

Research Article

A Comparative Analysis of Quality Assessment Mechanisms in Higher Education between China and Foreign Countries

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Abstract

This paper employs literature analysis and comparative research methods, based on the institutionalism and multicultural governance theoretical framework of comparative education, to systematically compare the similarities and differences between the higher education quality assessment mechanisms in China and those in selected foreign countries (the UK, the US, Australia, and representative European countries). The study finds that China has established a distinctive mechanism characterized by “government leadership, periodic assessment, and outcome orientation,” achieving a significant transformation from input-oriented to output-oriented, and from compliance supervision to quality improvement. Foreign assessment mechanisms are mostly characterized by “third-party institutional leadership, multi-party governance, and quality improvement as the core,” emphasizing formative assessment and the cultivation of a quality culture. These differences stem from variations in educational management systems, cultural traditions, and stages of development. China should strengthen the role of third-party institutions and the construction of a quality culture, while other countries can learn from China’s systematic planning and dynamic adjustment mechanisms, providing a reference for optimizing global higher education quality assessment mechanisms.

Keywords

Higher education, Quality assessment mechanism, Comparative analysis, Quality assurance, Third-party evaluation

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Countries worldwide have established higher education quality assessment mechanisms

to balance the contradiction between the expansion of education scale and the improvement of quality (Liu, 2025; Fang, 2010). China's higher education has undergone three stages of development: the elitist stage before 1998, the massification stage from 1999 to 2019, and the universalization stage after 2019. In 2020, China's gross enrollment rate in higher education reached 54.4% (Liu, 2025), ranking first in the world. However, rapid expansion has also raised concerns about education quality, prompting China to continuously improve its quality assessment system: from the early "211 Project" and "985 Project" to the current "Double First-Class" initiative and routine quality monitoring (Liu, 2025; Hu & Gasemi, 2024).

British, American, and Oceanian countries (such as the UK, US, and Australia) adhere to a combination of institutional autonomy and third-party evaluation, focusing on quality improvement; while some European and Asian countries safeguard the bottom line of education through government-led systematic evaluation (Fang, 2010). The differences between Chinese and foreign evaluation mechanisms not only reflect different educational philosophies, but also directly affect the allocation of educational resources, the quality of talent cultivation, and international recognition (Yang et al., 2024).

1.2. Significance of the Research

At the theoretical level, this study enriches the comparative research system on quality assurance in higher education, reveals the adaptability of assessment mechanisms to education systems, and supplements the theoretical framework for cross-national comparative analysis of higher education (Bilošičtsky et al., 2025). At the practical level, drawing on the mature experiences of standardized operation of third-party institutions and extensive student participation in assessment abroad can optimize the mechanisms in China; at the same time, foreign countries can also refer to China's quality control experience under the background of large-scale education to achieve mutual benefit and win-win results (Liu, 2025).

1.3. Research Objectives and Questions

(1) Research Objectives

RO1: Systematically review the development stages and core characteristics of higher education quality assessment mechanisms in China and selected foreign countries (UK, USA, Australia, France, Germany, Norway, etc.);

RO2: Reveal the differences between the two parties in terms of evaluation subjects, indicators, processes and management models, and explore the causes of these differences;

RO3: Summarize the achievements and challenges of the mechanisms between the two sides, propose feasible paths for mutual learning, and provide empirical support for the optimization of the global higher education quality assessment system.

(2) Research Questions

RQ1: What are the development stages and core characteristics of quality assessment mechanisms for higher education in China and abroad?

RQ2: What are the differences between the two parties in terms of assessment subjects, indicators, processes and management models?

RQ3: What are the reasons for the differences and what are the respective benefits and challenges?

RQ4: What experiences can China and other countries learn from each other to improve their own evaluation mechanisms?

2. Research Methods

2.1. Literature Analysis Method

The system retrieves core literature on higher education quality assessment mechanisms in China and foreign countries (such as the UK and the US), and collects theoretical research, empirical analysis, and policy evaluation results through databases to ensure the comprehensiveness and authority of the literature support.

2.2. Comparative Research Method

The comparison is based on the theoretical framework of institutionalism and multicultural governance, and the dimensions of comparison include the assessment subject and assessment orientation to ensure the rigor and systematic nature of the comparison.

2.3. Research Limitations

This article does not cover the evaluation mechanisms of all countries, and some literature focuses on specific areas, which may lead to an incomplete comparison of some dimensions.

3. Research Results

3.1. Core Characteristics of China's Higher Education Quality Assessment Mechanism

(1) Development stage: From compliance supervision to quality improvement

The development of China's higher education quality assessment mechanism can be divided into three stages (Liu, 2025; Fang, 2010; Hu & Gassemi, 2024). The exploratory stage (1984-1994): The government launched pilot programs for teaching quality assessment, focusing on discipline and curriculum evaluation, forming a preliminary framework. The pilot

stage (1994-2002): A categorized assessment model was adopted, including qualified assessment, excellent assessment, and random assessment, establishing differentiated standards for universities at different levels and laying the institutional foundation. The institutionalization stage (2003-present): The Higher Education Teaching Evaluation Center (HEEC) of the Ministry of Education was established in 2004; the first round of national undergraduate teaching evaluation was conducted from 2003 to 2008; after 2010, the focus shifted to “quality-oriented” assessment, implementing a five-year audit and evaluation cycle, and establishing a national higher education quality monitoring platform to achieve dynamic monitoring driven by big data.

(2) Assessment subject: government-led, with third-party institutions assisting

In China, quality assessment is primarily government-led, with the Ministry of Education responsible for formulating policies, frameworks, and standards, the HEEC organizing and implementing external assessments, and local education departments providing collaborative oversight (Liu, 2025; Hu & Gassemi, 2024). Although third-party assessment agencies have emerged, their influence is limited due to a lack of authoritative authorization and insufficient professional capabilities (Hu & Gassemi, 2024). Universities establish internal quality management offices or academic affairs offices to handle self-assessment and data reporting, but internal self-assessment is often influenced by external assessment guidelines, resulting in insufficient autonomy (Liu, 2025; Zhang et al., 2022).

(3) Evaluation indicators: from input-oriented to output-oriented

Early evaluation indicators focused on “input” factors such as faculty, infrastructure, and funding (Liu, 2025; Fang, 2010). After 2010, the focus shifted to “output orientation,” adding dimensions such as student learning outcomes, graduate employment competitiveness, and social service capabilities (Liu, 2025; Yang et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the “Double First-Class” initiative incorporates discipline level, scientific research innovation, and social service into its core evaluation dimensions (Liu, 2025).

(4) Evaluation Model and Unique Mechanism

China’s higher education quality assessment adopts a model that combines external evaluation with internal self-assessment, with periodic assessments (every five years) as the core, supplemented by annual quality reports and dynamic data monitoring (Liu, 2025; Hu & Gassemi, 2024). Its distinctive mechanisms mainly include three categories: first, key construction projects, which guide universities to improve quality through special funds allocated by the “211 Project,” “985 Project,” and “Double First-Class” initiative; second, professional accreditation, where disciplines such as engineering and medicine achieve alignment with global standards through international accreditation; and third, big data

monitoring, which relies on the National Higher Education Quality Monitoring Platform to achieve real-time collection and analysis of assessment data (Liu, 2025; Yang et al., 2024; Hu & Gassemi, 2024).

3.2. Core Characteristics of Foreign Higher Education Quality Assessment Mechanisms

Foreign evaluation mechanisms exhibit diverse characteristics. Based on core literature, the following analysis focuses on the UK, US, Australia, and continental European countries (France, Germany, and Norway) as examples:

(1) United Kingdom: Third-party institutions take the lead, with quality improvement as the core.

The development of quality assessment in UK higher education has gone through three stages: quality auditing in the 1990s, quality improvement after 2000, and strengthened institutional auditing in the 2010s, emphasizing student participation and outcome orientation (Fang, 2010; Huangfu, 2023). The assessment body is centered on the independent Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), with indirect government oversight through the Office of Students (OfS), and universities enjoying a high degree of autonomy (Fang, 2010; Zhang et al., 2022). Third-party organizations provide teaching support and accreditation services, with deep involvement from employers, students, and other stakeholders (Huangfu, 2023). Assessment indicators consider both process and outcome, including student learning experience, research impact, teaching quality, and graduate employability, emphasizing “adaptability” rather than uniform standards (Liu, 2025; Fang, 2010). The assessment model combines institutional auditing and professional assessment, with formative assessment (a continuous assessment method that promotes quality improvement through timely feedback and adjustments) at its core, focusing on quality improvement rather than compliance penalties, and ensuring transparency and public oversight of assessment results (Fang, 2010; Zhang et al., 2022).

(2) United States: Decentralized certification with significant market characteristics

The evaluation of higher education quality in the United States originated in the late 19th century, developed into a regional accreditation system in the mid-20th century, and has emphasized student learning outcomes assessment and accountability since the 21st century. The evaluation bodies are decentralized, with no nationally unified evaluation agency; regional and professional accreditation agencies are the core. The government is responsible for recognizing accreditation agencies but does not directly evaluate institutions (Zhang, 2016). Evaluation indicators balance institutional autonomy and accountability requirements,

including teaching quality, research output, student retention, graduate employment, and community service. Professional accreditation focuses on industry needs and practical skills. The evaluation model involves voluntary accreditation and periodic reviews, emphasizing continuous improvement. Accreditation results are linked to federal funding and student loan eligibility, exhibiting a strong market-oriented characteristic (Zhang, 2016).

(3) Australia: Audit-based assessment, government-enterprise-university collaboration

In the 1980s, quality assessment of higher education in Australia was primarily based on self-assessment by universities. The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) was established in the 1990s. In 2011, the Higher Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) replaced the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), strengthening systematic quality assurance (Ruan et al., 2021). The assessment body is centered on the independent TEQSA, with universities conducting internal quality assurance and the government guiding the assessment direction through funding. Assessment indicators include teaching quality, student outcomes, research level, infrastructure, and international collaboration, emphasizing alignment with AQF standards (Bilošichtsky et al., 2025). The assessment model employs an audit-based approach, focusing on the effectiveness of universities' internal quality assurance systems. Assessment results are linked to government funding, incentivizing universities to make independent improvements.

(4) Continental Europe: Combination of regional cooperation and national autonomy

France: The High Council for Evaluation of Higher Education and Research (HCERE) is responsible for evaluating institutions and programs. Engineering programs are certified separately by the Council for the Qualification of Engineers (CTI), achieving a balance between government leadership and academic autonomy.

Germany: The certification committee coordinates the national certification system, while independent certification bodies (such as AHPGS) are responsible for specific assessments, emphasizing the connection between professional quality and labor market demands.

Norway: The Norwegian Education Quality Assurance Agency (NOKUT) conducts independent assessments and accreditations, combining input and output indicators with a focus on quality improvement.

At the regional cooperation level, the Bologna Process promotes mutual recognition of quality standards within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and establishes a unified qualifications framework. (Quality Assurance in Higher Education [QAHE], 2025)

(5) Common characteristics

The common characteristics of foreign higher education quality assessment mechanisms

are mainly reflected in five aspects: First, the assessment body is mainly an independent third-party institution, with indirect government supervision and significant autonomy for universities; Second, the assessment orientation is mainly formative assessment, focusing on quality improvement rather than compliance penalties (quality culture refers to the core values, behavioral norms, and institutional atmosphere of universities and the entire education system); Third, the indicator system emphasizes student experience, learning outcomes, research impact, and social needs; Fourth, the management model presents a multi-party governance approach, with deep participation from stakeholders such as students, employers, and academic groups; Fifth, international cooperation emphasizes the mutual recognition of regional and global standards (such as the Bologna Process and the Washington Accord) (Fang, 2010; Zhang et al., 2022).

3.3. Core Differences Between Chinese and Foreign Higher Education Quality Assessment Mechanisms

Table1

Comparison of Core Differences in Quality Assessment Mechanisms of Higher Education in China and Abroad

Comparison Dimensions	China	Selected foreign countries
Assessment subject	Government-led, weak third-party institutions	Independent third-party organizations dominate, and universities have a high degree of autonomy.
Assessment guidance	Emphasis should be placed on both compliance and quality improvement, with an early focus on compliance.	Prioritize quality improvement, primarily through formal assessment.
Evaluation indicators	Shift from input-oriented to output-oriented, with unified standards as the main focus.	Balancing results and process, emphasizing the adaptability and differentiation of indicators.
Management Model	Centralized management and overall government planning	Decentralized management and multi-party co-governance
Development momentum	Policy-driven, key project guidance	Driven by market and social demand, universities have a strong willingness to make independent improvements.
Stakeholder participation	Primarily government and universities, with limited participation from students and employers.	Deep involvement of students, employers, and academic groups
International docking	Professional certification is becoming increasingly internationalized, but the overall mechanism needs to be matched.	Regional and global cooperation is mature, and standards are widely recognized.

Note. This table summarizes the differences in curriculum and education quality assessment systems between China and selected foreign countries with mature higher education quality assurance mechanisms. The comparison covers seven dimensions: assessment subject, assessment guidance, evaluation indicators, management model, development momentum, stakeholder participation, and international docking.

4. Discussion

4.1. Analysis of the causes of differences

(1) Differences in education management systems

China employs a centralized education management system, with the government responsible for planning, funding, and oversight of higher education. The evaluation mechanism must align with the overall education development strategy (Liu, 2025; Hu & Gasemi, 2024). In contrast, countries like the UK and the US employ a decentralized system with a strong tradition of university autonomy. The government primarily focuses on oversight and service, while independent third-party institutions form the core of quality assessment, ensuring objectivity and professionalism (Fang, 2010; Zhang et al., 2022).

(2) Development stage and demand differences

China's higher education has undergone rapid expansion, necessitating the establishment of a unified quality control system in the short term to ensure basic educational quality. Therefore, a government-led unified evaluation model has been adopted (Liu, 2025; Yang et al., 2024). Foreign higher education is mature and stable in scale, and the core demand for quality assessment has shifted from "compliance" to "improvement," focusing on personalized development and quality enhancement (Fang, 2010).

(3) Differences in culture and social environment

Traditional Chinese culture emphasizes collectivism and unified planning, reflected in evaluation mechanisms as centralized coordination and unified standards (Fang, 2010; Bilošichtsky et al., 2025). Western culture emphasizes individualism and pluralistic governance, advocating institutional autonomy and multi-party participation (Fang, 2010). Furthermore, Chinese higher education has a stronger public service orientation, focusing on national talent cultivation and social development needs; foreign universities (especially private universities) have a more pronounced market-oriented characteristic, emphasizing alignment with social needs and market feedback (Zhang, 2016).

4.2. The effectiveness and challenges of domestic and foreign evaluation mechanisms

(1) China's achievements and challenges

The achievements are mainly reflected in three aspects: First, a comprehensive quality assessment system covering different stages and types of higher education has been established, ensuring the basic quality of education during the period of scale expansion; Second, key construction projects and professional certification have been implemented to promote the development of high-quality higher education and the internationalization of disciplines; Third, a big data monitoring platform has been built to realize real-time dynamic monitoring of assessment data and improve the timeliness and accuracy of assessment (Liu, 2025; Yang et al., 2024; Hu & Gasemi, 2024).

The challenges are as follows: First, a quality culture has not yet been formed, and universities lack the intrinsic motivation to improve quality. Second, the development of third-party institutions is lagging behind, and their assessment autonomy and professionalism are lacking. Third, the assessment indicators still suffer from the problem of “one-size-fits-all” approaches, making it difficult to adapt to the differentiated development needs of different types of universities, such as research-oriented and teaching-oriented universities. Fourth, the participation of stakeholders such as students and employers is low, and the assessment indicators are not well aligned with social needs (Liu, 2025; Zhang et al., 2022).

(2) Foreign achievements and challenges

The achievements are mainly reflected in four aspects: First, independent third-party institutions ensure the objectivity and professionalism of the assessment, and the high degree of autonomy of universities stimulates the endogenous motivation for quality improvement; Second, differentiated indicators and formative assessments are adapted to the personalized development needs of universities and focus on continuous quality improvement; Third, stakeholder participation ensures that the assessment meets social needs and promotes the connection between higher education and the labor market; Fourth, international cooperation achieves global mutual recognition of quality standards and facilitates the flow of students and talents (Fang, 2010; Zhang et al., 2022).

The challenges are as follows: First, the decentralization leads to inconsistent evaluation standards, making it difficult to conduct cross-border and cross-regional comparisons of the quality of higher education; second, the evaluation costs in some countries are too high, increasing the operational burden on universities; and third, the evaluation mechanisms for emerging fields such as cross-border education and distance education are lagging behind and cannot effectively cover new educational models (Bilošičtsky et al., 2025).

4.3. Experiences learned from each other

(1) Foreign experiences that China can learn from

Four key lessons learned: First, strengthen the development of third-party institutions, improve the authorization mechanism and professional capabilities of third-party evaluation agencies, expand their participation in evaluation, and enhance the objectivity and professionalism of evaluation (Chen & Wu, 2020); Second, optimize the evaluation orientation, shifting from “compliance penalties” to “improvement support,” strengthening formative evaluation, and providing universities with timely feedback and targeted improvement suggestions (Fang, 2010; Zhang et al., 2022); Third, expand stakeholder participation, establish a standardized participation mechanism for stakeholders such as students and employers, incorporate their opinions into the design and adjustment of evaluation indicators, and improve the alignment of evaluation with social needs (Chen et al., 2023; Huangfu, 2023); Fourth, promote differentiated evaluation, develop targeted evaluation standards based on the type and positioning of universities, and encourage the distinctive development of universities (Liu, 2025; Fang, 2010).

(2) Chinese experiences that can be learned from abroad

Three core lessons learned: First, systematic planning and dynamic adjustment, drawing on the experience of assessment system planning in the context of large-scale education in China, strengthening the systematic coordination of the assessment mechanism, and improving the overall effectiveness of assessment (Liu, 2025; Yang et al., 2024); Second, special support for key areas, focusing on the development of higher education in key disciplines and underdeveloped regions through special funding and policy guidance, and narrowing the quality gap (Liu, 2025; Hu & Gasemi, 2024); Third, big data-driven assessment, drawing on the experience of building China’s National Higher Education Quality Monitoring Platform, building an intelligent assessment system, improving assessment efficiency and accuracy, and better addressing the challenges of emerging education models (Yang et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2022).

5. Conclusion

5.1. Research Summary

Based on the theoretical framework of institutionalism and multicultural governance, this paper systematically compares the higher education quality assessment mechanisms of China and selected foreign countries (the UK, US, Australia, France, Germany, Norway, etc.) from multiple dimensions, including assessment subjects, indicators, processes, and management models. The study finds that China has formed a distinctive mechanism of “government-led, periodic assessment, and outcome-oriented,” effectively ensuring the basic quality of higher

education during its period of expansion, but still faces challenges such as a weak quality culture and insufficient development of third-party institutions. Foreign mechanisms, with “third-party institution leadership, multi-party co-governance, and quality improvement as the core,” fully stimulate the autonomy of universities, but suffer from inconsistent standards and lagging assessments in emerging fields. These differences stem from variations in educational management systems, development stages, and cultural environments.

5.2. Policy Implications

(1) Implications for China

Four suggestions for optimizing the quality assessment mechanism of higher education in China: First, deepen the reform of the assessment mechanism, clarify the division of responsibilities between the government and third-party institutions, and grant third-party institutions more independent assessment rights; Second, cultivate a quality culture, strengthen the promotion and guidance of quality concepts, establish an incentive mechanism for quality improvement, and stimulate the endogenous motivation of universities; Third, optimize the indicator system, reduce uniform and mandatory indicators, increase differentiated and flexible indicators, and incorporate the opinions of stakeholders such as students and employers; Fourth, promote international cooperation, learn from the new modules of the International Alliance for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (INQAAHE) such as cross-border education and distance education, improve the adaptability of the assessment mechanism to emerging education models, and enhance the international recognition of China’s higher education quality standards (Hu & Gassemi, 2024).

(2) Lessons for foreign countries

Three suggestions for optimizing the quality assessment mechanism for foreign higher education: First, strengthen system collaboration, establish a unified and coordinated assessment standard mechanism, reduce differences between regions and institutions, and improve the comparability of assessment results; Second, emphasize scale and equity, learn from China’s experience in key construction projects, and narrow the quality gap between different types of universities and different regions through policy guidance and financial support; Third, adapt to emerging education models, learn from China’s experience in big data monitoring, accelerate the construction of intelligent assessment systems, and improve the coverage and effectiveness of assessments in areas such as cross-border education and distance education (Bilošičsky et al., 2025).

5.3. Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study has certain limitations: the selected foreign countries do not cover all

education systems, and there is insufficient literature support for some regions (such as Africa and South America). Future research could include: First, expanding the scope of literature to include more national cases (such as other Nordic countries, Southeast Asian countries, and African countries) to enhance the comprehensiveness of comparative analysis; Second, combining quantitative research methods such as regression analysis and structural equation modeling to empirically explore the impact pathways of assessment mechanisms on education quality; Third, focusing on emerging fields such as AI-enabled assessment, cross-border education assessment, and online education assessment to conduct in-depth comparative research; Fourth, conducting comparative research on higher education quality assessment mechanisms in countries along the Belt and Road Initiative to provide more specific references for optimizing global higher education quality assessment mechanisms.

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Data availability

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethics approval

Not applicable.

Consent to participate

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Consent for publication

All authors have given their consent.

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