

An Exploration of the Internal Quality Assurance System of Postgraduate Education in the UK

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Abstract: *Universities in the UK are primarily responsible for the quality of postgraduate education. Through in-depth research on the educational quality assurance organization system, educational quality assurance process and educational quality assessment and feedback system of graduate students in British universities, it is found that universities in the UK provide all-round guarantee for the training of graduate students, forming a top-down quality assurance organization, diversified guarantee methods and student-oriented guarantee concept.*

Keywords: Education in the UK, Postgraduate education, Quality assurance system.

1. Introduction

The UK is recognized as a world powerhouse in science, technology, innovation and education. The UK ranks fourth in the Global Innovation Index 2023 [1]. Among them, UK postgraduate education plays a pivotal role in the UK's scientific and technological innovation, which cannot be separated from a perfect quality assurance system for postgraduate education. The quality assurance system of UK postgraduate education is mainly based on internal quality assurance and supplemented by external quality assurance, with internal institutions and personnel within the university responsible for internal quality assurance, and national and local specialised quality supervision agencies responsible for external quality assurance. As a result, the main body of responsibility for quality assurance of higher education in the UK has experienced an evolution from teacher - university - country - university [2]. Therefore, the main body of postgraduate quality assurance is focused on the internal of universities, and by analyzing the management organizational system, assurance aspects, and evaluation and feedback mechanism of the internal quality assurance system of UK postgraduate education, with a view to providing some inspiration and reference for the construction and improvement of the quality assurance system of postgraduate education for universities in China.

2. The Internal Quality Management Organization System of Postgraduate Education in the UK

2.1 Quality Assurance Organizations at University Level

HEIs in the UK have an overarching authority at university level that is responsible for co-ordinating quality assurance across the university. Under the supreme authority, there are usually various committees responsible for the organisation and implementation of specific tasks. For example, the Academic Affairs Committee, the Postgraduate Studies Committee, the Teaching and Learning Promotion Committee, the Research Committee and the Faculty Council. Taking the University of Oxford as an example, the Council is the main administrative and policy-making body of the University of Oxford, which consists of 26 members and is mainly responsible for the University's academic policies and the

implementation of the strategic plan for teaching and learning. Under the Council, Education Committee, General Purposes Committee, Personnel Committee, Planning and Resource Allocation Committee, and Research Committee are responsible for the detailed implementation of the work [3]. Among them, the Education Committee is mainly responsible for the implementation of student education affairs. For example, institutional arrangements for postgraduate education, admission and funding, programme structure and design, evaluation and feedback, and so on. Taking Imperial College as an example, the Senate is the highest academic authority body of Imperial College, and its subordinate committees include the Learning and Teaching Committee and Quality Assurance & Enhancement Committee, (QAEC), which are responsible for the specific educational quality assurance work. At the next level of QAEC, Postgraduate Research Quality Committee and Programmes Committee and Faculty Education committees are set up, among which the Postgraduate Research Quality Committee is responsible for various affairs of graduate education quality assurance [4]. By setting up various committees at the university level, universities carry out integrated planning for all the work of postgraduates, which ensures that the quality supervision and management of postgraduate education is carried out in an orderly manner.

2.2 Quality Assurance Organizations at Faculty Level

In the overall operation of quality assurance within postgraduate students, the faculties are responsible for the implementation and monitoring of the programme. Faculties usually have departmental committees to ensure the quality of postgraduate education. For example, For example, the academic departments, faculties and research centers of the University of Oxford are divided into four departments, namely, Humanities, Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences, Medical Sciences, and the Social Sciences. Each has a divisional board with responsibility, under Council and subject to plans, policies, and guidelines set down by Council and its committees, for each division. The composition of each division and divisional board, the powers and duties of each divisional board, and the role of Head of Division, are set out in legislation [5]. Taking the University of Cambridge as an example, The University of Cambridge is a confederation of Schools, Faculties, Departments and Colleges. There is six School, each of which constitutes an administrative grouping

of Faculties and other institutions. They are: Arts and Humanities, Biological Sciences, Clinical Medicine, Humanities and Social Sciences, Physical Sciences, and Technology. Each School has a Board of Governors responsible for the management of internal affairs [6]. The deans and heads of departments are responsible for managing the academic research and teaching of postgraduate students, and they make recommendations and suggestions to the university in the form of annual reports on the quality of education in their colleges, so as to promote the improvement of the quality of postgraduate education in their colleges.

3. The Internal Quality Assurance Process of Postgraduate Education in the UK

3.1 Enhancement of Guaranteed Educational Inputs for Postgraduate Students

Educational input is the cornerstone to guarantee the quality of postgraduate education. Educational inputs are divided into hardware and software inputs. Hardware input mainly refers to the financial support from the state, society and the Higher Education Funding Council, which is mainly used for the infrastructure and daily expenses of universities, such as the construction of libraries, the beautification of campus environments, the salaries of academic staff, and research funds. Software inputs include the quality of postgraduate student input and faculty strength. In postgraduate selection, in order to guarantee high-quality postgraduate students, UK universities have made requirements on applicants' prior academic qualifications, grades, English proficiency and academic ability. To apply for the Master of Education (Comparative and International Education) at the University of Oxford, for example, applicants need to have a first or second class undergraduate degree and an honours degree in a relevant subject. English needs to be at an advanced university level, or for non-native English speakers, an IELTS score of 7.5 or TOEFL score of 110 or above. In addition, all applicants are required to submit supporting documentation for their application to the programme and letters of recommendation from three academic referees. Finally, the interviewer will examine the candidate's academic ability, potential, interest, and fit with the programme through online video or offline interviews [7]. Only those who are qualified in all aspects will be given the opportunity to get admission.

Teachers are a key factor in the quality assurance of graduate education, and excellent faculty can contribute to the quality of graduate training. In order to ensure the quality of teachers, universities have developed various professional development programmes for teachers. For example, the Centre for Teachers' Personal and Professional Development, established by the University of Cambridge in 2009, provides a variety of courses for teachers' leadership development, professional development and career development through online and offline training, which can promote the development of teachers' teaching ability, research ability and career planning ability [8]. In addition, policies related to teacher assessment, promotion and training have been formulated within universities to ensure the quality of teacher education [9].

3.2 Optimising the Process of Postgraduate Training

The training process of postgraduates directly determines the quality of postgraduate output. British universities have made detailed regulations on the cultivation objectives, cultivation methods and tutor guidance of postgraduates. British universities set the cultivation objectives according to the types of postgraduate degrees, such as the curriculum-based master's degree is to cultivate high-level applied talents. The cultivation mode is mainly based on classes and practice, and the content of the lectures is mostly professional knowledge and professional skills. The research master's degree, on the other hand, is designed to cultivate scientific research talents. Most of the time, master's degree students follow their supervisors to carry out project research, so as to cultivate students' ability to carry out project research independently, scientific research ability and innovation ability. In terms of curriculum and teaching, British universities usually adopt a small class teaching system, and adopt a combination of seminars, thematic studies, lectures and practice, compulsory courses and elective courses for classroom teaching. In the process of training, postgraduates are required to take enough credits to meet the requirements for graduation.

Postgraduate supervisors play a vital role in the development of postgraduate students. The tutor group system is implemented in UK universities. A postgraduate student usually has two supervisors, one of whom is a professor who is mainly responsible for the overall training of postgraduates and plays a leading role in the process of postgraduate training. The other supervisor is a teaching assistant or researcher, whose main job is to assist the first supervisor in training postgraduates. In addition, universities in the UK promote the professionalism of postgraduate supervisors and the quality of postgraduate education through the implementation of supervisory professional development programmes and the mentor group mentoring program. Tutor professional development programmes include online development programmes and offline development programmes. The online development programme provides postgraduate tutors with learning resources and communication platforms through learning resource banks and online forums. For example, the University of Nottingham provides a series of online learning modules for new supervisors, which include videos, quizzes and so on. In addition, the university uploads recordings of various seminars and lectures onto its website for tutors to study. Offline development programmes, on the other hand, are carried out through seminars, workshops, lectures and trainings in a variety of formats and with a high degree of flexibility. The diversified offline programmes provide a platform for face-to-face communication among supervisors and an opportunity for supervisors to discuss experiences, approaches and issues related to postgraduate supervision, thus enhancing supervisory practices and improving the quality of postgraduate training. For example, the Institute of Academic Development at the University of Edinburgh and the University of Liverpool provide a variety of seminars and workshops for mentors. Mentor group mentoring program refers to a kind of mentor support system consisting of two or more mentors, in which the group helps mentors to improve their own professional quality within a short period of time by means of complementary disciplines and mutual assistance between new and old teachers, etc. For example, the University of Edinburgh will provide new mentors with the opportunity to learn from their mentors, so

as to enhance the quality of postgraduate training. For example, the University of Edinburgh will form a mentoring group between new mentors and experienced mentors to provide mentoring assistance to new mentors, so as to enhance the academic mentoring skills of new mentors [10].

3.3 Strictly Controlling the Output Quality of Graduate Students

The quality of output directly reflects the goodness or badness of the postgraduate training process. UK universities adopt coursework assessment system and graduation assessment system to guarantee the output quality of postgraduates. The course-based master's degree students in the UK have to take enough credits and complete a small dissertation or scientific research report within the stipulated study period. Research Master's degree students are mainly assessed by their dissertations, which are required to make innovative contributions to theory. In addition, some schools will also implement a final elimination system, such as the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge. For master's degree students whose grades are in the bottom 5%, even if they have passed the assessment, their grades will show a failing grade. For doctoral students, they are required to undergo an examination once a year, and those who fail in the examination will be eliminated and lose their eligibility for doctoral studies in the following year. In addition, British universities also have strict requirements for doctoral theses, which are usually between 50,000 and 100,000 words, and the thesis should fully demonstrate the depth and breadth of the research, and reflect the author's ability to independently carry out scientific research and innovation. Doctoral theses are normally examined by two or more experts. One is an external expert in the field, and the other is an internal professor who has supervised the doctoral candidate. For those who fail the examination, graduation will be postponed for one year, and those who pass the examination will be awarded the doctoral degree. Through the strict graduation assessment system, British universities have effectively guaranteed the quality of postgraduate output.

4. Evaluation and Feedback on the Internal Quality Assurance of Postgraduate Education in the UK

4.1 All-encompassing Quality Evaluation System

Internal evaluation in UK HEIs is the responsibility of the three levels of the university, the faculty and the department. The university-level organisations are mainly responsible for longer-cycle evaluation systems such as periodic reviews and external inspections. Faculties and departments are mainly responsible for specific operational evaluation work, such as conducting annual reviews and peer hearings.

Firstly, the quality assessment system carried out by the university level. UK universities usually have university-level quality assurance and evaluation bodies, such as the Education Committee of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. The purpose of the periodic review, usually conducted every six years, is to ensure that the postgraduate degree programmes offered by the university meet the requirements of the National Quality Standards Framework

and that the teaching and learning in the faculty meets the objectives of the programme. The review covers the effectiveness of leadership and governance systems, academic standards and quality, and the postgraduate experience [11]. In addition, universities conduct a system of overall review of their postgraduate teaching and learning, degree awarding and postgraduate evaluation by employing external experts in the relevant fields to form an expert assessment team, and submit an annual assessment report to the college or university based on the results of the inspections [12].

Secondly, the quality assessment system carried out by the faculties. The annual review and peer attendance system are conducted by the faculty. The annual review is an annual summary of the quality of education at the University, which includes a review of whether the graduate major has met the standards set by the University and whether the graduate learning outcomes have met the expected goals. For course-based graduate students, the annual review provides a timely overview of course progress, course scheduling, and overall teaching and learning. For research postgraduates, the annual review is mainly concerned with the research environment, research ability and supervision. The system of peer listening is a tradition in UK universities. For example, all teachers at University College London are subject to and participate in peer review, the results of which are collected and fed back by the university [13].

Finally, HEIs are also active participants in the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) and the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES). PRES and PTES are conducted by the Higher Education Academy. The surveys are conducted in the form of questionnaires on seven dimensions: mentoring, student and mentor responsibilities, learning resources, research skills, professional skills development, evaluation of academic progress, and opportunities [14]. Its purpose is to understand the research experience of postgraduate students and to help universities to obtain factual evidence that is conducive to decision-making, so as to improve the quality of postgraduate training [15].

4.2 Incentive-based Feedback

UK universities provide feedback to outstanding students and teachers through incentives. Incentives mainly include academic rewards for students and honourable incentives for tutors. Postgraduate academic rewards are in the form of scholarships for outstanding postgraduate students. Scholarships for postgraduate students in the UK include government scholarships, institutional scholarships, and institutional scholarships [16]. Among them, the British government scholarships are equivalent to China's national scholarships, the award amount is larger, such as the "Royal Society Fellowship", the amount of the scholarship is more than ten times the amount of the ordinary scholarships, designed to reward the best students throughout the United Kingdom. Institutional scholarships are co-funded by the government, educational institutions and enterprises, with a wide range of projects, such as the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Federal Department of the Chevening Scholarship, the Scottish Executive funded by the Scottish Scholarships, the British Embassy and Consulates Cultural and Educational Services is responsible for the

management of the Scottish Scholarships. British universities grant scholarships to outstanding postgraduates, on the one hand, can stimulate the academic enthusiasm of postgraduates and improve the quality of postgraduate research. On the other hand, it can alleviate the financial pressure of postgraduates, to solve the postgraduates' worries.

The purpose of honour incentives for tutors in UK colleges and universities is to affirm and supervise the professional development of tutors. For example, in order to recognise the outstanding performance of tutors in postgraduate research and dissertation supervision, the University of Edinburgh has set up teaching awards for postgraduate tutors and awards for excellent doctoral supervisors [17]. By encouraging graduate tutors with honors, British universities can not only encourage them to continuously improve their professional development, but also encourage them to explore the best guiding practice and promote the improvement of the quality of graduate education.

5. Characteristics on the Internal Quality Assurance System of Postgraduate Education in the UK

5.1 Top-down Postgraduate Quality Assurance Organisation

Through analysing the internal quality assurance institutions and personnel settings of postgraduate education in UK universities, it is found that there is a central authority and an administrative body within each university, and the responsibilities and powers of each body are clearly defined. Various committees are set up under the central authority to be responsible for academic, teaching, research, funding and other internal affairs of the university, such as the Academic Affairs Committee, which is the highest management body under the central authority to manage academic quality and standards. The Chair of the Academic Council is the President, who, together with the deans, faculty representatives and graduate students, directs and manages the teaching and research of the university. At the Faculty level, each Faculty has a dedicated committee to co-ordinate the work of the faculty, which is overseen by the Dean. At the departmental level, there is usually a departmental committee with a head of department to ensure the smooth running of graduate education within the department. In addition, some universities have also set up prosecutors' committees, faculty-student liaison committees, professional committees, and so on. It can be seen that UK universities have formed a top-down postgraduate quality assurance organisation at the university, faculty and departmental levels, with each organisation having clear responsibilities, coordinating with each other and cooperating with each other to promote the quality of postgraduate education.

5.2 Diversified Quality Assurance Approaches

Based on the analysis of the quality assurance organisation, cultivation process, evaluation and feedback mechanism of postgraduate education, it is found that the way of quality assurance of postgraduate education in the UK presents diversified characteristics. Firstly, in terms of quality assurance organisation, UK universities have established a

top-down quality assurance organisation system, with clear responsibilities of each main body, which guarantees the orderly conduct of postgraduate education. Secondly, in the cultivation process of postgraduates, based on the theory of total quality management, British universities have made detailed regulations on the cultivation of postgraduates from the three links of input, cultivation and output, covering the aspects of enrolment, teaching objectives, curriculum, faculty, degree standards and graduation assessment, etc., which have further guaranteed the quality of postgraduates' education. Finally, in terms of evaluation and feedback mechanism, UK universities continuously motivate the enthusiasm of postgraduates for scientific research and teachers' guidance for practical exploration by rewarding outstanding postgraduates and supervisors, in order to promote the quality of postgraduate education. In addition, UK universities have adopted annual review, cycle review and external inspectors to monitor and evaluate the quality of postgraduate education in the UK, so as to guarantee that the professional settings and teaching standards of postgraduates meet the national standards.

5.3 The "Student-centred" Value Proposition

From the perspective of the construction of the British postgraduate education system, British universities have strict requirements in enrolment, the establishment of training objectives, the formulation of training programmes, the selection and recruitment of teachers and other aspects. Through this series of systematic management and training measures, British universities aim to ensure that postgraduates can receive high-quality educational resources, practice the student-oriented service purpose, and improve the overall quality of postgraduate education. In addition, UK universities attach importance to the evaluation of education services by postgraduates. By actively participating in survey projects on postgraduates' learning experience, universities understand postgraduates' evaluation of research activities, course teaching and education management, and take the evaluation results as the basis for improving teaching and management, and attach importance to postgraduates' right to participate in the management and evaluation of higher education, and regard students as important participants in education, highlighting the value orientation of putting students first.

6. Conclusion

In the 21st century, with the transformation of higher education from "elitism" to "popularization", the stability and improvement of education quality has become the core issue of education development, and its importance has become increasingly prominent. Especially in the field of higher education, quality has become the focus of universal attention. The quality construction and sustainable development of higher education are of great significance to the quality assurance and promotion of graduate education. This not only reflects the essential pursuit of education, but also the key to realizing the modernization of education and meeting the needs of social development. After combing and analyzing the internal quality assurance system of British postgraduate education, it is found that British universities have established special organizational and management institutions and

organizational and management personnel at the university level and at the college level respectively, and improve the vertical educational quality assurance system of universities from the three aspects of input, process and output, so as to realize the organic combination of full and comprehensive internal quality assurance of postgraduate education. It presents the characteristics of top-down security organization, diversified security methods and student-oriented value orientation.

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