

Localizing Quality Audit in Chinese Higher Education Institutions: Analysis of Factors from Organizational Sociology Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The massive rise of Chinese students in the higher education sector has uncovered a fundamental tension between the expansion of student enrolment and efforts to maintain academic quality. Quality Audit is one of the external quality assurance schemes that is particularly attracting concerns about its organisational tactics, implementation methodologies, and possible impacts. The semi-structured interview was conducted at an application-oriented institution with organizational sociology serving as the analytical framework. The goal of the interview was to investigate the influence of the quality audit on localization. This case study, which was based on University Q, concluded that the present policies witness decoupling in areas such as curriculum teaching, assessments of student learning, and quality assurance. The above-mentioned decoupling phenomena are affected by a variety of factors, including institutional legitimacy, sources of pressure, institutional content, monitoring systems, and organizational context. The present research aims to gain a more in-depth understanding of the previously established theoretical framework. Future research hopes to concentrate on the phenomenon of path innovation in higher education institutions in order to contribute new insights to the localization-related theories of institutional-led review for tertiary teaching and learning.

Keywords: *Institution-Led Review; Localization; Quality Assurance; Tertiary Teaching and Learning.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Influenced by the neo-liberalism in 1980s, quality assurance in the higher education sector has been agenda in the western powers so that the government can respond to the market's appealed requests in the process of popularization of higher education. The effective practices of quality evaluation and audit conducted by the education powers have added insights to the localization and recreation of enhancing the global competitiveness of China's higher education.

From the year 2003 to 2013, a five-yearly quality evaluation of undergraduate teaching and learning for higher education institutions in China was initiated and conducted by the Higher Education Evaluation Centre (HEEC) commissioned by China Ministry of Education (MoE). After that, a quality audit was determined and prompted by the MoE, and the current round (2021-25) is highlighted as the potential discovery for the classified patterns for quality evaluation. This scheme predicts that

the standards for the HE providers' classification tend to be more flexibly refined and detailed than before. Therefore, the reviewed universities are encouraged to precisely identify their own organizational positions and strategies in the HE sector through the comparative analysis of selected standing data and accounts of their own provisions for quality assurance and enhancement. There are a few estimated indicators that are hoped to be achieved, including organizational objectives, faculty professionalization, teaching and learning, quality assurance, and distinctive work.

The existing research excessively analyzes the theoretical documents of quality assurance in Chinese HE, but there is a lack of research on discussing the organizational responses to external quality accountability and the interactive process among different stakeholders within the HE sector, with a particular spotlight on second-tier HE institutions in China. Based on the potential research gaps, the current study aims to discover the organizational strategic

responses to the quality audit by the external stakeholders and hopes to deepen the understanding of its impacts and institutional logic in the context of Chinese higher education. Based on the potential research gaps, the current study aims to discover the organizational strategic responses to the quality audit by the external stakeholders and hopes to deepen the understanding of its impacts and institutional logic in the context of Chinese higher education.

2. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In the field of sociological institutionalism, an institution is made up of locally meaningful constructions made by people in a specific context within the constraints of the organizational structure, and through the resources and powers of the organization. Individuals within the organization are not static carriers of the institutions but can constantly challenge, change, transform, and legitimize them. The predictable factors influencing the response of organizations to external pressures come from five dimensions: cause, constituent, content, control, and context. The above theory is applicable to the current study. A quality audit is a top-down mandatory policy that externally impresses on HE providers in China, and it aims to be deconstructed and implemented at university level. The contextualized process of organizational responses may encounter complex technical requirements that probably result in a decoupling phenomenon. This means the reviewed subjects may allow the internal normative and operational modes to detach from the external institutional requirements.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Based on the research gap and analytical framework identified above, the current study decided to adopt a case study as a qualitative design for data collection. A case study is beneficial to investigate a limited system in depth and answer practical questions such as "how" and "why", both of which require a more detailed description of the research subject.

To acquire information on the contextualization of policy-decoupling within a China second-tier university, the researcher purposefully sampled a provincial applied-oriented HE provider (University Q) located in the northeast as the case. In recent years, University Q has been actively transforming internal norms and practices for gaining qualified or above grade after an on-spot visit that is scheduled in the autumn of this year. Apart from the visible representatives, the feasibility of field research also contributed to this case sample because the researcher was admitted to accessing internal archival and recruiting interview participants within University Q through a partnership research program.

The following is the interview administration for obtaining empirical data to answer research questions. To begin with, an information sheet and interview questions sheet were emailed to the potential participants prior to the in-person interview to inform them of the purpose of the interview, the use of the data, and the interviewees rights. Then, a total of ten participants were engaged, and all of them had no conflicts of interest with the researcher. Further to clarify, two of ten interviewees are senior managers at committee board that are in charge of the quality assurance and enhancement in University Q; the remainders are administrators and academics at faculty level that are involved in the ongoing organizational schemes. After conducting interviews (one hour per person), the audio data was electronically transcribed into text, and double checked by the researcher members. Finally, the method of thematic analysis was undertaken to analyze the coding results and write reports.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Legitimacy and Rationale

The prioritized rationale for quality audit results from a chronic phenomenon where emphasis on research output has always been on the agenda but the value of academic teaching cannot function among many HE institutions in China. The ongoing audit not only hopes to address the shortcomings of assessment rectification on the basis of quantitative methodology but also targets to effectively improve the capacity-building of undergraduate teaching.

From the interview data, the legitimacy of the quality audit was fully approved by the staff interviewees, and the potential benefits to the reviewed university were also identified, such as providing a good opportunity to show teaching achievements, cultivating a quality culture, and optimizing quality assurance strategies no matter at individual, faculty, or university level. However, the decoupling of positive impressions and practical actions was contributed by the different perspectives on top-down organizational strategic tasks, resource arrangements, and management mechanisms. This gap stands out when multiple institutional pressures and content co-exist.

4.2 Sources of Institutional Pressure

In the current study, the quality audit coexisted with professional accreditation, third-party ranking, position promotion, and work appraisal; hence, responses to the audit varied depending on the positions of the practitioners.

For the provincial university, the audit results made by the official department play an important role in maintaining the organizational reputation and its top-level leaders, and this is highlighted in comparison to the

informal accreditation and rankings by mess associations. To cope with this pressure, University Q has developed a series of strategies that are incompatible with its own competencies.

As for the front-line academics, there is a clear distinction between the primary purpose and the realistic benefits of quality audits and career promotion, where they have no choice but to respond to the one that maximizes their personal interests. The benefits from organizational achievements cannot produce a sense of position glory or an increase in salary. As a result, they are driven by a utilitarianism-based paradigm and are more willing to devote their energies to the quantitative article punishments rather than to involving themselves in preparations for quality audit.

4.3 Institutional Contents

The contents of the quality audit and assessment broadly refer to the norms and requirements that universities need to accept and follow, with particular aspects of pedagogical reform, student development, faculty professionalization, quality assurance, and distinctive practices.

From the perspective of decision-makers at the national level, the above indicators are essential for the overall improvement of undergraduate teaching quality and have been taken as dimensions for reviewing the localized performance. As seen from the research findings, even if the University meets the threshold "quality" set by the external system, the actual quality is unable to be guaranteed or improved either. This may result from the mismatch between organizational capability and intended institutions. After the University has implemented a number of superficial reforms like the Outcome-based Education and blended classroom, the paper materials for welcoming reviewers may achieve the standard line of quality audit, but the perceptions of the practitioners tend to be much more negative and witness marginal changes in capacity building.

4.4 Control Mechanisms

The control mechanism in the analytical framework above refers to the ways in which the system exerts pressure on the organization. Through a high degree of authority, the external pressure that is exerted over the reviewed universities is achieved. In China's complexly centralized education system, the provincial Education Department is commissioned by the state to assess the providers' performance and to determine the quotes of financial allocations in the higher education sector. The evaluation result for a certain university is like an implicit thread connecting key resources such as project funding, enterprise investment, and international exchange, so this pressure forces the organizational governor to overcome difficulties in meeting the ends.

At the faculty level, this institutional pressure is internalized through the cascading pressure of the hierarchical system, supplemented by administrative performance appraisals and other management measures. On the one hand, the top-down campaign-alike may help universities to make quantitative achievements in the short term, which is significant for consolidating the legitimacy of the organization; on the other hand, this control mechanism lacks bottom-up participation enthusiasm and prudent thinking, which does not actually stimulate the initiative of front-line teachers and merely contributes to a marginal effect on continuous quality improvement.

4.5 Organizational Contexts

In the theoretical framework of this paper, the local context refers to the kind of organizational environment in which the audit and assessment take place. Elements such as the organization characteristics, the stability of the external environment, and inter-organizational relationships are inextricably linked to the organizational context.

Focusing on the current study, the University is a provincial application-oriented higher education provider, and this status determines that its autonomy, personnel arrangements, and financial allocation are largely subject to external authorities, as well as the influence of the chronic ideology of planned economy accustomed, which has forced it to visibly excel in teaching reform and student development in order to gain an advantageous position in the sector. Contextually, in comparison with counterparts in the same province, there exist gaps in the learning status of students, the professional competence of teachers, and the available teaching resources. The above dilemma prevents the University from deploying resources at will or keeping patients with the delayed self-enhancements by unintended trials and errors. While the local context of the university is a key factor influencing the localization impacts, the transformation must be constructed with and supported by the external environment.

4.6 A Case of Localization Strategy: Curriculum Reform Scheme

To make solid progress in the accreditation of its star majors, University Q has introduced the pedagogy of Outcome-based Education (OBE) following the recent reassessment review. The principles proclaimed by the OBE have led to a reform revolution in many programs at the University.

The theoretical scheme of localized OBE consists of training objectives, graduation requirements, and course objectives, and the assessment of learning achievements is fully authorized to be conducted by the course teachers, consisting of self-evaluation by students themselves and

evaluation of course assessment results. Furthermore, teachers are required to control the teaching process on the basis of the idealized learning outcomes that students can potentially achieve, and to translate the teaching outcomes into quantitative indicators that can be described in words and calculated in digits. Therefore, it is no wonder that teachers need to record and calculate a relatively large amount of quantitative data, making their workload often exceeded.

In essence, the process of training talents in the University based on OBE attempts to mechanically transplant the industrial model of mass production into the program teaching, and the student-centered provision is predetermined by the teacher without students' involvement. It may be safe to estimate that the above localization in curriculum reform reflects the nature of teacher-centered philosophy.

5. CONCLUSION

The current study concluded that when the application-oriented university utilized localized resources to interact with the pressure from quality audit, there was a decoupling between policy expectations and contextual practice, indicated in quality monitoring and assurance provisions. Further analysis proved that varied location impacts at different levels at the university resulted from multiple factors including institutional sources, institutional content, and expectations, institutional monitoring mechanisms, as well as organizational contexts. The current study hopes to deepen the understanding of the established theoretical framework for interpreting the localization impacts of quality audit, and further research is expected to focus on the path of breakthroughs in Chinese-foreign cooperative institutions.

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