

## The Philosophy Teaching Assessment System and Its Enlightenments of British Universities

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### Abstract

As a basic element of the university teaching quality monitoring, teaching assessment has become an indispensable part of university teaching management. Only by ensuring its effectiveness can teaching assessment promote university teaching quality. As a basic discipline in the UK higher education, philosophy is the investigation of those very general and fundamental questions which are about knowledge, reality, mind, morality, logic, language, reasoning, politics, art, and value, and these questions have drawn attention. The University of Oxford and University of Cambridge are the two most well-known universities which are called the "crown" of UK higher education. This paper mainly takes Oxford and Cambridge as the cases of study, which is based on the two external and internal quality assurance systems of UK higher education. The study sums up the commonalities and particularities of standards for the philosophy teaching assessment of the two British universities and analyzes the organization and implementation, aiming to obtain a deeper understanding of it, and points out its enlightenments for the quality assessment of higher education in China.

**Key words:** British universities; Philosophy teaching assessment; Quality assurance

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### INTRODUCTION

Philosophy is the most important knowledge of mankind and is the basis for all disciplines. Before the birth of science, every nationality and country in the West are committed to study philosophy. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle once pointed out that there was no more valuable to science than philosophy. Philosophy is not as useless as we imagine, on the contrary, it involves people's world outlook and outlook on life and closely relates to the ways we behave. Currently, higher education in many countries pays more attention to the humanistic value and significance of philosophy and emphasizes on the university philosophy education. Throughout history, philosophy has been enjoying a high status in Britain, and philosophy teaching assessment is the theme of UK higher education research and one of the indispensable parts to ensure British its teaching quality. After the accumulation, inheritance and innovation of history, UK higher education has established a unique and quite effective philosophy teaching assessment system. Among them, faculties of philosophy at University of Oxford and University of Cambridge rank among the first-class faculties of philosophy. Therefore, it is particularly necessary to learn from the British universities' philosophy teaching assessment system. This paper is intended to take faculties of philosophy at Oxford and Cambridge as cases of study, combining British external and internal higher education quality assurance system, to explore the effectiveness of the philosophy teaching assessment system of British universities.

## 1. THE IMPLEMENTATION BODIES OF THE PHILOSOPHY TEACHING ASSESSMENT SYSTEM OF BRITISH UNIVERSITIES

The philosophy teaching assessment system of British universities is closely related to the UK Higher Education Quality Assurance System, which has the external and internal parts. The external part means the external monitoring and assessment system, which is mainly implemented by the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (hereinafter referred to as QAA); the internal part refers to the organization and procedure system among universities and colleges aiming to improve the teaching quality. Thus, the philosophy teaching assessment system of British universities includes two assessment bodies: the external QAA and the internal Academic Committees of universities and colleges.

### 1.1 The External Assessment Implementation Body: QAA

QAA was established in March 1997, based on the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) and the Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFCs). In its nature, QAA is an independent unofficial agency donated by HEQC and universities and colleges, aiming to assure good teaching standards and promote continuous improvement of the higher education quality. Its core duty is to safeguard the quality and standards of UK universities and colleges so that students can enjoy the best learning experiences (QAA, 2013).

UK National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education published a report in 1997, namely *Dearing Report*, which intended to emphasize to strengthen the power of QAA and to implement the higher education quality assurance and standards gradually. Therefore, QAA worked closely together with the higher education sector, the academia and other higher education stakeholders to establish a series of quality standards: *the Academic Infrastructure*. As the uniform yardstick of quality assurance for UK higher education, it provides a consistent framework of academic standards for the assessment and quality assurance. However, since the school year 2012-2013, the Quality Code has replaced it. The Quality Code gives individual higher education providers, who are the independent and self-governing, a shared starting point for setting, describing and maintaining the academic standards of their higher education programs and qualifications and for assuring the quality of the learning opportunities they provide for students (QAA, 2014). In order to ensure higher education institutions to meet the expectations set by the Quality Code, QAA carries out the regular external audits on them, during which higher education

institutions must provide evidences that they meet the expectations.

### 1.2 The Internal Assessment Implementation Body: Academic Committee of Universities and Colleges

UK universities and colleges build interior assurance mechanisms for teaching quality and qualification standards, and the code of practice of QAA provides general guidance and reference to them, usually including professional approval, annual monitoring and periodic assessment (Tang, 2012). At University of Cambridge, for example, the internal organization and implementation of its philosophy teaching assessment are conducted by the Academic Committee.

The Academic Committee is responsible for all matters related to universities' academic and educational policies, such as new curriculum development, teaching and research and resource allocation, etc. The Academic Committee consists of a number of specialized committees, among which the Education Committee is responsible for making recommendations on policies of the quality of education and academic standards to the Academic Committee. The faculty of philosophy also has a Faculty Board which is responsible for the supervision and management of philosophy teaching quality.

## 2. THE STANDARDS OF THE PHILOSOPHY TEACHING ASSESSMENT SYSTEM OF BRITISH UNIVERSITIES

There exist commonalities and particularities of the standards of the philosophy teaching assessment system of British universities. The commonalities are the general, same expectations that every discipline should achieve nationwide, while the particularities are specific requirements set with the basis on the internal structure and elements of philosophy.

### 2.1 The Commonalities of Standards of Philosophy Teaching Assessment System

The commonalities of the standards of the philosophy teaching assessment system of British universities are subject benchmark statements published by QAA, which are contents of the Quality Code mentioned above. As the important reference norms and standards for UK higher education quality assurance, they play irreplaceable roles in assuring the teaching quality. Subject benchmark statements provide a way for the academic community to describe the nature and the characteristics of higher education programs in a specific subject or subject area. They also set out general expectations for the award of qualifications at a given level in terms of the attributes and capabilities that those possessing such qualifications should have demonstrated (QAA, 2007).

Subject benchmark statements clearly define the intelligence undergraduates should possess in every discipline and the methods and skills they should master, which means the commonalities of the standards of the philosophy teaching assessment system. Specific contents are in Figure 1.

- ◆ systematic understanding of the main aspects of the field you study, and obtainment of coherent detailed knowledge among which at least part is at the forefront of certain aspects of the major;
- ◆ the ability to accurately choose and apply methods of analysis and exploration in your major;
- ◆ understanding of conceptions, which enable them to use professional concepts and methods to design and maintain arguments or solve problems, in which at least part of them is at the forefront of the major; the ability to describe and comment some current specific researches or advanced academic achievements of the major;
- ◆ the ability to identify the uncertainty, ambiguity and limitation of knowledge;
- ◆ reasonable arrangements for their own learning, and the use of academic commentary and key resources (for example, the studies and raw materials suitable for the major through accreditation).

**Figure 1**  
**The Standards of UK Honors Degree Awarding** (Bi, 2005)

## 2.2 The Particularities of Standards of Philosophy Teaching Assessment System

The particularities of the standards of the philosophy teaching assessment system of British universities are products of the specialization of UK subject benchmark statements. The philosophy subject benchmark launched in 2007 is a revised version of the original statement published in 2000. It is also the benchmark for honors degree in philosophy, which is established by QAA and philosophy experts of various higher education institutions. Its contents mainly include the definition and scope of philosophy, as well as quality standards of honors degree in philosophy.

### 2.2.1 The Definition and Scope of Philosophy

Philosophy enjoys a special position in UK higher education. Due to the tradition of “academic freedom” in UK higher education, there is a big difference between the knowledge and understanding of subject education among universities and colleges of different regions, levels and types. Therefore, the primary task of setting subject benchmarks is to reach a nationwide

consensus on the connotation of a certain subject. So, the philosophy subject benchmark elaborates modern philosophy authoritatively, including its definition and scope. It defines philosophy as a discipline seeking to understand, and critically to question, ideas concerning the nature of reality, value and experience (QAA, 2007). In daily expression, “philosophy” can be extended as the most basic concepts, attitudes and beliefs held by individuals or groups. General philosophy includes enquiring the widest thoughts and views. Under this system, there are contents such as existence, truth, time, causality, free will, mind and body, God, knowledge, rationality, logic, meaning, duty, goodness, beauty, interpretation, gender and historicity, etc. Philosophy studies particular areas of human practice and enquiry, such as language, science, social science, politics, law, education, religion, literature and the arts, mathematics, and applied ethics, etc..

The Honors degree of UK higher education is between the foundation degree or diploma and master’s degree.<sup>1</sup> At present, UK higher education provides the diverse courses for honors degree in philosophy. For example, Faculty of philosophy at Oxford provides courses like the physics and philosophy, psychology, philosophy and physiology, philosophy and theology, philosophy and modern languages, philosophy, politics and economics as well as the mathematics and philosophy. Philosophy is a part of the humanities, but its importance extends into many other areas of intellectual inquiry. The philosophy of social science is relevant to social theory. The connection between logic and the development of computing is well known. In recent years, philosophers have begun to focus on some new, disturbing philosophical issues which they are also willing to explore and solve. For example, with the development of Medicine, some people may decide whether to give birth to a baby according to its gender and can also choose to end their lives with euthanasia. Meanwhile, we have to think about applied ethics issues like this. In fact, British philosophy research fruitfully leads and influences the philosophy research and development worldwide.

### 2.2.2 The Quality Standards of Honors Degree in Philosophy

The philosophy subject benchmark describes two levels of achievements: threshold and typical, in which the former means the minimum standards for obtaining a philosophy degree, while the latter means standards attained by the majority of honors graduates. The specific requirements of each standard are shown in the Table 1:

<sup>1</sup> National Qualifications Frameworks. (2006, July 8). Retrieved from <http://www.qaa.ac.uk>

**Table 1**  
**The Quality Standards of Honors Degree in Philosophy (QAA, 2007)**

Categories	Threshold	Typical
Knowledge and understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Familiarity with the writings of some of the major philosophers;</li> <li>◆ Familiarity with some central theories and arguments in the fields of logic, metaphysics, epistemology or philosophy of mind;</li> <li>◆ Familiarity with some central theories and arguments in the fields of moral, political or social philosophy;</li> <li>◆ Appreciation of the wide range of techniques of philosophical reasoning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Knowledge of the theories and arguments of some of the major philosophers, encountered in their own writings, and some awareness of important areas of interpretative controversy concerning the major philosophers;</li> <li>◆ The ability to employ historical doctrines to illuminate contemporary debates;</li> <li>◆ A clear grasp of some central theories and arguments in the fields of logic, metaphysics, epistemology or philosophy of mind;</li> <li>◆ A clear grasp of some central theories and arguments in the fields of moral, political or social philosophy;</li> <li>◆ An awareness of major issues currently at the frontiers of philosophical debate and research;</li> <li>◆ Appreciation of the wide range of application of techniques of philosophical reasoning</li> </ul>
General philosophical skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ An ability to identify underlying issues in various debates;</li> <li>◆ Grasp of some philosophical problems, mentioning arguments for or against proposed solutions;</li> <li>◆ Understanding of the importance of careful interpretation of a variety of texts;</li> <li>◆ Views on the success of standard arguments;</li> <li>◆ Familiarity with the use of specialized philosophical terminology;</li> <li>◆ The ability to distinguish the nature of sound arguments and logical fallacies;</li> <li>◆ Appreciation of how generalizations can be supported or weakened by detailed discussion;</li> <li>◆ Recognition of arguments on both sides of a philosophical question.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ The ability to identify the underlying issues in different kinds of debate;</li> <li>◆ The ability to analyze the structure of complex and controversial problems, with an understanding of major strategies of reasoning designed to resolve such problems;</li> <li>◆ The ability to read carefully and interpret texts drawn from a variety of ages and/or traditions with a sensitivity to context;</li> <li>◆ The ability to judge the success of standard arguments;</li> <li>◆ The ability to identify textually-based arguments and subject their structure and implications to rigorous assessment;</li> <li>◆ The ability to use and understand properly specialized philosophical terminology;</li> <li>◆ The ability to abstract, analyze and construct logical argument, employing the techniques of formal and informal methods of reasoning as appropriate, together with an ability to recognize any relevant fallacies;</li> <li>◆ The ability to employ detailed argument to support or criticize generalizations in the light of specific implications;</li> <li>◆ Readiness to review unfamiliar ideas with an open mind and a willingness to change one's mind when appropriate.</li> </ul>

Britain provides a way to describe the nature and the characteristics of a specific discipline or courses in the discipline fields by establishing the subject benchmark. As an important external reference for universities and colleges to design and develop new curriculum in a subject area, it provides guidance for elaborating the learning results relating to courses. Meanwhile, it also provides universities and colleges with support to seek its internal quality assurance, because it plays as the reference point in the review and assessment of the learning results, which not only increases the pertinence and comparability of the assessment but also makes the assessment result more persuasive and safeguard the objectivity and impartiality of the assessment.

### 3. THE ORGANIZATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PHILOSOPHY TEACHING ASSESSMENT SYSTEM OF BRITISH UNIVERSITIES

As mentioned above, UK Higher Education Quality Assurance System consists of two parts, accordingly,

the organization and implementation of UK philosophy teaching assessment are completed by two systems. The external assessment means the institutional audit organized by QAA and the internal assessment refers to the professional approval, annual monitoring and periodic assessment autonomously conducted by universities and colleges.

#### 3.1 Institutional Audit by QAA

At the early stage, QAA mainly carried out subject reviews to assess whether UK higher education institutions meet the quality standards it sets. However, the institutional audit has replaced the previous subject review since 2003. Institutional audit is an evidence-based process carried out through peer review, aiming to ensure that the education provided by universities and colleges is of good quality and appropriate academic standards and ensure they exercise their degree-granting power reasonably.

The specific contents of institutional audit are as follows (QAA, 2009b):

A. The audit body and auditors. Institutional audit is implemented by an audit team which normally includes



five auditors and an audit secretary, one of whom is a student. These examiners are university academic staffs or administrators, and the student auditor is a student representative who is at school or on sabbaticals or has graduated recently.

B. Briefing papers and students' written submission. During the assessment, faculties of philosophy of universities and colleges need to answer the following questions: (a) what is we trying to do? (b) Why are we doing it? (c) How are we doing it? (d) Why is that the best way to do it? (e) How do we know it works? (f) How can we improve it? QAA uses these questions to appraise the effectiveness of the management of standards and quality in universities and colleges. A briefing paper is an opportunity for an institution to outline the way it goes about answering those six questions, with the first three questions focusing more on a description of its approach and the rest of the questions taking a more reflective view. Students are invited to give a written submission to the audit team voluntarily. It is clear that students welcome the opportunity to provide their views, and the audit team will get great benefit from their constructive written submissions.

C. Central element of the audit. Institutional audit covers an institution's management of the security of the academic standards of its awards and of the quality of the learning opportunities it provides to enable students to achieve those standards. The audit team will mainly review the following six areas: Institutional management of academic standards of its award; Institutional management of learning opportunities; Institutional approach to quality enhancement; Collaborative arrangements; Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students as well as the accuracy and completeness of the published information.

D. Audit procedures and methods. The entire audit process includes five stages: preparation, the briefing visit, the audit visit, Liaison with the institution and reports. During preparation, namely 24 weeks before the audit visit, there will be a preliminary meeting between QAA and the institutions to discuss the structure and the content of the audit as a whole and the meeting will also provide an opportunity for a separate discussion with student representatives who have given written submissions. The briefing visit will be held five weeks before the audit visit, which is an opportunity for the team to gain a sound understanding of the institution and its approach to the strategic management of academic standards and quality. The audit visit is to pursue deeper exploration on the matters identified at the briefing visit and focuses on the management of quality and standards. The audit visit will normally extend over five working days (Monday to Friday), among which up to four days will involve meetings between the audit team and staff and students of the institution and its collaborative partners, and on

the final day the audit team will make judgment on the conditions of the institutions. During both visits to the institution, a representative of the audit team will have regular meetings with a named institution. Such meetings will provide opportunities for the team to seek guidance or clarification outside of the formal meetings of the visits, and for the institution to raise further explanation or evidence to promote the deliberations. Finally, QAA will publish *Report of the institutional audit results*, which will give some "good practices" of the institutions as well as the suggestion to get improvement. The report doesn't provide a specific way for the institutions to apply mechanically, but provides an opportunity for them to reflect on their own practices and then to enhance the teaching quality.

The institutional audit strengthens universities' responsibility for the management of academic standards and education quality. On the one hand, making full use of the internal quality assurance mechanisms in universities and colleges can greatly reduce the burden of external audits; on the other hand, ensuring the quality of higher education from the outside helps to reduce the burden on institutions and expand their autonomy. After the institutional audit, the education quality and self-management skills of institutions has greatly improved. On this basis, the institutional audit better reflects the balance between quality assurance and quality improvement.

### 3.2 The Internal Assessment of Universities and Colleges

Except for institutional audit by QAA, faculties of philosophy also assure and improve the teaching quality through the internal mechanism, generally including professional approval, annual monitoring and periodic assessment.

Cambridge Academic Committee is responsible for the change in rules and regulations and approval of new majors of the university. For example, when Faculty of philosophy at University of Cambridge introduces a new honors degree examination (Tripos) mechanism, it needs the consent of the Senate and the Academic Committee. Annual monitoring mainly focuses on whether faculty of philosophy effectively achieves its objectives, and whether students' learning outcomes achieve the intended target. Usually, Faculty of Philosophy supervises philosophy teaching, including the annual examination set by a professional team, and also involving external inspector reports, identified requirements by special professional groups and feedback of teachers and students, etc. Faculty of philosophy at Cambridge will conduct assessment on teachers, students and examinations at regular appropriate intervals. The *Quality Guidelines* regulates Faculty assessment should be carried out at least once a year and the faculty should respond to the external prosecutor reports and students' survey questions

accordingly. Periodic assessment is conducted by the university, usually once every 5-7 years, whose purpose is to assure and improve the educational standards and teaching quality of philosophy.

As important members of the Academic Committee, professors play important roles. There is no doubt that the professor appointment is a highlight to safeguard the teaching quality internally. Generally speaking, British universities recruit professors openly, and they are recommended by the selection committee and appointed by the council. After professorship is conformed as a profession, university professors' academic freedom and lifelong tenure will get safeguard. Promotion to professor will primarily be on the basis of outstanding research coupled with a strong record of teaching and administration. Regard shall be the person's standing in the relevant subject or profession as established by outstanding contributions to its advancement through publications, creative work or other appropriate forms of scholarship or performance, and through teaching and administration. More specifically, applicants will be assessed in the following three aspects when being considered for promotion to Professor.<sup>2</sup> Firstly, for teaching and learning, the focuses are the quality of teaching, whose evidence can be from student questionnaires or by direct observation of teaching; contribution to course development, innovation and planning, including production of teaching materials and assessment methods and supervision of postgraduates, etc. Secondly, for research, the focuses are the quality of research output as evidenced by published works, including books, articles in core journals; creativity and contribution to the body of knowledge of the subject; research grants obtained and research projects managed; ability to organize conferences and colloquia, etc.. Thirdly, for administration, attentions will go to applicants' ability to organize activities, programs, or projects (e.g. admissions, student welfare, quality assurance, graduate studies, examinations, and monitoring of research programs, etc.). UK professor appointment is characterized by open recruit, diverse forms and strong autonomy, which improves the teaching quality as well as assuring the effectiveness and validity of the teaching assessment in China.

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#### 4. ENLIGHTENMENTS

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The philosophy teaching assessment system of British universities involves the external institutional audit by QAA and the internal approval, monitoring and assessment by their own Academic Committees. Both of them are committed to the philosophy teaching

assessment and play vital roles in making philosophy become an outstanding subject and enjoy reputation internationally. This unique teaching assessment system provides important references and enlightenments for higher education quality assessment of China.

#### 4.1 Establishing External Unofficial Agency of Higher Education Quality Assurance

Education quality assurance system is a powerful weapon to improve education quality. UK higher education institutions accept institutional audit by QAA, which makes the teaching and assessment to be of strong objectivity and impartiality. At present, although the higher education quality assurance system has involved the participation of the government, social intermediaries and universities and colleges themselves in our country, there are still problems, and one of them is its official nature (Guo & Tian, 2011). Social intermediaries have the nature of quasi-government, which means they are established under the guidance of the government and also rely on the government's funding, so they have to reflect the will of the government. Meanwhile, due to the lack of supervision and competition mechanism, it will inevitably cause non-democracy and unfairness during the assessment. Therefore, we should set up a quality assurance agency independent of the government according to the actuality in our country, and put education assessment as an effective management measure and be strengthened.

#### 4.2 Improving the Assurance Mechanism for the Teaching Quality Assessment of Universities and Colleges

It is acknowledged that the internal cause is the root cause for the development of things while the external cause is the necessary condition. British universities and colleges conduct quality monitoring and assessment according to benchmark and guidance jointly set by the external agencies, making the teaching and assessment with strong directivity and operability thus achieving its high quality education. Traditional universities, such as Oxford and Cambridge, publish the investigation conclusions and analysis reports of students' learning experiences on their respective teaching quality information web pages. However, in our country, although The Ministry of Education advocates the 39 national "985 project" universities launch the undergraduate teaching quality report, some didn't release it on time, and some put the report at unattractive places. Moreover, most of these reports include self-praise, and avoid or beg the question. Therefore, universities and colleges in our country should be clear their own missions, assume responsibilities in curriculum design, implementation and review, and do the quality report seriously.

#### 4.3 Constructing High Quality Teacher Teams

Teachers' quality directly affects teaching as well as the results of teaching quality assessment. In 2000, Oxford

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<sup>2</sup> University of London: Academic Promotion to Senior Lecturer, Reader, and Professor. (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.london.ac.uk/4293.html#c7160>

University once put forward that teacher should achieve and maintain excellence in each field of the teaching and scientific research, keep and develop Oxford's historical position as a world-class university and bring benefit to international societies, nations and locals through their research achievements and the skills of graduates. However, the current university teachers' assessment system in our country is not perfect. The are problems like emphasizing teachers' scientific research ability while neglecting teachers' teaching ability, teachers' moral level and physical and mental health (Huang, 2011). Therefore, Chinese universities should be perfect personnel appointment system. Meanwhile, teachers should have regular trainings and examinations. Only high-quality teachers can implement the teaching assessment system seriously, so as to improve the quality of education.

#### 4.4 Improving the System of Students' Evaluation on Teaching

Students are the main body of learning and the objects of teachers' teaching. Their evaluation can reflect the real situation of class and their satisfaction will directly affect the teaching quality. QAA of Britain widely encourages students to give written submissions during the institutional audit and holds meetings to study and discuss students' submissions, which have great reference value for higher education teaching assessment. However, although universities and colleges in our country have begun student evaluation, it doesn't achieve the desired effect. On the one hand, the majority of students lack the necessary understanding for evaluation or they do not take it seriously for personal emotional factors. On the other hand, universities and colleges just simply publish the results of students' evaluation on teaching without careful analysis or discussion, which results in students' evaluation on teaching become a mere formality. Therefore, universities and colleges should do a good job of propaganda and implementation of students' evaluation on teaching, rationally analyze the evaluation results, do the assessment earnestly and improve the teaching quality.

In summary, with the popularization and internationalization of higher education and the wave of

knowledge economy, higher education quality assurance has become the major theme of national higher education research, and teaching assessment draws more attention for it is an important link to safeguard higher education quality. Britain enjoys international reputation for its unique teaching assessment system. Considering characteristics as "backwardness" and "catching up" of our country's higher education, we really need to draw lessons from the successful experience of British universities when reflecting and constructing our higher education quality assessment system.

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