

Quality Assurance of Higher Education

—a Persist Effort in China's Higher Education Institutions

by Prof. He Qi Xin, Vice Dean, Beijing Foreign Language University

In recent years, the astonishing development in higher education in China is, to a large extent, due to the decision to drastically increase enrollment in Chinese universities and colleges. It was a decision made by the Chinese government in 1999, to meet the needs of the social and economic development in China and to satisfy people's ardent desire for higher education.

With the joint efforts of both governments at various levels and universities and colleges all over the country, the last six years have witnessed a great leap forward in the history of China's higher education. In the year of 2005, the student population at the college level in China reached 23 million and the gross enrollment rate was 21%. It is safe to say now that the decision made at the end of the last decade of the twentieth century was far-seeing and definitely right, meeting the needs of the social, economic, scientific and technological development of the country, raising the overall educational level of the public.

However, it must be admitted that rapid development in higher education in recent years has brought heavy pressure to Chinese universities and colleges: there is much room for improvement in school curriculum, teaching materials and methodologies, both the size and the quality of the teaching staff; in some schools, there has been even a slight decline in the quality of teaching. Although the central government has increased governmental funding on a yearly basis, the increase in funding obviously fails to be in keeping with the rapid expansion of universities and colleges in recent years. Consequently, some efforts to further reform the educational systems, especially at the college level have been frustrated. Unfortunately, China, a developing country, is now running a mass education of largest scale in the entire world. Therefore, to carry out "the Project for Quality Assurance and Further Reform in Higher Education Institutions" (shortened as "the Quality Assurance Project" henceforth) becomes a must for a continuing development in China's higher education.

"The Quality Assurance Project" was initiated by the Ministry of Education in China in April 2003, which consists of the following 12 aspects:

1. Carry out further reform on teaching and educational structure, with the help of information technology;
2. Encourage professors to offer courses of general studies and some basic courses in various disciplines for undergraduates;

3. Offer a number of top-quality courses via the Internet to students all over the country;
4. Further improve the standards and methodology of teaching English to non-English majors;
5. Promote higher education accreditation, assessing every regular higher education institution once every five years;
6. Establish a series of national teaching bases and experiment bases via the Internet;
7. Further develop tertiary vocational education to meet the needs of market economy;
8. Further improve the disciplinary structure of China's higher education institutions, with a focus on tertiary vocational programs;
9. Promote reform in the field of medical education;
10. Build more efficient e-libraries and improve the quality of textbooks;
11. More attention to be given to the students' ideological, ethical and cultural development;
12. Invite top-quality teachers both at home and abroad to join the faculty in Chinese higher education institutions.

Dr. Zhou Ji, China's Minister of Education, emphasized at the beginning of 2006, "all the universities and colleges in China should give more attention to the raising of teaching standards and quality assurance." Talking about the implementation of "the Quality Assurance Project" in the last three years, Dr. Zhou further elaborated on the following four aspects:

1. Selecting excellent teachers:

Teaching is the first duty of all the teachers. It should be specified that to offer courses for undergraduates is a basic requirement for all full and associate professors. Anyone who does not shoulder teaching responsibility cannot be promoted to professorship and those who have not taught any classes for two consecutive years are not permitted to maintain the status of a professor. Full and associate professors should be encouraged to participate in educational reforms, to improve the contents and methods of their teaching. It is also advisable to invite renowned scholars and specialists to offer courses or to give lectures. The award for excellent teachers in higher education institutions initiated by the Ministry of Education in 2003: the award is given to 100 candidates every three years for their outstanding achievements in teaching.

2. Establishing top-quality courses:

Efforts should be continued to adjust university curriculum according to the needs of economic and social development. Higher education institutions should aim at a balanced development of students' acquisition of knowledge, training of abilities and raising of ethical and ideological standards. Faculty members are urged to update the teaching contents by the latest developments in science, technology and culture, to improve their teaching methodologies, shifting from a knowledge-oriented approach

to a capability-oriented approach. Starting from 2003, a series of top-quality courses have been selected on the basis of their contents, course books, teaching approaches and teaching staff and the syllabi, accompanying exercises, experiments and supplementary materials of these courses will be placed on the net so that they can be shared by teachers and students all over the country. The Ministry of Education intends to select 3000 courses within five years, covering major disciplines in Chinese universities and colleges.

3. Further promoting the reform of teaching English to non-English majors:

Progress has been made in recent years in the teaching of English to non-English majors in Chinese universities and colleges. Higher education institutions are required to adopt the teaching software and the English course books recommended by the Ministry of Education, in an effort to update traditional teaching methods and to improve students' command of the English language. Where condition permits, higher education institutions should try to hire qualified scholars and specialists from abroad to offer bilingual courses and should encourage Chinese teachers returning from abroad to conduct courses in English. The Ministry also plans to develop five to six English courses for non-English majors in the near future, following the teaching standards of English for non-English majors approved by the Ministry of Education.

4. Regulating and improving higher education accreditation system:

The Ministry of Education intends to further regulate higher education accreditation system in China, according to the new requirements for quality assurance and the result of accreditation will be regarded as an important criterion for university management. The basic statistics related to the management of universities and colleges will be published annually, which will be used as an important factor in higher education accreditation. As a further improvement in accreditation system, more attention will be given to the discrepancies between universities of various types, levels, which may lead to changes in the standards used in higher education accreditation today. Starting from the year 2007, a number of disciplines will be chosen as an experiment for assessment of majors in universities and colleges.

It has been generally agreed, through practice in the last few years, that the implementation of "the quality assurance project" enables us to further raise the teaching standards in Chinese universities and colleges, to further improve educational structure, to further regulate university course offerings, to further strengthen students' skills and ability and to further improve the quality and efficiency of higher education in China.