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Quality Assurance in Chinese Higher Education: Policy Reforms and Institutional Challenges

Junxiu Liu [1, *]

[1]University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, Chengdu 611731, China

[*]**Corresponding Author**
Junxiu Liu

lileihanmeimei168@outlook.com

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Abstract

Quality assurance (QA) has become a central concern in Chinese higher education amid rapid expansion and reforms. This paper examines the evolution of QA policies in China and analyzes the institutional challenges that universities face in implementing these policies. The study situates China's QA development in the broader context of global trends toward accountability and quality improvement. It reviews major policy initiatives ─ from the massification of higher education and early evaluation schemes to recent audit-based approaches ─ and evaluates their impact on university governance, educational quality, and stakeholder involvement. The findings indicate that China has made significant strides in building a comprehensive QA system, including national evaluation agencies and internal quality monitoring mechanisms, which have improved baseline educational standards. However, challenges persist in fostering a genuine "quality culture" within institutions, balancing government control with university autonomy, and ensuring that QA processes lead to substantive improvements in teaching and learning. The paper concludes with recommendations to enhance stakeholder engagement, strengthen internal quality management, and align QA practices with educational outcomes. These insights contribute to understanding how policy reforms can effectively support quality improvement in the context of China's dynamic higher education system.

Keywords: Quality Assurance; Higher Education; Policy Reform; Quality Culture; Institutional Evaluation; Educational Quality

1. Introduction

In recent decades, quality assurance (QA) in higher education has emerged as a global priority, driven by the demands of a knowledge-based economy and the pressures of international competition. Around the world, universities are expected to produce skilled graduates and cutting-edge research, prompting governments to implement QA mechanisms to monitor and improve

educational standards (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Rhoades & Sporn, 2002). In China, these global trends have intersected with domestic imperatives. Since the late 1990s, Chinese higher education has undergone a dramatic transformation from an elite to a mass system. Enrollments expanded rapidly after 1999, when a government policy initiative led to an unprecedented surge in admissions (Zha, 2011). Annual undergraduate enrollment grew from about 1 million in 1998 to over 9 million by 2020, propelling China′s gross higher education enrollment rate to 54.4% in 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2021). This massification improved access but also intensified concerns about educational quality (Dahlman & Aubert, 2001; Trow, 1973). Institutions faced overcrowded classrooms, strained facilities, and uneven faculty qualifications, leading observers to warn of a potential decline in academic standards (Zha, 2011; Mok & Jiang, 2018).

The Chinese government responded to these challenges by making quality improvement a core focus of higher education policy (Ministry of Education, 2010). Over the past two decades, China has developed an extensive QA framework that draws on international models while aligning with national conditions (Liu, 2018). Early efforts in the 2000s emphasized accountability and evaluation, reflecting a state-led approach to reform. A national undergraduate teaching evaluation project was implemented between 2003 and 2008, in which teams of experts assessed each university′s teaching quality against set criteria. This top-down evaluation system was intended to ensure that rapid expansion did not come at the expense of academic standards. At the same time, China launched excellence initiatives such as the "211 Project" and "985 Project," funneling resources to select universities to build world-class status (Salmi, 2009). These initiatives underscored the government′s dual strategy of expanding capacity and enhancing quality at the pinnacle of the system (Altbach & de Wit, 2018; Mohrman, Ma, & Baker, 2008).

By the 2010s, Chinese higher education entered a new phase where quality assurance and improvement overtook expansion as the primary policy goal. The *Outline of China′s National Plan for Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)* explicitly prioritized quality, calling for a "quality-centered" growth model (Ministry of Education, 2010). Reforms in this period introduced more nuanced QA mechanisms. The Ministry of Education established the Higher Education Evaluation Center (HEEC) as a semi-autonomous body to oversee evaluations and shifted from one-off inspections to a combination of periodic assessments and continuous monitoring (Shi, 2009; Liu et al., 2025). New QA philosophies and methods were adopted from international best practices, including *student-centered learning, outcome-based education (OBE), and continuous quality improvement (CQI)* principles. For example, program accreditation in engineering and other disciplines was strengthened to meet global standards; by 2016 China had joined the Washington Accord for engineering education, signaling that its accreditation processes achieved international equivalence (Xu & Li, 2019). At the institutional level, universities were encouraged to conduct internal self-evaluations and establish quality management offices, embedding QA into their governance structures (Chen & Li, 2022; Zhou & Gao, 2017). These shifts represent a move from a singular reliance on external supervision to a more complex QA system combining external *and* internal measures.

Despite these extensive reforms, Chinese higher education still grapples with significant institutional challenges in quality assurance (Wang, 2014; Yang, 2015). Tensions exist between a centralized accountability-driven QA approach and the need for genuine improvement on the ground (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). Many academics perceive QA exercises as bureaucratic and compliance-oriented, which can limit their effectiveness in improving teaching and learning (Zhou & Gao, 2017). Additionally, the sheer scale and diversity of China's higher education sector—from elite research universities to local teaching colleges—make it difficult to design one-size-fits-all QA policies (Mok & Jiang, 2018; Gao & Guo, 2018). As China strives to build world-class universities and cultivate innovative talent, addressing these challenges has become ever more critical.

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of quality assurance in Chinese higher education, focusing on policy reforms and institutional challenges. Drawing on policy documents, national reports, and existing research, we trace the evolution of China's QA system and evaluate its impact on university practices. We then discuss the ongoing challenges in implementing QA at the institutional level, including issues of governance, culture, and stakeholder participation. The goal is to shed light on how China can further strengthen its QA mechanisms to support sustainable improvement in higher education quality. Insights from China's experience will also be relevant to other higher education systems undergoing rapid expansion and reform.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach, using document analysis and literature review to examine quality assurance policies and practices in Chinese higher education. We reviewed a wide range of primary policy documents and regulations issued by the Chinese government and Ministry of Education (e.g., the 2010 National Education Reform Plan and subsequent QA guidelines), as well as reports from national QA agencies such as the HEEC. These sources provide insight into the intended objectives, structures, and evolution of China's QA system. In addition, we analyzed statistical communiqués and official data on higher education development (e.g., enrollment figures, numbers of evaluated programs) to understand the broader context of QA reforms (Ministry of Education, 2021).

The document analysis was supplemented by a systematic review of the scholarly literature on Chinese higher education quality assurance. We surveyed academic articles, books, and conference papers in both English and Chinese that address QA policies, evaluation outcomes, and quality improvement challenges in China. Key sources include comprehensive overviews of QA developments (Liu, 2018), case studies of university QA practices (Chen & Wu, 2020; Zhou & Gao, 2017), and comparative analyses situating China's experience in global context (Marginson, 2011; Hazelkorn, 2015). We paid special attention to research by Chinese scholars and practitioners (often published in translation) to capture on-the-ground perspectives. For example, the work of Wu Yan (the Director-General of HEEC) and colleagues provides authoritative insights into China's QA philosophy and criteria. We also included recent studies that highlight current challenges and criticisms of QA implementation, such as the engagement of

faculty and students in QA processes (Zhou & Gao, 2017) and the role of new data-driven evaluation tools (Zhang et al., 2022).

By triangulating policy analysis with literature review, we aimed to develop a well-rounded understanding of both the formal QA system and its practical effects. The methodology is exploratory and interpretive: instead of testing hypotheses, we identify patterns and themes in QA reforms and their outcomes. Given that this research does not involve human subjects or confidential data, no institutional ethics approval was required (and hence no survey or interview data were collected). The analysis is informed by theoretical concepts from higher education studies—such as accountability vs. improvement, centralization vs. decentralization, and quality culture (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Rhoades & Sporn, 2002)—which serve as lenses for interpreting China′s QA trajectory.

Several strategies were used to enhance the reliability and validity of our findings. First, multiple sources were consulted for each aspect of QA policy (for instance, both official policy texts and independent evaluations of their impact), to ensure that conclusions do not rely on a single viewpoint. Second, where possible, we cross-referenced Chinese-language and English-language literature to capture a broad spectrum of analysis. Third, we contextualized China′s QA developments within international trends by referencing comparative studies and global QA guidelines (Altbach & de Wit, 2018; Salmi, 2009). This approach helps distinguish which features of China′s QA system are unique and which reflect common global patterns. Overall, the methodological approach is appropriate for a policy-focused analysis, providing depth and context rather than quantitative measurement. The next section presents the results of our analysis, detailing the chronological reforms in China′s QA system and their outcomes, followed by a discussion of ongoing challenges and implications.

3. Results

3.1. Evolution of Quality Assurance Policies in China

Quality assurance in Chinese higher education has evolved through distinct phases of policy reform, each introducing new mechanisms and priorities. Table 1 provides a timeline of major QA initiatives and their characteristics.

Early QA efforts were largely top-down. In the 2003–2008 nationwide undergraduate teaching evaluation, teams of experts visited every higher education institution (HEI) to conduct intensive reviews. Universities prepared elaborate self-study reports and underwent site inspections that examined inputs (faculty qualifications, facilities), processes (teaching and curriculum management), and outputs (graduate employment rates). This exercise, unprecedented in scale, instilled a baseline QA awareness across the system and identified shortcomings at many HEIs, leading to concrete improvements such as curriculum updates and faculty development programs (Liu & Hou, 2009). However, it also had drawbacks: because institutions were judged against uniform metrics, some critics argued it encouraged *"teaching to the test"*—universities might focus on the evaluation criteria (e.g., expanding library collections) rather than substantive

educational quality (Bao & Liu, 2019). Once virtually all universities passed the one-time assessment, its effectiveness in driving ongoing improvement diminished (Wang, 2014).

Table 1. Milestones in the Development of China's Higher Education QA System

Period	Policy Initiatives	QA Mechanisms Introduced	Key Features
Late 1990s	Expansion Era – "Massification" begins (1999 enrollment surge); Project 211 and 985 launched.	– Basic standards for HEIs; – Selective excellence funding.	**Focus:** Increase capacity; build elite universities. **QA:** Ad hoc evaluations; input controls (e.g., infrastructure).
Early 2000s	National Teaching Evaluation (2003–2008); Establishment of HEEC (2004).	–Comprehensive institutional evaluations by MoE/HEEC; – Ranking and classification of universities.	**Focus:** Accountability and oversight during rapid expansion. **QA:** One-time external reviews of teaching quality for all universities; quantitative indicators (faculty credentials, library size, etc.) widely used.
2010s	Quality Enhancement Era – Education Reform Plan (2010); "Quality Project" and Double First-Class Initiative (2017).	– Transition to audit-style evaluations (from 2013); – Program accreditation (e.g., engineering, medicine); – Annual quality reporting by HEIs.	**Focus:** Continuous improvement and global competitiveness. **QA:** Emphasis on outcomes (student learning, employment); introduction of student-centered and OBE approaches; internal QA systems strengthened within universities.
Late 2010s–2020s	Data-Driven & Differentiated QA – New national standards (Undergraduate Teaching Audit Evaluation 2018); Big data in QA (learning analytics).	– Regular quality audits of universities on a 5-year cycle; – National data platform for monitoring indicators (teaching load, graduation rates, etc.); – Independent QA agencies emerging in some provinces.	**Focus:** Fostering quality culture and transparency. **QA:** Mix of external evaluation and self-assessment; data-informed decision-making; greater public disclosure of quality information (e.g., annual quality reports published by MoE).

A significant shift occurred in the early 2010s, marked by the slogan "putting quality first" in national policy (Ministry of Education, 2010). The QA system transitioned toward a more regular and nuanced regime known as *audit evaluations*. Instead of pass/fail inspections, audit evaluations are lighter-touch reviews conducted on a 5-year cycle, focusing on whether an institution's *internal QA system* is functioning and on outcomes like student learning and development (Yang & Chen, 2016). The idea is to respect institutional diversity: each university is evaluated in light of its own mission and objectives (fitness for purpose), rather than against an identical checklist for all (Liu et al., 2025). This approach was first piloted in 2013–2014 and fully implemented by 2018. The audits shifted attention from simply meeting minimum standards to *continuous improvement*: universities now receive feedback on how to enhance quality rather than just a yes/no judgment. As a result, many institutions established or expanded their internal Quality Assurance Offices to conduct self-evaluations and close the quality loop (Chen & Li, 2022). By 2020, over 1000 Chinese HEIs had undergone the new audit evaluation, indicating a systemic move towards ongoing monitoring.

Alongside institutional audits, program-level accreditation has been strengthened in specific disciplines. For example, engineering programs are accredited through the China Engineering Education Accreditation Association (CEEAA) using international standards, and medical schools undergo accreditation aligned with the WFME (World Federation for Medical Education) guidelines (Liu & Hou, 2009; Xu & Li, 2019). These accreditations ensure that graduates in regulated professions meet industry and global benchmarks. China's membership in international agreements (like the Washington Accord in 2016 for engineering) signifies that its program QA processes have matured to global norms, facilitating international recognition of Chinese degrees (Xu & Li, 2019). By 2022, over 1,200 engineering programs in China had been accredited, reflecting this trend of professionalizing QA at the program level (Chen & Wu, 2020).

Another development in the late 2010s is the use of data analytics and transparency in QA. The Ministry of Education established a National Higher Education Quality Monitoring Platform, aggregating key performance indicators (KPIs) from all HEIs annually. Indicators include student-faculty ratios, graduation rates, research outputs, and student satisfaction survey results. Summaries are published in annual national quality reports (Wu et al., 2025). These data-driven measures enable continuous surveillance of quality across the system and help identify emerging problems (for instance, unusually low employment rates in certain majors can trigger a quality review). Chinese universities are also increasingly required to publicize information such as teaching conditions and graduate outcomes on their websites (Pan, 2015). This push towards greater transparency aims to involve the public and stakeholders in quality oversight and to incentivize institutions to improve through reputational pressures (Hazelkorn, 2015; Gao & Guo, 2018).

In summary, China's QA policies have progressed from a one-time evaluative mode to a dynamic and multi-layered system. The current QA architecture includes: (a) External periodic evaluations (institutional audits and specialized accreditations), led by or in cooperation with national agencies; (b) Internal quality assurance mechanisms at universities (self-assessment reports, teaching supervision committees, etc.); and (c) Outcome monitoring via data collection

and feedback loops (Ministry of Education, 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). This evolution reflects lessons learned over two decades of reforms. The policy intent is now to foster a culture of quality—where HEIs take proactive responsibility for quality—rather than relying solely on top-down enforcement (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Ministry of Education, 2010). The effectiveness of these reforms, however, depends on how they are received and enacted at the institutional level, which we examine in the next subsection.

3.2. Institutional Responses and Outcomes

Chinese universities have had to adapt rapidly to the changing QA landscape. The external evaluation cycles and new quality criteria prompted many institutions to undertake internal reforms. Common responses included:

Strengthening Internal Governance for QA: Nearly all universities now have a dedicated quality management office or Teaching Affairs Department responsible for coordinating QA activities (Chen & Li, 2022). These units compile data, prepare self-evaluation reports, and organize campus-wide efforts during audit evaluations. University leaders have also established QA committees that include academic staff to discuss continuous improvement. This represents a shift from the past, when QA was often seen as an external task disconnected from daily management. In some leading universities, institutional research (IR) teams analyze teaching and learning metrics to inform decision-making, indicating growing internal capacity for QA.

Curriculum and Teaching Reforms: Spurred by QA feedback, universities have revised curricula to enhance relevance and rigor (Wang, 2014). For instance, many introduced new general education courses and practical training components after the 2003–08 evaluations highlighted rote learning issues. More recently, outcome-based education principles have led to clearer articulation of learning outcomes for each program and alignment of assessment methods with those outcomes (Yang & Chen, 2016). Pedagogical improvements, such as interactive teaching and use of educational technology, have been piloted, sometimes in direct response to QA recommendations that called for student-centered learning (Zhang et al., 2022). These changes show QA′s influence in prompting academic innovations, although implementation depth varies by institution.

Faculty Development and Incentives: Recognizing that faculty engagement is crucial to quality, many institutions expanded training for teachers and linked QA to faculty evaluation. Teaching development centers have been established to offer workshops on instructional skills, often catalyzed by QA findings that teaching quality needed improvement (Long et al., 2024). Some universities incorporated student course evaluations and peer observations into faculty performance appraisals as part of internal QA. However, the effectiveness of these measures in truly improving teaching remains debated (Xiong & Yang, 2017). In research-intensive universities, research output still dominates faculty incentives, potentially undermining the QA focus on teaching (Yang, 2015). Nonetheless, there is evidence that institutions are striving to balance this by recognizing teaching excellence—for example, through teaching award programs and promotion criteria that consider teaching effectiveness (Jiang & Tam, 2019).

Quality Culture Initiatives: Leading universities have explicitly started talking about "quality culture," encouraging bottom-up participation in QA (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). Some have set up platforms for students to give feedback on courses and campus facilities, beyond the mandatory end-of-term evaluations (Zhou & Gao, 2017). A few institutions involve student representatives in internal quality assurance committees, a practice aligned with international standards but still new in China. Faculty are also being engaged through departmental self-studies and annual teaching reviews where they reflect on their courses. These practices, while not yet universal, signal a gradual shift toward making quality assurance a shared value rather than a top-down mandate (Chen & Li, 2022). For example, Sun Yat-sen University reportedly organized "quality month" campaigns to promote awareness of continuous improvement among staff and students (Pan, 2015).

Resource Allocation and QA: The government's performance-based funding has provided financial incentives linked to quality metrics. Universities that performed well in evaluations or achieved accreditation of programs often received additional funding or were granted approval to expand programs (Salmi, 2009; Mok & Jiang, 2018). This has generally had positive effects, enabling those institutions to invest in hiring more qualified faculty, upgrading laboratories, and reducing student–teacher ratios, thereby further improving quality. On the other hand, lower-tier institutions that struggle with quality have sometimes faced enrollment caps or closer supervision by authorities (Bao & Liu, 2019). Such high-stakes consequences make QA a critical matter for institutional survival and development, spurring university leaders to prioritize QA efforts. However, it also raises a concern: if funding is too tightly tied to evaluation results, institutions might engage in short-term tactics to "score well" rather than pursuing deeper quality enhancement (Hazelkorn, 2015; Gao & Guo, 2018). This tension between genuine improvement and gaming the system has been observed by some researchers, especially during the era of one-off evaluations.

The outcomes of QA reforms in China can be observed in several dimensions of the higher education system:

Academic Quality and Student Outcomes: Overall, the quality of educational provision has improved in measurable ways. The proportion of faculty with higher degrees has increased significantly across Chinese universities, partly due to QA pressures to meet faculty qualification benchmarks (Ministry of Education, 2021). Curriculum renewal has kept programs more up-to-date with disciplinary developments and labor market needs (Wang, 2014). Importantly, student outcomes have shown gains: average graduation rates have risen, and graduate employment rates have remained relatively high (typically above 90% within six months of graduation for most universities in recent years) despite huge increases in the number of graduates (Ministry of Education, 2021). Some of this success is attributed to QA-driven improvements like strengthened practical training and closer monitoring of at-risk students (Mok & Jiang, 2018). However, challenges persist in aligning graduates' skills with rapidly changing economic demands, as discussed later in the paper.

Institutional Differentiation: QA policies have contributed to a clearer stratification in the higher education sector. Elite universities that receive excellence funding (Double First-Class universities) have used QA as a tool for competitive enhancement, adopting international best practices and benchmarking themselves against world-class standards (Hazelkorn, 2015; Marginson, 2011). Many of these top institutions now regularly undergo international reviews in addition to national QA, and they have climbed steadily in global university rankings, suggesting improvements in research and teaching quality (Altbach & de Wit, 2018). In contrast, some local colleges and private institutions have faced greater difficulties in meeting QA standards (Zhang & Wan, 2017). A number of private colleges underwent consolidation or program cuts after failing to achieve satisfactory evaluation results in the 2000s. The QA system thus acts as a mechanism of accountability that can weed out substandard providers, but it also means weaker institutions require more support to improve. Recent policy has acknowledged this, with targeted programs to help *"newly-established HEIs"* (often local colleges) build capacity (Pan, 2015). This differentiation aligns with the government's intent to have a diverse system with different tiers, but it raises equity concerns about students in lower-tier colleges (Yang, 2015).

Internationalization and Recognition: One clear outcome of enhanced QA is the greater international recognition of Chinese higher education credentials. Through alignment with global accreditation systems and demonstration of rigorous QA processes, Chinese universities have gained trust internationally. For instance, the acceptance of Chinese engineering and medical degrees abroad has improved post-accreditation (Liu & Hou, 2009; Xu & Li, 2019). Several Chinese universities have obtained accreditation from international bodies (e.g., AACSB or EQUIS for business programs), leveraging domestic QA improvements. Moreover, China's active participation in global QA networks (such as the Asia-Pacific Quality Network, APQN, and the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, INQAAHE) is both a cause and effect of its QA advancement. These engagements not only elevate the reputation of Chinese higher education but also continuously expose Chinese QA practitioners to new ideas and standards, creating a virtuous cycle of quality enhancement (Liu et al., 2025). On the flip side, the internationalization of higher education—such as the growth of Sino-foreign joint universities and programs—has tested China's QA system, which must coordinate with foreign QA agencies to accredit these joint initiatives (Huang, 2016). China has responded by issuing special QA guidelines for transnational programs and conducting joint evaluations, an area that still evolves as cross-border education expands.

In sum, the reforms in QA policy have led to notable improvements in the infrastructure and processes of quality assurance at Chinese universities, with positive impacts on educational quality in many cases. However, the experiences of institutions also reveal areas where QA practices have yet to achieve their intended effect, or have generated unintended consequences. The *Discussion* section will delve into these persistent challenges, offering a critical perspective on what obstacles remain and how they might be addressed to ensure that QA truly supports educational excellence across China's diverse higher education landscape.

4. Discussion

China's ambitious efforts to implement quality assurance in higher education have yielded both significant progress and ongoing challenges. In this section, we reflect on the implications of the findings, examining the tensions in China's QA system and the hurdles that institutions face in cultivating genuine quality improvement. Several interrelated themes emerge: the balance between accountability and improvement, the centralization of QA versus institutional autonomy, the development of a quality culture, and the capacity of stakeholders (faculty, students, third-party agencies) to engage in QA processes.

4.1. Accountability vs. Improvement

One of the classic debates in QA is whether evaluation systems primarily serve as accountability tools or as mechanisms for improvement (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002). China's experience encapsulates this tension. The early QA regime was firmly accountability-oriented – universities were held to uniform standards set by the government, and poor performance could lead to sanctions or loss of face. This had the advantage of establishing minimum quality thresholds across a vastly expanded system, a necessary step in the aftermath of rapid growth. However, a compliance-driven approach can engender a checklist mentality among institutions, where the focus is on satisfying the evaluator rather than innovating in teaching and learning (Bao & Liu, 2019). Indeed, some Chinese academics have criticized past evaluations as overly bureaucratic, consuming faculty time in preparing documentation and statistics that may not reflect actual learning quality (Wang, 2014; Zhou & Gao, 2017). While the newer audit model aims to pivot towards improvement by providing developmental feedback, it is still evolving. Universities often still perceive external audits as high-stakes "inspections" and may engage in short-term mobilization of resources (e.g., temporarily reducing class sizes or sprucing up facilities) before an audit, which can limit the authenticity of the exercise (Yang, 2015). The key challenge is to embed continuous improvement so that QA is not an event but a process. This requires reducing the punitive perception of QA and framing it as a collaborative effort to enhance quality. Chinese policy makers appear aware of this, as seen in recent guidelines that explicitly forbid excessive paperwork in evaluations and encourage expert panels to act more like consultants than judges (Pan, 2015). Moving forward, the effectiveness of QA in China will hinge on strengthening its formative aspects – helping institutions identify weaknesses and support improvement – rather than just its summative judgment function (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008).

4.2. Centralization and University Autonomy

China's QA system reflects the broader governance model often described as "centralized decentralization" (Marginson, 2011), wherein the government sets the agenda and framework, but implementation is devolved to universities. The state maintains tight control over QA criteria and processes through the Ministry of Education and its authorized agencies. For instance, even as audits replaced evaluations, the criteria for audits were still designed by national bodies and largely standardized (covering institutional mission, faculty, teaching conditions, student support, etc.), albeit assessed more flexibly (Shi, 2009; Yang & Chen, 2016). This centralization ensures a baseline consistency and aligns QA with national goals (like producing more STEM graduates or

promoting innovation). However, it can conflict with institutional autonomy and innovation. Some university leaders argue that they need greater freedom to define quality on their own terms and to experiment with new educational models without fearing negative evaluation results (Yang, 2015). The Double First-Class initiative, for example, pressures elite universities to excel in research and global rankings, which might incentivize practices (hiring star researchers, emphasizing publications) that do not directly translate to better undergraduate teaching quality (Hazelkorn, 2015; Mok & Jiang, 2018). In less prestigious institutions, strict adherence to government QA directives may stifle local adaptation – for example, a teaching-focused college in a poor region might be better served by qualitatively different QA metrics emphasizing community impact and practical training, rather than the same research indicators used for top universities (Zhang & Wan, 2017). The Chinese government has acknowledged the need to "respect institutional diversity" in QA (Ministry of Education, 2010), but in practice, achieving this remains difficult in a centralized system. A potential path forward is granting universities more autonomy in internal quality management, with the state shifting to a supervisory and capacity-building role. This could involve allowing institutions to set specific additional quality goals based on their mission (with state oversight ensuring these goals are credible), and accepting differentiated evaluation outcomes rather than assuming one hierarchy of quality for all (Liu et al., 2025). Such an approach would require trust in universities—a cultural shift from the traditional top-down control. Notably, some pilot reforms are testing greater autonomy: e.g., a few top universities have been allowed to undertake self-evaluation in lieu of a scheduled external audit, submitting their self-assessment to MoE for record (Pan, 2015). If successful, this could be expanded.

4.3. Building a Quality Culture

International QA experts emphasize that a sustainable quality system depends on cultivating a quality culture—shared values and commitments to quality within the academic community (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Green, 1994). Establishing such a culture is arguably the most persistent challenge in China. Historically, Chinese universities (especially during the expansion era) have been more accustomed to responding to government directives than engaging in collegial self-reflection on quality. Changing this mindset is a slow process. Our review indicates some positive trends: faculty awareness of teaching quality issues has risen, and there are more discussions at department and school levels about how to improve courses and academic support (Zhou & Gao, 2017; Long et al., 2024). The involvement of faculty in QA processes, however, is not uniform. In many institutions, QA is still seen as the domain of administrators, with academics participating only minimally, for instance by filling out evaluation forms or complying with new syllabus requirements (Zhou & Gao, 2017). For QA to truly lead to pedagogical enhancement, faculty need to take ownership. This could be encouraged by initiatives such as faculty-led quality circles, peer mentoring programs for teaching, and giving departments greater responsibility (and credit) for internal quality improvements (Chen & Li, 2022). The role of students is equally important. Chinese universities have begun to solicit student feedback more systematically, but students can be reluctant to voice criticism due to cultural norms and skepticism about whether feedback will bring change (Yang, 2015). Strengthening student

representation in QA committees and transparently acting on student feedback (e.g., publishing "you said, we did" reports) could gradually empower the student voice. A heartening development is that some quality evaluations now explicitly assess whether an institution has a positive quality culture – for example, audit teams might interview random faculty and students to gauge their understanding of and commitment to quality goals (Liu & Cheng, 2005; Liu et al., 2025). This sends a message that quality culture is not an abstract ideal but a tangible part of what "counts" in QA. Over time, recognition (through awards or commendations) of departments and universities that exemplify a strong quality culture could reinforce these values. As Harvey and Stensaker (2008) note, building quality culture is a long-term endeavor; China's QA evolution may need another decade of persistent effort in this direction for the cultural shift to fully take root.

4.4. Stakeholder Engagement and Third-Party Agencies

A robust QA system engages multiple stakeholders, including not just the university and government, but also independent agencies, employers, and society at large. In China, this aspect of QA is still developing. The creation of the HEEC and specialized accreditation committees has introduced elements of peer review and expert involvement beyond direct government officials, which is a positive step. However, truly independent QA agencies (like non-governmental accreditation bodies common in some countries) are rare. An attempt to pilot third-party QA agencies in a few provinces has encountered obstacles such as lack of authority, limited professional capacity, and unclear division of responsibility with government education departments (Chen & Wu, 2020). In Yunnan Province, for instance, a third-party QA agency struggled to gain the trust of universities, who still looked to the provincial education department for final judgments (Chen & Wu, 2020). Strengthening such agencies requires clear policy support that delineates their role and ensures their evaluations carry weight. Training of QA professionals is also needed so that there is an expert community outside the universities and government capable of carrying out evaluations objectively (Liu, 2018). Engaging employers and industry representatives in QA is another area for improvement. While many universities have industry advisory boards for their programs (as encouraged by accreditation standards), the extent to which employer feedback influences curriculum and QA decisions is not always evident (Hu & Vargas, 2015). Given China's focus on aligning higher education with economic needs, more systematic inclusion of labor market outcomes in QA (such as employer surveys, graduate tracking studies) would be beneficial (Jiang & Tam, 2019). The data systems established are starting to do this, but qualitative input from employers could enrich the understanding of quality beyond numerical indicators. Furthermore, transparency to the public remains a challenge. Chinese QA results are often not fully disclosed—typically, a list of evaluated institutions might be published with general comments, but detailed reports are internal (Pan, 2015). Increasing public access to quality information could enhance external pressure and incentives for improvement (Hazelkorn, 2015). However, it must be balanced with fairness, to avoid misinterpretation of data by rankings or media that might unduly stigmatize institutions in challenging contexts. Initiatives like publishing brief annual quality reports for each university (a practice some institutions have voluntarily adopted) can improve accountability to society (Ministry of Education, 2021). Internationally, China can also leverage cross-border external

reviews—for example, inviting foreign QA agencies to conduct reviews of certain programs or benchmarking exercises. This has been done on a limited basis (such as joint evaluations for Sino-foreign joint universities), and expanding it could further spur Chinese universities to meet global quality expectations.

4.5. Sustaining Improvement Amid Massification

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the scale-related challenges that persist. China now hosts the world's largest higher education system, and maintaining quality across such a vast and diverse array of institutions is a herculean task (Liu et al., 2025). Quality gaps between urban elite universities and rural local colleges are still pronounced. Faculty student ratios in some less-funded institutions remain high (e.g., above 25:1), and faculty qualifications and research opportunities lag behind, affecting the educational experience (Ministry of Education, 2021). QA mechanisms have identified these disparities, but addressing them requires resource allocation and capacity building, which extend beyond QA per se. The government has launched initiatives (like targeted support for universities in central and western China) to reduce inequities, yet the effects will take time to manifest (Pan, 2015; Wang & Liu, 2021). Additionally, academic pressure and employment competition influence perceptions of quality. With a record number of college graduates each year (over 9 million in 2021), students and families gauge quality partly by employability and career outcomes (Mok & Jiang, 2018). QA in China increasingly incorporates graduate employment rates as a metric, but there is debate about over-reliance on this indicator. If universities focus narrowly on employment statistics, they might neglect broader educational outcomes like critical thinking or civic education (Yang, 2015). Thus, QA must strike a balance in defining quality holistically, not just through easily quantifiable outcomes. The concept of "high-quality higher education" now being promoted in China's new policy rhetoric (as seen in the 14th Five-Year Plan for Education) suggests an orientation toward more well-rounded, inclusive, and innovative education (Huang, 2016; Zhang & Wang, 2024). QA standards will likely be revised in coming years to align with this expanded notion of quality, encompassing aspects like teaching innovation, student satisfaction, and contributions to society.

In conclusion, the discussion highlights that while China has built an impressive QA infrastructure in a short time—effectively underpinning the rapid expansion of its higher education system—the journey toward deeply embedded and effective quality assurance is ongoing. Key challenges such as nurturing a quality culture, fine-tuning the balance of control between the state and institutions, and engaging stakeholders more fully must be addressed to avoid QA becoming a mere formality. The Chinese experience reinforces lessons familiar in global higher education: quality assurance is not a one-time reform but a continuous process of learning and adjustment for all actors involved. As China continues to innovate and refine its QA approaches, it can offer valuable insights to other countries facing the twin demands of expanding access and ensuring quality in higher education.

5. Conclusion

Quality assurance has been at the forefront of China's higher education reform agenda as the country seeks to transition from mass access to world-class quality. This study reviewed the trajectory of QA policy reforms in Chinese higher education and examined the institutional challenges that remain. Over the past two decades, China has succeeded in establishing a comprehensive QA system that includes national evaluations, program accreditations, data monitoring, and internal quality mechanisms. These measures have helped protect educational standards amid explosive enrollment growth and have driven improvements in areas such as curriculum design, teaching conditions, and outcomes assessment. The QA reforms are closely intertwined with China's push for global competitiveness of its universities, reflected in initiatives like the Double First-Class plan. By aligning many QA practices with international norms and emphasizing accountability, Chinese policymakers have signaled that educational quality is as important as quantity in the country's development of human resources.

However, the Chinese experience also underscores that implementing QA in a way that genuinely enhances educational quality is a complex endeavor. Many challenges identified in this paper are not unique to China—such as fostering a quality-oriented institutional culture rather than compliance behavior—but some are accentuated by China's context and scale. The persistence of a top-down ethos means that universities often remain reactive to government mandates. To truly internalize quality improvement, institutions will need greater empowerment and encouragement to take initiative in QA, tailoring improvement strategies to their unique missions and student populations. Furthermore, while China's QA system effectively identifies problems, addressing those problems requires ongoing investment in faculty development, student support, and infrastructure, especially for institutions in less-developed regions. The inequity in resources can translate into inequity in quality, a challenge that China's QA and funding policies must tackle hand-in-hand.

The analysis leads to several recommendations for policy and practice. First, China could adopt a more risk-based and differentiated QA approach: institutions with strong track records might undergo lighter-touch reviews, whereas those with documented challenges receive more intensive mentoring and monitoring. This would allocate evaluative effort where it is most needed and reduce unnecessary burden on high-performing universities, allowing them to focus on innovation. Second, strengthening feedback loops is crucial. After evaluations or audits, actionable recommendations should be followed up, and universities should report on improvement actions taken; in turn, QA agencies should provide guidance or training to assist with those improvements. Creating communities of practice—networks where QA officers and faculty from different universities share effective practices—can also facilitate collective learning and dissemination of what works. Third, enhancing stakeholder engagement will improve legitimacy and effectiveness of QA. Incorporating student and employer input more systematically can help ensure that quality is defined in terms of real educational value added, not just administrative metrics. The move towards publishing annual quality reports is positive; expanding this transparency and

encouraging public dialogue about higher education quality will keep institutions responsive to societal needs.

For scholars and policymakers internationally, China′s QA journey offers valuable insights. It demonstrates the possibility of building QA systems relatively quickly through strong government initiative, but also highlights the risk that such systems may emphasize compliance over creativity. The Chinese case reinforces the idea that quality assurance must evolve: initial phases may rightly focus on establishing accountability and minimum standards, but mature systems should pivot to promoting a deep-seated culture of continuous improvement. As Chinese higher education moves into a new stage of consolidation and improvement, its QA system is likely to keep adapting. Future research could fruitfully examine, for example, the impact of QA on student learning outcomes more directly (beyond proxies like employment) and how new challenges—such as the rapid digitalization of education with online learning—are addressed by QA policies.

In conclusion, quality assurance in Chinese higher education has come a long way, reflecting and enabling the sector′s remarkable expansion and rising stature. The policy reforms have established structures and awareness that did not exist a generation ago, laying the groundwork for more substantive quality improvements. Yet, achieving the lofty goal of world-class education for a system serving tens of millions of students will require sustained commitment to refining QA practices. It entails trusting and supporting universities to innovate, engaging educators and students as partners in the quest for quality, and remaining vigilant that the ultimate purpose of QA is not the production of self-congratulatory reports, but the enhancement of student learning and development. The Chinese experience thus far illustrates both the opportunities and the challenges in using policy levers to drive educational quality. Other countries can learn from China′s successes in building QA capacity, while also heeding the caution that true quality is cultivated from within academic communities, not just engineered from above. As China continues to navigate this balance, its outcomes will be closely watched, offering lessons for the global higher education community in the shared pursuit of excellence.

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