

Original article

The transformation of quality management in Chinese transnational higher education: Implications of integrating students into the system

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Abstract:

This paper aims to develop a new model that promotes the managerial transformation of transnational higher education (TNHE) in China by defining and discussing the roles of students. In the context of the commoditization of higher education, this study conducted interviews with 15 students from two TNHE universities in China to identify their opinions on TNHE quality management and their perceptions of their roles in the quality management process. Based on the empirical results, the paper clearly shows that students realize they are customers in their interactions with universities and are concerned about quality management. However, they believe their voices are negligible. Therefore, we propose a theoretical model that incorporates students into different operational and strategic levels of governance, proposing that students, as stakeholders, should play a greater role in the governance of TNHE. As a conceptual framework, the model can be used by managers at home and host institutions to improve managerial efficacy in TNHE while meeting stakeholders' broader objectives regarding educational quality.

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of economic, social, cultural, and technological changes in China in the late 1970s, there has been an increase in people's demand for higher education (Ahmed & Han, 2017). In this context, the Chinese central government realized that the one-stop, single-administration system was insufficient to meet the people's demands (Mok & Liu, 2007). The government then began implementing education reform by decentralizing authority and liberalizing the private sector to engage in higher education development, which diversified the supply (Mok, 2009). One of the mainstream developments was the encouragement of integrating high-quality educational resources from overseas. Thus, under the wave of reform, more and more domestic educational institutions began cooperating with foreign counterparts, and transnational higher education (TNHE) emerged as part of China's higher education reform.

In its early stages, Sino-foreign cooperative education in China was characterized by weak management, small-scale operations, and a limited scope of activities. The approval process lacked uniformity, involving multiple oversight bodies such as the State Education Commission, Provincial People's Governments, and provincial education administrative departments. Furthermore, the absence of specific regulations to standardize application and negotiation procedures meant there were no clear criteria for foreign partners to follow, significantly hindering development (Zhang & Li, 2019). Till 2001, China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) and signed the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), signaling its commitment to liberalizing the education sector and expanding transnational cooperation. To safeguard the integrity of Chinese-Foreign Cooperative Running Schools (CFCRS) and uphold high standards, the State Council in-

roduced the *Regulation on Chinese – Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools* in 2003. This landmark policy was a strategic response to the post-WTO educational landscape, aiming to expand access to international learning opportunities and cater to diverse societal needs.

With the development of TNHE in China over the last 40 years, China had 84 such institutions with non-independent legal status at the undergraduate level or above, along with 11 with independent legal status (including collaborations with universities in Hong Kong) (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021). As well as the transnational programs, typically offered by either conventional Chinese universities or Sino-foreign cooperative institutions, a total of 1,354 such programs were operational across the country (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021). However, as TNHE experienced rapid growth, it also began to face quality challenges. In 2018, the Ministry of Education (MoE) conducted an assessment of existing joint programs and institutions, which resulted in the closure of 234 such collaborations. The closures were attributed to insufficient quality educational resources, uncompetitive disciplines, and a lack of alignment with the government's regional and national development goals (Si & Lim, 2023). These closures underscore the government's focus on maintaining quality standards and its ongoing oversight of TNHE programs (ICEF, 2018). In addition, the closures may also reflect limited student demand for these programs (ICEF, 2018).

Nowadays, as an emerging form of education, TNHE has become one of the most important measures in China's education reform. With the increasing volume and variety of TNHE programs over the past decade, the quality of TNHE has attracted growing interest and attention from academics and policymakers. This has led the Chinese government to conduct a comprehensive review of TNHE quality and seek to establish a quality management system suited to China's conditions. Unfortunately, despite undergoing various methods and approaches in the past, the quality management of transnational higher education (TNHE) in China remains a subject of debate. In this regard, the aim of this study is to emphasize the role of students in the quality management of TNHE, thereby advancing the transformation of TNHE quality management by incorporating student perspectives into the system. Specifically, this study aims to address the following three research questions:

What are students' expectations regarding their learning in TNHE?

How do TNHE's students look upon the management on quality?

How do TNHE's students identify their roles in the process of quality management in TNHE?

This study will provide a comprehensive review of the importance of the student experience in quality management and make interviews with students to provide recommendations on reforming TNHE to improve and control quality more effectively.

2. Literature

2.1 Quality management on Chinese transnational higher education

The educational quality of an institution is measured by how effectively it uses its resources to achieve its mission and vision, and the extent to which its strategy impacts the lives of its stakeholders (Maguad & Krone, 2012, p. 63). From a macro perspective, quality management ensures the alignment of inputs, processes, and outcomes in higher education institutions (HEIs) (Chong, 2014). As demonstrated by Tsiligiris & Hill (2021), the establishment of quality management in transnational higher education (TNHE) should include the following key components and activities: quality control, quality assurance, quality audit, quality assessment, and quality improvement. Together, these components constitute a comprehensive quality management system for TNHE.

This is due to the fact that the educational quality of TNHE is influenced by various factors in cross-border collaborations. For example, McBurnie & Ziguras (2009) argue that geographical distance can create conflicts between academic and commercial priorities, potentially leading to inconsistent adherence to academic standards and a decline in quality. Students need to be protected from inadequate or substandard transnational education (TNE) services and diploma mills. They should receive a relevant, high-quality education, and the resources they acquire must be valuable for their future academic and professional endeavors (Knight, 2007; Smith, 2010; Bergan, 2010; Sarrico et al., 2010). In addition, differences in the political, cultural, or social needs of host countries often force education exporters to adapt their content, although a recent study finds that there is loosely coupled cooperation in curriculum and teaching, foreign and Chinese teachers, management, and operations in TNHE (Zhang et al., 2024). However, exporters are typically unwilling to jeopardize their domestic and international reputations by lowering educational standards (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2009). This disharmony often leads to conflict in collaborative partnerships.

However, most studies on quality management remain focused on single-country contexts (Brookes & Becket, 2007). More specifically, when investigating quality management in TNHEs, a fundamental concern is whether resources and standards can be successfully transferred from the home country to the host country (Sharp, 2017). For exporting countries (i.e., home countries), the risk of reputational damage is a critical issue. Concerns arise because reputational damage can negatively affect an institution's ability to attract students, faculty, staff, researchers, and research projects in an increasingly competitive global marketplace (Downes, 2017). In addition, exporting low-quality educational resources or services can damage a country's long-term economic and international standing (Knight, 2007; Smith, 2010). As a result, most studies from the perspective of exporting countries prioritize equivalency over resource enhancement (Smith, 2010).

Undoubtedly, how to ensure quality in TNHE is necessary for various reasons. Especially in the era of TNHE, due to its rapid expansion, a sound quality assurance system is essential (Smith, 2010). In general, TNHE exporting countries usually guarantee the quality of TNHE institutions and

programs through non-mandatory assessment and certification, while education importing countries usually strengthen their supervision of cross-border higher education through laws, regulations, and policies promulgated by the government. In order to support and promote international cooperation and understanding between TNHE importing and exporting countries and to improve the quality of TNHE worldwide, international organizations and international quality assurance agencies are actively involved in external quality assurance activities in TNHE and play an active role in regulating and guiding the development of quality assurance frameworks for TNHE. For example, in 2005 UNESCO and the OECD jointly formulated *Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross – Border Higher Education*, which support and encourage international cooperation and emphasize the importance of quality assurance for TNHE. These guidelines also protect the rights of students and other stakeholders from poor-quality and unregulated providers and further address the social, economic, and cultural needs for the development of quality TNHE. Other regions have also paid attention to quality assurance. For example, the *European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (EN – QA)* was established to promote cooperation in quality assurance for TNHE in Europe. Australia also proposed the *Transnational Quality Strategy*, and the QAA published the *Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education: Provisions for Collaboration*.

In China, the MoE, under the supervision of the State Council, is responsible for managing the national education system, developing national policies, and implementing regulations (QAA, 2017). Local education departments and committees further adapt the policies and strategies issued by the MoE at the provincial and municipal levels to suit local conditions. As an importing country, China has "gatekeeping" procedures in place to ensure that they do not receive substandard, unqualified education (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2009). With regard to the establishment of CFCRS at the undergraduate level and above, the MoE approves their operation if all conditions are met, but provincial and municipal education departments are responsible for CFCRS at the diploma level. However, all CFCRS, regardless of the level of education, are required to register with the MoE and obtain a license to operate.

The MoE oversees quality assurance and creates policies that determine which other authorized agencies are responsible for monitoring the implementation of these policies. In China, the Academic Degree and Graduate Education Development Center (CDGDC) is one of the agencies responsible for assessing the quality of undergraduate and postgraduate programs (QAA, 2017). The CDGDC is involved in examining the equivalence of Chinese and foreign university degrees, and advises the MoE on the recognition of qualifications. With the experience gained from the pilot evaluations of CFCRS in Jiangsu, Liaoning, Tianjin, and Henan, the CDGDC has developed evaluation procedures for CFCRS and aims to evaluate CFCRS at the national level. To maintain their accreditation, CFCRSs must submit a self-evaluation report to the CDGDC every year. Desk-based evaluations and on-site

visits are also conducted on 20% of CFCRS programs every 6 years (QAA, 2017). The results of the self-evaluation report and the student satisfaction assessment are also generated as the first outcome of the evaluation.

Meanwhile, the China Education Association for International Exchange (CEAIE) is mandated by the MoE to monitor and maintain the quality of CFCRS at the higher vocational and sub-degree levels. The CEAIE also assists the MoE in screening applications for new CFCRS. The result of this screening process is classified into three outcomes: qualified, qualified with conditions, or unqualified status. A CFCRS that receives a conditional qualification must address any deficiencies within a specified timeframe to receive a firm operating permit, while those that are unqualified may face suspension or revocation if they fail to meet the evaluation criteria.

To improve oversight of CFCRSs, the CDGDC also works with quality assurance organizations in TNE-exporting countries to ensure quality. For example, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2017) and the CDGDC signed a *Memorandum of Understanding* to enhance cooperation and mutual understanding for the development of high-quality Sino-British CFCRSs. In addition, in 2015, CEAIE signed a Memorandum of Understanding with QAA to strengthen their cooperation in vetting new applicants for Sino-British CFCRS.

2.2 Commoditization of higher education and the rise of student's perspectives

Traditionally, higher education has been viewed as a public good that benefits not only individuals but society as a whole through positive externalities such as a skilled workforce, scientific advancement, and informed civic participation. However, this perspective is increasingly challenged by several interrelated trends: the chronic underfunding of public higher education, which forces institutions to seek private sources of revenue; the global dominance of neoliberal economic policies that prioritize market principles, privatization, and reduced public investment; the pressures of globalization that encourage the commercialization of education across borders; and the World Trade Organization's (WTO) General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). By classifying higher education as a tradable service, GATS legitimizes its treatment as a commodity subject to market rules, similar to commodities such as software or agriculture. This shift transforms higher education from a shared social good into a privatized, transactional commodity (Tilak, 2008).

With the pace of development of China's transnational higher education accelerating under the development of globalization in recent years, the concept of commodification of higher education has affected the consensus on the value of higher education within the Chinese higher education system. Education or higher education in China is a public good in the traditional sense, according to the statements of the old-world theory of public goods, fully and directly provided and regulated by governments. With the introduction of the market mechanism of governance in the New World, the characteristics of Chinese higher education in this regard have also

changed, and the boundary between private and public goods has become blurred. Different from the development of higher education around the world, higher education in China is not completely regulated and financed by the government, but they receive a certain amount of financial payments from the government; most institutions must gain benefits to break even. Based on the quasi-public goods theory (Buchanan et al., 1965; Ostrom, 1990), Chinese higher education is more suited to the characteristics of goods serving as common pool resources under the categories of Ostrom (1990), rather than a complete market regulating commodities. In addition, the supporting evidence can be obtained by observing the attitude of the Chinese government towards higher education, which encourages the development of the mechanism of self-regulation by the education market, namely market regulations of private colleges and universities are established by governments, but the mechanism of price and competition in the market is improved and developed by the market itself (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021).

The development of higher education governance philosophies around the world has attracted the attention of the academic community to the student experience in higher education, especially in TNHE. Different from higher education, the contents of TNHE are more complicated because of its attributes of partnership; its attribute of partnership doomed the process of governance and management to involve more stakeholders and their interests appeals. Adopting a pure top-down or bottom-up governance mode in transnational higher education is unrealistic, because the achievement of long-term sustainability of TNHE business is strongly influenced by each of these interest groups. These stakeholders usually have different expectations because they perceive the quality of TNHE in different ways and standards, resulting in the difficulty in the management and governance of TNHE (Ginns et al., 2007; Min et al., 2012; Wallace & Dunn, 2013). Thus, normally, in key decision-making, satisfying the needs of other stakeholders such as communities, consumers, suppliers, and employees is not less important than just maximizing the benefits for the owners (Freeman, 2010). For organizations, recognizing different stakeholders and effectively satisfying their needs has become an important aspect of achieving organizational performance, which is the same in TNHE (Ferrero-Ferrero et al., 2018). Stakeholder engagement and management in the contemporary governance of TNHE business is an important part (Gao & Zhang, 2006). Under the influence of the democratization trend after the 1960s and the marketization wave in the 1980s, the idea that students are among the important stakeholders of higher education has been increasingly supported by universities in different countries and regions (Huang, 2003). A leading higher education institution (HEI) must anticipate the needs of its students and understand their expectations in order to formulate appropriate policies and long-term plans for growth and to determine a fair and considerate approach to student affairs. The quality of its education mainly depends on the quality requirements set by HEI stakeholders, including students (Kettunen, 2015).

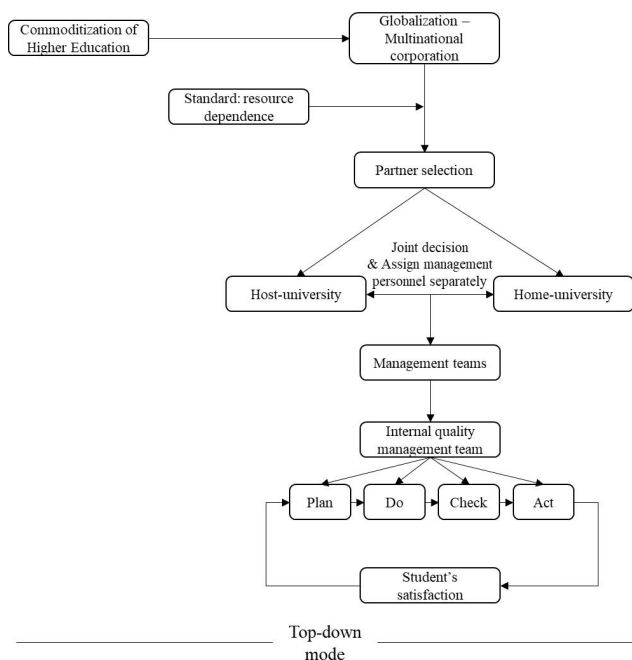


Fig. 1. TNHE quality management mode.

In this regard, the governance in TNHE has been absorbing the students' perspective in the quality management in the past decade as a way for the quality improvement in the management system. The most general way is to establish the quality management system by including the satisfaction, improving the quality of learning and teaching in soft or hard aspects through the feedback of satisfaction surveys. This is because students' satisfaction reflects their attitudes in the short term by indicating the outcome of their experiences and the quality of the educational services they received (Elliott & Healy, 2001), and it is also a critical factor in evaluating the accuracy and credibility of the services provided (Sapri et al., 2009). Furthermore, Barnett (2011) claimed that student satisfaction is an important indicator for measuring the performance and quality of higher education service providers. Undoubtedly, such reform in quality management is suitable for the development of commoditization of higher education. The purpose of this way is to prioritize students as important consumers and utilize their cognitive understanding to identify shortcomings and deficiencies within a university, thus further contributing to the improvement of that university and its quality of education (Levine, 1997). Over the years, it has become an important issue in quality management and is one of the key areas of research in the field of higher education. Some studies have discussed how to consider students' perspectives in teaching and how to pay attention to their role in quality assurance (Nunan, 1988). These studies have mainly explored the meaning of student-centered education and its manifestation in specific teaching processes and curriculum designs. Professional curriculum design, abundant teaching resources, rational teaching methods, and emphasis on classroom interactions are conducive to enhancing students' learning satisfaction (Nunan, 1988). Thus, the governance of TNHE, which incorporates the students' perspective by

conducting the satisfaction survey on quality management, is already very mature and common. Fig. 1 shows the universal quality management model involving the student's perspective in TNHE. In the top-down TNHE model paradigm, the quality management team is appointed by the top management of the host university and the home university. The current top-down model includes student satisfaction as part of the management audit by the quality management team.

However, as research on student perspectives becomes more in-depth, many studies point out that there are different student perspectives on TNHE, with their different standards of evaluation of TNHE quality. Previous research on students' experiences of TNHE quality found that their perspectives on the quality of TNE education are influenced by their country of origin, personal values, and previous educational experiences (Telford & Masson, 2005). Higher quality experiences are defined as learning outcomes that are more likely to be achieved (Finnie & Usher, 2005, p. 19). Different stakeholders, including students, perceive the quality of TNHE in different ways and thus develop different expectations (Ginns et al., 2007; Min et al., 2012; Wallace & Dunn, 2013). Students who have expectations that cannot be met by the current quality of education often have poor educational outcomes, which ultimately leads to their low levels of satisfaction (Lizzio et al., 2002; Nijhuis, 2006). Previous studies have found that students studying at Ningbo-Nottingham University were satisfied with their course arrangements, although some of them were concerned about the unbalanced proportion of foreign and Chinese courses (Mok & Xu, 2008).

Other students are concerned about the recognition of their degrees because the regulations for Sino-foreign cooperative universities do not clearly specify whether the degrees awarded in their home country will be treated equally overseas (Huang, 2003). The same arguments were highlighted by Ziguras & McBurnie (2011), who shared that the licensing and recognition of TNHE ventures and their degrees or programs by the host country for public sector employment or professional accreditation cannot be assumed. In particular, some TNHEs are offered online as they are not physically present in the local area. Therefore, the legitimacy and recognition of TNHEs requires thorough research and verification (Ziguras & McBurnie, 2011), thus transferring the risk to students who may face difficulties in having their degrees validated or recognized by employers (Wilkins & Juusola, 2018).

Clearly, students' experiences with TNHE governance are under-explored and under-integrated. The problem with too many student voices in quality management is the lack of a positive mechanism for students to express their opinions. This study explores mechanisms through interviewing the students' expectations toward the TNHE, the perceptions toward the quality management and the perceptions of their own roles in the quality management.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study conducts the interview with students who were participating in the 2+2 articulation programmes at A

university and B university or have graduated from these programmes. As the first batch of Sino-foreign cooperative universities, University A and University B are both high-quality Sino-UK cooperative institutions with a long history of development and have achieved great success in teaching quality in China. The aim of this study is to gather and evaluate data on students' expectations toward their learning in the 2+2 articulation programmes and their opinions on the learning and teaching quality. Conducting the interviews can illustrate the significance of key concepts in the interviewees' lived situations. Interviews entail primarily interpreting the responses of the interviewees (Kvale, 1996). By conversing with their interviewees, researchers can learn about their subjects' experiences and reconstruct events that they themselves have not experienced (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Discovering how other people experience and interpret their world through qualitative interviews, regardless of the research focus, requires the underlying research topic to be narrow enough to ensure that participants with similar backgrounds and perspectives can draw meaningful comparisons (Crabtree & Miller, 1992).

In this study, a pragmatic perspective was used to guide the research design and data collection and analysis. Pragmatic approaches aim to address real-life issues and questions, which have been widely applied in educational research (Mertens, 2010). Qualitative research methods are more effective in explaining the "how" and "why" of a particular phenomenon or behavior in a particular context. To gather data on the students' views, this study established some topic guidelines that included questions linked to all key themes from the literature. This study used a semi-structured in-depth interview and analyze the data from a constructivist perspective to understand how the students of University A and B expect their learning, perceive the quality management, and their roles in quality management in TNHE.

The NVivo qualitative research software was applied to code and analyze the transcribed interview data. In specific, we used the coding function of the software to summarize the themes related to the three research questions.

3.2 Study participants and data collection

A total of 15 students were invited to participate in the interview by purposive sampling (Table 1). In terms of gender, 6 were male and 9 were female, whilst in terms of university, 4 were studying at the University B, and 11 were studying at University A. These participants came from various academic majors, thus ensuring a broad coverage of disciplines and resources provided by the universities. Each interviewee was given a unique code to ensure confidentiality and protect their privacy. The unique code consists of two letters, "UA" which represents "University A" and "UB" which represents "University B", a number indicating the order of interviews.

Before collecting the data for this study, a *Human Ethics Approval* application was submitted to the university for their approval. This application introduced the study, the research procedures and the research participants and indicated that this study would follow the international standards of ethical practices. After receiving approval, the interviews were con-

ducted to collect data. Consent forms and information sheets were provided to the participants to introduce them to the research and to secure their consent. These two documents were also used to build trust with the participants by making them understand why their data were being collected for the study. Students taking the 2+2 articulation programme at either University A and University B were invited to participate on a voluntary basis, and the consenting participants were asked to sign the information sheet and consent form. They were reminded during the interviews that they have the right to quit the study at any time. Creswell et al. (2007) highlighted the importance of stressing the participants' rights to withdraw from any stage of the study or refuse to answer questions they deem inappropriate. Anonymity, privacy and confidentiality are three other important points that warrant attention from the participants (Coffelt, 2017). To conceal their identities, each participant was given a special code. The collected data were stored in a secure, password-protected media. International guidelines and various legislations were also considered in this research given that investigating the topic of TNHE may lead to conflicts with these guidelines and legislations (Yip et al., 2016). After transcribing the interview data and completing the study, all the collected data were discarded.

Table 1. Interview participants.

No.	University	Gender	Code	Major
1	UA	Female	UA01	Sociology of language
2	UB	Female	UB01	International relationship
3	UA	Male	UA02	International relationship
4	UB	Male	UB02	Architecture
5	UA	Female	UA03	Economic
6	UA	Female	UA04	Computer
7	UA	Male	UA05	Mathematics
8	UA	Female	UA06	Applied Mathematics
9	UA	Female	UA07	Financial mathematics
10	UA	Male	UA08	Computer
11	UA	Male	UA09	Accounting
12	UB	Female	UB03	International relationship
13	UB	Female	UB04	Media
14	UA	Female	UA10	Information technology
15	UA	Male	UA11	Engineering

4. Findings

4.1 Student's university choice and career planning are closely related

It is observed that students had a clear idea of their study career plan before admission, most of the students expressed that they have intentions to study abroad after the graduations. They understood the benefits that these 2+2

articulation programmes would bring to them and how these programmes would help them easily achieve their goals. Most of the students clearly realize what they want to get from they are learning in the 2+2 articulation programmes.

Most people study abroad, starting in high school at international schools, and then take foreign exams abroad. However, we are students who participated in the college entrance exam, so we are late starters. The only option for us may be a Sino – foreign joint school. (UA02)

I thought that I could go to this kind of Sino – foreign joint school and then I could go abroad for graduate school. So, I was thinking that I would like to go abroad for further study. My expectations before I entered the program were that I wanted to use it as a stepping stone, and that I would be able to experience an English – only education and develop international skills. (UA03, UA06, UB01)

The school appears to be quite decent, and it's a cost – effective way to study – aboard... Compared to domestic universities, certificates from Sino – foreign joint schools are more easily accepted by postgraduate programs at foreign universities. (UA04, UA07)

I was planning to change my academic background and study science because I studied liberal art in high school. In fact, liberal arts majors in China have a hard time finding jobs, even though I would like to apply to jurisprudence programs. However, I cannot apply to a good Chinese university because I scored low on the college entrance exam, so I thought I would change my major to science to improve my employment prospects. (UA07)

4.2 The university is beneficial for students to achieve their future plans

Students know that the cost they have paid in terms of time, energy, and money to participate in the programmes is a kind of transaction with the university to receive the services and intangible goods. They clearly know who they are as customers and the choices they make to fulfill their needs before entering the university.

The university had accepted part of opinions we proposed, I think the services they provided is quite good. (UA01)

As I know, most of the students would apply the foreign university for postgraduate education, whatever they have plan to go or not. They thought this is welfare they get from the degree. (UA05)

Compared to double first – class universities in China, the certificates and language scores from my universities are more easily accepted by foreign universities for postgraduate education. For example, our English results can be applied for exemption from IELTS. (UA04)

Because the university's tuition fees are higher than normal, my parents and I thought that the social network I had established would be better. (UB01)

I expect that they can provide me with more humanistic care and concern, as well as the freedom that I experienced while studying abroad. (UA11)

I expect that the university can provide me with a

more diverse selection of courses and an international atmosphere. I hope to have the opportunity to interact with international students and apply to be an exchange student or a postgraduate student at a foreign university. (UB04)

4.3 The negligible impact of feedback loops

Collecting the feedback from students is considered one of the most important mechanism to improve the quality management in TNHE. Generally, the quality management team should set up a new improvement plan based on the feedback and enable the effect of feedback to be apparent. In this study, two universities indeed developed a formal communication mechanism to collect feedback from students on the quality of various aspects. However, the majority of respondents did not acknowledge the effectiveness of the feedback loop.

The university would have arranged an evaluation for each course after the term was complete. However, there's nothing they can do if you don't complete it. I think I was one of the few who took it seriously, but I know some students didn't complete it. The university considered our opinions but did not accept them. (UA01)

Yes, some meetings would have been arranged by university to discuss the difficulties we have encountered in English, as well as any feedback we may have. If we had difficulties, they would suggest that we participate in the course. Regarding the feedback, I don't think it worked because, you know, I graduated. Even if it did work, I wouldn't have had the chance to find out. (UA02)

The university does provide a feedback mechanism, but I'm not sure if they changed it or not, I graduated and left after I provided it anyway. As far as I know, it was changed, but it didn't do much. (UA05)

I feel that the university has made changes based on our feedback, but only minor ones that haven't had much effect. (UB04)

4.4 Some inexpressible opinions in the feedback

During interviews, most students talked about their experiences at the host and home universities. Their descriptions conveyed a sense of separation, making it seem as if they had attended two different universities during their four years. Such as, a student suggested that the university improve integration between the host and home universities, whether at the curricular or daily affairs level.

There were differences between the home and host universities. The home university would provide high – standard fundamental courses for students. In contrast, at the host university, you might learn the same thing, or you might feel that the courses are easier. You may clearly feel the gap between the two universities, and you might feel disconnected between the first two years and the last two years. (UA06)

It was also found that some students expressed they have not felt international and freedom atmosphere at home-university, and they are required to participate in the national course.

The home university would provide national courses that were irrelevant to the major. (UA06)

My major is international relationship, but there were less of international students during my learning period, only two or four students, I remember. I think the university can improve its internationality to attract more international students. (UB03)

5. Discussion: students as one of the stakeholders involved in the quality management process

Moving beyond the traditional satisfaction framework, students express a range of perspectives from their learning experiences towards the quality of TNHE, which may never have been recorded or evaluated. A study that investigated students' learning experiences on TNHE by linking students' expectations and perceptions on the quality of education revealed that students' experiences on the quality of TNHE are influenced by their own expectations. The students' perceptions on TNHE are subjective, each student only focuses on and perceives the contents during their learning that are related to their expectations (Ke, 2024). Based on the empirical results of Ke's (2024) study, it can be found that the learning experiences expressed by the students are specific, contextual and non-conceptualized, which cannot be easily measured by changing the degree of specific topics or contents. For example, students expressed their dissatisfaction that the quality of teaching in TNHE is still affected by the expansion of higher education in China. In addition, they expressed their dissatisfaction on the higher turnover rate in the TNHE system, which caused their experience in TNHE to be diminished. The backward management philosophies and *Service Moat* of TNHE, which they expected, have made them feel unworthy of money in TNHE. In fact, these thoughts hidden in the students' expressions cannot be measured by the degree of feelings, and also these thoughts are constructed by the students' expectations of TNHE themselves.

The framework for studying student satisfaction originally hides the appeals of students' interest and excludes their expectations from the outset. As the results presented in this study, most of the students selected the TNHE's university as their journey of undergraduate education was a well-considered decision. The students had their own needs that they wanted the universities to fulfil. They knew their role at that time and the cost they were paying to achieve their planned goal (Stensaker & Matear, 2024). The so-called satisfaction investigation for them was a kind of mission assigned during their learning period; they might complete it, but they did not know if their opinions had been pushed onto the agenda. Currently, the TNHE quality management used the measurement of students' satisfaction as a reference for the improvement in simple is deficient, as Kettunen (2015) suggested that the quality of higher education mainly depends on the different requirements for quality set by different stakeholders of higher education, including students, universities, labor market, government, and the public.

For managers, it is important to realize that recognizing the

is an inevitable trend. We should realize that the customers of higher education do indeed know the demand of the market more clearly than those managers who are full of themselves, even than those marketing professionals, while at the same time, especially in TNHE, even do not mention that the native hysteresis of decision-making of the top-down mode. There is no doubt that introducing and enriching the role of students in the quality management of higher education can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of management. It is obvious that the applicability and effectiveness of students' expectations in a TNHE context would lead to insignificant ramifications for the quality of services and education, if students only report their feelings under the framework of measuring satisfaction. The value of students' participation in TNHE quality management is only the beginning of pluralistic governance, which will constantly make new demands on higher education management and advance the managerial revolution of higher education.

Reflecting on this discussion, we propose a conceptual mode as an alternative to the traditional one of quality management in TNHE. This model has expanded the role of students in TNHE quality management, involving their voices in different parts and levels. Also, it enriched the applicability of stakeholder theory in the field of higher education and promoted the revolution of quality management in TNHE.

Although the applicability of the proposed model requires further study and optimization, especially in the context of the realized outcomes (e.g., balance between ensuring educational quality and satisfying students' interests), it can be promoted to the managers in TNHE to rebuild the management system that involves the stakeholders of TNHE.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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