which is not

beneficial to the improvement and creativity in higher education institutions. And the definition of quality as “objectivist” also produces uniform evaluation methods and criteria, which can easily lead to the homogenization of HEIs. Finally, the shortcomings of the policy design also weaken the improvement and accountability functions of the quality assessment system. For example, the close relationship between the evaluation outcomes and funding decisions enhances the “compliance culture” and the flooding of falsification. The expert committees, lacking of specialists in teaching-learning, higher education and quality evaluation, and representatives of current students, alumni, employers and other stakeholders, decrease the efficiency of evaluation on improvement and accountability.

Therefore, the disappointing consequences of the quality assessment *vis a vis* its initial purposes, can not only be attributable to the design and implementation of the assessment policy alone, although some ill-designed factors really exist. Moreover we can not expect to use the quality assessment system to solve all of the existent problems in higher education. Obviously more investment in higher education is required at this moment; and simultaneously, in the context of massification of higher education, the meaning of quality also should be diversified for different institutions. We can not use the standards of elite education to measure the quality of mass education.

Finally, Chinese government has recently made some modifications on the quality assessment policy. As mentioned in 4.4.2, *Sunny Evaluation* has been initiated to counteract the cheating behavior, through the increase in the transparency of the evaluation process. And the uniform evaluation criteria have been adjusted for some specialized institutions. According to the analysis done in this thesis, the falsification in the evaluation mainly originates from the direct links between the assessment outcomes and the resources allocation, and the emphasis on *compliance* as the main policy objective. Hence, it will be not effective just to enhance its transparency. However, presumably the adjustment of evaluation criteria will have a relevant impact, since the standardization of evaluation methods and indicators is the main factor resulting in the homogenization of HEIs (see Figure 4.4).

5.2 Unsolved Issues and Future Research

Field Work

This thesis has examined the main shortcomings of the quality assessment of undergraduate education policy in China and provided some suggestions on how to improve it using a theoretical approach. However, the analysis did not result from empirical work conducted by the researcher.

Thus, field work is necessary to further improve the research done so far. We can explore the main policy consequences and problems by resorting to semi-structured interviews and unobtrusive observation. On the one hand, we can interview some evaluators in the expert pool, administrators of the HEEC responsible for the implementation of the quality assessment policy, and coordinators of the evaluated institutions in charge of the quality assessment. On the other hand, in order to counterbalance the subjectivity of interview, we can also employ unobtrusive observation on the site-visit process in several universities.

The Essence of Quality in Higher Education

There is little theorizing about quality in higher education. In China, quality in higher education remains an undefined concept in operational terms. This thesis also analyzes quality definitions in higher education from a pragmatic perspective. However, the design of quality assessment policies needs to explore, dig down, to the essential quality of the programmes or institutions that they are supposed to review (Harvey & Newton, 2007). Therefore, we can not rest only on the pragmatic definitions, but we should go further and explore the essence of quality in higher education resorting to academic research.

Other Types of Higher Education Quality Assessment

This thesis focuses on the quality assessment of undergraduate education policy, promulgated in 2002, a national external evaluation project. But nowadays some non-governmental agencies also evaluate undergraduate education in China, such as some research institutes and educational companies that mainly work for university rankings, and some professional evaluation agencies, undertaking various quality assessments for HEIs that intend to be evaluated (see sub-chapter 3.5). Indeed, the national quality assessment system should cooperate with these non-governmental evaluation entities. Moreover external evaluation should be combined with internal assessment effectively. Therefore, attention should be paid both to the evaluations performed by non-governmental agencies and to the internal quality assurance schemes in future works, to find an effective way for the national external quality assessment scheme to coexist with them.

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