Original article

Impacts of academics' morality on teaching quality: Evidence from teaching accountability at universities in China

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Abstract:
A teaching quality accountability mechanism was introduced to universities since 2003 to improve the teaching quality in China. During the teaching quality policy implementation, academics' teaching capacity and professional development have become indicators for universities' teaching quality. However, the moral commitment to teaching has been ignored in policy discourse and university contexts. In the study, a qualitative approach was employed at three different universities to explore the mechanism of moral behaviour on teaching quality. Forty-five academics with different subject backgrounds, ranks, and positions were interviewed. From the academics' perspectives, teaching quality enhancement depends on personal morality dedication more than the external accountability and internal evaluation systems found at universities. Meanwhile, the perceived moral commitment to teaching is changing with different career stages, positions, and university environments. Moreover, the morality of teaching has been watered down by multiple cognitive responsibilities.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the severe international competition market and enhanced domestic accountability system has resulted in the improvement of higher education quality as a common theme, attracting the interest of researchers and policy makers (Ewell, 2010). The subthemes include approaches and effects of enhancing teaching quality in light of the 'teaching drift' phenomenon, maintenance of research performance to attract funds and students, balanced teaching performance and research outcomes, and so forth (Deem & Brehony, 2005; Ardi et al., 2012). Regarding the approach to improve higher education quality, strong managerial accountability mechanisms with backward professional participation has been mentioned (Cheng, 2010). In relation to the effects of quality assurance actions, much research noted a deviation between policy goals and university or academic perceptions and actions, and the reasons are multi-factored, including policy content, account-

ability indicators or effectiveness, university contexts, and academics' interests (Dill, 2000; Cullen et al., 2003; Danø & Stensaker, 2007). The authenticity of teachers' professionalism depends first and foremost of their moral personality, and we should pay much more attention to the beliefs, expectations and motivational processes of teachers and how all these dimensions relate with them as persons(Buxarrais, 2021). However, there is a lack of research addressing academic morality in improving teaching quality at universities, and the research interest in this study is to explore the mechanism and limitations from the perspective of teaching morality at universities.

In China, the higher education system has experienced massive expansion since 1999, and the direct side effect is declining teaching quality at universities due to the increasingly large students–to–academics ratio. To reverse the situation and enhance teaching quality, the Ministry of Education (MoE) launched a national higher education accountability

mechanism, known as Quality Evaluation for Undergraduate Teaching (QEUT), in 2003. Each university must take the QEUT every five years and then adopt enhancement actions based on the evaluation outcome and feedback. The QEUT has been completed twice (2003-2008 and 2013-2018), and the third round began in 2021. Currently, the QEUT indicators are being renewed to fit the updated universities context. QEUT's main principle is to promote the internal quality assurance of universities and to consider the universities' comprehensive conditions by focusing on teaching quality.

Whether and how the QEUT can improve teaching quality has been explored by researchers(Liu, 2013; Zhang & Liu, 2018). However, in the context of policy, it is difficult to determine which factors under the accountability system contribute to teaching quality, especially from the perspective of academic morality. Most research has focused on rational quality factors, such as accountability indicators, policy implementation contexts, and university aims, and soft factors, such as individual humanism and constructivism, are ignored. Academics' commitment is crucial to truly enhance the quality of education and to ultimately achieve the status of world-class quested by both the state and universities(Wang, 2014). In this study, we aim to examine academics' moral perceptions and actions in the process of constructing teaching quality and to analyse the effects and limitations of academic morality in China's teaching quality assurance system.

Considering the organisational influence on personal choices and decisions, we employed a qualitative approach at three different universities to conduct in-depth interviews with academics of different ranks and positions. The main research questions are as follows.

1) What are the main factors contributing to teaching quality at universities?
2) How do the academics evaluate the effects of QEUT to improve teaching quality?
3) How do the academics look at the mechanism of actions through personal teaching morality in the quality assurance system at universities?
4) How can universities enhance teaching morality to contribute to teaching quality?

2. Literature review

In the past few decades, the quality assurance mechanism for teaching in higher education has been highlighted internationally. In light of the overwhelming impacts of new managerialism in the educational sector, most countries enhanced teaching quality through managerial accountability, which meant strengthening remote control and rational indicators to monitor university teaching processes and outcomes (Davies & Thomas, 2002).

The barriers for teaching quality in higher education include personal, students-related, departmental and institutional factors(Carbone et al., 2019). Inspired by Clark's (1983) higher education governance triangle theory, the factors that affect teaching quality are discussed from three aspects: national or governmental power, academic power, and market power. Burke (2005) described the three corners in the higher education accountability system—namely, the hierarchical accountability system implemented by the government, academic-led professional accountability, and student- and parent-oriented market accountability. With respect to the triangle quality assurance system, most research has indicated that the government's power to intervene in university quality practices has increased, but professional accountability has faded (Hoecht, 2006). The forms of hierarchical accountability are reflected in performance budgeting, performance funding, performance reporting, and so forth, and national power has eroded academic participation in traditional professional accountability, such as academic audits and accreditation (Smith & Rowley, 2005). In terms of market accountability, university quality is improved through student feedback and concern, which is represented by diverse forms of tracking assessments and rankings, such as course experience questionnaires, graduate destination surveys, national student surveys, and national student engagement surveys. The principle of market accountability for higher education quality is pushing universities to adopt a student-centred mission and to respond to students' needs and expectations (Garn, 2001). However, this bottom-up accountability is also affected by top-down hierarchical management. Most countries tend to link student survey results to university funding and ranking, thus the government plays the role of 'market manager'(Hursh, 2005). Therefore, in the quality accountability triangle model, the power of professionals and students is transferred to the government corner.

Research has discussed the gap between higher education quality assurance policy goals and university practice. The first reason relates to policy content and accountability indicators. If the content of the quality assurance policies do not align with the university's goals and needs, these policies may not be adopted (Oliver, 1991). Three important variables help universities adopt external accountability, including the significance of rewards and punishments, the power of measures used to allocate rewards and punishments, and alignment with institutional goals and culture (Massy, 2011). Negative alignment refers to the institution's handling of accountability that does not accurately reflect policy interests. Moreover, the accountability indicators cannot measure overall or true university quality (Julnes, 2006). The second reason relates to quality assurance implementation measures and their impacts on university autonomy. With the current overwhelming managerialism in higher education, university autonomy and the traditional self-driven quality culture have been disrupted on a large scale (Salter & Tapper, 2013). In addition, the moral boundaries that have long been used for education management have degraded. The performance-based measurement culture tends to eliminate individual diversity and, as a result, forms repressive and depressive environments in universities (Van Thiel & Leeuw, 2002; Findlow, 2008). The third reason is reflected in the academics' perspectives. As a major component of university quality, academics are important for teaching and researching policy context. However, under the strong intervention of external accountability mechanisms, university academics are facing despecialisation and non-specialisation, which means that professional activities are significantly impacted by external stakeholders, such as the government,

students, and sponsors (Webb, 2002). Meanwhile, academia's status as the knowledge authority and quality leader has been seriously challenged, and the space for academics to speak out actively for university quality has been limited (Biesta, 2004; Shore, 2008). The role of university academics as professionals will continue to be diversified and differentiated, turning them into managed academics, manager-academics, or academic managers (Deem & Johnson, 2000; Deem & Brehony, 2005; Winter, 2009). The reflection required by external accounting is a type of 'counterfeit reflexivity', leading to the alienation of academic relationships and job dissatisfaction (Morley, 2003).

Consequently, regarding the improvement of the quality assurance mechanism, the content and method of reforming the policy content or indicators are the most discussed issues among policymakers and policy researchers. Many researchers have suggested that policies and regulations should correspond to the university's mission and type, professionals' authority and autonomy, and student participation (Hoecht, 2006; Massy, 2011; Mattei, 2012; Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2015). If the quality assurance mechanism can align with the university mission, then the efficiency of the university's quality may be improved. At the same time, only when the academics' authority over teaching, research, and shared governance is respected, can the external quality guidance be accepted and implemented well (Nixon et al., 2001). Respecting and expanding students' participation in the formulation and implementation of quality assurance policies is also significant when improving the validity of external accountability policies (Mattei, 2012). Second, finding a method to root the quality assurance mechanism in the university context is a concern when improving policy effects. Hierarchical approaches through top-down mandates may lead to cheating or overperformance, especially if accountability has a high risk of rewards and punishments (Oliver, 1991). In contrast, this approach also poses risks to bottom-up quality assurance methods, such as student accountability, because this method may be unable to capture the full picture of university quality. Managerial accountability through remote control and data culture still has flaws in motivating academics' genuine intentions to contribute to university research and teaching quality, which is the mostly easily overlooked and marginalised (Olssen & Peters, 2005). Therefore, many researchers have noted that better implementation methods should consider the different stakeholders' interests and integrate the advantages of different accountability mechanisms. Third, the methods of constructing the internal quality assurance system and enhancing the university's capacity to maintain culture quality are significant. Some researchers have argued that universities with more discretion, higher reputations, and empowered resources tend to have larger capacities to construct internal quality systems; conversely, universities that are strongly resource-dependent face high risks to maintain internal quality assurances (Ozga, 2013). A university's capacity to enhance internal quality relies on feasible governance and balanced responses to quality subjects. Qualification of teaching staff is found to be one of the most important factors affecting the perception of education quality(Akareem & Hossain, 2016). Faulty members must learn

that they are responsible for strengthening the community's moral and intellectual quotient by providing quality education to students, and high quality education requires that faculty members are aware of the code of ethics to perform their tasks in their workplace (Sethy, 2018). However, in discussions of a university's actions to improve internal quality, the focus is mostly on the university's strategy, governance, regulations, reward, and punishments, and less research has focused on university teaching quality from the participation of academic morality or psychological views.

Research and teaching are always the core missions of universities. Meanwhile, teaching, along with research, is a cornerstone of academic career(Adam et al., 2021). Definition of quality around ethics and moral values is relevant to all stakeholders in higher education, and academics have the responsibility of undertaking research and teaching with high ethical standards that foster and promote students' learning(Prisacariu & Shah, 2016). The majority of research on teacher morality is in the field of fundamental education, with less focus on teaching in higher education. Moral cues include awe, elevation, pride, and self-satisfaction, and the immoral cues include contempt, shame, and guilt in the social cognitive chain of being (Brandt & Reyna, 2011). Teacher morality can be expressed as ethical behaviour required by professional ethic codes, personal morality, role in students' moral education, and work motivation (Ye and Zhou, 2020). As professionals, teachers are expected to respect the ethical–contractual obligations of social culture, in which moral identity and moral development are directed towards the good and involve the desire for improvement (Carr, 1993, 2003). Morality is a factor in improving the professional skills of future specialists (Kostynina et al., 2020). Teachers' responsibilities are not limited to providing services but also shape human behaviours and attitudes. Bergsteiner (2011) mentioned four responsibilities types under accountability: role or task, normative, moral, and felt responsibility. Moral responsibility means individuals take action to comply with moral values to avoid feeling ashamed or guilty and to maintain moral standards. Ye and Zhou (2020) suggested there is a long paternalistic tradition of emphasizing teacher morality in China, and society always regards teachers as 'moral guardians', which reflects Carr's (1993:197) idea that 'paternalism operates most effectively in conditions and circumstances of social and cultural homogeneity'.

Many studies have suggested that moral development is a complex and even unpredictable process (Campbell, 2008; Ye and Zhou, 2020). Aiming at the nature of teaching morality, Campbell (2003) introduced the concept of 'ethical knowledge' and defined the teaching profession as knowledge-based. The perception of teaching morality also meets conflicts among different stakeholders in educational contexts, which may sometimes undermine moral sensibilities and professional autonomy (Campbell, 2008). Teacher morality is growing in relation to professional development in aspects such as commitment to work conscientiously, coherence of teacher identity, and concomitant manifestation of teacher agency (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Brunetti & Marston, 2018). Teachers are expected to develop full professional morality, which is beneficial for teachers and their professional ideals (de Ruyter

& Kole, 2010). Additionally, teacher morality changes and functions throughout career stages, contributing to professional development and performance (Ye and Zhou, 2020). Teachers' perceptions of morality are also a dynamic process and are shaped by social contexts and individual features (LePage et al., 2011; Ye & Law, 2019).

Some studies have shown the significance of teacher morality in teaching university classes (Margolis et al., 2014) and in forming professional identities (Fitzmaurice, 2013). Hayden (2012) suggested that the characteristics of morality, such as democratic inclusion, openness, and dynamic engagement, are significant in reversing the devastating effects of standardisation in education. Moral efforts in academia vary with the length of teaching and professional stage. Fitzmaurice (2013) noted that early-career academics underpin not only notions of performativity but also hopes and aspirations in their professional work. When teaching at universities, the moral conflicts for academics include institutionally imposed rules and individual beliefs (Briggs, 2020). In other words, for teaching in university classes, the big moral challenges are conflicts between external codes and teachers' ideologies (Soleimani & Lovat, 2019). The academics' contributions to public morality standards depend on sufficient freedom. From the perspective of academia, in addition to external accountability or expectations, they have moral privileges to pursue others, such as 'knowledge for its own sake' (Metz, 2010). Therefore, this study aims to examine whether the QEUT is truly conducive to improve the quality of teaching from the perspective of academics, as well as to explore the impacts of academic morality in accountability mechanisms.

3. Research method

3.1 Sample Universities Selection

The impacts of teaching quality assessment on different institutions with different status are different, so it is necessary to select higher education institutions with contrasting characteristics as cases for comparison(Liu, 2013). Universities in China are categorized into research universities, research-teaching universities and teaching universities. Accordingly, we assume that academics at different types of universities hold different views, motivations and behaviors on teaching quality. To explore the impact of academic morality on the teaching quality assurance system of Chinese universities, three different universities were selected to examine whether the effects changed in different contexts. The second round of QEUT occurred from 2014 to 2018, and all universities passed the external teaching accountability. University A is a renowned research university and has been listed by the Chinese government as a "world-class university". In other words, University A is one of many top research-oriented universities in China. University B is a second-tier research university, and some subjects were listed as "world-class subjects". Universities A and B are governed directly by the MoE. In China, the MoE governs a few universities directly, meaning the universities have access to more resources and higher research reputations. University C, governed by the local provincial government, is a third-tier comprehensive

teaching and research university. Compared with University A and B, University C has less resources, including finances, reputation, and autonomy for development. According to the QEUT implementation codes, the teaching quality of Universities A and B were evaluated by the Higher Education Evaluation Centre of the MoE, and University C was evaluated by the provincial education authority.

3.2 In-depth interviews

A longitudinal qualitative method was employed twice at three case universities from 2018 to 2022. The first pilot study in 2018 was an in-depth face-to-face interview to find academics' perceptions on external teaching accountability effects and the teaching quality assurance mechanism. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the second interview in 2022 was conducted through formal virtual meetings to include newly recruited interviewees, and some of the previously interviewed participants from 2018 were asked questions via online meetings, emails, and instant messages to examine whether their attitudes and perceptions on the university teaching quality mechanism had changed. Each initial interview was recorded on tape and took 45 to 60 minutes. Fifteen academics from each university were selected from the subjects of human and social science (HS) and natural science (NS). The ranks of professor, associate professor, and assistant professor were included. In addition, the academic position was considered, meaning some participants held administrative positions. The first interviewee was reached through the gatekeepers at three universities, then a snowball approach was employed to find the other participants. All interviewee personal information is anonymous, and Table 1 displays the demographic information.

3.3 Data analysis

First, all the tapes were transferred to text and then imported into NVivo. Second, main nodes following the main four research questions were constructed. In accordance with Attride-Stirling (2001) encoding suggestions, the basic themes appeared after the first level coding, such as teaching enthusiasm and career calling. Then, the organisational themes were summarised in relation to the basic themes, such as personal conscience, professional development and cognitive responsibility. Finally, with the third induction, the main finding's global themes were formed, such as academic morality, quality culture, etc.

4. Major findings

4.1 Academic morality's contribution to teaching quality

All interviewees agreed that the external teaching quality accountability has some positive effects on university teaching quality, such as 'setting some threshold indicators to maintain the baseline of universities' teaching' (A-HS-3), 'giving motivations for universities to focus on undergraduate teaching but not just research' (B-NS-3), 'providing some public quality information for students and parents' (C-HS-4), and

Table 1. Demographic information of participants at three universities.

University	Discipline	Gender	Academic rank	Position	Code
University A	HS	Female	Professor	Deputy dean	A-HS-1
		Male	Professor	Dean	A-HS-2
		Male	Professor	Department head	A-HS-3
		Female	Assoc. Professor		A-HS-4
		Female	Assoc. Professor		A-HS-5
		Male	Assis. Professor		A-HS-6
		Female	Assis. Professor		A-HS-7
	NS	Male	Professor	Dean	A-NS-1
		Male	Professor	Deputy dean	A-NS-2
		Female	Assoc. Professor	Deputy dean	A-NS-3
		Female	Assoc. Professor		A-NS-4
		Female	Assoc. Professor		A-NS-5
		Male	Assoc. Professor		A-NS-6
		Male	Assis. Professor		A-NS-7
		Male	Assis. Professor		A-NS-8
University B	HS	Female	Professor	Deputy dean	B-HS-1
		Male	Professor	Dean	B-HS-2
		Male	Professor	Department head	B-HS-3
		Female	Assoc. Professor		B-HS-4
		Female	Assoc. Professor		B-HS-5
		Male	Assis. Professor		B-HS-6
		Female	Assis. Professor		B-HS-7
		Male	Assis. Professor		B-HS-8
	NS	FeMale	Professor	Deputy head	B-NS-1
		Male	Professor	Deputy dean	B-NS-2
		Female	Assoc. Professor		B-NS-3
		Male	Assoc. Professor		B-NS-4
		Male	Assoc. Professor		B-NS-5
		Female	Assis. Professor		B-NS-6
		Female	Assis. Professor		B-NS-7

'enhancing universities to find the nature of education'(C-NS-4). However, when asked whether the QEUT could improve teaching quality at universities, most participants admitted that there were some negative factors.

4.1.1 Teaching quality mainly depends on personal conscience

Most participants suggested that, although the external quality assurance system plays some positive role in universities' teaching activities, it is difficult to reach a true teaching quality for students. The set QEUT indicators include staff amounts and qualifications, internal quality monitoring systems, the university's mission, and student development to push universities to adopt quantitative and qualitative requirements, but the hierarchical accountability system emphasised institutional factors over teaching quality subjects. From the academics' perspectives, the subjects of teaching quality are academics and students; however, in the context of QEUT policies and universities, how to increase scholars' enthusiasm for teaching has been neglected. Most participants thought that, compared with research performance, teaching at universities currently depends primarily on personal conscience. Regardless of external accountability and internal regulations, teaching activities mostly depend on academics' charity, sense

Table 1. Demographic information of participants at three universities.(continue)

University	Discipline	Gender	Academic rank	Position	Code
University C	HS	Female	Professor	Dean	C-HS-1
		Male	Professor	Dean	C-HS-2
		Female	Professor	Department head	C-HS-3
		Female	Assoc. Professor		C-HS-4
		Female	Assoc. Professor		C-HS-5
		Female	Assis. Professor		C-HS-6
		Male	Assis. Professor		C-HS-7
		Male	Assis. Professor		C-HS-8
	NS	Male	Professor	Deputy head	C-NS-1
		Male	Assoc. Professor	Department head	C-NS-2
		Female	Assoc. Professor		C-NS-3
		Female	Assoc. Professor		C-NS-4
		Female	Assoc. Professor		C-NS-5
		Female	Assis. Professor		C-NS-6
		Male	Assis. Professor		C-NS-7

of responsibility, love for students, correct values, enthusiasm, personal experience, and disposition, without any promise of reward. In other words, the quality logic of high-level policymakers and low-level implementers is inconsistent, that is, the external rational quality culture has missed the internal soft quality mechanism. The academics are key factors in defining and contributing to teaching quality; however, whether participating in policymaking or demanding internal teaching quality culture, they always lose the right to speak. Conversely, academics become increasingly silent and tend to be double-faced, implementing sufficient requirements but maintaining a personal conscience.

4.1.2 Teaching processes and outcomes are hard to monitor by accountability

Another reason why the teaching quality depends on academic morality is that the teaching processes and results are hard to monitor and evaluate. QEUT requires universities to monitor the teaching process. All the three universities adopted more restrictive process-monitoring systems to set standardised teaching processes, including submitting onerous teaching plans, regulating teachers' clothing, punishing professors for coming late and leaving early, recording class observations, peer-reviewing documents, processing all records for student theses, and reforming teaching strategies. Furthermore, universities generally use students' five-score teaching evaluations and teaching rewards to evaluate academics' teaching performances. However, according to academics' suggestions, teaching rewards include more content beyond teaching activities. Therefore, the universities' responses to QEUT seem to be superficial, which will never touch the core of teaching quality. In the industrialised quality monitoring culture,

academic standing is seen as objectivism, not subjectivism that contributes to teaching quality. Under the policy principle, the motivations for academic morality in teaching quality are absent.

We are always as instruments but not humans in the quality culture. Actually, we are vivid individuals with emotions and ideas, but these are not in the consideration of external and internal policies and motivations. (C-NS-4)

4.1.3 Motivation for morality contribution is limited

Most participants argued that teaching at universities depends on personal conscience and commitment; however, universities put less attention and motivation to encourage academics' internal energy for improving teaching quality. Due to the difficulty in measuring teaching outcomes, there are few material incentives for teaching other than research performance. Meanwhile, there is a serious imbalance between teaching incentives and research rewards. Most academics receive little remuneration based on class hours, which is far less than how much they get for publishing one or two papers. Moreover, universities always include research performance or even teaching years to evaluate academic teaching rewards, which inevitably reduces the teaching motivation of young academics and those with excellent teaching ability but unremarkable research.

Teaching rewards is kind of important moral encouragement for us, but it always considers more factors beyond teaching itself, such as teaching years, academic ranks and positions, research performance, [and] social relationships. (A-NS-3)

We didn't really ask for too much. It's better for universities to say hello to us on our birthday, which is more exciting [to

us] than those who teach management. First of all, our academics need good limelight, to feel warm in the environment, and then do what you (university) want us to do. (C-HS-5)

Currently, the universities are flooded with an atmosphere indicating that 'higher research performance equals good teachers' (B-HS-4), which means that an academic's capacity is defined narrowly. Although the QEUT emphasises the significance of teaching, it also includes many indicators for research performance in its evaluation standards to review the capacities of a university's teaching faculty.

4.2 Changing perceived morality to teaching quality in different contexts

From the field study, we found that the perceived morality by different types of academics in different universities is changing. Different university contexts shape differentiated moral responsibility. Academics in different career stages and positions feel different moral commitment to teaching.

4.2.1 Changing teaching morality perceived

We found a changing pattern for academic morality to teaching, which means the new academics are likely to have higher academic morality, but the moral perceptions are diminished with increased teaching years and academic rank. Nevertheless, the moral commitment in teaching increases as the academics near retirement. In this pattern, associate professors tend to have lower moral sensitivity in teaching than assistant professors and senior professors or lectures.

I have to teach in very conscientious attitude, for I know meeting responsible teachers is really lucky when I was a student. I have to follow my heart when I decide to be a teacher at university, though we face heavy pressure of research outcome assessment. (A-HS-7)

I will retire next year and have no other pressure or pursuing. Teaching the students well is my favourite mission. Others like me have the same ideas. (C-HS-3)

As for associate professors and assistant professors with some teaching years, the moral commitment for teaching is not automatically lost, but eroded by the restrictive promotion policies and the encumbrances of daily work.

As for us (associate professors), it's harder to climb the ladder to get professor position, and we are always allocated some administrative tasks, such as taking charge of students' psychology, responding to the QEUT, preparing documents for external accountability, filling in various forms.... A person's energy is limited. (B-HS-6)

In the performance quality culture and hierarchical management, we sometimes have to do what seems correct but in fact not accepted sincerely from our heart. We know that educating students should be the most important mission for universities and our academics, but always we are beyond our (moral) control in the arena. (C-NS-5)

Another explanation for the changing pattern is that different universities shape moral perceptions for teaching. The academics at University A are always proud of being labelled as 'world-class university teachers'. This label gives them a greater moral expectation to perform well in all respects because they teach excellent students and have better resources and social reputations than their counterparts.

We are teachers at [a] 'world-class university' and teach the best students. We have to be responsible for the future national elites, or we may be shamed by the social expectation and our conscience. (A-HS-3)

As for academics at University C, it is evident that they express higher moral perceptions for teaching quality, which is relative to the university context and mission. In China, more than ninety percent of universities are regional universities like University C, the elite research universities are very few. 'This means most of the future talents are educated in these local ordinary universities but not research universities. Our alumni may be not be the leaders but the large-scale middle class, which is more significant to educate them well than the top elites from my opinion. (C-HS-2)

Therefore, the academics' moral perceptions for teaching are not separate from the universities' contexts, including the universities' mission and student pool. In other words, universities' contexts shape academics' morality in teaching. Moreover, academics' teaching morality is a direct result of the students they teach. Academics and students are the main subjects of teaching quality, but subjectivism is defined quantitatively or marked as a visual management document under QEUT requirements.

4.2.2 Different perceptions with academic positions

Furthermore, subtlety different perceptions of the moral commitment in teaching exist between academics with distinct management positions and ordinary academics. Academic-managers, such as deans, deputy deans, and department heads, tend to place accountability measures higher than morality effects in teaching, but managed-academics have higher expectations of the moral commitment for teaching quality. The academic-managers expressed more compliance with the external accountability discourse, but the compliance is discounted by managed-academics. The attitude gaps about the effects of teaching morality and accountability may lead to ineffective teaching quality and inefficient QEUT policy implementation. Meanwhile, the inconsistencies in layer-by-layer contextualised policy discourse explanations may produce a culture of broken promises that hinders academics' sincere desires to be university teachers.

4.3 Dilemma between academics' teaching morality and cognitive responsibilities

Although teaching quality is maintained by academics' moral commitment, academics feel torn between personal morality and cognitive responsibilities in their daily work lives. At universities, academics have more cognitive responsibilities that 'counteract the teaching morality' (A-HS-5).

Academics have to take on more cognitive responsibilities, which sometimes reduces moral commitment and sensitivity in teaching. 'The biggest mountain for us is promotion, for it decides if you stay or leave. This is [a] question about surviving' (A-NS-7). The three universities adopted 'publish or perish' personnel policies in current managerialism; academics

must meet the promotion requirements during the contract period, or they have to leave the university. The promotion is decided by an academic's research performance, teaching work, and social service. However, for academics, research performance primarily includes bidding for high-level research projects and publishing high-quality papers, on top of the challenges of teaching.

We (assistant professors) have to get at least one national research project and publish no less than six high-index papers in six years, and this is just the threshold requirements in my contract period. If you want to get [a] promotion to associated professor, you need more. (B-NS-7)

Seventy percent of my energy is put into experimenting, twenty percent for teaching, and ten for my personal life. It's always a clock upon my head to push for publishing. (A-NS-7)

Teaching, however, 'is easy to complete' (C-HS-7) and 'almost all can meet the teaching requirements (enough teaching hours and satisfied students' evaluation)' (B-HS-5). Sometimes, teaching requirements can be replaced by excellent research performance. At some universities, there are unwritten rules that, if academics have outstanding research performances far beyond their colleagues, then they can receive promotions, even if they have no teaching work or fail to meet the teaching performance requirements. Teaching work is always put in second place, or even marginalised, in universities' promotion regulations. In such a case, academics have to put more time and attention in to research than teaching, and they must sometimes sacrifice teaching time and interests.

Meanwhile, some young academics, especially new assistant professors, noted that they are required to take on more teaching tasks. Some senior professors or administrative staff 'give' some classes they used to teach or are no longer interested in teaching to young academics, who generally choose to accept the classes even if the subjects are beyond their research domains or outside their specialisations. Therefore, these young academics need spend more time preparing for new classes as they fight for the tenure positions, so the teaching quality is difficult to guarantee.

5. Implications and discussion

5.1 External accountability links to internal quality assurance

Coordination of external requirements and internal conscience is necessary in the hierarchical accountability system. Generally, top-down quality accountability is maintained with authoritative orders but not humanistic propitiation. As Briggs and Kim (2020) and Soleimani and Lovat (2019) mentioned, academic morality conflicts always appear between the imposed codes and individual ideologies. Due to the gaps of quality understanding between bureaucracy and professionals, the teaching quality is a result of inefficiency or strategic handling. Therefore, rational accountability should enhance the aspects of humanism to echo the academics' demands. Regardless of the external quality assurance policies or internal quality mechanism processes, the participation and subjectivism of academics must be appreciated. Academics are always treated

as objects in hierarchical accountability, and they may lose their enthusiasm and innovation in a repressive atmosphere. Accountors and accountees are not absolutely antithetical, and a mutual understanding of the mechanism for teaching quality assurance is needed in future.

The motivation of academics' moral commitments to teaching is significant for the improvement of teaching quality. In this study, teaching morality refers to academics' teaching motivation, including conscience, role expectation, professional ethics, and personal values, which change with university contexts, career stages, and academic positions(Ye & Law, 2019). Different from the continuing development model of teaching morality in basic education (Brunetti & Marston, 2018; Ye and Zhou, 2020), teaching morality at these case universities is changing in relation to the universities' statuses and academic rankings, which aligns with Fitzmaurice (2013) on early-career academic morality. However, few universities have endeavoured to care about academics' moral commitment to teaching, and teaching morality should be considered a key intermediate variable in the quality assurance process. Simultaneously, the changing pattern for teaching morality implies that a free environment with greater autonomy and less cognitive responsibilities is necessary for moral commitment, which echoes Metz (2010) finding. Furthermore, it is challenging for academic-managers to realise the importance of teaching morality on quality and of maintaining consistency among managed-academics. Though the morality for teaching is emphasised in policy discourse, the approaches to enhance the moral commitment are rarely weak at universities. In part, the moral commitment is hard to evaluate and understand, and moral commitment is ignored by universities under the high-risked research performance culture.

5.2 From visible data culture to invisible quality culture

As suggested by Patfield et al. (2022), the focus on managing quality should shift towards realizing quality in higher education. Therefore, it is worth considering what kind of teaching quality culture would be beneficial in Chinese universities. While teaching quality at universities is currently measured and compared using quality data such as academics' publications, backgrounds, rewards, and projects, the core mission of teaching quality has not be improved as expected. This is due to the neglect of quality culture. The professional communitarianism is powerful for reconstructing teaching quality culture but has diminished under the current overwhelming academic capitalism. Unlike research performance, teaching quality depends more on academics exploring the nature of education. In the 'best research equals best teacher' quality culture, the evaluation mechanism for 'good' teachers deviates from the educational mission, leading academics to care more about their personal interests. Thus, reforming the resource allocation model and teacher evaluation mechanism is necessary to reconstruct teaching quality, and the culture of high competitiveness and pressure has a negative impact on academics' teaching dedication.

Furthermore, the quality culture of academics' morality is

ignored for universities to chase visibility in highly competitive environments and pay off in the short term. However, investing in teaching, especially teaching morality, hardly produces visible outcomes. The intermediate chain effect of teaching morality is invisible at universities' administration. The "visible accountability" emphasizes rigid evidence-based documents while losing its core purpose. To transfer from visible data culture to invisible quality culture is not easy for universities due to hierarchical systems, cultural inertia, and many other factors. In the hierarchical governance system, the power of teaching is not fully mastered by academics but partly controlled by external requirements and procedures. The teaching autonomy is difficult to guarantee, so the chain effect of academics' morality is not highlighted in an oppressive environment. Gore (2021) pointed out one of the complexities in the quest to improve teaching is distinguishing "what is good teaching." Although the Chinese government begins to change the data quality through new top-down evaluation mechanisms where academics' performance is not evaluated solely based on "counting papers" or "visible outcomes," evaluating academics' "excellence" is still an unsolved problem for universities. Lastly, current teaching quality at universities pays more attention to institutions such as teaching accountability, while academics are not given sufficient focus(Chen et al., 2014). To maintain the sustainability of teaching quality at universities, the prior consideration is expected to sustain academics' conscience and commitment exceeding their maturity and capacity, such as empowering academics to involve in the process of defining teaching quality criteria and enhancing teaching reflection as Tavares et al. (2017) suggested.

5.3 From hierarchical accountability to hybrid accountability

Most studies reveal the drawbacks of hierarchical accountability, including the lack of professionals' participation, possible cheating, abuse of power, and low motivation for members (Romzek, 2000). However, bottom-up accountability in higher education, such as professional accountability or market accountability, may also have negative effects, such as the weak quality assurance mechanism and low efficiency in implementation(Smith & Rowley, 2005). Therefore, a hybrid accountability mechanism is needed to overcome the shortcomings of single accountability. Academics' conscience, as an important variable in teaching quality, should be designed in the accountability system to inspire their conscience and enhance their commitment to teaching.

Hybrid accountability system requires coordination of different evaluations for academics. High-risk evaluations are always treated as priority for academics. In the study, it is evident that academics contribute most of their energy to research performance rather than teaching. Research evaluation is a higher-risk activity for them, and therefore, the efficacy of teaching accountability has faded in the hybrid quality assurance mechanisms. The divided system exists partly because different evaluations originate from different policy-making sectors, which focus on their own policy goals but lack consistent concerns from the standpoint of university

academics. The result is that academics become "split" or "two-faced" individuals, and teaching accountability suffers. To improve the effects of hybrid accountability, evaluation systems should be integrated to enhance academics' professional development, rather than institutional performance. Institutions may respond positively to external accountability when their mutual missions are aligned (Massy, 2011). Similarly, academics may align with rational accountability if its mission echoes academics' professionalism and virtue. The ideal hybrid accountability system is not "more is better". Instead, a hybrid quality mechanism needs to face the challenge of achieving "less is more". This means that more quality can be achieved across multiple sectors and individuals with fewer accountability instruments, which is the orientation for optimizing the future accountability systems at universities.

In summary, this study concentrated on academics' responses to and perceptions of the QEUT ,and explored the factor of academics' conscience affecting teaching quality and efficiency of QEUT. Secondly, the interviews revealed that academics' perceived morality is dynamic, which means academics' moral commitment to teaching varies with different university contexts, career stages and positions. Thirdly, the tensions and conflicts between academics' teaching morality and external accountability mechanisms are discussed. These findings imply policymakers, higher education institutions, academics, and other stakeholders to further improve the quality mechanism of university teaching. The improvement dimensions include coordinating external accountability policies with academics' morality commitments, shifting the focus of evaluation from visible data to invisible quality, and create hybrid accountability system based on diverse stakeholders' interests.

6. Concluding remarks

Since the 1980s, new managerialism has swept through Western countries and has spilled over from the business sector to public sectors, including higher education field (Askling, 1997). Chinese universities adopted the same approach in recent decades to improve quality through remote control and performance evaluation. Increasingly, managerial accountability in the hierarchical system has emphasised alignment with orders and obedience to cognitive responsibilities, however the traditionally weak power of academic professionalism became even more fragile (Davies & Thomas, 2002). Even though the teaching quality has been revalued by top policymakers, academic behaviour has lagged because of stronger organisational and institutional inertia, which means the effect of teaching accountability is maintained and limited by academics' moral commitments rather than policy effects. Further research is needed because academic teaching morality has not been recognised and respected by external policy discourse and internal institutions at universities. In the process of improving the accountability mechanism for teaching quality, more attention should be paid to academic teaching morality and the adoption of feasible measures to enhance professionals' moral dedication to teaching in different career stages at different universities.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing interest.

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