

## Review

# Thoughts on internal and external quality assurance

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**Quality assurance of higher education is made up of two parts: internal quality assurance (IQA) and external quality assurance (EQA). Both belong to a union of the coexistence and balance of yin and yang. But in reality there exists a paradox of “confusion of quality assurance (QA) subject consciousness, singularity of social QA and lack of QA independence”. The present paper suggests that “giving priority to the internal QA, the external QA is promoting the internal and appropriately combining both the internal QA and the external QA”.**

**Key words:** Higher education, internal quality assurance (IQA), external quality assurance (EQA), appropriate combination.

## INTRODUCTION

As everybody knows, quality assurance (QA) is the process of determining whether products meet customers' expectations. But as for quality assurance of higher education (QAHE), it is not easy to define. Just like love, everybody talks about love, but when trying to give a definition of “love”, people are at lose. Though there are many arguments about QAHE, the researchers can still talk QAHE from 6 aspects: as excellence, as fitness for purpose, as a threshold, as added value, as value for money and as satisfaction of the client (Green, 1994), consisting of two parts: internal quality assurance (IQA) and external quality assurance (EQA). At present a true QAHE system including the internal administration of higher education institutions (HEIs) and the external surveillance by society has not yet been established in China and some countries in Asia. How to deal with the relationship between both is a demanding problem to us. On the background of the “Level Evaluation of Teaching in HEIs” organized by the Ministry of Education (MoE) in China, the present paper tries to deepen the alleged surface problems, analyze such profound QA problems as subject consciousness, social evaluation and independence, explores the probability of the appropriate combination of both the internal and the external QA, whose purpose is to implement the spirit of “establishing the healthy QA of the higher education system” issued by the “National Education Reform and Development of Long-term Planning (2010 to 2020)”.

## The connotation of QA of higher education

The QA system can be divided into two branches: one is IQA, the other is EQA. The IQA system refers to all evaluations carried out by the main QA organizations in HEIs themselves, including the self-evaluation of programme, HEIs's self-evaluation, whose main goal is to insure and improve the quality of each organization's core activities covering teaching, learning, administration, research, social service and others. EQA mainly refers to all the QA activities carried out by external organizations except HEIs (ASEAN University Network, 2007), for example: the professional evaluations and international accreditations of special domains of study implemented by the regional, national, or provincial organization (Figure 1). Only by combining IQA and EQA, can higher education realize the ideal function of higher quality.

## PARADOX OF INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

**Problem 1: “You are wanted to evaluate” or “You want to evaluate”? (confusion of QA subject consciousness)**

The alternative question of “you are wanted to evaluate”

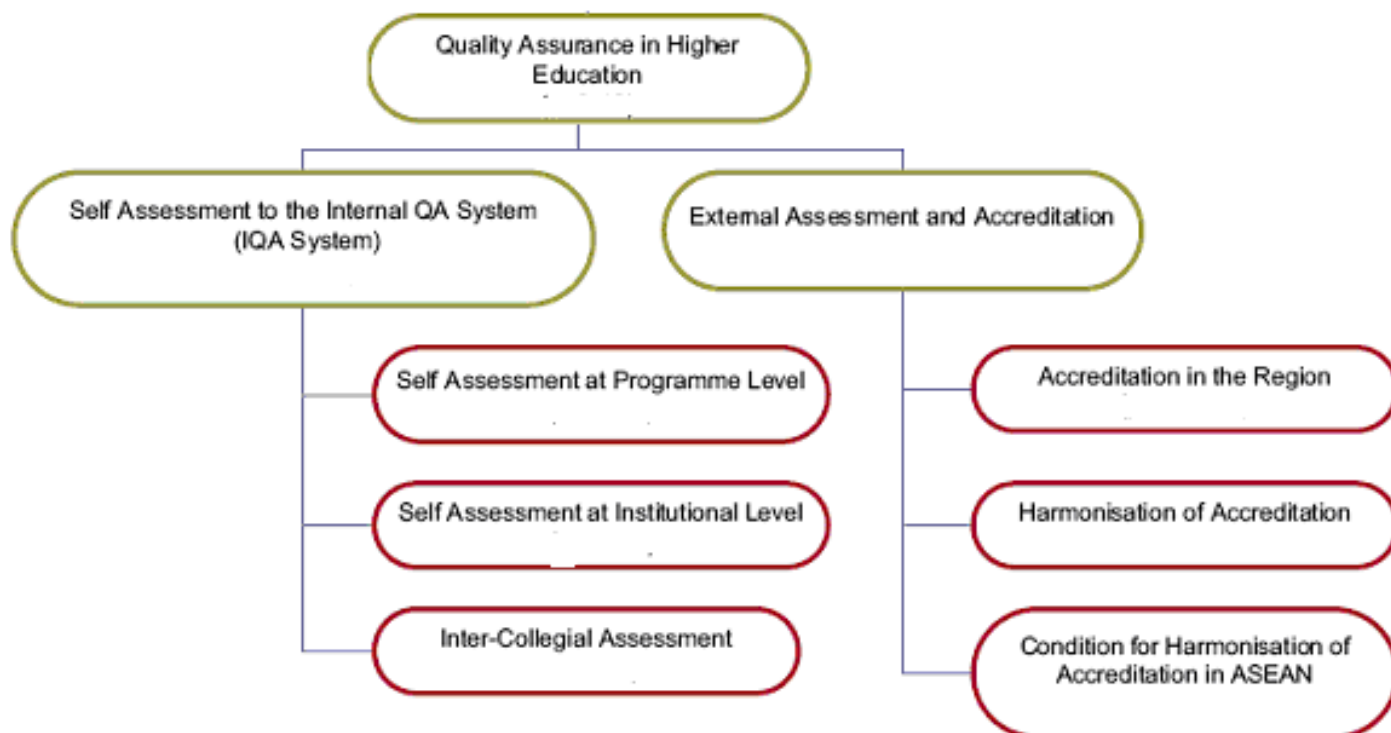


Figure 1. Framework of the system of quality assurance of higher education (ASEAN University Network, 2007).

or “I want to evaluate” shows the confusion of subject consciousness, bias and even torture of IQA and EQA. The confusion of subject consciousness rises where actors are answering the two questions. HEIs of the type “you are wanted to evaluate” have no choice but to establish “the offices to welcome evaluation” with the expression of “welcoming evaluation” and begin to passively deal with all under the pressure of the education administration department, not from their own needs. They see the demand of the government “I want to evaluate” as a “picky” inspection task, a kind of “from the top down” administrative power. Therefore, the evaluation contents of HEIs’ internal self-evaluation are the same as the evaluation by external experts.

Internal self-evaluation basically becomes a “rehearsal” of the external evaluation: what the external experts “evaluate”, is what the internal self-evaluation “demands attention for”. To some degree, the external experts become the “baton” of the internal self-evaluation. Obviously, such attitudes and behaviors ignore completely the essence and original aim of QAHE. “Subject consciousness” is the clear understanding of the fact that one himself is the subject of social politics, culture, economy and public life, not a trifle object; one himself takes part in the correlated social relationship and events as the legal subject of independent consciousness and independent position. The subject consciousness of QA is to establish the consciousness of “I want to evaluate”, which is an active, pro-active, and constructive

attitude, showing a strong recognition of self-consciousness. Since both, IQA and EQA, are a demand for the development and the high quality of HEIs, the subject of self-consciousness should be acquired in order to change from “you are wanted to evaluate” to “I want to evaluate”.

### Problem 2: Do stakeholders’ have a “voice” or not? (singularity of social QA)

Education evaluation also must be a kind of social evaluation by the public. It is the evaluation based on the evaluation subject of the public, namely an integrating expression from many individual evaluations by the public. The original form is the town talks of the public opinion, showing the public opinion and thought about some incidents and public persons. In modern society the public opinion as well as radio, television, newspapers, magazines and other multimedia is the evaluation instrument of the public. Entering the stage of mass higher education, the resources of higher education in China are no longer only distributed by the national government, but also by the market. As one of the economical subjects in the market competition, universities are no longer the former “ivory tower”. Only by the enterprising spirit in the competition, can they obtain such education resources as financial support, student origin, teachers and research instruments.

Therefore, QAHE must open the correlated information to the public, accept the surveillance and evaluation from both public and external organizations.

Quality is not a simple one-dimensional notion, but a multi-dimensional one. These different notions are set by different stakeholders such as students, employers (society), the government and the academic world. There is quality of input, process quality, and quality of output. When discussing quality and judging quality, all these dimensions have to be taken into account by the researchers. A holistic view of quality in higher education is greatly needed, but the researchers can only find quality by looking at the various aspects. There is not one standard definition of higher education quality anymore. Since "quality is a matter of negotiating between all the parties concerned" (ASEAN University Network, 2007), then in this negotiation, each stakeholder needs to formulate, as clearly as possible, his requirements. Higher education must hear all the stakeholders' voices in the process of QAHE, and let the public opinion be present in the evaluation. Only by understanding the quality concept as understood by each stakeholder, can the idea of the real QAHE be realized.

### **Problem 3: University ranking of EQA being "pleasing" or "unpleasing"? (lack of QA independence)**

We must notice that the evaluation is much on the road to "university ranking". As consequence, in a strong competition between universities the index of simple figures in the commercial university ranking can lead to a "similarity" of HEIs, and weaken the diversity and individual character of HEIs. For example, the score of "student training" of some colleges who only have the right to enroll undergraduates is much higher than many key universities with a long history just because they have a large number of students. Tsinghua University, for instance, ranks the 9<sup>th</sup> place in the ranking of graduates in mathematics. Therefore, if only figures are emphasized, there is no way to observe the quality for HEIs.

IQA is crucially essential to insure the production and development of education quality in HEIs, so QA should always insist in the spirit of independency and autonomy, not like "a weathercock" which change a lot according to the wind. Although, universities today are closely connected with the society, no longer "ivory towers", they still have their own characteristics, such as academic freedom, academic autonomy, and academic neutrality. In the impetuous tendency of longing for quick success and instant benefit, to meet the requirement of ranking, the development planning of "GAO Daquan" (all HEIs seek for the same standard) can never improve the quality but is a true harm to QAHE. The wise behavior for HEIs is to try their best to develop themselves better, give the university ranking their own criticism and suggestions,

and supply information to the public.

### **THE APPROPRIATE COMBINATION OF BOTH THE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL**

The main battlefield of QAHE is in the internal part of HEIs. Therefore establishing an IQA system is a must; but QAHE is not finished without EQA. Only by giving priority to the internal QA and by the promotion of the internal QA by the external QA the appropriate combination of both, the internal and the external QA, can be acquired.

#### **Giving priority to the internal QA: IQA is the foundation**

No matter what, IQA and EQA have only one goal: the improvement of HE quality. In the process of reaching the goal, the responsibility for the quality of education mainly lies on the shoulders of HEIs that are in the center of the quality process. To some degree, IQA is the core of QA, therefore, a complete IQA system should be established (Zhang and Lia, 2010). The IQA system in HEIs should include at least the following five aspects: (1) leaders of HEIs who are responsible for the goal of development, planning, learning, student training, teaching, administration and others; (2) faculties and departments in charge of teaching and learning that are the basic teaching units and the practical body of quality control and evaluation; (3) all the academic staff who keep on improving their ability of teaching and research, guaranteeing teaching quality; (4) all the students who must study hard to guarantee the learning quality and supervise the multiple dimensions of the teaching quality; (5) teaching units and the regular organizations of both, IQA and EQA, that form a 3-level evaluation system of a professorial committee, the teaching units and students, whose task is to judge, diagnose and supervise the quality of the "education input - education process - education output" process.

#### **The external QA promoting the internal QA: EQA supplies guarantee**

Although in the QAHE system, the internal administration of HEIs plays the key role, the function of external surveillance by society is the guarantee for the proper operation of HEIs. One of the important goals for EQA is to boost up HEIs to increase the quality mission and responsibility; it emphasizes the construction of IQA of HEIs. The EQA organization can reinforce and complete the IQA system of HEIs. The EQA system consists of at least the following elements: (1) departments of the government, mainly the education administration departments, such as the MoE regional educational

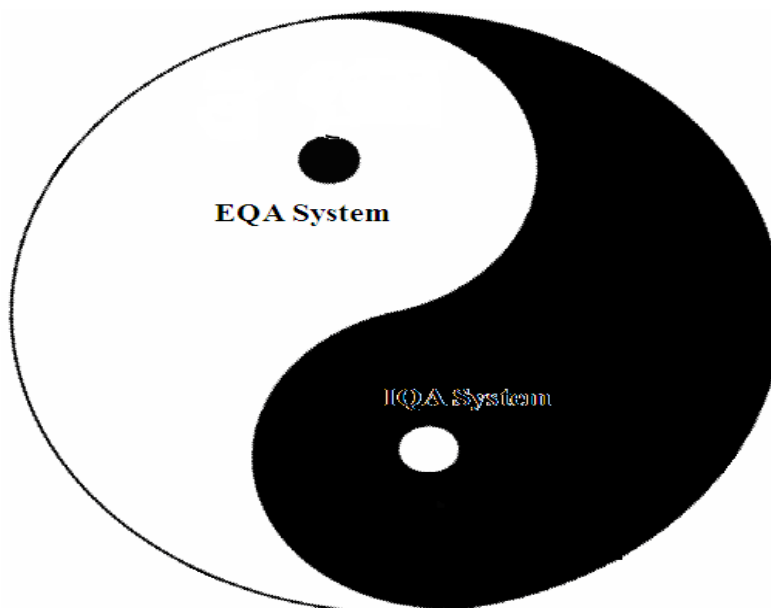


Figure 2. The appropriate combination of both the internal and the external.

departments whose duties are to make the guideline, standards and policy of QAHE, organize the evaluation experts, and publicize the results; (2) social medium-organizations, carrying out impersonal, equal and independent quality evaluation of HEIs according to the prescriptions of the law and the evaluation standards; (3) newspapers, periodicals, news media, social ranking and other forms for expressing the public opinion, showing opinions, criticism and suggestions about the teaching quality of HEIs; (4) employers, supplying feedback about the quality of graduates and doing suggestions for improvement.

All, is based on “the goal, the eligible students, and established scientific, multiple evaluation standards and carried out quality evaluation activities in which the government, HEIs, parents and others are involved.” (ZHANG and DONG, 2010). Among the above 4 elements, the most crucial one is the first: departments of the government because it is the policy-maker, the policy-executor as well as the policy-assessor. The QA agencies in China, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand tend to a “unitary evaluation mode” of the government, which means that the government has a strong control over the EQA system. Therefore, it is necessary to emphasize the government’s duty in EQA.

#### **The appropriate combination of both the internal QA and the external QA: IQA and EQA are the union of the coexistence and balance of Yin and Yang**

From the perspective of a formative evaluation, the ultimate goal of evaluation is to improve something. As a

consequence, the methods to combine IQA and EQA should seek for: the combination of self-evaluation with external evaluation because self-evaluation is the foundation of the external evaluation. The latter is only an instrument, and its results must be helpful to the reform and develop the internal operation of HEIs, and raise the training quality of students. The quality of QAHE must be a “natural heaven and earth figure” of both the internal and the external, including IQA and EQA. EQA includes a quality audit, a quality evaluation and social evaluation while IQA includes quality administration, quality control and self-evaluation (Figure 2). The figure shows that this is a periodical cycle, the union of the coexistence and balance of yin and yang: the internal is equal to the external while the external is equal to the internal. Both, the internal and the external, are corresponding to each other, indiscernible and follow the rational line to work well. The EQA system is a crucial element for QA, it is an important part of the QAHE system, and is a necessary condition for the operation of IAQ in HEIs. The IQA system is the core for QA, it is the foundation for the operation of IAQ in HEIs, which means that the QAHE system must be established on the foundation of the combination of IQA and EQA. Without the administration and control of EQA, there is no IQA; without the core of IQA, there is no ground for the EQA system.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Quality is an eternal topic in the whole world. Quality is life as well as efficiency. QAHE a hot topic, concerns HEIs’ great divide and prosperity. The researchers should

first fully understand the Connotation of QAHE, knowing the important function of IQA and EQA, which is “two sides of one coin”. Facing the paradox of IQA and EQA, which consists of “confusion of QA subject consciousness”, “singularity of social QA” and “lack of QA independence”, the researchers should find the appropriate combination of both the Internal and the External: first by giving priority to the IQA, secondly EQA supplying guarantee and promoting IQA; thirdly the appropriate combination of both the IQA and the EQA, which the union of the coexistence and balance of Yin and Yang. Only by this way, can QAHE reach the goal of excellence.

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